



Case Study: Women's Rights in Egypt

Partners: NWF, CEWLA, ACT, Better Life, HMLC

Country: Egypt

I. Summary

The 25th of January 2011 uprising in Egypt called for freedom, dignity and social justice. The uprising was full of opportunities and challenges for Egyptian men and women who have been deprived of their political, social and economic rights. Hence, the revolution has given women a sense of freedom and empowerment, and seemed like a perfect opportunity to claim their rights. However, while many groups, including women, overcame their fear to speak out against violations of their basic rights, the changed power relations threatened to ignore women's rights or even reverse gains that were won in the past. Oxfam partners in Egypt have increased their efforts during the last year to collectively formulate priority demands on women's rights and bring these demands to the forefront.

II. Why Oxfam funded this project

Oxfam has been working in Egypt since the early nineties, and it has long standing partnerships with 12 to 15 partners that base their programs on rights and inclusion. As Egypt has a strategic regional position and faces increasing pressures for economic, social and political change, Oxfam sees an important role in supporting civil society along with nascent youth movements. Oxfam works on sustainable livelihoods, social and political participation, and on gender justice. Core to Oxfam's approach has been supporting local civil society to be a democratic and accountable actor vis à vis the state in the context of development and human rights.



III. Full description

Oxfam partners in Egypt have made collective and coordinated efforts to ensure an active role of Egyptian women in formulating and building a democratic country that respects the rights of women. In spite of equal participation in the protests that led to the ousting of Mubarak on February 11, 2011, Egyptian women have been marginalized throughout the transition and change process.

The Supreme Council of Armed Forces has excluded women from different bodies negotiating the transition in Egypt. It has also cancelled the quota reserving 64 seats for women in parliament (out of 444), and has provided no alternative. Women have been excluded from the drafting committee of the new constitution and from the various

committees charged with changing legislation. The constitutional assembly included only 7 women out of 100, none of them explicitly working on women rights. The legitimacy of laws on child marriage, divorce and female genital mutilation is now being criticised due to the involvement of Suzanne Mubarak (the former president's wife), although these were the results of years of struggle of various women's rights groups.



The transitional authority has dissolved the previous National Council of Women (NWC) and recreated it to its own liking, ignoring the critiques of women groups. Women have been excluded from provincial governor posts on the grounds that they would be unable to work effectively in the current security environment. In confrontations between police and protesters and in an apparent attempt to force women off the street women protesters have endured aggressive sexual harassment including so called 'virginity testing' of women by the military authorities. A conservative discourse is challenging the notion of women's rights as being alien and not truly Egyptian, and is calling for women's return to the household.

Women in Egypt as participants in the movements for democratic reforms, and more explicitly now as advocates for deeper political transformations, have succeeded in framing women's issues as an important component within the broad agenda for democratic change. Oxfam counterparts working on women's rights are connected to workplace and neighborhood community groups and build bridges between gender justice and broader social justice issues. Continuing to build and to maintain those bridges will strengthen women's agency and their leadership role in the struggles for further political and social democratization.

Methodology

The partners ACT, CEWLA and NWF are members of the Egyptian Feminist Coalition of NGOs, which was established immediately after the revolution. The coalition currently includes 17 members aiming to raise women's voice, demanding equal and fair representation, and protecting rights of women. It meets on a regular basis to formulate shared positions; both the coalition and its individual members are active in lobby and advocacy for women's rights targeting officials, new political parties, parliament and media. The efforts of these women's rights partners are supported and complemented by other civil society organizations specialized in human rights or reaching out to rural areas, such as HMLC and 'Better Life'.

Oxfam supports these organizations in a number of ways. It provides funding to the various activities and initiatives of these organizations. It also provides the space for key members of the organization to make themselves heard by stakeholders in Europe. Women's rights also featured prominently on the interactive social media campaigning website [Meanwhile in Egypt](#).

Results & Successes

In June 2011, during an event led by 500 non-governmental organizations, including the Egyptian Feminist Coalition of NGOs, a Charter was released listing the social and political demands of Egyptian women towards building a democratic Egypt. Endorsed by approximately half a million Egyptian men and women through a signature campaign, the Charter calls for women's political and social representation, access to justice, redress of discriminatory legislation and fulfilling the commitments to international human rights conventions, including social and economic rights.ⁱ



Besides the Coalition having successfully organized the national celebration of International Women's Day in March 2012, for the past few months women's organizations have been working on a number of national initiatives and campaigns to investigate women's needs and demands in the constitutionⁱⁱ.

Finally, it is important to note that many writers published articles in newspapers criticizing the marginalization of women while they were and are integral part of the revolution.

IV. Challenges & Failures

The coordination of the women movement and strong popular support to put forward women's rights demands was a great step. Yet, despite massive public support for the Charter, the transitional government has done nothing to address these demands.

Another challenge lies in civil society organizations and reformists working for change having to address a variety of pressing issues in this critical time.

Future Opportunities

Different women's rights organizations have been active throughout the past year and a half to encourage women to participate in shaping the future of their country, through casting their votes, and running for elections to be able to have women representatives in decision making structures. It has become clear to political parties and politicians that women, who have been actively participating in elections, comprise a substantial number of voters, and are a force to reckon with.

V. Read on

[Egypt's Women Find Power Still Hinges on Men](#) article New York Times, author David D. Kirkpatrick, 9 January 2012

VI. Additional Information

Counterparts: NWF, CEWLA, ACT, BLACD, HMLC

Project: 'Other' (this is a non formalized initiative to which various Oxfam partners contribute).

Bureau/field office dealing with the project: Middle East and North Africa Bureau (Oxfam Novib)

Country and further context: After more than 30 years of Mubarak being in power, unprecedented mass demonstrations starting on January 25th 2011 led to his ousting on February 11. The uprising was driven by a strong belief that change was possible and quickly gained massive support across the country. Men and women from different religious and social backgrounds were united in their demands against corruption, unresponsiveness in government and decades of heavy restrictions on civil liberties. Although the events were historic and unpredictable, public opposition to the Mubarak regime had been mounting for years. Economically the country has gone through far-reaching reforms leading to significant economic growth, but unequal distribution of the new wealth has resulted in public dissatisfaction and unprecedented social unrest. Massive strikes and demonstrations in the industrial heartland, the large cities of the Nile Delta, over the past few years, have exposed the limits of acceptance by the society and pose a serious challenge to the regime.

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Source Case: Oxfam Novib country strategy 2012, monitoring and/or annual reports, interviews with NWF, Egyptian Feminist Coalition of NGOs, Press releases, [Egyptian Women's Charter](#)

Aim of the Case:

Campaigning (for strengthening lobby and campaigning)

Telling (for sharing insights and trust)

Learning (for sharing and learning from experience)

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ⁱ In December 2011, the Egyptian Administrative Court issued an order to banning virginity tests for female detainees, after several women allegedly were subjected to such examinations following protest in Cairo's Tahrir Square in March. In that same month thousand women marched through downtown Cairo, an extraordinary expression of anger over images of soldiers beating, stripping and kicking female demonstrators in Tahrir Square. According to the New York Times, historians called the event the biggest women's demonstration in modern Egyptian history and the most significant since a 1919 march against British colonialism inaugurated women's activism.

ⁱⁱ A number of organizations such as ACT, CEWLA working with others in the Egyptian Feminist Coalition of NGOs have written these demands in several documents, which they are currently working jointly to compile together in one document to present to the constituent assembly. Among these demands is: respect of all international agreements concerning women rights signed by the Egyptian state and repealing any national legislations that collide with these agreements; ensuring that social justice and equity are respected and that men and women are treated equally before the rule of law; gender equality in employment and high ranking public positions. The state is responsible for promoting women's rights through affirmative mechanisms and policies (stipulated in the CEDAW), as well as fighting negative norms and traditions that degrade women.