Gender and Civil Society

In the Context of the Egyptian Revolution 2011

Lena Gruber, Mag. Claudia Throm

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Ferenc Miszlivetz

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i   Introduction

One year ago the so called *Arab Spring* started with the overthrow of Tunisia's president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January, 14th 2011, followed by the *revolution* in Egypt and the withdrawal of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. In the context of the civil society movement in Egypt, we are going to discuss the concept of civil society with a gender perspective.

In the first chapter the concept of civil society will be presented. Therefore, articles from researchers on civil society, such as Marc Nerfin, an expert on alternative development and citizenry, Ferenc Miszlivetz, a Hungarian sociologist specialized on civil society and Central and Eastern Europe, Jody Jensen and Jude Howell, researchers in gender, civil society and development will be used. In that context, the terms revolution and social change will be discussed briefly as civil society agents are always demanding some kind of change in the society. Also, this seems interesting as the Egyptian upheaval is always called *revolution*.

Considerations about gender and civil society as well as gender and social transformation will be made in the second chapter. We want to point out some reasons, why a gender-lens is not only interesting but also necessary for a comprehensive analysis of civil society and successful action by civil society agents. The main literature used for that chapter is the article *Gender and Civil Society* by Jude Howell for the *Global Civil Society Yearbook 2005/6*.

In the third chapter the theoretical debate about gender and civil society and social transformation shall be applied on the Egyptian revolution. It will be discussed how women participated in the revolution, and what maybe held them back from joining the protests. It shall be assessed – as far as possible at that time point – what opportunities women have in participating in the building of the *New Egypt* (name given by protesters for the Egypt after the Mubarak regime.) Therefore, the used literature is mainly newspaper articles as well as academic/popular-scientific articles from different experts on the region. The reason for including newspaper articles for an academic paper as a

resource is that the events took place recently and not a lot of scientific articles are available yet. We try to read these newspaper articles having in mind the role and power of media in constructing "realities" and identities. Especially in analyzing articles and pictures about Egyptian women one has to reflect upon patriarchal and racist structures that lay behind the creation of the image of the "Arab woman"[1] (compare Throm/Gruber 2011).

ii   Background

We consider a social transition such as in Egypt 2011/2012 as process of change that takes more than a spontaneous protest. Therefore, we provide a brief overview of some taken measures by the civil society in Egypt, years before the "revolution" and in the recent events.

Already in the year 2004 the *Egyptian Movement for Change* with the slogan *Kefaya* (the Arab term for "enough") was founded; a heterogeneous network of oppositional groups and individuals represented by the author Alaa Al-Aswani. Among others, they demanded Mubarak to resign, to end the state of emergency (that has been declared in 1981), and to release thousands of political prisoners. They further fought against corruption, violations of Human Rights and the regime's cruelty (Meital 2006). It was also in the year 2004 that workers of the textile fabrics in the city Mahalla al Kubra went on strike to make the miserable working conditions and corruption public. On the 6th of April 2008 strikes were organized again. A very high number of women participated in these strikes. Support came from a youth group that used social networks like *facebook* and *Twitter* to mobilize for the protest. Out of this youth group, the *April 6 Youth Movement*, which played a decisive role in the later overthrow of the regime, was founded. The main demands of the *April 6 Youth Movement* were freedom of speech, and an end of the nepotism in politics and economy (Hamed et al 2011/ Hermann 2011).

A decisive trigger for the mass protests was the killing of the blogger and regime opponent Khaled Said by the Egyptian police. In June 2010, Said was working in an Internet café in Alexandria when the police arrested him for criticizing the regime and

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[1] This common image of the "Arab woman" will be critizised in Chapter 3 "Gender in the Egyptian Revolution"

brutally killed him in the middle of the street. Said became an iconic figure for the uprisings. The *facebook* group *We are all Khaled Said* was founded, which called for protests on the 25th of January 2011, the National Police Day (König 2011). The overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia a few days before, on the 14th of January 2011, increased the motivation of the Egyptians to protest and fueled their hope that a regime change due to the power of people is actually possible in North Africa. Several marches took place in Cairo on that day, which all gathered around the *Tahrir Square* (literally translated to "liberation square") which became famous not only for its signifying name but for being the main site of protest in the Egyptian revolution.

The protests brought together a very heterogeneous group of people and had a non-violent character. In quiet some reports one could read about the revolution being free of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). The revolution in Egypt surely can be identified as a non-violent struggle. But, at this point we would like to express our concern (being feminists and bearing in mind that street harassment and street violence against women, domestic violence and discrimination against women are very frequent in Egypt) that it is hard to imagine that the protests really have been free from SGBV.

For the next eighteen days the protests did not stop and brought more and more people on the streets having one common goal: the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. One of the biggest protests took place on the 28th of January after the Friday prayings in Cairo, Suez and Alexandria. At the same day the regime cut off the Internet and mobile services for the entire country. The regime started to respond violently to the demonstrators with teargas, recruited thugs, shootings into the crowd, etc.. However, the largely non-violent protests went on. The government released prisoners (as one demand of the protesters) and called back the police from the streets. People organized vigilante groups for the security of the protesters; also food, medical care, sleeping possibilities etc. were organized, as protesters occupied the Tahrir Square day and night. The army overtook the control of the city and was supposed to stop the protests. On the 1st of February the *March of a Million* was organized. Mubarak stated on national TV that he will undertake some reforms and that he will not run for presidency in the next elections. The protests did not stop as the people were asking for the immediate end of Mubarak's time in office. At one of the first days in February, the army expressed its solidarity with the people,

which was decisive for the success of the revolution. On the 11th of February 2011 Mubarak fled the country.

The Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that the authority would be transferred to the *Supreme Council of the Armed Forces*. For the next months smaller protests continued to express the fear that there will be no real reforms and the military junta will stay in power (for the course of the Egyptian revolution see Haddad 2012 on AlJazeera). Elections took place from November 2011 until January 2011. The *Freedom and Justice Party* (formed by the Muslim Brotherhood) won the elections, followed by the Salafist *Al-Nour Party* (Coleman 2012). At this point of time it is not predictable which reforms will take place under the new government ruled by Islamic powers. Especially the development of women rights and women's participation in the political, economic and social life needs to be observed closely.

iii Research Interest

In almost every media - from alternative, left-wing or feminist to mainstream or conservative - articles about the participation of women in the Tunisian and Egyptian protests were published. Pictures of marching, leading and screaming women went around the world. Inspired by the unusually high representation of (Arab) women in (western) media and their actually strong participation in the civil society movements in Tunisia and Egypt, we started to discuss the representation of women in media in the context of the *Arab Spring* (compare Throm/Gruber 2011). As a matter of course, the uprisings in the Middle East were also subjects of debates about non-violence, civil society and democracy in and outside the university.

Due to these considerations and observations we developed an interest about gender and civil society and the following questions:

How did women participate in the Egyptian upheaval? What changes towards gender equality and women's empowerment could be achieved? These questions cannot be assessed with the limited time and research possibilities we had at our disposal and our

limited background knowledge on the region. As we both focused our studies on gender and peace we decided for the following research question:

How does a gender analysis enrich discussions about civil society and social transformation theoretically and in the context of the Egypt revolution?

Civil society is a sphere of organization and articulation separate from the state which operates in the public sphere. Civil society units are characterized by common interests and solidarity. We assume that a gender sensitive approach towards the theoretical concept of civil society especially provides a critical analysis of the use of the public sphere. Further, we are convinced that the period of social upheaval is a crucial moment for women's empowerment as we see it as window of opportunity to change gender relations and roles. We think that a gender analysis of the society is necessary in order to lead social change towards more democracy and positive peace. We will further see how these considerations can be applied for Egypt in the course of the revolution 2011/2012.

1   The Concept of *Civil Society*

In the following chapter the concept of civil society shall be discussed. First, it will be assessed what characterizes civil society, some ongoing debates about the borders of civil society shall be clarified for our understanding of civil society and the historical development of the term will be described briefly. Second, as civil society always claims some kind of social change, we will discuss the terms social transformation and revolution.

1.1   The characteristics of civil society

There is an ongoing debate among scholars what the term civil society includes. The term is often used (sometimes misleading) by politicians, non-governmental organizations, media, transnational organizations, governments and others. The term is neither a synonym for NGOs nor for social movements or protests, nor for the people in general. As mentioned before civil society is a public sphere of articulation and organization separate from the state (Jensen/Miszlivetz 2005).

> *"Civil society can express itself in a great variety of forms, from individual initiatives through social movements, clubs, associations, societies and other organizations. More importantly, however, it is embodied in a spirit of civic solidarity, civil courage and community ethos. This can manifest itself rather spontaneously and can take a wide variety of forms, from mild deliberation to strong protest."* (Jensen/Miszlivetz 2005:180)

It serves as the counterpart of the economic and political system. It can address critique, control and containment of existing and prevailing power-monopolies (i.e., the state, the army, the police, multinational companies, intergovernmental institutions, local authorities, etc.). According to Jürgen Habermas civil society encompasses *"nongovernmental and noneconomic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the lifeworld"* (Habermas 96 quoted in Jensen/Miszlivetz 2005:180). It describes collective action due to a collective idea and goal. Civil society is characterized by self-organization, autonomy, use of the public sphere and the spread of a universalistic idea. Habermas also says that civil society is organized horizontally/non-hierarchically/egalitarian and open to all members of the society. According to him, civil society articulates social problems of the private spheres in the public sphere (Habermas 96 quoted in Jensen/Miszlivetz 2005).

Further, civil society works beyond national borders; it includes global networks as well as local organizations. Though a global or at least regional interconnectedness of civil society can be observed, the forms of expression of civil society depend on the cultural context, religion, media, state authority and suppression, gender relations and roles and previous historical movements.

The uprisings in Egypt are an act of civil society as its agents operated against and independent from the governmental and economic elite. The protests were characterized by a high level of solidarity among a variety of actors, which common main goal was the overthrow of the regime. The networking amongst these actors (not only with the help of social media) was impressive and well planned. The *April 6 Youth Movement* received support and trainings by CANVAS (Centre for Applied Non Violent

Action and Strategies) which was founded by OTPOR members, the civil society movement that played a decisive role in overthrowing Slobodan Milosevic in 1999.[2] Thus, the agents of civil society in Egypt are interlinked with others worldwide. Also, the strong use of social media enabled an expression of solidarity worldwide. (Though, the role of *facebook* and *Twitter* should not be exaggerated.) The networking and interdependent character of the developments of the whole region from Northern Africa to the Arab Peninsula need no further explanation.

1.2 Historical Development

The concept of civil society evolved in the eighteenth century with the industrialization and capitalist development in Western Europe and North America (Howell 2006). In the 1980ies, the term underwent a revival in the context of the liberation struggles in Eastern Europe. Marc Nerfin talked about a *Third system* that is a counterpart to the political system (*the Prince*) and the economic system (*the Merchant*). This *Third system* he is describing is de facto the concept of civil society though he is not using this term*.* He explains that the third system is not synonymous with the people. It brings together those people who are reaching a critical consciousness of possible change and the role they are playing in society. (That was clearly the case in Egypt.) Further, he adds that *"the Third system associations are formed by citizens whose situation in society, and/or some personal reason, whether intellectual, moral or spiritual, makes them anxious to improve their lives, individually or collectively, and that of others"* (Nerfin 1987: 173). The *Third system* offers a space for those never or rarely heard. Nerfin calls for the empowerment of people in the shadow of the white, western, elitist, male, Christian discourse. He points out the power of people in peace movements all over the world at the end of the Cold War. Interestingly, Nerfin (1987: 176) especially recognizes the efforts of women in the strengthening of the *Third system*, as he states, "social orders created and dominated by men have failed." Further, he believes that women's movements all over the world play a crucial role in building a more peaceful and democratic world. Despite his acknowledgment of women's movements he did not provide a gender perspective of the *Third system*. According to Nerfin the networking of the *Third system* is operating at the global, regional, national and local level. *"Their*

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[2] Compare *Bringing down a dictator* 2000, a documentary about the OTPOR movement

centres are everywhere, their peripheries nowhere. Networking simply means that a number of autonomous, equal and usually small groups link up to share knowledge, practice, solidarity or act jointly and/or simultaneously in different spaces" (Nerfin 1987: 186-7). Thus, the *Third system* stands for civil emancipation, empowerment and equality.

Jude Howell (2006: 15) does not only distinguish between the state, the market and civil society as Nerfin does, but adds a fourth site, namely the household. She explains,

> *"We conceptualise these sites as concentrations of power galvanised by distinct dynamics – in the case of the state, the dynamic of coercion and regulation; in the case of the market, the dynamic of profit and accumulation; in the case of the household, the dynamic of material and affective provisioning; and in the case of civil society, the dynamic of voluntary solidarity."*

As mentioned, she speaks of "voluntary solidarity" within the units of civil society. *"For civil society to sustain itself, people need to be able to associate voluntarily [...] and to have a common reason to associate"* (Howell 2006: 15). Further Howell enriches the concept of civil society with a gender perspective, which will be discussed closely in Chapter 2.

1.3   Discussion and clarifications about the borders of civil society

The concept civil society is theorized and filled with different meanings and considering the ongoing academic debate which actors should be summarized under it (movements/actions/social spheres); we want to discuss some of the considerations and results of discussions we had in the process of writing this paper.

Independence from the State

There is a debate to which extend civil society has to exist independent from state structures. Therefore, it needs to be clarified that interaction does not mean dependence. The movement in Egypt had some very powerful supporters like oppositional parties; and in the course of the protests the military expressed its

solidarity with the protesters. Also, media always plays a decisive role in influencing people and policies. Nevertheless, it was a civil society movement, organized and mobilized by the people.

Non-Violence

Some scholars argue that the term civil society should only include non-violent movements. We think that the boundaries of civil society could be drawn if "civil society actors" are founding a military group to achieve their goals. Spontaneous outbreaks of violence or violent reaction to police violence are likely to happen in a civil society movement. This does, of course, not mean that any form of violence should be accepted nor that organized violence or a paramilitary group can be considered civil society. Civil society movements can involve violent outbreaks but have limits considering the use of physical force.

The boundaries can be observed when an armed group is formed out of a civil society movement, as it was the case in Libya due to several reasons, which to discuss would go beyond the scope of this paper. In the case of Egypt, the uprisings can be called an action of the civil society, as the violence that appeared was spontaneous, not organized and mostly reactions on violence from police or recruited thugs. Several participants confirmed that non-violence was promoted (Steinweg 2011).

Comprehensive change

Some people in social movements argue, that the movement is more likely to be successful, when activists are concentrating on one demand rather then a comprehensive societal, political and economic change. In our point of view, it is exactly the contrary. When fighting inequality and social injustice it needs to be a fight on many fronts. This debate is of special relevance in the fight for women rights and women's participation, as they are often left behind in the rebuilding of the society after a democracy or peace movement. This will be discussed closer in the chapter on *Gender and Social Transformation.*

1.4 Considerations about social transformation and revolution

Civil Society agents are always demanding some kind of social change. As the uprisings in Egypt are often referred to as *revolution*, the question appears, what a revolution is, and if the revolts and the overthrow of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt be called a revolution.

The social scientist Jeff Goodwin (2001) defines a revolution as *"a situation, where the state or political regime got overthrown by a civil movement in an irregular, extra-constitutional and/or violent process."* This definition focuses on the result of an uprising. In Egypt and other Arab countries this result is not yet clarified. The countries are still in transition and a more democratic structure is not guaranteed. According to Jack Goldstone (2001), a political scientist, a revolution is the aim of formal or informal civil movements for a transformation of political institutions and authorities. These efforts are non-institutional and undermine the political regime. Thus, revolution is the process of transition and does not necessarily say something about the outcome. According to that definition, Egypt is in an ongoing revolution.

Charles Tilly (1973) observed that one of the ways revolutions happen is that "the efficiency of government coercion deteriorates". That decline occurs "when the character, organization and daily routines of the population to be controlled change rapidly" (Tilly 1973 quoted in El-Ghobashy 2011). Following Tilly, the protests in Egypt are to be called a revolution.

We are convinced that a revolution needs preparation. Social transition is never as spontaneous as the term *revolution* might suggest as the former CANVAS trainer Ivan Marovic explains to Tina Rosenberg from *Foreign Policy*:

> *"Revolutions are often seen as spontaneous. [...] It looks like people just went into the street. But it's the result of months or years of preparation. It is very boring until you reach a certain point, where you can organize mass demonstrations or strikes. If it is carefully planned, by the time they start, everything is over in a matter of weeks."* (Ivan Marovic quoted in Rosenberg 2011)

Besides the scientific definitions of the term, the *revolutionaries* in Egypt are using the Arab term *thawra* to describe their action and effort to overthrow the regime, which mostly is translated into to *revolution* (see Winegar 2012).

2   Gender and Civil Society

On the one hand, there is little theoretical literature on gender and civil society, although both are research fields of power relations, exclusion and suppression, the role of the state and social interaction as well as the linkage of the personal and the political.
On the other hand, a lot of empirical studies focus on the role of women in civil society movements. The following chapter outlines the necessity of discussing civil society from a gender perspective.

2.1   Gender and Civil Society in Action

According to an article by Jude Howell in the Global Civil Society Yearbook 2005/6, many reasons why the relationship between gender and civil society should be analyzed more closely exist.

"*The first and perhaps most obvious reason for feminist theory and practitioners is that women have been significant actors in the theatres of civil societies across the world*" (Howell 2006: 39). As women are in many state still marginalized in national and party politics, informal, self-organized, communities groups etc. build windows of opportunities to become politically active. Women all over the world fought for their rights to vote, against domestic and gender based violence, for land rights, women rights or marriage rights, or for an equal payment.

Second, gender mainstreaming in analyses and action of civil society is important, because styles of organization, mobilization, leadership and solidarity might vary between men and women (Howell 2006).

Third, civil society as an open and unregulated form of political organization bears the risk of being undermined by sexist and other discriminatory practices. On the other hand it has subversive potential:

"*It can provide a site for organizing around feminist issues, for articulating counter-hegemonic discourses, for experimenting with alternative lifestyles and*

for envisioning other less sexist and more just worlds. [...] Yet it can also be an arena where gendered behaviors, norms and practices are acted out and reproduced. [...] Civil society can be the terrain of conservative ideologies that foster women's dependency in the constricted space of the family as well as of emancipatory ideologies that aspire to gender equality." (Howell 2006: 39f)

Civil society discourses, spaces and organizations are shaped by and reproduce gender relations, just as the political and the economical system.

Fourth, women have to be cautious when the language of civil society is used for debates about state deregulation or community provision of welfare services. There is a danger that these ideas push women into the private sphere and family care, the unpaid and undervalued "care" sector (Howell 2006).

The fifth argument mentioned in the Civil Society Yearbook is that feminists are well placed in fighting against oppression and just power relations in civil society because of their own experience on issues of domination and emancipation (ibid.).

2.2   Theoretical Considerations about Gender and Civil Society

Beside the mentioned reasons exist more considerations on how a gender lens is necessary in the practice of the field of civil society. The most obvious is the discussion about the dichotomy between the private and the public; where women are ascribed to the private sphere and men to the public. As civil society always operates in the public sphere, it is useful to assess how men and women are represented in the public and how they are making use of the public space. Perceptions of femininity and masculinity, codes of conduct or cultural taboos do have an influence on how women participate in the public sphere. In civil society action women can make use of these social and cultural notions, or they intentionally provoke attention by ignoring them. Analyzing civil society with a gender lens quickly shows that the public sphere is not equally accessible for all citizens. Gender is besides other factors like race, ethnicity, class/socio-economic status a main axe of exclusion in the public sphere (Howell 2006).

To analyze gender and civil society more closely, and especially the use of the public sphere, we would like to apply feminist peace theory that shall be explained briefly.

Feminist Peace Theory

The famous statement of the western 1960ies feminist movement "the private is political" is also the ground for feminist peace theorists. Feminist peace theory points out the interconnectedness of all forms of violence (against women). It considers gender inequalities and gender-based violence in the private and the public sphere. It further considers political oppression and unequal access to higher positions in politics, economics, in social life and education. Further, it distances itself from the concept of state security to a more comprehensive idea of human security or inclusive security (Weber 2005). We speak about the "continuum of violence" affecting women in the domestic and public sphere, in times of peace and war. Gender-based violence includes economic violence, domestic violence, state violence, sexual and physical as well as psychological violence related. Feminist peace means making women visible, especially in situations of conflict. It refuses the victimization of women as this would deny that women are powerful, active political agents. But, it points out that it is mostly women that are victims of wars nowadays. Also, it criticizes western feminists that often portray women of the global South as passive victims of violence and patriarchy. Considering social transformation processes, feminist peace theorists point out the structural exclusion of women in the rebuilding of the new social structures in peace building in democratization processes and therefore builds the ground for feminist action in peace building and democratization (ibid.).

Considering feminist peace theory and civil society studies, we are moving away from the private – public dichotomy as well as the politics-economics-civil society triangle. Gendered power relations pervade all spheres of life, the spheres of state, economy, civil society and family/household. It is true that the "women's sphere" in almost every society is rather associated with the private than with the public, but it is the same patriarchy that rules the private and the public. Civil society is interlinked with family, political and economic system. Gender relations in all these spheres are influencing each other.

2.3 Gender and social transformation

"The spaces and institutions within civil society can exclude women, but they also have an emancipatory potential, which feminists can and do make use of." (Howell 2006: 39)

The recent awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee from Liberia and Tawakkul Karman from Yemen is a great sign for the power of women in liberation struggle. The three laureates are not only symbols for peace and democracy, but for the empowerment of women. With their fights, they have shown, that there is no democracy and no peace without women. Also, their stories tell that a movement can be more successful with a gender sensitive approach, with a critical gender analysis of the society you want to change and the thoughtful reflection of gender roles and relations. This chapter provides ideas why a gender perspective is important for comprehensive social change.

> *"The history of women's participation in liberation or revolutionary struggles in a number of conflict areas in the last 25 years has demonstrated that armed conflict may create opportunities for women's greater participation in decision-making within the family, within the community and on a national scale in a post-conflict country."* (Etchart/Baksh 2005)

Obviously, that does not mean that an armed conflict is necessary to empower women, neither that an armed conflict automatically leads to women's empowerment. But some case studies show that women are able to gain power in the phase of reconstruction after a conflict[3]. The time, where major changes towards a more democratic, peaceful and equal society take place, is also a window of opportunity for women.

This is especially the case, when women actively participated in these movements for change. The participation and public representation make women visible in the society. The rebuilding of political and social institutions as well as economic structures leads to a shift of power.

Further, when changing aspects of social and political structures, gender roles and perceptions are changing too (Etchart/Baksh 2005). But a change in concepts of femininity and masculinity only works when both, men and women, are working on it. A

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[3] *Conflict* does not necessarily mean a violent conflict or war. The uprisings in Egypt can be called *conflict*.

challenge for women is to use the participation in the informal civil society movement as a springboard to gain more decision-making power in formal politics. Thus, the public participation of women in the movement (like demonstrations, strikes, organizational functions) can be one factor that changes perceptions of gender roles. Another factor is the history of women rights and women's struggle. Women's empowerment and democracy do not come over night.

According to Hilkka Pietilä (1984), a women's movement "opens up new perspectives for equality between men and women as well as for social transformation altogether. An analytical, cognitive women's movement as such is a peace movement." We can only talk about sustainable and comprehensive peace or democracy when gender equality is ensured. Therefore, the fight for democracy and peace as well as the fight for gender equality cannot be separated and ideally go hand in hand with each other.

3 Gender in the Egyptian Revolution

Before analyzing gender in the revolution in Egypt, we consider it as important to express some thoughts about the representation of Arab women in the media, public discourse and even scientific work. Talking about gender in the Middle East is a very sensitive issue. Further, we want to briefly portray the societal stand of women in Egypt as this is a relevant factor for the (non-)participation in the protests.

3.1 Critique on the image of the "Arab Woman"

First of all, the Middle East is not synonymous with Islam. (Neither Islam nor the Middle East automatically stands for women's suppression.) Women belonging to religious minorities, such as the Copts in Egypt, are mostly experiencing the same gender perceptions as Muslim women in the same socio-economic situation (Al-Ali 2005). Local traditions, cultural practices, political configurations and economic conditions, etc. are factors leading to a very diverse situation of women.

It has to be pointed out that women are never - in no region or context - a homogenous group.

Further, one has to be careful, when political actors are instrumentalizing women rights for their own goals. In the construction of the threat of Islamist powers in western media and politics gender relations are very often misused for political reasons. The liberation of women was used as an argument in the Afghanistan and Iraq war. In Egypt, it was used to keep a non-Islamic, pro-western authoritarian leader into power and to exaggerate the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Arab women are most of the time represented as passive, suppressed, veiled, non-political human beings. We want to point out that life realities of Arab women are diverse and sometimes the contrary of the common picture. It is to mention, that even among western feminists the picture of the helpless suppressed veiled Arab woman is drawn, which is not only oversimplified, but also racist. That picture and assumptions take away the power of Arab women to act as political agents. Western feminists do not have to and should not speak for Arab women. Arab gender researchers and feminists, as Nadje Al-Ali point out:

> *"In contrast to stereotypical depictions of Middle-Eastern women as passive victims of patriarchal oppression, women in the region have organized themselves for over a century to challenge both state authority and the prevailing gender ideologies and oppressive practices shaping their every-day lives."* (Al-Ali 2005: 101)

Women in the Middle East were fighting against several forms of inequality, legal restrictions, political barriers, against colonial occupation, imperialism and conservative patriarchal values. But there are huge differences in the countries of the Middle East according to women's movements.

3.2   Women's struggle in Egypt

In the *Global Gender Gap Report* 2010, Egypt is ranked 125th out of 135 countries. One has to be careful with such rankings. The *Global Gender Gap Report* considers the following four criteria: Economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. Though the statistic data does not

represent the heterogeneous life situations of Egypt women, an existing gender inequality can be read out: Less than one quarter of women is working in the formal sector. The female adult unemployment rate is three times higher than the rate of men (19% to 6%). The literacy rate of women stands at 58%, compared to 75% of men. Only 2% of the members of the parliament and only 9% ministerial positions were hold by women in 2010.[4]

The Egyptian society is considered as very dangerous for women in terms of street harassment, sexual violence and domestic violence. The legal situation to punish violence against women can be called insufficient and misogynistic. The *UN Development Programme* found 50% of all women had been subjected to sexual harassment and even 99% to verbal harassment by men. According to a 2008 study of the *Egyptian Center for Women's Rights*, an Egyptian NGO, even 83% of Egyptian women reported sexual harassment, and 62 percent of Egyptian men admitted that they had harassed women. Further, though female genital mutilation is prohibited, according to UN data, about 80% of women in Egypt have been subjected to this violent practice (Mekhennet 2011).

Women's movements in Egypt (1920s and 30s) started to become strong with the struggle against the colonial power, though Egypt is also known for its historic female political figures. In 1923 the *Egyptian Feminist Union* was founded. Hoda Shaarawi, the founder, shocked the country with going unveiled. Egypt was the first Arab country to elect a woman to parliament in 1957 - Rawya Attiya was a Liberation Army officer before she became parliamentarian. But, there were only four seats in the parliament held by women in 2005. In 2003, the first female judge came into power, in 2009 the first female university president was elected (Alexander/Fam 2011).

The National Council for Women (NCW) led by Mrs. Mubarak had participated in realizing some important women's rights, recognizing international conventions such as the *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW). The rights to mobility, political representation as a fixed quota, unilateral divorce, and the prohibition of female genital mutilation were officially enforced (Sholkamy 2012). But, these rights were difficult for women to claim in an authoritarian, very patriarchal,

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[4] http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2010.pdf

military ruled regime. *"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 do not deliver gender justice"* (Sholkamy 2012: 95). Further, women's rights activists criticized the NCW to suppress, control and muzzle women's groups that did not go in line with the Mubarak regime. After the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, the NCW was dissolved (Sholkamy 2012).

3.3 Gender and civil society in the context of the Egyptian uprisings

As mentioned, women made themselves quiet visible in the protests in Egypt. Women were not only participating as protesters, but also leading chants, cleaning the streets, hurling stones and were outspoken (Alexander/Fam 2011). They controlled bags and ID cards of people on the Tahrir Square, talked to the media, helped wounded people, distributed water and bread and put videos and pictures on the Internet. The pictures in the media showed a very heterogeneous group of protesters. There were pictures and descriptions of veiled women who covered their face, or just their hair or appeared unveiled, there were women alone, with children, young and elder women (Sholkamy 2012; compare Throm/Gruber 2011).

According to Ghannoushi (2011), the high participation of women means a challenge to two narratives. The perceptions of the role and character of Arab women are put to the contrary. First, the conservative Muslim perception that pushes women into the private sphere of childcare, sexual purity and family honor. Second, the perceptions of the Western world, which sees Muslim women as objects, which are all suppressed by their husbands and are in need of foreign intervention.

Despite the relatively high participation, there were still many Egyptian women, who were not able to join the protests. The non-participation of these women has nothing to do with disinterest or disengagement, but with several reasons related to existing gender roles and relations. They had to take care of children, the family budget, elder family members, or other duties. Some might were just not interested or in favor of the revolution. They *"[...] cooked for their male relatives who were demonstrating, took care of the children whose schools were closed, managed the household budget after banks*

closed and people were not paid, and stood in long lines for food in anticipation of shortages." (Winegar 2012)

This description leads us back to the considerations of civil society and gender. It was not possible for everybody to join the protests in the same way. Public space was not equally accessible for women and men, rich and poor, urban and rural population. Like in every sector of life the intersectionality of gender, socio-economic background and other factors does also exist in the alleged free and egalitarian space of civil society as pointed out by Winegar:

> *"To be the iconic revolutionary in Tahrir, one either had to be poor, without anything to lose, or privileged in certain ways. One usually did not have children to provide for [...] or was not tasked with caring for them in the home [...] It helped if one had a salaried job at a place that was closed because of the revolution (as did government workers and some private-sector workers, mainly in companies). People whose income depended on more informal employment (e.g., housekeepers, vegetable sellers, cab drivers, handymen, day laborers) often were not willing to risk losing potential pay by protesting for hours in Tahrir.* [Authors' note: There are far more women engaged in the informal sector in Egypt then men, as everywhere in the world] *If not among the eldest males in the household, one generally had to have one's family's permission to go to Tahrir, which was most easily (though not always) given to young men, who—in Egypt as elsewhere—are the ones seen to be responsible for fighting for the nation but whose power is still circumscribed by gerontocratic patriarchy. One had to also have the health and stamina to endure hours in the square and attacks by the regime, which, given the 30-year decimation of the public health care system under Mubarak, often meant the youth or the upper classes who could afford quality health care. One had to also live in Cairo or have the capital (both economic and cultural) to get to Cairo and to stay there.* (Winegar 2012: 69)

Thus, women have to face unequal access and possibilities to make use of the sphere of civil society. Besides the gender related duties Egyptian women had to take during the revolution, some women also said that they did not join the protests due to the fear of gender-based violence (Winegar 2012).

In the uprisings in Egypt, women certainly had to feel restrictions to make use of the public sphere.

But, at this point the question appears, how much public space does an association, movement or idea need to be in line with the concept of civil society. Oppressive regimes, wars and other factors always hindered people from using the public space. But, in many cases some forms of protest took place, which are to be considered as acts of the civil society. For example, in the protest against Pinochet in Chile people were clapping with pots and pans every day at the same time to express their opposition to the regime but to avoid getting arrested they did not leave their houses.[5] Women in the non-violent protest against the Liberian civil war denied their partners (mostly soldiers) to have sex to make them stop fighting.[6] These actions have to be included into the concept of civil society. There are in the private sphere, though also public in a sense of common action. Further - as Howell describes civil society as expressing voluntary solidarity - these actions count as actions of civil society.

Back to Egyptian women in the revolution 2011, Winegar points out, that all the women that could not join the protest, but joined the ideas of the uprising were part of the revolution too. They expressed their solidarity to the protest due to supporting their family member, male friends or husbands, or sisters, daughters and female friends.

She further claims that research about political change should not only take place in the public sphere, were the actual struggle seems to take place, but also in the home of people (see Winegar 2012). Not only do day-to-day practices support political action, but also do they represent political change, as well as political change represents changes in the private sphere. That leads us back to the statement "the private is political" and again away from the dichotomy private-public. Social and political transformation is always interlinked with the private, and with power relations determined by gender (among other factors).

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[5] compare *Chile – Defeat of a Dictator* 2000, a documentary about the non-violent CS movement against Augusto Pinochet in 1983, in: A Force more Powerful

[6] compare Pray the Devil back to Hell 2008, a documentary about the women's peace movement in Liberia 2003

A female protester said: *"There are so many women who like me defied their families. The revolution is not only taking place in Tahrir, it is taking place in every Egyptian house. It is the revolution of fighting the patriarch"* (Alexander/Fam 2011).

Many reporters and interviewees talked about the protests as "free of gender-based violence". A *New York Times* article reads: *"Many women had reported an end to sexual harassment during the 18 days of Egyptian protest in Tahrir Square. However, as soon as Hosni Mubarak stood down, harassment started again. A point which Egyptian women reiterated time and again. On the night of Mubarak's resignation, there were numerous cases of sexual assault, most involving groping and verbal slurs"* (Johnson 2011). We can hardly imagine that no woman experienced sexual violence in the course of the revolution, if women reported that they were afraid of going to the Tahrir Square and other public places due to the fear of sexual and gender-based violence. Further, in a society, which is known for a very high level of harassment and violence against women. If the level of SGBV really were remarkably low during the revolution, further studies about that fact would be very interesting.

3.4   Gender Relations after the Revolution

"This revolution is making a new social contract. It is creating a new value system", said 79-year-old feminist activist Nawal El Saadawi (2011), well known for having been fighting for an Egypt with more rights for women for decades.[7]

It is not clear yet whether a transition to a democratic system is taking place in Egypt. Free elections took place, but elections are not the only factor for a democracy. Is El Saadawi's assessment of the New Egypt too optimistic? Especially women rights are in danger of being left behind or even suffering a setback. As mentioned, some protesters and observers described the demonstrations as relatively free of SGBV and female and male protesters as equals. But, what is left of the alleged gender equality and freedom of SGBV? On the 8th of March, the International Women's Day, gender injustices seemed to resurface when marching women were insulted and attacked. Some counter-protesters said, it is not the time to fight for women rights, but the time to build a democratic state.

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[7] Nawal El Saadawi in *Riz Khan* on Al Jazeera, 2/3/2011, accessible under:
http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/rizkhan/2011/03/2011318326616845.html (16/4/2012)

Obviously, this is absurd. As we pointed out in the beginning, women rights and a comprehensive democratic change can only go hand in hand. Mona Eltahawy, reporter for the Guardian, states: "There's a thin line between sex and politics, and it is nonsense to keep repeating the mantra that Egypt's revolution 'wasn't about gender'. What revolution worth its salt can be fuelled by demands of freedom and dignity and not have gender nestled in its beating heart [...]?" (Eltahawy 2011). Nehad Abul Komsan, an activist and founder of the *Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights* said: "More women need to be engaged in the discussions. When we talk to leaders they say it is not the time to talk about gender issues; it is the time to talk about the future. But we can't have a gender-blind future." (Alexander/Fam 2011) Also, Hoda Badran, chairperson of the *Alliance for Arab Women* expressed her concern about women rights after the revolution to a reporter of the feminist online news platform *womensenews.org*: "We have to be careful because many times women participate in the first part of the revolution and then after it's finished, the women are pushed back" (Soguel 2011).

The elections left the *Freedom and Justice Party* (formed by the Muslim Brotherhood) as the strongest party, followed by the Salafist *Al-Nour Party* (Coleman 2012). Some Egyptian citizens, reporters and scholars are expressing their fear that with these Islamic powers women rights will even change for the worse. On one hand, the danger of a worsening of women rights is real, as the Muslim Brotherhood and particularly the Salafists often expressed their patriarchal, conservative, misogynistic worldview. Amal abd al-Hadi, an Egyptian feminist, noted in the New York Times *"that in past Egyptian revolutions, in 1919 and 1952, women's contributions had been met with similar setbacks. One of the feminists' worst fears is that expected revisions in the country's laws will erode the rights they do have, especially if conservative Islamic forces play a greater role in government"* (Otterman 2011).

But, some facts are actually giving the impression that the situation for women indeed will be far away from gender equality. Parliamentary quotas for women have been scrapped and no women were included in the committee that was formed in February 2011 to guide a transition to a new democratic state and constitution.

Many political parties have been formed, each with a women's committee and all formed with the significant involvement of women who hold key positions in these new political parties (except perhaps the Salafist parties). Also, the activists are still present on the political scene and are still demanding democracy and women rights. Women

groups are participating in debates about the new constitution and legal reforms and advocating legal and constitutional justice, including striving for civil personal status codes.

The *National Council for Women* (NCW) was one of the institutions that fell first. The NCW was headed by Suzanne Mubarak, representing the old regime. The NCW was often criticized for controlling and holding back alternative feminist groups and to only seemingly fight for women rights to calm down internal and international demands for gender equality. It is remarkable that women's organizations in Egypt demanded the dissolution of the NCW (NAZRA 2011). Quiet some women's organizations have been strengthened or newly founded in the last year.

The possible change in the political situation of women is hard to assess. The outcome of the elections does not provide an optimistic assessment for the political representation of women. But, women's groups are very strong today and they will not stop demanding more rights. Further, we think that the dissolution of the NCW can provide very positive changes as it only pretended to stand for women rights.

The Egyptian economy did not yet recover. "Some 60–70 per cent of Egyptians in the labor force are employed in the informal sector and it is this sector that is suffering the most and benefiting the least from the revolutionary calls for social justice" (Sholkamy 2012:98). In Egypt, it is mainly religious organizations that provide financial support for poor people. Sholkamy assesses the economic situation and the strength of religious powers as follows: "This may well be the worst outcome of the revolution, since this clientelism and making poverty a religious domain may set the gender agenda back decades because it reinforces stereotypical gender roles and a highly patriarchal gender division of labor" (Sholkamy 2012: 98).

4 Conclusions

The influence of the revolution on the women's rights situation in Egypt is not yet clear and predictable for the future. But, there is quiet some evidence that women will gain more power and rights, and will be able to participate more in public life. Two factors for sure can be assessed as promising for the Egyptian women: Firstly, the very strong

participation in the protests and the reporting about it. Secondly, the historic women's movement in Egypt and the strength of women's organizations that had been under the control of the NCW since 2000. In general, these two factors – the high participation of women in revolutionary struggle and an existing (but maybe banned) strong (historic) women's movement – positively effect women's empowerment in the process of social transformation.

But, in Egypt, the electoral victory of conservative Islamic powers might cause a backlash for gender equality. Thus, conservative religious powers that strongly gain political influence might hold back the enforcement of women rights. (Again, we want to point out that we don't see Muslim women as automatically suppressed, but we also see patriarchal structures and misogynistic worldviews as a serious problem within Muslim organizations and parties.) Also, the economic situation could be assessed as dangerous for women, as women are mainly working in the informal sector that did not profit from the revolution and especially suffers from the economic crisis.

Thus, generally and in the case of Egypt specifically, social transformation can be a window of opportunity for women's rights. Unfortunately, very often in the building of the "new" society women are left behind.

As mentioned, in a democracy or peace movement, a society is more likely to gain more women rights, if women strongly and visibly participated in the revolutionary struggle. But, as we discussed the possibility for women to use the public space, it can be concluded that the alleged openness and general accessibility of civil society is not real. Gender, among other factors, does strongly restrict the use of the public sphere. Women in the Egyptian revolution reported that they were not able to participate due to gender related duties such as taking care of children, or due to the fear of getting harassed or attacked on the street. The reports on the high participation of women and the "violence-free" revolution disguised the life realities of the majority of the women.

In this context, we are questioning how much public space civil society needs, as those people who showed "voluntary solidarity" (see the definition of civil society by Jude Howell) in the course of the Egyptian revolution but could not join the protests could be

seen as part of the civil society movement too. Generally spoken, even if the use of the public space in restricted or even impossible, civil society can still express itself.

We question the distinguishing between the political, the economic, (the household) and civil society from a feminist point of view, as gender inequality and SGBV are existent in all sectors and none is free of violence against women or freely accessible for women. The sphere of civil society is not only in danger to reproduce gender relations - rather then criticizing and fighting them - but more so, might be especially vulnerable for sexism as it is unregulated and self-organized, and could provide a stage for anti-feminist powers.

But, we don't want to portray women as passive, ever-lastingly oppressed victims in all fields of life. We strongly recognize and appreciate the power of women in civil society movements (for example women of Egypt or the recent Nobel Peace Prize laureates Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman). Women all over the world engaged in civil society to fight war, inequality, authoritarian regimes, etc. In the *New Egypt*, the development of the situation for women will be very interesting to observe.

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