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The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood after the Arab Uprisings (2011-2013): Activism, Politics and Gender Discourse

Following the 2011 uprisings that ousted Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) enjoyed an unprecedented level of political participation, seizing both a majority in parliament and the presidency of the country in 2012. This paper explores how the Brotherhood's opportunity for greater political involvement affected its female members, the Muslim Sisters. In particular, it reflects on the extent to which the group was willing to include women in its political affairs, the role that women played in the political spaces seized by the movement, and the gender discourse promoted by the Sisters. The data presented draws from the author's analysis of MB's primary video material and literature

published online between 2011 and 2013. These are complemented by the scholar's observations and interviews with Muslim Sisterhood members between 2013 and 2018 in Egypt. Findings suggest that the uprisings benefited the Sisters in terms of political participation, but that women who held gender worldviews similar to those of the Salafi-leaning MB male leadership ended up having greater public visibility in the 2012-2013 MB government. This contributed to the promotion of a conservative and motherhood-centred gender discourse in the political spaces that women and the movement seized after the 2011 uprisings.

Keywords: Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood, Arab Uprisings, Political Participation, Women.

Introduction

On 25 January 2011, Egypt witnessed unprecedented anti-government demonstrations, which culminated in the overthrow of the three-decade long regime of Hosni Mubarak. The protests were driven largely by youth and labour movements and united both men and women regardless of class, political, religious and ideological background with the objective to bring about regime change, freedom, dignity and social justice. Like other Arab women in the region, Egyptian women's role in the uprisings was not limited to that of supporters, but included that of political leaders and organisers (Allam 2018). Although women's liberation was not the immediate motive of the female protesters who took part in the revolts, gender issues became increasingly salient as the post-uprisings transition unfolded and women suffered mounting backlashes against their presence in the public sphere (Pratt 2013). What seemed to aggravate the situation for Egyptian women was the subsequent electoral victory of Islamists movements. When the polls for the parliamentary elections closed in Egypt in January 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood (*Jamaa al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* - MB)'s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) had seized 46 percent of the seats, followed by the ultra-conservative Salafi al-Nour Party with over 23 percent. Later in June, the MB candidate Mohammed Morsi became the first democratically elected civilian president in the history of the country.

Like other contemporary religious-political movements around the world (Celis and Childs 2014; Bacchetta and Power 2002), Islamists support a conservative gender ideology that attributes men and women different social roles based on what are believed to be 'natural' differences between the sexes. Islamists understand men and women's roles as complementary, rather than equal, with women's primary duties being that of caregiver to their husbands, families and communities. Accordingly, Islamists' position on women often translates into a politics of gender that endorses women's subordination to men in the private sphere of the family and limits their participation in the public sphere to areas that reflect such a gender complementarity and are considered non-threatening to men's status and leadership. Above all, Islamists in the Arab region have often promoted conservative law reforms in matters of reproductive, personal and family rights, which inevitably discriminated against women (Brand 1998).

Yet women were a large majority of those who supported the MB to power. After the uprisings, the Muslim Sisters mobilised *en mass* as voters and recruiters of voters, contributing to the political success of the movement. Furthermore, many took part in the elections as candidates, also obtaining office in the FJP, the Egyptian parliament and government. As scholars have previously observed, if given the opportunity to participate politically, Islamists are likely to extend participation to women to maximise their appeal across female constituencies and assert their progressive image before their electorate and international observers (Abdellatif and Ottaway 2007; Tadros 2012). The MB is not *sui generis* and, following the uprisings, it provided women with a space to be politically active. While women's political involvement in the MB was, therefore predictable, the real novelty of the post-2011 period was that the Sisters obtained political office and could practice their activism freely in Egyptian society for the first time. This gave observers a one-time opportunity to assess their political activities and gender discourse in actual practice.

The remainder of this paper observes how the political participation of the Muslim Sisterhood, their activism and role, expanded following the 2011 Egyptian uprisings and the possibility for greater MB's participation in political life. In particular, it reflects on how the gender ideology of the MB influenced the inclusion of women in its political offices, as well as the activism, role and gender discourse of the Muslim Sisters in such spaces. The data presented derives from the author's analysis of MB video material and primary literature published online between 2011 and 2013, addressing Muslim Sisterhood's election campaigns, conferences, parliamentary interventions, outreach activities and public debates. These are complemented by the scholar's observations of Muslim Sisterhood's activities and interviews with Muslim Sisterhood members between 2013 and 2018 in Egypt. The findings suggest that the uprisings benefited the Muslim Sisters in terms of political participation, but favoured women who held conservative gender worldviews similar to those of the Salafi-leaning MB male leadership. As a result, the gender discourse that the Sisters promoted in the political spaces that women and the movement seized after the 2011 uprisings was conservative and motherhood-centred.

Women and Political Participation in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

The involvement of women in the MB dates back to the establishment of the movement by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Al-Banna promoted an alternative national ideology based on Islam for moral, social, political, economic and legal reforms which, in his view, could only be attained by reforming individuals' morals and values (Gershoni and Jankowski 1995). By virtue of their role as biological and cultural reproducers of the Islamic community, women had therefore an important contribution to make to the MB's socio-political project.

Since the establishment of the first branch of the Muslim Sisterhood in 1933, women's greatest contribution to the movement was expanding its female members and spreading its *da'wa* (invitation to Islam) by way of charity and religious work. Nonetheless, the historical circumstances that led to the involvement of the MB soon demanded women to play a greater role in political activities. In the 1950s the MB fell under increasing repression by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, leading women to emerge as the powerhouse of the

movement. Under the charismatic leadership of Zainab al-Ghazali, the Sisters led protest activities in support of male members, acquired funds for those imprisoned and their families and played a key role in sustaining the movement and its network.[1] Because of their activism, over 50 Sisters were arrested, including al-Ghazali (Abdel-Hady 2011: 32). In the 1970s, the MB took advantage of President Sadat's tolerance towards Islamists to re-build the organisation. The Sisterhood never regained the strength it had acquired in the 1950s. Yet, during those years, MB female university students contributed significantly to increasing the appeal of the movement by exerting their presence in Egyptian society and promoting the ideal model of a pious yet politically active and socially empowered Muslim woman, as promoted by the MB (Talhami 1996).

Following the entrance of the MB in institutional politics in the mid-1980s, the Sisters became of strategic value to the movement both as voters and recruiters of voters, and availed of their new status to expand their participation. The first woman to challenge the MB's taboos concerning women and politics was Wafaa Ramadan, who, in 1992, took part in the elections for the MB in the medical association's board without the approval of the MB leadership (El-Ghobashy 2005). MB leaders criticised Ramadan's actions. Yet, under pressure from MB moderate members, they felt compelled to revise the movement's official stand on women and political participation, published in a famous 1994 paper (Ibid). The episode encouraged more Sisters to follow suit. In the year 2000, Jihan al-Alafawy, the wife of the ex-MB leader Ibrahim al-Zaafarani, competed for the parliamentary elections in Alexandria against a renowned pro-Mubarak ally. Five years later, Makarim al-Dairy, the widow of the MB leader Ibrahim Sharaf, contested a seat in the Cairo district of Nasr City against a prominent NDP businessman, Moustafa al-Sallab. This trend culminated with the MB nominating 13 female candidates under the women's quota in the 2010 parliamentary elections (Shitrit 2016). On all occasions, however, women suffered severe harassment by the Egyptian state and never gained office, with the exception of the professional associations.

The Sisters enjoyed an unprecedented opportunity to expand their participation after the 2011 uprisings and the opening up of the Egyptian political sphere. Back then, however, besides a handful of women, most Sisters lacked political expertise. Decades of repression had severely limited the women's (and men) political involvement. In addition, the MB had obstructed women's political development by channelling their activism to traditional areas such as charity and *da 'wa*. Therefore, when nominating female candidates for the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections, the MB reverted to traditional practices for selecting them. Those Sisters who had the opportunity to be involved in the FJP admitted that the MB selected women based on their family linkages with well-known MB male leaders and their reputation as trusted and loyal members, rather than the women's professional qualifications.[2] As one Sisterhood member stated:

> 'These [candidates] were the women who were trusted by the movement,
> who enjoyed family linkages and connections with trusted MB male

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[1] The Muslim Sisters played a similar role after the MB ousting on July 3, 2013. See Biagini, 2017.
[2] Point mentioned in interviews with the author by Dalila, Leen, Nasibah and Mariam, Cairo, 2018. All the names of the respondents were changed, unless they explicitly requested otherwise.

leaders. Before the revolution women had very little opportunity to work or deal with people outside their circles. We, as women, barely knew each other... when the MB started to select women for political roles or positions in the party, the selection took place according to the word of mouth rather than the women's professional qualities. Members would suggest the name of Sisters known to have good qualities, although they had never met them... This is why most women who were elected into a position of leadership in the FJP or obtained office in parliament were above 50 years old and were the wives of already well-known MB leaders'.[3]

These traditional practices are important for understanding the gender worldviews and personal characteristics of the women who acquired political prominence in the ranks of the MB after 2011. The MB is a highly hierarchical organisation, known for promoting to leadership positions members who are loyal and obedient to the movement and its principles. Since the 2000, the MB organisation fell under the leadership of conservative members whose religious worldviews and practices are closer to a Salafi interpretation of Islam and Islamic doctrines (Kandil 2015) and hold a rather conservative position in matters of gender and women's roles. Consequently, when it comes to women, demonstrating loyalty and obedience to the MB also includes endorsing those feminine qualities that the MB male leadership values in its female members, such as piety, modesty, dedication to the family and motherhood, among others. It was therefore due to the religious-conservative and hierarchical culture of the MB organisation that, after 2011, the women who were selected by the movement for positions of leadership and visibility were those who endorsed the traditional gender ideology distinctive of the MB Salafi-leaning leadership. They all shared the commitment to promote the valorisation of the institution of the family, women's motherhood roles, and female virtues such as piety and modesty, as endorsed by conservative MB members.

The Establishment of the FJP and its Vision for Women

On 21 February 2011, the MB announced the establishment of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). In the platform,[4] the FJP expressed its commitment to a civil state with an Islamic reference. It pledged support to democracy and a parliamentary form of government characterised by free and fair elections, the rotation of power, and the full separation between legislative, executive, and judicial authorities. It also vowed to promote political pluralism, freedom, equality and equal opportunities for all people, regardless of race, gender or religion. Despite such premises, however, the party remained under the control of the MB organisation (Al-Anani 2011), meaning that hierarchical practices and conservative religious worldviews dominant in the MB also influenced the FJP, preventing the party from adopting fully democratic principles. This became evident in the party's programme for women too.

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[3] Nasibah, interview by author, Cairo, 2018.
[4] For the 2011 FJP Platform see https://goo.gl/Mde8oH [in Arabic] or
http://kurzman.unc.edu/files/2011/06/FJP_2011_English.pdf [in English]

In its platform, the FJP said to promote women's rights within the limits set by the Islamic *Sharia*, and to ensure a balance between their rights and duties towards the family. It also promised to reform the Personal Status and Family Law (PSFL) according to Islamic values and traditions. To accomplish this, the FJP vowed to substitute the National Council for Women (NCW) and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) with a single institute, the National Council for the Family (NCF). Under the leadership of Susanne Mubarak, both the NCW and the NCCM had played a key role in ensuring that Egypt adopted laws extending women's rights in matters of divorce and child-custody, and that it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The MB considered these laws to be in conflict with Islamic principles and detrimental to Egypt's moral fabric. Accordingly, if it reached power, the FJP pledged to reconsider Egypt's ratification to both international conventions and to undergo a fundamental reappraisal of the institution of the family. Additional steps towards that goal included introducing social welfare assistance for working mothers, divorced women and widows, promoting piety and modesty in the Egyptian media and public sphere, and re-introducing religious curricula in schools.

Concerning women's political role, the FJP avoided statements denying the right of women and Copts to become head of state. On one occasion, however, the MB leadership affirmed that the FJP would only support men for the position (Al-Ahram 2011). The statement followed previous interventions by MB male leaders describing women as 'unfit' for the role of the presidency (Tadros 2012: 147-150). Furthermore, the Party denied women the right to take part in its internal elections and excluded them from its decision-making bodies. The Sisters assumed leadership in the Women's Sections established by the FJP across the country, and over a thousand figured as FJP co-founders (Ikhwanweb 2011). Yet, these positions invested women with authority over other women only, and not over the party or its politics. Only once the FJP assigned a woman to its Executive Office, Kamilia Hilmi. The party promoted the news as a demonstration of its support for women's political participation and its recognition of women's contribution to the MB. Yet, when commenting on the reasons for her nomination, the FJP made reference to Hilmi's longstanding dedication to the International Islamic Council for Da'wa and Relief, proving that piety continued to be a crucial criterion for selecting its members to positions of leadership. Less clear is whether the MB included a woman in the Executive Office to appease its critics. Six months later, Hilmi resigned stating that 'her primary work as President of the Islamic Commission for Women and Children at the International Council for Dawa and Relief […] posed an obstacle to her presence in the Executive Office' (Kamilia Hilmy cited in Al-Masry Al-Youm 2012). The party never elected another woman to replace her. As a result, as the MB approached the first free and fair parliamentary elections in the history of Egypt, women lacked real voice and representation in the political decision-making bodies of the FJP and the MB movement.

The Muslim Sisters in the 2011-2012 Parliamentary Election: Joining Arms with the Brothers in the FJP

Despite lacking representation in the MB leadership structure, women significantly expanded their political participation following the establishment of the FJP. On 2 July 2011, the MB held the first Muslim Sisterhood Conference since the group was outlawed in 1949. The event, titled 'Women from the Revolution to the Renaissance' (*al-Mar'a min al-Thawra ila al-Nahdah*), was hosted by al-Azhar al-Sharif, the leading Sunni religious institution in Egypt and the region, and drew the attendance of over 2,000 Sisters (Ikhwan al-Ismailia 2011). The MB introduced the event as marking the beginning of a new era for the Sisters. In his inaugural speech, the MB General Guide Mohammed Badie paid tribute to women and their role in the revolution, asking them to join arms with the Brothers during the phase of Egyptian transition, a time in which their participation was 'needed more than ever before' to lead Egypt through a real *Nahdah* (renaissance).[5] His Deputy Khairat al-Shater followed suit underscoring the MB's obligation to redress the low political participation of women, previously constrained by security concerns. Concluding, he invited the Sisters to support the MB in the upcoming parliamentary elections.[6]

As in the past, women were instrumental to the political success of the MB. According to a young member who took part in the election campaign:

> 'At the time of the elections we all [women] participated. First, we took courses in the Mokattam [at the MB headquarters in the Cairo district of Nasr City] about the FJP, their programme and vision. Then we hit the streets to talk with people about the party, our views of society, and the future of our country'.[7]

Women campaigned tirelessly for the FJP and, in election days, stood hours outside the pooling stations pre-counting the votes and displaying support for the MB.[8]

The Sisters also partook in the election as candidates. The 2011 Parliamentary Election Law (PEL) finalised by the Egyptian Security Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) required political parties to include at least one woman in each electoral lists. The FJP competed for elections in 46 districts, therefore nominating 46 women, some of whom were placed in a winning position, at the top half of the lists. These were mainly Sisters who already held a senior position in the movement's *da'wa* circles, had a history of social activism within their local communities and enjoyed family linkages with prominent MB male leaders. Two of them, for instance, were Wafaa' Mashhur, the daughter of the fifth MB General Guide Mustafa Mashhur, who was placed first in the FJP's list for the Shura Council in Assiut, and Azza al-Garf, placed fourth out of 12 in the FJP's list for the People's Assembly in Giza. However, being active in society and enjoying a distinguished reputation in the movement did not always work as a springboard for women's entrance into politics. The MB was ready to sacrifice its female candidates when it availed of a prominent male alternative in the same

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[5] Ikhwan Online 'Muslim Sisterhood conference under the title "from the Revolution to the Renaissance"', *YouTube*, published on 02/07/2011 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxtNaPIe1ps consulted on 06/06/2017
[6] Ibid.
[7] Farida, interview by author, Cairo, June 2014.
[8] Khadija, interview by author, Cairo, 2014.

district. This happened to Manal Abu al-Hassan, a leading Sisterhood cadre with a history of social and political activism, who, nevertheless, was asked by the MB to relinquish her place in the FJP's list for North Cairo in favour of a male nominee.[9]

These female candidates were already well-known for being loyal MB members and for holding religious-conservative worldviews. Yet, in retrospect some Sisters who remained politically uninvolved during the same period believed that the women that the MB selected for the elections were under severe pressure by the part of the movement to promote a conservative gender discourse in their public appearances. As one member put it, these Sisters 'lacked a real independent voice', meaning that they would never say things that the movement did not approve.[10] This claim seems plausible considering that during the elections the MB had to be careful not to alienate its conservative constituencies, and was also in a competition with the ultraconservative Salafi al-Nour Party for votes. An attentive listener, in fact, would have noticed that even those Sisters such as Azza al-Garf, who built their political and professional career thanks to the fact that their husbands shared parenting responsibilities at home (Topol 2012), were careful to underscore that women's motherhood duties were to be prioritised before a political role. As al-Garf stated during an MB electoral rally in Giza:

> 'In the FJP we believe that women have an important role, which is equal, if no greater, than that of men. […] Women gain support from society when they excel in their role. Beside the political role, the first basic role for women, the one I also never give up, is to be makers of the new generations. This role comes as a first priority. […] Women should not step back after the elections [...] but they should put their priorities in order. First is their house and only after comes society, and their activities in society should aim at protecting their children and their houses'.[11]

Overall, during public meetings all Sisterhood candidates would endorse the FJP as a true promoter of women's rights and their political participation, while also committing themselves to reform the PSFL in line with Islamic principles, as stated in the FJP programme.

Muslim Sisterhood's Activism in the Freedom and Justice Party

Within the FJP, the politicisation of the institution of the family and motherhood, together with charity and religious work, continued to be at the core of the Sisterhood's programme. After its establishment, the Sisters relocated all their activities to the Women's Sections of

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[9] YaQiyyn TV 'A debate between Dr. Manal Abu al-Hassan candidate of the Freedom and Justice Party and Margarite 'Azib, candidate of the al-Wafd Party', *YouTube*, published on 26/11/2011 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVvaT5Wqo3o consulted on 06/06/2017

[10] Leen, interview by author, Cairo, 2018.

[11] Huryaweadela Channel 'Azza al-Garf Freedom and Justice Party candidate in the Giza list', *YouTube*, published on 05/12/2011 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k-OynJpHPU consulted on 06/06/2017

the FJP. The activism that they carried out in these spaces centred on the promotion of the Islamic identity and values, the valorisation of the family and women's role within it. In their discourses, the Sisters portrayed the family as an institution damaged by previous amendments of the PSFL, which had led to late marriages, an increase in divorce rates and extra-marital relationships, and endorsed the promotion of Islamic values as the solution to these problems.

Strategically, the Sisters availed of Egypt's national days to sponsor their own version of the ideal Muslim woman and Islamic society. For example, on 30 March 2013, on the occasion of International Woman's Day, the FJP's Women's Committee hired a venue at the Pyramids of Giza to host a 'Day to Honour Ideal Mothers and the Mothers of the Martyrs'.[12] Similar celebrations were held outside Cairo.[13] The Sisters also continued to champion charitable activities, including collective visits to orphanages, children's contests for Quranic recitations and workshops to teach women handcraft skills and run small family businesses.[14]

From within the FJP, the Sisters worked to strengthen formal ties with the Women's Committees of other Islamist parties across the region, such as the Tunisian Ennahda and the Turkish Justice and Development parties. As early as January 2012, for instance, a delegation of FJP female members led by Kamilia Hilmi visited the Women's Section of Ennahda. On this occasion, the Sisters delivered a series of lectures to 'encourage Tunisian women to reach their full potential after the revolution', and to suggest 'methods to restore the Islamic identity into the family unit, previously lost to processes of westernization' (Ikhwanweb 2012). These meetings served to build cooperation between likeminded activists committed to advancing the role of Muslim women in post-uprising Arab societies.

The Muslim Sisterhood MPs and their interventions of Women's Issues

The Egyptian parliamentary elections closed on January 2012 with a striking victory for the MB. The FJP emerged as the largest block in parliament, securing 232 seats in the People's Assembly (lower house) and 105 seats in the Shura Council (upper house), followed by the Salafi al-Nour and the liberal al-Wafd parties, respectively. Although women's representation in parliament had always been low in Egypt, in 2012 it figured one of the lowest. Women gained 2.2 percent representation in the People Assembly and 4.8 percent in the Shura Council. Yet, the Sisters were the majority of women elected into parliament by popular vote. The Muslim Sisterhood members Azza al-Garf, Hoda Ghania, Siam al-Gamal, and Reeda Abdallah, were four out of the nine women elected to the People's Assembly, and Susan Saad Zaghlol, Nagwa Gouda, and Wafaa Mashour, were three out of the five elected to the Shura Council.

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[12] Ikhwan Online 'The Freedom and Justice Party celebrate mothers', *YouTube*, published on 30/03/2013 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDYYzZE1UwI consulted on 06/06/2017

[13] Markaz Waqry Ishmoun, 'Ceremony to honour ideal mothers', *YouTube*, published on 16/03/2013 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEQHu1HyhS8 consulted on 06/06/2017

[14] Hefny, interview by author, Cairo, 2014.

As this was the first time that the Sisters gained office in parliament, they considered this result a success and remained committed to expanding women's presence in politics. For instance, the Secretary General of the FJP Women's Section in South Cairo, Sabah al-Saqqary, supported the adoption of a zip-list female party quota for the next parliamentary elections, arguing that such quotas had led to greater success for Tunisian women, when compared to the one adopted by Egypt .[15] Azza al-Garf also claimed that women should have enjoyed a greater presence in parliament, but she remained opposed to the adoption of quotas, arguing that women should 'rise politically as a result of their own efforts [by way of] chang[ing] obsolete customs and traditions'.[16] Instead, Manal Abu al-Hassan, by then Secretary General of the FJP female section in North Cairo, welcomed the results but considered these unsatisfactory. Her suggestion to redress women's low representation was, however, peculiar, because it involved informal procedures reminiscent of those already adopted by women in the MB movement. Her proposal to the FJP was associating 'a woman to each Member of Parliament to assist them in their work [so to] enhance the presence of women in parliament, and allow women to gain experience in parliamentary affairs' (Manal Abu al-Hassan cited in al-Shark al-Awsat 2012).

The post-uprising Egyptian parliament held its first session on 23 January 2012 to be dissolved six months later by a ruling of the Egyptian High Constitutional Court. Its short-lived experience made the parliament unable to produce abundant legislation. Yet, during this time, discussions concerning women took place and the Sisters took part in them,[17] offering valuable material for reflection. On these occasions, the members of the Salafi al-Nour Party raised the most restrictive proposals in matters of women's legislation. These concerned lowering the age of marriage for girls from 18 to 16 years old to accommodate the practices of Egyptian families in the countryside, where daughters were usually married well before they reached the legal age (Omar 2014). Another concerned amending the 2005 child custody law. In case of divorce, the Egyptian law granted the mother custody of her children until they turned 15 years old. Al-Nour MPs requested the custody of children to be granted to the father when boys reached 7 years of age, and girls 9 (Ibid). Less clear is whether the abolishment of article 20/2000 granting women the right to unilateral divorce, or *Khul*, was advanced by al-Nour single-handedly or in conjunction with the FJP (Ibid). Issues of marriage and divorce had always been central to the political agenda of the Sisters. Many women acquired prominence in the MB based on their activism against international conventions such as the CEDAW and the CRC (Tadros 2012: 124). Yet, none of the FJP female MPs officially backed the proposal to abolish *Khul*. In fairness, the parliamentary proposals were not indicative of the gender worldviews of all the Sisterhood members. Some of the women who failed to receive media attention during the same period maintained that

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[15] Al-Jazeera Mubasher, 'Interview with Dr. Sabah al-Saqqari', *YouTube*, published on 03/10/2012 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-FoGQIvur8 consulted on 06/06/2017

[16] Misrtokarer's Channel, 'Women's Fight between Azza al-Garf and Farida al-Shubashy', *YouTube*, published on 18/02/2012 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUb6JKN93K4 consulted on 06/06/2017

[17] The interventions of the FJP female MPs were not limited to women's issues, but touched on those of the Martyrs of the Revolution, security, the military and Al-Azhar al-Sharif's budgets, as well as the Constitution, among others. It is for the purpose of this paper that only their interventions on gender issues are considered.

unilateral divorce was beneficial to women, regardless of the government that introduced it. As Wafaa Hefny, a Professor of English Literature and Muslim Sisterhood member, stated:

> 'One of the good things that Susanne Mubarak did was reforming the Family Code, because it made it very easy for women who are subjected to abuse to get a divorce and their allowance. One has to say what works for you and what works against you. This was a good thing'.[18]

More controversial were the discussions concerning female circumcision (or Female Genital Mutilation - FGM) advanced by various MPs on Egyptian media channels. Although Egypt had made FGM illegal in 2008, FGM remained widely practiced outside hospitals, particularly in the countryside, leading to great risks of infection-transmitted diseases and death for the girls subjected to it (Tag-Eldin et al. 2018). Al-Nour MPs were reported defending FGM as religiously ordained. Yet, FJP MPs Azza al-Garf, interviewed several times on the issues, avoided clear cut statements, insisting that Egypt had more pressing problems to focus on, other than what was, in her view, a matter of women's personal choice and their families (Topol 2012).

Discussions on women and women's rights advanced by the Islamist parliament spurred widespread national outrage and anti-Islamist demonstrations. In their defence, the Sisters claimed that these suggestions were raised by ultra-conservative al-Nour MPs to deliberately 'thwart the revolutionary parliament'.[19] In truth, the Islamist-led parliament passed only one law concerning women during its time. This introduced state-paid health insurance for women heads of the household and their children, and was approved with a striking parliamentary majority on 26 May 2012. The Sisters welcomed the law as a first step towards empowering lower-class Egyptian women, whose needs had been much neglected by previous governments. As Hefny explained in another statement:

> 'Laws concerning women and the family helped a lot, but what about the majority of women who spend all day on the streets selling vegetables for few pounds a month, or those who must work all day in worse jobs because their men are sleeping, taking it easy, or have no husbands? Laws promoting equality and most of those laws we have now are not of any use to these women, who, by the way, are the majority in the Egyptian society. If you want to develop the country you need to start taking care of the majority of its people, you need to empower the weak of Egypt. Morsi's government had this idea in mind'.[20]

Therefore, diverse worldviews concerning women's issues and what laws were best suited to address them also existed among the Sisters. The fact that those women who emerged to prominence under the MB government reflected the official gender narrative of

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[18] Hefny, interview by author, Cairo, 2014.
[19] Hoda Abd El-Moniem, interview by author, Cairo, 2014.
[20] Hefny, interview by author, Cairo, 2014.

the MB male leadership provides further indication that the movement acted selectively when assigning women to political positions, favouring those who committed to advance its gender worldviews and agenda.

The Muslim Sisterhood during the Presidential Elections

Despite promising the contrary, the MB announced its decision to file a candidate for the presidential elections on 1 April 2012. The Sisters endorsed the decision as necessary to accomplish the goals of the 25 January Revolution and bring justice to Egyptian women and their martyred sons. The MB launched the presidential campaign with the Sisters on 6 April 2012. A meeting titled 'Our Martyrs are the Light of our Renaissance' (*Shuhada'una Nur Nahdatuna*) was held at the Muslim Sisterhood's headquarters in Cairo. The opening ceremony was one heavily charged with emotions, where mothers who had lost their sons in the uprisings cried and raised photographs of the martyrs. Hoda Abd el-Moniem, a prominent Muslim Sisterhood lawyer, delivered a first speech. Behind her, a massive poster portraying Khairat al-Shater and Mohammed Morsi, the two MB presidential candidates, hung from the wall.[21] In her speech, el-Moniem praised women's past role in resisting regime oppression, and asserted the importance of a new constitution to guarantee Egypt's future prosperity. In her words, to rise once again as a nation Egypt necessitated 'a solution grounded on Islam for peace, law, and constitutional legitimacy'.[22] Manal Abu al-Hassan led a second talk where she encouraged women to vote for the MB in the upcoming presidential elections, so that the aims of the revolution could be fully achieved, including the expansion of women's social and political rights. As she stated, 'The FJP took the decision to contest the presidential election due to the obstacles that hinder the revolution's goals. It introduced two loyal candidates. They both have a program to help Egypt and uphold women's rights'.[23]

During the presidential elections, the MB agreed to expand women's political participation in the FJP to new roles. Some of those Sisters who benefited from the initiative were 'younger ladies [members] who were already active within the MB circles but lacked a wide [support] network [and that the MB] selected to be part of the FJP Media and Foreign Relations Committee ... [and to] be spokespersons for the MB abroad'.[24] At the time, many young Sisters took up roles as Morsi's ambassadors, travelling to Poland, Malaysia, Turkey, Tunisia and the USA to convey his presidential platform. Senior Sisters also attempted to expand their political role in the FJP. When Morsi staged his bid for the presidency, Sabah al-Saqqary nominated herself for the post of FJP Chairman left vacant by Morsi. In a televised interview, al-Saqqary clarified her decision stating that the FJP posed no restrictions to

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[21] Mohammed Morsi became the only MB presidential candidate after the SCAF disqualified Khairat al-Shater on 15 April 2012.

[22] YaQiyyn TV 'Mohammed Morsi and Khairat al-Shater at the General Conference. Part 3', *YouTube*, published on 19/04/2012 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pgVn0HvDm0&nohtml5=False consulted on 06/06/2017

[23] YaQiyyn TV 'Mohammed Morsi and Khairat al-Shater at the General Conference. Part 5', *YouTube*, published on 19/04/2012 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pgVn0HvDm0&nohtml5=False consulted on 06/06/2017

[24] Nasibah, interview by author, Cairo 2018.

women to apply for the position and that by nominating herself she wished to encourage other women to do the same in the future.[25] Yet, al-Saqqary did not win. Instead, the FJP elected two leading MB male political figures, Essam el-Arian and Saad al-Katatny, to the post of FJP president and vice-president, respectively. While al-Saqqary lacked the political experience of the two male candidates, her action testifies to the desire of some of the Sisters to play a political role greater than this that the movement was ready to extend to its female members.

The 2012 Egyptian Constitution and the Presidential Initiative to Support the Rights and Freedoms of Egyptian Women

In the run up to the presidential elections, gender issues had become paramount in Egypt. The Egyptian feminist movement had repeatedly demanded the government to introduce comprehensive gender reforms and intervene against the issue of sexual harassment, which had risen to unprecedented level in Egypt after the uprisings. However, these demands were ignored. Besides, Islamist figures, including some Sisters, had often used their media visibility to criticise the Egyptian feminist movement, accusing it to promote a foreign agenda and to use the revolution to push forward narrow feminist interests (Al-Sharq al-Awsat 2012). Therefore, during his electoral campaign, Morsi took care to emphasise the importance of women's rights in order to appease the fears of the Egyptian feminist movement in view of a possible consolidation of the MB into power. Yet, five months after his election to the presidency, Morsi forced a constitutional-drafting process through an Islamist-dominated assembly against the warnings of Egyptian liberal sectors of society and the same feminist movement. The constitution was later adopted by popular referendum on December 2012. As recognised by some scholars, the 2012 Egyptian constitution 'was the first to explicitly establish – without qualification – equality and equal opportunities for all its citizens, men and women [*muwatinin wa muwatinat*] without distinction, favouritism, or partiality, in rights and duties', therefore making of equality a funding principle of the new state (McLarney 2016:110). Nevertheless, critics asserted that the lack of an explicit reference to gender equality and to non-discrimination based on gender, coupled with article 36 promoting women's equality within the limits of Islamic *Sharia*, left open the possibility for gender discriminatory legislation to be applied (Al-Agati and Senari 2012: 33). Albeit referring to Islam as a body of values did not necessarily imply that discriminatory gender legislation was going to be implemented, and considering that constitutional laws alone are not sufficient to guarantee that a country complies to gender equality in actual practice, the 2012 constitution attracted substantial criticism by the Egyptian feminist movement, NGO and civil society activists who were excluded in the process of drafting the constitution.

In the attempt to restore its relationship with Egyptian society, Morsi promoted the 'Initiative to Support the Rights and Freedoms of Egyptian Women' (*Mubadara d'am Huquq*

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[25] Al-Jazeera Mubasher 'Interview with Dr. Sabah al-Saqqary', *YouTube*, published on 03/10/2012 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-FoGQIvur8 consulted on 06/06/2016

wa Hurriyat al-Mar'a al-Masrya), launched on 26 March 2013.[26] The initiative promised to bind the government to adopt democratic and pluralist principles in the procedures aimed at the drafting of women-related legislation, thereby guaranteeing that the diverse perspectives held by Egyptian society in matter of women and gender issues could be accounted for in future laws. The initiative involved representatives from diverse civil society and state institutions to work together towards producing a package of laws and recommendations concerning six broad areas affecting women and their rights. These areas targeted issues of harassment, women's political, economic and social rights, women's representation in the media, and cooperation among women's NGOs.

The Egyptian military removed the MB from government on 3 July 2013, making it impossible to know about the outcome of the initiative. By July, only one session (on harassment) was held. As harassment was a paramount issue back then, the Muslim Sisterhood's interventions are therefore worth mentioning, regardless of the limited information available. On that occasion, MP Hoda Ghania asserted that Egypt's solution to the problem of harassment rested on the revalorisation of the role that the family and the religious institutions played in the upbringing of children.[27] Albeit a gender-sensitive education is central to any strategy targeting the resolution of gender issues and women's violence, Ghania's intervention reflected the classic MB's approach to society's problems, whereby long-term cultural and educational reforms enjoyed priority before short-term legal interventions. Furthermore, and although it is only conjecture, given that the MB regarded Turkey as a model for Egypt's state feminism, one could imagine that Morsi's government would have favoured legislation that prioritised the welfare of the family before women's diverse needs and individualities.

Conclusions

The opening up of the Egyptian public and political spheres after the 2011 uprisings benefited the Muslim Sisters significantly in terms of political participation. In addition to their traditional roles as voters and recruiters of voters, women took part in the elections as candidates, obtaining office in the Egyptian parliament and government for the first time. Several became FJP co-founders and had the opportunity to play a leadership role in the Women's Sections of the party. Above all, since the MB was no longer subjected to repression, the Sisters could practice their activism openly in Egyptian society, expanding to new spaces and constituencies. Yet, the inclusion of the Sisters in politics took place within the framework and agenda that the MB set for women. The MB granted women greater participation and role in its political institutions, but not in those MB offices tasked with taking political decisions, which remained a priority of male members. Consequently,

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[26] SupportEgyWomen 'Initiative for the Rights and Freedoms of Egyptian Women', *YouTube*, published on 26/03/2013 [in Arabic]. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0p0JXjT_MZk consulted on 06/06/2016

[27] NCWegypt 'Dr. Omaima Kamel and Dr. Hoda Ghania on harassment', *YouTube*, published on 13/04/2013 [in Arabic] URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fo6C0wUVwl4 consulted on 06/06/2017

women's ability to influence MB politics remained severely limited, despite the fact that women's contribution had been crucial for the MB to gain power. The Muslim Sisterhood's leadership and authority continued to be confined to women-only spaces, from within which the Sisters carried out activities in support of the MB's objectives. These aimed at securing the MB into a position of power in Egypt and advancing the MB social-conservative programme of reform for Egyptian society, through initiatives that aimed at the revalorisation of the institution of the family, women's motherhood role, and female virtues such as piety and modesty.

Since its establishment, the MB channelled women towards traditional areas of activism such as charity and *da'wa*, which made it somehow expected for the movement to do the same after the uprisings. Albeit a movement for gender change exists within the MB, the Muslim Sisterhood's efforts in this direction have been limited by factors such as state repression, the survival of gender-conservative worldviews across the MB leadership and its members, and a highly hierarchical, nepotistic and male dominated MB organisation. After 2011, the MB continued to reward members with positions of leadership based on their loyalty and abidance to the movement and the principles of its organisation, a practice that discouraged member's criticism and change. Given the opportunity to expand its role in Egyptian society, the MB extended the same to its female members, but appointed to political positions those women who embodied cultural, religious and gender values similar to that of the MB leadership. Consequently, those Sisters who acquired greater visibility in the ranks of the movement after 2011 failed to challenge the MB's gender doctrine or male authority. Rather, they carved a political role for themselves by emphasising gender difference and separate spheres of influence for men and women, in order to fit into the MB male dominated culture. Overall, the entrance of the Sisters into politics after the 2011 uprisings did not contribute to a significant diversification of the gender worldviews and positions promoted by the MB in such spaces. Arguably, like that of Islamist male members, the activism and gender worldviews of those Sisters contributed to nurture, rather than to diminish, the preoccupation of the secular-oriented sectors of Egyptian society for the future of women's rights in the post uprisings period.

Acknowledgements

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