



**Beyond the Headlines  
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Yassmine ElSayed Hani, *Al Akhbar Newspaper*  
Nancy Okail, *Freedom House*  
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***How Have Women's Political Rights Fared in Egypt?***

**Patricia Ellis:** Good afternoon everyone and welcome. Thank you all so much for joining us for today's event on "How Have Women's Political Rights Fared in Egypt?" which could not be a more timely topic. I'm Patricia Ellis, president of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We promote women's leadership and women's voices in foreign policy. On behalf of the Women's Foreign Policy Group and our Board Member, who's here with us today, Diana Negroponte—the inspiration for this event, I must say—I want to extend a warm welcome to our members, guests, diplomatic colleagues, and to our partners from NYU DC. Special thanks to its director Michael Ulrich and his team. Thank you so much for your warm hospitality and for having us in your beautiful new building. It's fantastic and we look forward to many more collaborations.

Before I introduce our moderator, Kate Seelye, who will introduce our impressive panelists, I just want to mention a few exciting upcoming events that I think you all might be interested in. On November 27th we will be having one of our Embassy Series events on Jordan hosted by the Ambassador of Jordan—something else that will be very timely and the Embassy Series events are wonderful, so we hope you can all make that. And then on December 5th we will be having an event with a senior State Department official, Tara Sonenshine, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, and this will be about Women, Girls and Public Diplomacy, so we hope that you will all be able to join us.

It is now my great pleasure to introduce our moderator for today, Kate Seelye. She is the vice president of the Middle East Institute. She previously served as a radio and TV journalist covering the Arab world and was based in Beirut. She reported half hour documentaries for the well known PBS show Front Line World, covered the region for NPR, and also for PRI and BBC's The World. So please join me in welcoming Kate Seelye. [*Applause.*]

**Kate Seelye:** I want to thank the Women's Foreign Policy Group for hosting this talk. As she mentioned, it could not have come at a more opportune time. Before we get started and I introduce the panelists, I just wanted to set the stage for this discussion that we're having. As we talk about women's rights in Egypt, I just want to remind you that currently, Egyptians are meeting to attempt to draft the first new constitution since 1971 and getting ready to put it to a referendum by the end of the year. So this will be the first effort since the Tahrir Square uprisings to find the nature of the future of the Egyptian republic. And this new constitution is going to determine, really, how democratic Egypt will be and will determine the balance between the presidency and the parliament. Under Mubarak, it was largely in the hands of the presidency. It will define women's rights. It will define Islamic law—how it will be referenced. And it will define the status of religious minorities. So it is a very critical document that is currently being put together by a group of 100 people, who were appointed by the last parliament. Now, the parliament that appointed them came to power in early 2012 after the first elections, since the overthrow of Mubarak and that parliament was largely Islamist in makeup. 50% of the members were members of the Freedom and Justice Party, the Muslim Brotherhood Party, and some 20% were made

up of hard-line Salafists from the Nour Party. So this is the group that put together this 100 person assembly that's drafting the constitution. The group claimed to put together a diverse—rather, the members of parliament claimed to have put together a diverse Constituent Assembly. Many have claimed otherwise—liberals, Copts and women were appointed, but many have since walked out. And today, there are only five women in the assembly that is drafting Egypt's future constitution—just five women, who will be writing the fate of Egypt's women. And of those five, three are *Ikhwan* members of the Muslim Brotherhood. And to give you an example of where they stand on women's issues, one of their MPs, Aza Al-Garf, who was elected in this last election, wants to roll back divorce laws for women, wants to make it harder for Egyptian women to get out of difficult marriages, wants to roll back the ban on female genital mutilation, wants to pose setting a minimum age for marriage—so, this is the sort of thinking that is going into some of the drafting of the constitution. I'm not going to get into some of the draft articles under debate relating to women—I think that Nancy and some of the others will talk about them—but all of this is coming in a country where women already face many, many obstacles—severe sexual harassment, very little serious legal attention to sexual violence, ongoing practices of female genital mutilation, few access to jobs, etc—although I should note, nobody has jobs in Egypt. And that's why we're here today, to talk about the challenges, possible solutions, and to also look at other countries from the Arab Spring area, like Tunisia, to see what they have done in terms of women's rights in their constitution and see if there are lessons to be learned there.

So, we have three wonderful individuals with us today to talk about this topic, and I'm going to introduce them in the order in which they'll be addressing the audience. We're going to hear first from Nancy Okail, whom I had the pleasure to host at MEI's annual conference just two days ago for an Egypt panel. Nancy is the director of Freedom House's Egypt program, which would normally be based in Cairo, working on the ground, except that she's one of dozens of activists being prosecuted by the Egyptian authorities as part of an ongoing crackdown on independent civil society groups in Egypt. She has over 12 years of experience in promoting democracy and development in the MENA region. She worked in government as a senior evaluation officer of foreign aid and has managed programs for Egyptian pro-democracy organizations that have challenged the Mubarak regime. She is also a visiting scholar at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins. Nancy will be followed by Yasmine ElSayed Hani, who is a foreign news editor and the Washington-based correspondent for a very prestigious Egyptian newspaper called *Al Akhbar*. She's here in Washington, DC hosted by the Woodrow Wilson Center on a fellowship and is researching for her project—and I hope I have the right title—"New Determinants of the US Foreign Policy towards the Middle East after the Arab Spring". Hani was a graduate student at Cairo University during the Tahrir Square uprisings. She spent a lot of time in Tahrir Square and has been interviewed several times on NPR during that very exciting time. Then, we are going to conclude with Zainab Al-Suwaij, executive director of the American Islamic Congress—it's a non-partisan, non-profit, independent organization, dedicated to building inter-faith and inter-ethnic understanding and to promoting human and civil rights in Muslim majority countries. Zainab left a teaching position at Yale University just after 9/11 to co-found AIC, which now has six bureaus worldwide in Egypt and Tunisia and Jordan and Boston and here in Washington, so it has really grown tremendously, and it's trained hundreds of young, Middle Eastern activists in methods of non-violent protest and media mobilization. So we have an incredible group—I should note that each speaker will address their topic for seven to eight minutes, and then we're going to open the floor to a Q&A. So, I would like to invite Nancy to begin.

**Nancy Okail:** Thank you very much for the invite and it's such a pleasure to be here and to speak among the distinguished panel. I usually like to stand against the idea of framing women's issues in isolation from the overall dynamics in any country or in any context. When you're living under a dictatorship or authoritarian leadership, the idea of rights and citizenship is diminished and the rule of law is not actually rule of the game, and it's more of the culture of impunity that is guiding how people behave, how people are treated and how they struggle to get rights. But when you also are a minority or a marginalized group under this regime, you are further and more underprivileged than the rest. And as my favorite author, George Orwell, in *Animal Farm* says, "all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others." [Laughter.] So that's the case in Egypt and I also like giving just an idea of

how women's rights fared in Egypt before the revolution, what happened during the revolution, and what are the conditions right now, and the opportunities and threats to women's rights right now.

So before the revolution, under the Mubarak regime, women were confined by three main dimensions: culture, laws and practice. And without going into an academic framework, I'm just going to give you an example of how this is operationalized in life—in daily life. In 2007, I was conducting an evaluation of rural development projects. And one of the aspects of the project was to raise awareness of the disadvantages of female genital mutilation in Egypt, and of course, this is a big issue in Egypt because over 90% of Egyptian girls are circumcised. When I attended the awareness session for evaluation as part of the project, I found women sitting there from all ages, all cultures, and taking the class and raising their hands and learning of all of the disadvantages of female genital mutilation. After the session, I finished with formal questions and I went and had coffee with them at one of the women's houses and I said, after the session would you still circumcise your girl? And she said, of course. And I said, why? And she said, because I want my girl to get married. So you see, if you translate this into an analytical framework, this is about structure and function. This is about how these habits and traditions serve the survival or the place of women in their communities. And although we had laws in Egypt that actually prohibit it—female genital mutilation—people still practice it.

And it is very important to understand this issue between practice and laws and the difference between rhetoric and what people actually do. When I had people from the Freedom and Justice Party debating the current laws that are in the draft of the constitution, and saying that, yes, Egypt has time for the international human rights rules and everything but Egypt has its own tradition, and even if we put those rights and laws in the constitution, people will practice them because it's a traditional culture. We may keep the age of women marriage at 16 years old, but people in rural areas will still marry their children at 8 or 12 or even less. And they use this rhetoric a lot, and it worries me because they use this argument when they come and speak to people in foreign policy in the international community, and people do not know how to respond to that. The fact of the matter is, again, there is confusion—people always confuse between a strong state and an authoritarian state. A strong state is a state that protects people under the rule of law. An authoritarian state is a weak state that does not have enough power and legitimacy to enforce those laws. So by the same argument, one of the traditions of Egypt—equally as the genital mutilation, equally as the lower marriage age—is family feud. This is a tradition. So if we go by the same token, we should let people kill each other and take their rights by their own hands, because the rule of law is not enforced. And it is very dangerous to look at women's issues as a specific issue away from the overall democratic transition that we want to see.

Now when the revolution happened in Egypt, we had very high hopes that the dynamics would change. But only less than a month after Mubarak was toppled on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February, on March 8, 2011, Egyptian women went to Tahrir Square to stand for rights for women. What happened was that they were harassed, they were beaten, they were sworn at, and a lot of articles came the next day in the national newspapers saying, this is not the time to discuss women's issues, we have priorities. And of course, this is a perfect demonstration of power relations and how people impose power and—as you all know there are different forms of imposing power: direct power, hidden power, invisible power. And the hidden power is who decides what goes into the agenda without raising a hand or raising a finger, just dismissing the issue from the agenda and claiming that this is not a priority right now. A year later, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, myself and three other women were put in a very small cage with 20 other defendants who are accused of crimes of arms trafficking, drug dealing—we were squeezed in that cage. And you can imagine all sorts of things in harassment, even psychologically being in that situation. And we see that after that happened—and we stayed there for hours and hours during the trial—the people from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists in general who always claim that they didn't want women to be in the work place to protect their body and their dignity, none of them said, how could this have happened to three women in that situation in front of the eyes of the whole world? On Women's International Day. So you see, here is the difference between rhetoric and application and the laws and the practice of it. Now, we are having laws that are being drafted in the constitution. This is not the only problem that we are going to face.

And if I may sum up to leave more time for discussion—I would frame the issues in Egypt and the Middle East, and in general the Arab world, into four main areas. First of all, is lack of awareness of the issues of women and where they come from. One of the most prevalent discourses against women and women's rights—that the Muslim Brotherhood advocates now—they always make a reference point in everything that's been achieved in the rights of women back to the old regime or the West. So in Egypt, all the laws that were in favor of women's rights—the argument is that these are all a part of the old regime, this is not our culture. Or, this is all Western rhetoric and this is not our culture. So, this is one problem and the way to combat that is to find examples that are locally rooted in order to promote women's rights and stay away from the idea that it's a Western idea or product of the old regime. The second thing is the unfair laws in the constitution—I'm just going to have two more points. Article 36 in the new constitution that is being drafted right now says that men and women are equal only when they don't contradict with Shari'ah law, and this is a very vague, broad way to define it because if we look at it—it's like who gets to define Shari'ah law, what types of principles are we talking about—this can just take us years backwards in everything that women have achieved. Secondly, there is a lack of skills and lack of platform. So, we may have had women in the parliament and we did have women in the parliament and we have women, as little as they are represented, in the Constituent Assembly, but first of all, what ideals do they represent? Secondly, do they have the skills to negotiate and push policy? Do they have the skills to push policy? Do they have equal ability to run for parliament? Going back to my very, very first point that when you have a patriarchal culture, people that are affected first are women and youth and they are unable to fight equally for themselves. When women run for parliament and are attacked, they are not criticized for their political or economic agenda, but for their behavior. They have defamation campaigns about them and about their sexual behavior and their affairs, not treated equally as any other man running for parliament. So that's another layer of oppression that pressures women—their ability to put their claims forward.

I'll stop here and listen to the distinguished speakers and hope to have a more interactive discussion later on. Thank you very much. [*Applause.*]

**Yasmine ElSayed Hani:** Thank you very much for giving me this interesting opportunity to be here and speak to you. Nancy touched on many, many things and many points that she talked comprehensively about on women's issues in Egypt. I will try to frame the issue of women's issues in three main areas, which constitute the reason of the political problems that the whole society is facing now, and not just the women. The women problems in Egypt are not just political, they are social and economic. Unless we consider the social and economic part of their political problems, these are the reasons of their political problems. Of the cultural reasons, I will not go in deep because Nancy mentioned many things, but I will say that we have a cultural aspect of the women problem represented in treating women through inherited traditions and unfortunately, those traditions are superior to laws. So we never have any law in the country—it will not be applied to closed communities according to the inherited traditions. These closed communities are geographically confined, they are underdeveloped, and they are also poor. They do not have enough access to education, and they are having their own social and political discourses as well. The symptoms of these communities are the widespread operations of FGM [Female Genital Mutilation], early marriage, and all these kinds of things. The women in these communities, they do not have a problem with these things because they are being socialized in a way to wait for the marriage, so the earlier marriage for them is less and not a problem. So this is a part of the women crisis in Egypt.

The second aspect is a development aspect. Women have troubles to find a job, to find access to a good education, to healthcare. Women suffer as society suffers as a whole. This extends on a national scope. This is not only in closed communities, but this is national, because we are a developing country. The symptoms of this condition has led women to have less priorities, so women prefer that their husbands find jobs, find access to good education—then themselves having good access to jobs and education. So they are aware of the rights but they do not prioritize these rights. So this is, again, part of their problem. Also, all they are dreaming of—unfortunately, dreaming, not a regular wish, but

dreaming—is their wish to have good housing, access to clean water. This is on a national scope, not in closed communities. We have more than 50% of the Egyptian population under the poverty line. How would we expect women in these terrible and horrible conditions to be aware or to prioritize their own needs over their family's needs? In a recent poll released by Gallup, improving economic conditions affects the say in a society supporting women's rights. Like, for instance, the men who have good education and who have jobs—they tend more to support women's rights. So this is part of the solution, which is development, national development, overall development and not just focusing on women's development. So it's a national solution. Part of this aspect of development would come to be the poor families. So in the poor families, the families might not have enough money to pay for the education of girls, so they prefer to educate the boys because inside the culture, they understand that the boys should be well-raised, should find a job, should have a good education because they are the ones that are going to build a family and have a home. But the girls are going to be fed by their husbands. So for poor families, it is not as important for the girls to be educated as it is for the boys to be educated. They tend to prioritize the education of their boys and this is not because of culture, this is because of their economic conditions. They are having shared symptoms but for different reasons. Also, the poor families, with this understanding, they support early marriage to lessen fiscal pressures on them, because the girls are going to be fed by their husbands so it's okay, whenever possible, to let them marry. Part of this development aspect of the problem is the education. We have illiteracy among women that exceeds 60%. They do not know how to read and write. Of course, this led to a lack of self-confidence in the women's society and community. They do not trust themselves to represent themselves. So, we have in the past voting process—after the revolution—we went to the polling centers many times. We have a high level of women turnout and only 8 out of almost 500 parliamentarians were women—and we have high women turnout. So, they do not trust themselves. They do not trust themselves.

The third aspect of the problem, of course, is the political aspect. We can imagine the past two types of suffering—for whom are they going to vote? For whom the closed communities are going to vote? And for whom the people who are suffering economically are going to vote? But, I would say very briefly that the political aspect after the revolution—I was in Tahrir Square. All kinds of women were there. The participation of women exceeds their class—poor women and rich women were participating. Illiterate and educated women were participating—everyone was participating and we were not participating for luxurious reasons, but we were chanting slogans to topple Mubarak's regime to gain back our lives. To gain back our lives. What happened was that the revolution provided spaces of freedom for everybody equally. That's the problem—that the extremists rose along with the liberals, along with the conservatives, along with the moderates, along with everybody that was included in the political continuum. It is now stretched to include everybody. The consequences of that are that the women are freely operating and are freely attacked. So, they were free to go into the streets on March 8, 2011, but they were free to be attacked as well. This happened because the space of freedom was provided for everybody.

We had three main tracks followed by women after the revolution regarding political activism. The first types of women choose to approach politics—they have high hopes after the revolution and they choose to approach politics through institutions. So, many of them participated in political parties, and political institutions generally, and participated in the parliamentary elections. The second type choose to continue with the field activism and field protests, because they are helpless and believe that the revolution continues and that the topple of Mubarak was just the starting point and not the ending point. They had no hopes in the political organizations or even any of the parties that were established after the revolution. The third type was, as we call it in Egypt, the Couch Party or, *Hezb Al-Kanaba*, who prefer to follow politics and everything that is going on in the country on their TV screens. However, they choose to follow. They have interest because the revolution brought politics to everybody's life—their homes. So, they started to understand that politics is part of all of our problems. So, they kept an eye on politics, but through their homes. Those three types of women were treated differently during the transitional process—which was ruled by SCAF, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—and after the elections they were treated differently, and I will elaborate more in the question and answer time.

The third thing in the political aspect is the representation and quotas. This is a very controversial problem—it's actually an issue. Unlike those who think that this is the solution for the political rights of women, I do not really share this view. I still believe that it's very important but it's not the solution, because we had a law in 2009 that was passed saying that 64 seats in the parliament should be there for women. Those 64 women that held seats in parliament, they were selected by the then-corrupted ruling party to decorate and tarnish the political system, but they do not represent anything and they do not help solve anything. The problem is we have a rise in the Muslim Sisters—part of the Muslim Brotherhood—so they constitute a certain women's group to fight women's rights. And here I'm quoting a prominent woman activist. She said that, "The Islamist regime is trying to fight women through women." So, we have Muslim Sisters but they are seeing women's rights through the lenses and ideologies of the Muslim Brothers and the extremists such as the ultraconservatives, for instance.

I will stop here. I really have other points, but I will stop here and complete in the question and answer. Thank you. [Applause.]

**Seelye:** You will certainly elaborate more on how women are fighting women.

**Zainab Al-Suwaij:** Good afternoon. Thank you to the Women's Foreign Policy Group for hosting such an important panel on a very timely issue. It's been already two years after the Arab Spring and the situation there has been very difficult, very challenging, especially for women in these countries. Starting from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen and Libya—and there are some other countries as well that are still in transition, such as Syria, Bahrain and others. This period of time is a very difficult period of time through the transition. A country I would like to draw an example from where this happened before is Iraq. Almost 10 years ago, similar things happened in Iraq and after decades of dictatorship and very oppressive rules, women were the first victims of these kinds of regimes and throughout the transition period—it's been very long, it's been 10 years now, but still the effort to build strong women activism on the ground was not easy. But there was something I see now missing in the newly democratic Arab Spring countries. That thing is organizing women activists to work and fight for more of their rights. And in 2003, I remember in Iraq, many women activists were gathered together to work specifically on women's rights and how to ensure women's participation politically and economically in their country. In these countries we have to remember that yes, there is a law, there is a constitution, but the social norms, culture and religion play a big role in minimizing women's rights—and only women's rights. For some reason, these laws do not apply to any men in the community, but only women. But you see, a lot of people are conflicted between these things. So even now, after 10 years—I remember in 2003 or 2004, we were working to implement a quota in the constitution or transitional law for women. And that was a key—giving the cultural understanding, the tribal laws, the religious boundaries—all of it minimized women's roles in public life, especially when it comes to political participation. So we demanded at that time no less than 40% participation for women in the government and that was a huge number—all the political parties were shocked. We ended up with no less than 25%, but that set the bar. In the first election in Iraq, we had about 32% of women participate in parliament. The number after the second election went down to 27% but still, no less than 25% and that set a the norm in the culture and society to learn and accept that women would participate in large numbers in their communities.

Now, this is not the case right now in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere. Even in countries, for example, guaranteeing and ensuring women's participation, when it comes to holding that seat in parliament they are excluded. In Tunisia, for example, women have equal rights to men, but when it comes to elections in Egypt or Tunisia, only 2% of women held seats in parliament. This is considered a disaster by all means, because most of these women were on the front line just like men during the revolution, many of them got wounded, got killed. They mobilize, many of them took care of many aspects relating to the success of the revolution, yet their roles were minimized afterwards. And in March of last year, when women were in Tahrir Square standing for their rights, they were told to go back home, this is not your

time, we need to take care of other issues. So always they have that mindset of women come secondary, or not the priority, or not even as equally as men in the community.

The other aspect that appears very strongly in many of these countries is the interpretation and implementation of Shari'ah Law. Yes, we give women their rights, but these rights have to be combined with Shari'ah Law. So, there is a contradiction in the constitution itself when it comes to Shari'ah Law and when it comes to the secular constitutions that serves all citizens of that country. Many people did not realize that but they were very excited—oh, we have a new government, we get rid of the previous regime, the previous dictator. But what the future has for us is unknown until all of these women put their acts together to fight against this wave of more radical forces against women's rights. I think we are in a very critical period of time in the Arab world. Arab women and Muslim women, specifically women in countries after the Arab Spring, laid a foundation and there are opportunities when women fight for their rights right now and implement some of these things in the constitution. It will serve them for many generations to come. But, unfortunately, I did not see this kind of mobilization among women activists in these countries, whether in Egypt, Tunisia—even in Libya and Yemen. Yes, they fought to get rid of the dictators but these efforts have not been really obvious. This is a situation that we are facing right now and lessons learned from other countries, to be able to reach that level of inspiring and flourishing and women's rights, specifically, we have to be able to ensure mobilization of women activists. We see, on the other hand, as Yasmine just mentioned, how the Islamist political parties are mobilizing their women to be able to influence the secular or liberal women in the community to bring them to their own side, which is basically to tell them, no, what you are thinking of as an equal individual in the community is not the solution. You have to come to our side; you have to become a second-class citizen to be able to live the normal life that you want. So, the role that they give them is the traditional role, which is not what many women are looking for, especially in this era and especially after this massive train of freedom that started from Tunisia all the way to Yemen and Bahrain.

So, I would like to conclude with the transitional period we are still in—there is still a lot to come, many elections and many constitutional reforms and all of these issues need to be addressed now and women, secular, liberal, and conservative need to be on one page, mobilized—able to reach the level of women's rights that they are looking for in the near future. Thank you very much. [*Applause.*]

**Seelye:** Thank you Zainab, Yasmine and Nancy for that fascinating overview. We clearly have our work cut out for us—I think we're all in this together. We've heard that women are facing challenges due to culture norms and values, to entrenched positions, to development—clearly the role of the constitution is enormously important in protecting women's rights against these pressures. Before we get into questions of solutions and how to improve the situation, talk a little bit more about what's at stake in this Egyptian constitution and what rights might be rolled back and what's different in Tunisia. So let's start with that. I want to ask you, Nancy, and I'll proceed down—really, tell me what is at stake in the new Egyptian constitution and what are the key articles under debate that will address and impact women's rights? And then we will get into some of the concerns of what will be rolled back.

**Okail:** Without going into particular details of the constitution, the main article, article two, which implies that laws will be determined by Shari'ah Law or principles of Shari'ah Law is problematic in itself for all of the rights of Egyptian women. And of course, women will be affected. And article 221 in the draft constitution goes back and defines, what are those principles, where they come from, and it refers to developmental schools of Islamic Shari'ah and other schools. So, that is like really dangerous for all rights and for everyone, but particularly for women. Again, article 36 puts women and men as equal unless it contradicts with Shari'ah. Another article that keeps changing—they keep changing the numbers as they change the draft—also gives the government the right or the authority to oversee the upbringing of youth, their rehabilitation and their moral, traditional, physical behavior, and that is like very Reichstag stuff. You are creating an army of people. You are interfering in the private life and expanding the public's fear. And what right does the government have in overseeing the rights of the social lives of Egyptians?

I just want to—one of the points that were raised by Yasmine and Zainab as well is the idea of awareness—that women are unaware that these are their rights. I tend to disagree with this idea that they are unaware and where this awareness comes from. I remember my British supervisor was telling me that she tried to learn Arabic while she was working in Egypt one day, and she was completely put off, because as she was trying to learn—I mean, the textbook—the first lesson said, the mother was cooking in the house and the father went to work. This whole process of orientation and socialization is through education—that subconsciously, you are conditioned that this is the role of the woman and that is the role of the man. So, this is the first phase of how you get oriented in society—through education. Looking at our approach of the process of conscientization—raising the idea that this is not a god-given role, this is a social structure of society and this is how society is constructed. We can always do that, but unless it is reflected in function and structure, it is not going to be implemented.

And I think one of the best examples is the book of Naila Kabeer, *The Power to Choose*, and she had a study of Bengali women who work in the textile industry in Dhaka, and the Bengali women in the Diaspora in the textile industry in London. And she found out, interestingly enough, that women in Dhaka had more rights and freedoms than one in London, because the one in Dhaka—they are fighting for their survival, they have to go out to the factory, they have to stay out late, they become the breadwinners in their families. In London, their method of survival depends on being confined and accepted within their small societies of the Bengalis in London, so they do not have to abide by those roles and if they contradict those traditions, they will be outside of this privilege of being part of this small community. So, again, it's more of a function, interest, and structure. I was working in upper Egypt, which is the poorest part of Egypt in the South and it's supposed to be, as we grew up learning that the upper Egyptian women are the more submissive, weaker women in Egypt. But when you go there you find that this is the complete opposite of the truth. No man in upper Egypt, for example, would be able to take the decision of selling his land, for example, without the approval of the mother. They are empowered in terms of their role. When I asked them, when I went there, I found that their level of civil society activities are far more developed than in Cairo. I said, I thought women in Egypt were more underprivileged. And she said, which Egypt are you talking about? The Egypt you're talking about is your Egypt in Cairo. But a long time ago we realized that we fall outside of your centralized governance and we have to find our own mechanisms to survive. So, it's very important to take this into consideration when we generalize and talk about women and awareness and this whole idea of function.

**Seelye:** Let's pick up on this. We're talking about empowerment now and really, how do you empower the women in the region? What do you think? Especially in Egypt in the face of financial setback—due to the constitution and also the demands of the Freedom and Justice Party—that we alluded to a little bit. How does one fight this? And how does one start to empower women so that they have a voice or even become aware that they have a voice?

**Hani:** I think part of the solution is to focus on the development programs generally—they are the key to educating our children. If they got educated, they would be more aware of their rights and more aware of the possible solutions and programs, and the possible alternatives and the problems that they are facing in their lives.

But I really want to comment on what Nancy just said. In fact, the political arguments over domestic politics that we are facing in Egypt and this whole argument about the constitution, are overlapping between concepts between Shari'ah, Shari'ah Law, and Shari'ah rulings, and all of them have very different meanings. I would say in the constitution that was passed in 1971, when we said that the principles of Shari'ah are the main sources of legislation, we didn't have a problem with that in Egypt. We've been living for more than 1,300 years as a Muslim country and a conservative country and we didn't have the kinds of problems that some people are expected to have now. Now, there's a completely different story, which I will touch on, but I mean, Shari'ah as main principles of legislation—we did not have a problem with that, even with the sectarian tensions we are having in Egypt are because of the lack of enforcement of law and not because of Shari'ah. The main principles actually

guarantee security for everyone, equality for everyone, but the corrupted government that has ruled for decades—that is what has caused the tension between the components of society. This was proved again, by a Gallup poll in June 2012 when they found that the Egyptian men who prefer Shari’ah to be the only source of legislation is 87% and the women is 82%. So we are a conservative society. We do not have a problem with Shari’ah. The problem is the concept of rulings of Shari’ah, which the ultraconservatives and the extremists are pursuing to enforce and to inject into the new constitution. This word, rulings and instructions of Shari’ah, opened the door of different interpretations and here comes the final vote of the different interpretations of the context of principles will have to do with political palates and will have to do with political power. And that’s why the current problem is not between the liberals and the Islamists, it’s between the moderate society and the extremists. And that is why I would expect that you would hear the same voices of concern from the conservatives, expressing their concerns, not just the liberals or socialists because it’s a struggle for the moderation of Egypt—the moderate nature of Egypt.

The problem with the Salafis, or ultraconservatives, is that they are adopting the extremist interpretations of Islam as interpreted by the Wahabbi movement of Islam that was in the Arabian Peninsula in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Again, they want to impose this understanding on Islam and on the constitution and on the current political debate, and this is the problem. I believe that the last Friday of Shari’ah was a political message sent by the ultraconservatives to the Muslim Brothers to pressure them to abide by their pressures inside of the Constituent Assembly to change the article from “the principles of Shari’ah are main source of legislation” to “the rulings of Shari’ah are the only source of legislation.” So this domestic politics is very much complicated and it can never be dealt with a simplistic understanding. It’s a dichotomy—struggle—where two groups are fighting against each other, but Egypt is fighting extremism.

**Al-Suwaij:** Yasmine, you just mentioned a poll that’s been 82% and 87%. My question is, how many people from religious minorities in Egypt and women are included in that poll? Does people consider them part of the society or not? Because there’s a huge number of Copts, Christian Egyptians, and then you have Baha’is and other religious minorities. And if we are talking about Shari’ah Law—and Egypt has been well known for their secular law, or civil law—and now implementing everything to be compiled with Shari’ah Law and an Islamic country, how is that going to serve the religious minorities in Egypt and how are their rights going to be guaranteed? We all know that they’ve been discriminated against in the past under Mubarak and hopefully now—many of them were part of the Tahrir Square revolution, and how is that going to fit in there? I see it—many of these rights are going to be stripped from them, even the small rights that they did have before.

**Hani:** For the first question, your question is about the religious minorities, if they are included or not. This is not only based on the Gallup poll, but I made a paper on the development of the Egyptian public opinion. I did not rely on public firms, but I relied on different, national, prestigious polling firms, and the mean number or percentage of conservatives among the Egyptian society is 80%, whether Christians or Muslims. And so far, I didn’t hear any voice from the Copts having complaints about the second article, which is that the principles of Shari’ah should be the main source of legislation. On the contrary, they are now defending and they are actually pushing with all of their efforts to keep this article and this was actually made by the Copt...

**Seelye:** And this is because they don’t want to have the rulings?

**Hani:** Yes, yes exactly. The second article is the principles of Shari’ah, but the ultraconservatives are pushing to inject the rulings of Shari’ah to make the country a theocracy, which would crush not just the minorities, but would crush all of the Egyptians—the democracy, the democratic system itself.

**Seelye:** Let me jump in, because I would like to hear from Zainab on this issue. You followed Tunisia. Tunisia managed to avoid inserting Shari’ah into its constitution. How did it manage to do so, and what are lessons that Egypt and activists from Egypt can draw from this?

**Al-Suwaij:** The situation in Tunis is different, even though they have the Ennahada, which is an Islamist Muslim Brotherhood political party ruling there. I think the effects and culture in Tunisia are different than in Egypt. I would see it as more European with Arab culture—little bit of Arab culture embedded there but more of the European culture. They speak the Arabic language with a lot of French, but it's still—and I think the influence of Europe and France is huge on this country. And even as religious as they are on a personal level, the amount of including Shari'ah ruling in the constitution was not being implemented as effectively as the one in the Egyptian constitution. I think even with the religious parties that occupied most of the seats in the parliament, they push for it but they still have that balance of the political party that pushed against it—and that's how they kept the balance. In Egypt, we have overwhelmingly Islamist religious political parties that took over the seats in the parliament and that has led to us seeing it going more towards an Islamic constitution instead of Egyptians, despite all of their ethnic or religious affiliations and at the same time, serving women in the community and Egypt in general. I cannot draw a parallel between Tunisia and Egypt given the cultures. Also, the Salafi's movement in Egypt is much more involved and more active than in Tunisia. I remember last year right after the revolution, I was going from Egypt to Tunisia, taking flights in the evening—one of my colleagues was with me. And at the airport we were taking the shuttle from the terminal to the airplane and there was a young guy, an imam from Al-Azhar, came on the bus. So the young guy with the beard asked, so you're going to Tunis? I said yes. He said, for jihad? And I said, that's great, I am on the right plane. [*Laughter.*] And he was like, no no no... yeah but for dah'wah also. A guy sat next to him and he said, well, what are you going to do? And he said, I belong to the Salafi movement in Egypt and I was just released from jail—I've been in jail for over six years and I'm going now to start and establish a similar movement in Tunisia. I was thankful that I arrived safely and they have a mission to accomplish in Tunisia, but these kinds of things that can transfer from one place to another—and I know in the region there are certain governments that they feed with money and support through these movements that we see, especially among the Salafi movement and the radical movements that we see in the region.

**Seelye:** In Saudi Arabia and Qatar. And part of the problem here is that the liberals have been completely overwhelmed and there is a strong liberal position and view, but I want to open up the floor to questions—we only have about 20 minutes left and I'd like to start with Patricia.

**Ellis:** I'd just like to pick up on a few things that the panelists dealt with. One is the issue of quotas, and there seems to be some difference in opinion and some people that support quotas in different countries, including those in the region have said that they see it as a temporary important step, so that's one thing. I'd also like the panelists to address what Zainab raised about women joining together. What are the possibilities and what are the issues on which they could join together, because there seem to be so many divisions. And lastly, I was just wondering if we could hear something about the youth—there were so many people in Tahrir Square, particularly young people. How are they channeling their energies now?

**Okail:** I think the quotas are a good start but it's not the solution and it's not a guarantee that women's rights will be preserved, because we had—in the last time that the Egyptian parliament we had women, but they were women who were from the Freedom and Justice Party and they were against women's rights, basically, if we can put it bluntly. They were the ones who were advocating rolling back the age of marriage for girls and legalizing female genital mutilation and everything we've achieved—going backwards. So maybe in the first phase it could be, but not a guarantee. Why aren't women uniting together and why paralyzed? I think it's important to look at the overall situation and the dynamics of the country. There is a very strong wave of polarization in the country—even civil society, NGOs are being polarized and politicized. So you're not just a civil society member representing an NGO and a cause, but you're mostly affiliated with a certain political group or political party or certain ideology. I think it's normal in a transition to find that. We just got out of a long term of stagnation and apathy, and everyone is trying to identify themselves with a certain ideology. This is problematic, but the problem is, and why is this happening and why are we finding that the Salafi's voices are higher in Egypt—although in terms of numbers and the last elections prove that they are not the majority in terms of numbers—but

what happens is that when you have a government that does not sit stably and comfortably in their seats they tend to do one of two things. One is to use oppression and policing basically against freedom of expression. And those were the tactics of the old regime—using police force to oppress people and impose their own ideas. The second is to rely on populist decrees and populist decisions in appeasing the popular vote. What is happening now in the constitution is that the Muslim Brotherhood are appeasing the Salafis and getting their—the articles that they want to include in the constitution today, because they have their eye on the coming parliamentary elections in March, so they want to win their votes. Had the liberals demonstrated an equally strong voice in the streets so far, the Muslim Brotherhood would have taken that into account, but they have not—they are fragmented, they are polarized, most of their leaders are, unfortunately, holding their egos more than the interests of liberal values in general. And so they seem to be on the weaker side, and that's why the Muslim Brotherhood is not putting them in their calculations when they are taking their populace approach to government.

**Hani:** For the women's rights organizations to coordinate with each other and why they're not cooperating, I would say that—and this is based on an interview that I made with one of the prominent woman activists her name is Wanaiza, she is enrolled in the New Woman organization, operating since 1986. She said that since March 2011, when many women were harassed in Tahrir Square, there has started to be an understanding among the women[s] organizations that they have to unite in order to get their voices heard. This understanding was enhanced after the successive ignore of the government to women in the national dialogues that emerged after the revolution with the political forces, as well as the successive cabinets that ignored the participation of women, and the last of it is with the assembly. So there started to be cooperation among the women activists. This cooperation began to be known as what is called The Women Alliance. This is a movement made by the womens organizations that are cooperating now in successive movements. They are calling for several protests against what people in the senior levels of government—the people aiding the presidential team such as Aza Al-Garf—people that want to abandon the progress that has been made in the long years by women's organizations. They are cooperating and operating now, which is the good news—that what happened brought them together to get their voices heard.

On the youth, I would say that the youth were the bulk of the Egyptian revolution—the bulk of the protesters. The youth in Egypt constitute more than 50% of the population—this is the good news. This community, this youth community has its own language, its own principles, its own free public sphere to communicate, to challenge—they have the will to challenge and they have the power to challenge. They transcend institutions. The 6<sup>th</sup> of April movement has been more influential than any party's movement.

**Seelye:** Do the youth have—the 50%—many of them are young boys, who are not as progressive as the April 6<sup>th</sup> movement followers, who were involved in the harassment of women—do they have women's rights and women's interests in mind?

**Hani:** Again, it's not the interests and the struggles of women—it's an interest in the struggle for democracy, which includes women's rights. So this interest in the struggle for democracy is there because simply, this youth is suffering, they do not have jobs. Their conditions are not good. What the revolution did was it brought politics into their minds—it injected politics into their minds after a high percentage of political unawareness among people. So, they are starting to think politics. This community of youth is being polarized by political forces—for youth to fight youth. So we have youth that belong to Muslim Brothers, youth that belong to Salafis, and we have independent youth and the youth now is supposedly going to fight each other on political bases. So this is what is happening. However, the youth, by having their own free public sphere and their own language, they are most likely to work for common understandings than do those that are operating on selfishness.

**Seelye:** Zainab, you've been mobilizing youth and women for a long time. Would you like to comment?

**Al-Suwaij:** Sure. I think that the youth movement in Egypt and in the rest of the Arab Spring countries—not in Tunisia but in Egypt in particular—I started working with youth in Egypt in 2006 and we've been working specifically on activism and how to get them involved on violence and peaceful approaches towards change. These kinds of programs expanded their—people had a need to fill their vacuum. They've seen the need for change as well. When the revolution happened I said, oh, that's a great way to reach a certain level and our job is finished. Actually, I realized, our job just started. People were able to move and make that change from a grassroots level that tackled the governments, put their voices in there. But afterwards, they've found themselves in a vacuum and no one has wanted to pay attention to them, even though they were the fuel for these revolutions and for change in their communities. Their voices are being neglected and their rights not being given to them. Many of these young people—some of them have been embedded in certain political parties, but their views—it varies—do not really in align with the Muslim Brotherhood parties, the Salafis parties. Most of them, as Yasmine mentioned, have their own language, their own mindset, their own technology that they are using, and what they are looking for is really a different system, not the same system but under a different name than the previous regime. And the disappointment right now that they are seeing is huge. And I was talking with one of these young activists that I had worked with before and he is with one of the secular political parties now and I said, what are you going to say if a majority of the people in parliament become from Islamist political parties? And he said, well we're ready for another revolution. And I said, well doing one revolution after the other is not the solution, but what could you do as a group to change what's in the community and to educate the public—to reach that level? And I told him about the programs, workshops, conferences that have been implemented that led you to revolution and now it's another step that you need to take forward. The other thing is, also, that these youth movements are not organized, and when their voices are scattered they do not have one strong, projected voice. They could have had their own political party. Everyone's looking at them saying, oh, look at these kids in the streets, the internet generation. So, these are the troubles that they have.

**Seelye:** Let's take a couple of questions. I'm going to pool them because we only have another 10 minutes or so. If you could please state your name and affiliation. We'll take the woman here in the middle, and we'll do three in a row and I shall deposit them among the panelists.

**Question:** Hi, I'm Ann Stone and I'm here in my capacity as the founder of the National Women's History Museum. I wanted to address some points that all three panelists made. First, on the quotas, the dark side as we know is that you get the parties putting women in who are puppets and who are not representing women at all or any interests above what the party wants, and that is the dark side. We saw this in Indonesia when you had direct elections without the parties—you didn't get women that really were useful for advancing women's rights. Part of what each of you addressed was the fact that there is still this mindset problem that is in the culture. No matter what the law says, the culture says something else. And part of that mindset is introducing new values about women in civil society. Zainab and I worked in training Iraqi women, and one of the most powerful things that women said after the training was that it was the first time that they ever felt good about being women, and part of that is introducing their history. And in Egypt you have Hypatia of Alexandria who was a renaissance woman well before the men—would be a powerful example of women in power before men way back when. But bringing their own history forward to show their value—unique contributions women make in civil society—we've used this in many countries—women to vote for women and to understand the importance of having women at the table, that we have a unique voice, a unique perspective, we're seen as being more ethical, we are the peacemakers. So, this might be something you want to think about.

**Seelye:** Thank you. We have a question—the woman right here.

**Question:** Hi I'm Kent Davis-Packard from the US Department of State. I'm wondering, what do you see as the most effective role of the United States in Egypt's efforts to empower its women? And what, if any, ministry, person or organization would be one to interlock with the United States on women's issues?

**Seelye:** And let's take another question. One more in the front here.

**Question:** Diana Negroponte, member of the board of the Women's Foreign Policy Group and at Brookings. In other societies facing this resistance to women's empowerment, the role of the courts and women's training as judges has played an important role. What do we see in Egypt in terms of women training and becoming judges?

**Okail:** We toppled Mubarak, but not the Mubarak regime. So it's still there and the same modes of domination are still there. And what this regime ruined in the political sphere they ruined in the public and social spheres. One of the true arenas that suffered from this domination is education and media, and these directly affect women. And in the media we still see the domination and subordination of women and youth—I mean generally, whoever was marginalized before remained marginalized and we still have this patriarchal influence that we had. I used to feel like very frustrated that we had—in the Egyptian talk shows that boomed after the revolution—that we had in every talk show a couple of politicians and one young figure sitting there is this patronizing way of talking to him like, you're so clever and you did the revolution—how cute. I mean, this is how—literally, this is not a joke—this is how they looked down at their role and their capacity. Education is one thing, if the US would really want to contribute—to have more support in terms of not just funding, but in terms of transferring knowledge and different modes of education—not just in a patronizing way. And also freedom of the media, because this is an important tool, and particularly television more than any other media outlet, because we have a population that is almost 40% illiterate. People watch television, they get affected by it—however you condition people, even through the soap operas and arts and everything—it sinks into society and we want to make change. We need to liberate the media, not in a certain direction but give everyone an equal opportunity. Unfortunately, we are finding very, very regressive steps since the new government took over against freedom of expression and freedom of the media. Only yesterday, one of the most prominent television channels was closed down. This is the second one to be closed down. The Dream TV was an outlet for so many members of the opposition out there and so many of the television media tried to show solidarity and they blackened their screen yesterday—they said, in solidarity we are with Dream TV. But this is really dangerous and this is very important in stressing—it's not only going to affect women, but all forms of freedom of expression and the promotion and transition to democracy.

**Seelye:** Great. I'm going to jump in because we only have a minute or two left—is that correct? And I'd like them to respond to the question about the courts and the judges.

**Hani:** This is a very interesting point, really. I would say that in our judicial authority, we have certain levels. So women have access to be appointed in these levels; however, not to a very high level. So, we have the first judge at the constitutional court. Her name is Tahani al-Gebali, and she's very famous, by the way. So she is the first female judge at the constitutional court, which is the highest court in Egypt. I would answer by asking another question. Who trains women? They should have first gotten a good education, to be entitled to go through all of these levels and positions and to sign up for good public positions. So, unless we address the development problem locally and nationally—which has to do with the will of the women, the future leaders, and the future strong partners in Egypt—we will not be treating them justly.

**Al-Suwaij:** To go back to the one thing about women judges. Under Islamic law, women cannot be judges. If it's in the constitution, they put women as judges—that's just for a big picture. But it's very difficult. Even in other countries they've been struggling to have women judges or women being appointed, especially in countries where they have civil law and not Islamic law, which says a woman cannot be a judge—cannot be a ruler. That's where you see the disconnect here. So, yes, the idea is great, it might be suggested, but it's not going to be well-accepted or received by any of the Islamist political parties that are running the show right now.

On the other hand, I think training of women in general—women leaders, women in parliament, women activists—it's very important. And I think, to answer your question Yasmine, I think it is very important to learn from experiences of other countries, whether it's neighboring countries or countries that have experience in women and gender equality for a long time, because these experiences, yes, might not fit the culture, but might give you an exposure and methods and techniques that you could use to try to gain more of your rights.

In terms of the question about the role of the West, they must play a big role, and that is shown in the large amount of financial assistance we give the Egyptian government every year and all of this is coming from our tax money. So, implementing programs there and not only helping the military aspect of Egypt—it's very important. At the same time, protecting NGOs that work on the ground—I think that if it comes from the American government directly—you, it's coming from our tax money directly to these governments and we can demand to protect at least the rights of these NGOs that are working—not against the government. All they have been doing is educating people on the ground and educating society and lifting it. So, they accept our money for military, they accept our money to build things, for their leaders to flourish, but at the same time, our NGOs working on the ground are being harassed and are not able to do much on developing their programs there.

**Hani:** One final and one very quick comment. On what you said, Zainab, that Islam does not allow women to be judges—this is completely wrong. This is actually the inherited understanding—that women can't be judges. This is the understanding that is being circulated and being used by some people, but this is not true.

**Al-Suwaij:** But this is the norm now.

**Hani:** But saying 'this is the norm' is a story and saying that 'Islam said this' is another story. We have certain verses in the Qur'an that talks about men and women and address them and it says in words [*speaking Arabic*], "so some of you are superior on the other", men and women—so this actually implied the complete freedom for women to sign up for public positions inside any position and she has to deal with problems...

**Al-Suwaij:** But this isn't happening.

**Hani:** To which she will go judge on a daily basis the small things and big things. So if we say women cannot work as a judge, women are better to stay home.

**Al-Suwaij:** When you go to court, as simple as when you go to court, when you go as a witness, you do not consider one person your half—we have to be two to equal one.

**Hani:** These are issues that have to do with money, but there are certain issues, very family issues that women can be a witness alone and actually, men cannot be a witness in some of these issues.

**Seelye:** Let's let Nancy comment.

**Okail:** I'm very happy and thrilled that this is happening because what you are seeing right now—this interaction between Zainab and Yasmine—is actually the problem we are having in Egypt, who has the authority to define what Islam is? Who has the authority to interpret the verses of Islam? Who defines who that authority is? And one of the overarching problems that we have in the constitution now is there is an article that put Al-Azhar on top of all of the governmental institutions in the country. Now, some people are happy about that because Al-Azhar, now, is the moderate voice of Islam, but later on we don't know if this is going to remain because the mode of appointing Al-Azhar leaders will change and might bring more extremists. And when this is put above the law, this is very, very dangerous. So, this is a demonstration of one of the most—I mean, and I'm happy it's happening between Yasmine and Zainab because they're both legitimate Muslim women and they have very different perspectives

and again, it's going to be the leaders in the country who define who has the word and the right to define what Islam is and what the rules are.

**Seelye:** Right, and when you have Salafists involved trying to—it's not very heartening. Although this is the debate that's most interesting, I'm afraid we must wrap. [*Laughter.*] So I want to thank our wonderful panelists, Zainab, Yasmine, and Nancy. [*Applause.*]