

“Here are the Women”

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Introduction:

This article sheds light on the labor movement in Egypt, examines the vital role of the Egyptian female worker within it and tries to analyze how her active contribution in the past few years has led to the emergence of women leaders who played a prominent role in strikes and protests in a number of factories and assembly lines. It also examines how much women are capable, in the midst of the said movement, of breaking the barrier of sexual discrimination.

Methodology

In this paper, I document the events of the famous real estate tax collectors' strike, by gathering, presenting and analyzing the views and attitudes of some of the participating employees. For that purpose, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 2 male and 7 female employees who led the real estate tax collectors' strike, in addition to interviewing a focus group of 6 female employees from several governorates. These interviews aimed at examining the role of women in the strike and the union, as well as the gender dynamics that were playing out during the strike. This qualitative approach was complimented by reviewing local media coverage (news articles and blogs in Arabic and English). Moreover, I did a series of interviews with 2 labor journalists, 4 researchers, and 3 human rights' activists and labor leaders. The research was conducted between November 2010 and January 2011 as part of my Master's thesis.

Women launch the “Winter of Labor Discontent”

Since 2004 a wave of workers' strikes has rolled through the spectrum of the nation's industries and across both the public and the private sector as a response to the disjointed, unregulated, “liberalized” economy, marked by a privatization push since

the late 1990s and the rise of worker contestation (Ricciardone, 2008, p. 1).

By the end of 2006, a wave of protests known as the “Winter of Labor Discontent” began to rise in Egypt starting with a strike in the Misr Spinning and Weaving Factory in Mahalla al-Kubra, in which 27,000 workers participated, sparking the biggest series of strikes Egypt has ever known since the 1940s and paving the way for a flood of labor protests.

Workers at the factory were waiting for their pay packets. Former Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif had promised all public sector workers an annual bonus equivalent to two-months pay. Disappointment quickly turned to fury as workers discovered that they had received only the standard bonus.

Some 3,000 women garment workers then stormed into the main spinning and weaving sheds and asked their male colleagues to stop working, shouting what will become later a slogan for thousands of female workers all over Egypt: “Where are the men? Here are the women!” The purpose of the shouting was to shame men into leaving their work and joining the women who were demanding their rights and those of their male colleagues. Hearing the chants, male workers joined the women and around ten thousand people gathered in the factory courtyard and once again women were at the forefront. The phenomenon expanded and spread so fast that workers from several labor sites simultaneously carried out sit-ins in central Cairo, waiting for their demands to be met.

The snowball of labor protests, since the strike of Al-Mahalla workers in January 2006, rolled from one factory to another until it became a phenomenon worthy of being noted and studied.

It's not surprising that the textile female workers are the ones who sparked this wave of labor strikes. The majority of workers in the textile sector are women who are often concentrated in the lowest-paid and least-skilled jobs. Garment workers at the Mansura-Espana factory, for example, earn as little as \$30 per month.

Women Crossing the Red Line

During the stage where the labor movement was taking root and expanding, women's participation was obvious since they played a major role in organizing their fellow workers during the protests and challenging the state-run unions. Women also initiated many of these events, led them, and had a great impact on the success of these protests and the realization of their demands. This huge female participation is due in large part to some factories relying exclusively or predominantly on female workers.

The Mansura-Espana garments company in the town of Talkha in the Nile delta, for example, has 284 workers, three-quarters of whom are women. In April 2008, 150 female workers went on strike, after rumors spread that the land on which the factory stood had been sold to a property developer and that the main shareholder, Egyptian United Bank, was planning to shut down the company. Fearing that they would be fired and the factory closed, strikers took over the shop floor, sleeping between the machines at night.

Female workers faced a lot of defamation attempts during their struggle. One of the managers threatened to frame them on trumped-up charges of "prostitution" because they were spending the night in the company of their male colleagues who were also on strike. These attempts went as far as inciting factory managers to harass women workers in order to break their will and prevent them from striking (Izzat, 2009, p. 4). Despite increasing social pressure and the pressure coming from the police, officials from the state-run Textile Workers Federation, and management, the female strikers held out for two months, ending their occupation only after an agreement was signed guaranteeing the future of the factory. Management

and government officials also conceded to other demands including the back payment of some unpaid bonuses, no indictments, and payment for the period of the strike.

The Mansoura-Espana Factory strike and occupation "was not instigated by a grass-roots women's movement, but it was effectively implemented by women's collective efforts and sustained by the convergence of their motivations" (Ricciardone, 2008, p. 70). It shows how the workers' collective power can undermine the oppressive relationships that structure society. Previously, it was unthinkable for women to spend nights away from home, sleeping on a factory floor with male colleagues. Many habits such as deference to bosses, fear of the police, and passive acceptance of the role of government trade union officials were challenged.

The importance of that step taken by the women workers cannot be understood unless we factor in their economic power within their families since many of them are the main breadwinners. In spite of the strict prevailing norms which shape male and female gender identities, class affiliation has complicated traditional gender roles and pushed many of these women to take on the struggle and play leading roles in the labor movement. As one of the male workers put it: "We don't talk about 'women' and 'men'. The women at the factory are braver than a hundred men. They are standing shoulder to shoulder with the men in the strike" (Alexander & Koubaissy, 2008).

The prominent role of women was not limited to factory workers, it was witnessed in the public sector as well, where women played a leading role in one of the major events in the history of the trade union movement in Egypt: the strike that led to the establishment of the first independent trade-union: The Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETA).

Real Estate Tax Collectors: From a Strike to an Independent Trade Union

On 3 December, 2007, thousands of real estate tax collectors in the governorates, among them 750 women, led an eleven-day strike in front of the People's Assembly, the Ministry of Finance, and the

Cabinet of Ministers, demanding equal treatment with their counterparts working under the Ministry of Finance. Many believe that the real estate tax collectors' movement wasn't only one of the most important labor protests that has spread in Egypt since 2006 but it has also become a milestone in the labor movement, especially since it led to the formation of the first independent trade union. Thus, real estate tax collectors were able to change the concept of unionism and impose trade union freedoms as a fact.

The reasons which prompted women to participate in the real estate tax collectors' strike and sit-ins don't differ much from those of the industry sector. Women's participation was economically driven and largely related to their traditional role within the family. At a time when women were facing the double burden of home and work responsibilities, the high cost of living only increased the pressure, prompting them to defend their livelihood.

This "economic necessity" discourse which motivated them to get out has helped them avoid obstacles when shedding their traditional roles and gave legitimacy to their movement. It was also a response to an opposing discourse which considers that women have nothing to do with public affairs or outside the family circle. Women's participation in the strike would not have been acceptable unless it was out of "necessity". In "normal" times, the same action would have been considered to be socially unacceptable or offensive. The best way then for women to legitimize their decision to participate in the strike was to resort to the image of the long-suffering mothers who are willing to do anything to improve the livelihood of their children. They didn't feel that they could defend their actions on the basis of a frank discourse related to their personal needs (i.e. independence, self-assertion, or autonomy).

Real estate tax collectors' leaders tried to draw women to the strike on purpose by emphasizing the workers' living conditions and the humiliation real estate tax collectors face when they learn that they are not equal to their peers working under the Ministry of Finance. However, the discourse to

motivate female employees wasn't based on their status as women who suffer from specific forms of discrimination at work, and the burdens they carry as women – an approach which would have equated between women and men without addressing their different experiences. The discourse used largely succeeded in attracting them to participate in the strike, and their presence was sometimes even prominent in sit-ins, like the one held in front of the Ministry of Finance where female employees led the scene. Their participation however decreased at night.

Strike leaders were also consciously seeking to involve women. Some of their reasons included protecting the strike from security forces, attracting sympathy, and social solidarity with the strikers. The participation of women was also used as a means to urge men to participate, by belittling the men who didn't participate and showing that women were more courageous than men. And so, the prevailing traditional views of women were used first to protect the strike from security repression: a security man wouldn't "hit a woman," because that, according to custom, is an insult to his position as a man. It was also used to consciously exploit the gender role stereotype:

If women are leaving their main traditional position in the home to participate in a strike, how can men not play this role too? And since the strike is usually the work of men, women who participate, are given masculine qualities such as 'X' woman was manlier than he was.

Whether the men leaders who were urging women to participate were driven by equality principles or pure pragmatism, they ended up recognizing the need for women to support the strike. Leaders adopted, consciously or unconsciously, the principles which unify the working class in order to tip the balance of power dynamics in favor of the workers, both men and women, against the government. Therefore, significant efforts have been made to widely involve women, especially since leaders are aware of the huge numbers of women in the labor force.

The Strike and Task Distribution on the Basis of Gender

Female employees in the real estate tax collectors' strike took on many organizational roles; some of them were leaders who participated in negotiations with government officials and talked to the media about their cause. Their opinions were also heard among their colleagues. They also made plans for subsequent steps and participated in the decision-making process within the strike committee.

They were an intrinsic part of this democratic experience owing to several factors:

1. Female employees continuously present in the strike are Greater Cairo residents, which gave them more room to move and participate, compared to women who live in remote governorates.
2. The presence of female employees in the real estate tax collectors' protests as strike leaders was the result of continuous struggle for the rights of employees over the years, and helped them form a sense of community based on mutual confidence with their male peers who believe in women's role. It should be noted, in this respect, that the women who played a prominent role as leaders were old colleagues of one of the most important leaders of the strike, Kamal Abu Eita.
3. The 24/7 presence of women in the sit-in or strike site allowed them to be part of the strike leadership as a result of their effective participation.
4. These female employees are college educated which qualified them to assume managerial positions in their workplace where they gained leadership skills. Some of them also have experience in trade unionism, which gave them skills that helped them in making decisions or in contributing to them.
5. Age was an important factor; the overwhelming majority of the female leaders were in their fifties or older. They're also married and have adult children. As a result, they earned their colleagues' respect. This social status also helped them to be partially free from household chores and child care. Therefore, among the women leaders I've interviewed, parents weren't generally an obstacle for their participation in the strike. They all described their husbands as "understanding" and "accepting".

Although some women took on leadership roles, their organizational tasks mostly revolved around rations. They were responsible for preparing meals and tea for thousands of strikers daily. Even though this role wasn't imposed by any of the men, women automatically sensed that it was within the frame of their responsibilities. Preparing food for large numbers of people does not require additional training but is linked to the type of responsibilities assumed by women at home since an early age. The women felt that by doing so they were participating in their own way in strengthening social solidarity and familiarity between strikers and in providing basic survival means to achieve labor victory. However, women's participation in the strike wasn't a smooth ride; even though patriarchy wasn't very noticeable on the workers' side, government officials tried to use it in different forms through security and administrative powers. They first tried to make the sit-in nearly impossible, going as far as not allowing strikers to go to the bathroom by forbidding nearby residents from receiving women and closing the bathrooms of the nearby mosque. This measure, seemingly targeting all workers, affected women in particular. Women had to walk the distance of two metro stations in order to use a gas station's bathroom.

In addition to security pressures, the then Minister of Labor, Aisha Abdul Hadi, contacted a number of female leaders to convince them to return to their homes and break the sit-in, saying that women strikers aren't only challenging the socially acceptable definitions of male and female roles, but that they are also compromising their honor. But the women defied the minister; they were aware of her tactics aimed at breaking the movement and isolating men. More importantly, they realized that by liberating themselves from fear, they were also liberating men as well and they were breaking the chains of guardianship which bind both genders:

By doing that, she [the minister] showed us that we hit a raw nerve with the government. We [women] then understood that she wants to get rid of the women so that they can get their hands on the men, scare them, and break them up. But they won't succeed as

long as we [women] are sitting here, I mean, the men themselves are protected by us. (Mervat, female employee)

That's why women in the strike were shouting the slogan coined by women workers in the Mahalla factory at the beginning of their strike in 2006: "Where are the men? Here are the women!" to express the feeling of their increasing power as women and their awareness of having challenged, through their activism and their strike, the "ideal" female behavior which typically depicts women as less aggressive and more "obedient" and "polite" than men. As union leader, Madiha explains:

Women in the real estate tax collectors' strike changed the history of all labor protests that followed. Because it was well known that women do not sleep out, do not participate, and do not leave their family and children in order to take to the street and demand their rights. It is known that if they are given one cent they will accept and if they are given ten they would accept as well. But it was the first time they said: 'Where are my rights?' Side by side with men. So when we felt that security forces were going to attack us, we women used to stand in a certain way in the front row to protect the [male] strikers.

Women Employees: From Strikers to Union Leaders

The employees' strike resulted in the establishment of the first independent union in Egypt, setting a precedent which was quickly adopted by workers in different production companies in both the public and private sectors. This trend increased during the revolution and after the fall of Mubarak, leading to the declaration of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions in 2011. This led to trade union pluralism after years of monopoly by trade unions sponsored by the old regime which had imposed one organization on Egypt's workers, in violation of international conventions signed by Egypt. These conventions were meant to provide trade unions with freedom and give workers the right to found their unions and not force them to join an imposed entity. Thus, the events of the revolution of 25

January 2011 inspired thousands of workers from different sectors to create their independent trade unions, such as the public transport workers, the textile workers, the information centers workers, and many more.

Women's contribution to the activities of the Real Estate Tax Authority (RETA) independent union increased significantly. The women I had met believe that this is important because it gives them social strength after having been excluded from public activities in general which had resulted in a lower status for their gender. Madiha Morsi Hamid's example underlines this aspect.

Madiha is the one who worked on establishing the RETA committee in Cairo, with a 100 percent participation rate; "from the mailman to the managing director," she says. She was elected by the workers as chief of the trade union committee in Cairo. Even though she had no prior trade union experience, participating in the strike, following up on the negotiations with government authorities and being close to experienced trade unionists such as Abu Eita gave her considerable experience in trade union activism and increased her interest in political and economic public affairs. Her legal background enabled her to play a prominent role in following up on all legal affairs related to the independent trade union that was formed. She was also an important legal reference for other trade union leaders.

In the context of her trade union work, she began holding meetings in the 29 governorates in order to establish a women's committee. In Cairo, she meets regularly with about 14 women weekly to address work issues which concern them as women.

Although women's work situation in the public sector is better than it is in the private sector, they still feel discriminated against in many respects. The view which sees women's role in making a living as secondary and their reproductive role as essential is entrenched in the state establishments. Based on this premise, legislation denies working women equal rights in their family insurance coverage and there is hesitation to promote them or provide

them with training opportunities. So women's entitlements in the government sector is based on patriarchal values.

In order for Madiha and some other women to be able to take on leading trade union roles, they had to take on many additional roles and tasks (inside and outside the household). They had to deploy more effort than men in order to make their voices heard and impose their legitimacy as unionists.

While all the women I met are balancing between domestic responsibilities and trade union activities, it was only natural to ask: shouldn't that have affected the power dynamics within the patriarchal infrastructure of the family? There were many answers to this question. The gains acquired increased the economic independence of women and provided them with somewhat greater leverage vis-à-vis their male partners, making them aware of their greater status within the family. The increasing economic power, which came as a result of the success of the strike, enabled them to ease their financial burden within the family: "My life changed completely after the establishment of the trade union, but I continue to devote a large part of my time to my home and children," says Madiha. She continues:

I must arrange their lives. Because I'm too busy, I couldn't fully follow up on their studies, so I hired a teacher, thanks to the financial compensation. After that, I dedicate my time to seminars, conferences and meetings. But union work has become essential to me. Before each meeting or sit-in, the number of phone calls I receive shows my husband the importance of my work which he respects and admires. But sometimes he feels a bit jealous; however he did not prevent me from being active, because he's jealous for a reason: he believes I was limited within the confines of my home but now I'm free. And my trade union activism has changed me a lot, to tell you the truth. Before, I used to give up on my rights with my husband in order to avoid problems but now, through the rallies, sit-ins, and strikes, I understand that nothing comes easily... so you have to demand your

rights, especially since I spend my salary on the household. This is the change that has occurred: previously, I used to shut up to avoid problems, but now I make demands.

Nevertheless, the tension between accepting and rejecting one's "proper" role, rights, and obligations as a female remained largely unresolved. So even if these women realized that the power dynamics within the family are unfair, they admitted that this realization is one-sided and therefore didn't lead to restoring some balance to these relationships. During their struggle, they changed a few stereotypes about their roles as women, but for the vast majority of them, this didn't change the traditional task distribution within their families.

Generally though, most women I interviewed were aware and critical of gender constructions, especially since they work outside the home, were effectively present and seen during the strike, and are currently active in trade unions. This has made them aware of the unequal social relations within the family which have a negative impact on work relations or their ability to fulfill the requirements of their trade union activities.

Conclusion

The strong presence of women in the Egyptian revolution and subsequent events was not incidental. Anyone following the events can easily see that the years prior to the revolution saw a strong participation of women in various movements in Egypt. Women's presence was not limited to political parties and intellectual circle. They were active in union and labor movements as well.

The attractive research component here is that despite the emergence of some voices in recent years calling for the return of working women to their homes, raising obstacles against hiring them, and relegating them to less skilled and less paid jobs without contracts or with temporary contracts, in addition to being subjected to sexual harassment and the like, some female workers emerged as initiators, leaders, and organizers of their colleagues in strikes and protests and as essential participants in the success of these movements. This is one of the factors

which enhanced their status and gave them back some of the respect and influence in society that they deserve.

This reality doesn't reflect the evolution of a feminist movement or consciousness in the ranks of the working class itself, but the struggle dynamics have made the workers, both male and female, more open to ideas which defy the prevailing "common sense". The experience of women's involvement in the protests provided an opportunity to fight against gender discrimination on the one hand and pushed women to break free of some of the restrictions on their participation in public life on the other. With their movement, women went past a number of prevailing social constraints and gender stereotypes, such as assuming leading organizational roles in different places and showing perseverance despite attempts by security and management to vilify and defame them.

The women workers' struggle has also increased their political awareness and interest as a result of the expansion of their circle of activity from the limited confines of their demands (inside the factory) to the general political, social, and economic fields. In some places, women were the most radical and daring, as shown in the example of the real estate tax collectors. The struggle for economic issues – wages in this situation – pushed them to participate in union activities, supported sometimes by progressive male trade union leaders. Their victory in the battle to increase wages also gave some of them greater power to negotiate within the family, without necessarily reversing the power dynamics within it. It earned

them the respect of male workers as well, through their effective participation by challenging gender stereotypes and authority and by resisting the police and threatening state-controlled unionists, and allowed some of them to assume leadership positions within unions.

In conclusion, the integration and participation of large numbers of women in the different struggles strongly suggest the possibility of building and establishing a militant feminist movement. The revolution has opened the door for that, and we have already seen the inception of such a feminist movement when tens of thousands of women broke into Tahrir Square during the 20 December 2011 demonstration, touting the slogan "The daughters of Egypt are a red line," in reaction to the army targeting female revolutionaries using all kinds of oppression and abuse. This demonstrates that the presence of groups of women, especially in the working classes, at the heart of social and political movements has become a reality and cannot be overlooked. For the first time, a popular organized feminist movement is possible in Egypt, because there are blocks of women ready to integrate into the struggle. Such a movement which includes wide sections of women presents itself as a priority, especially with the most recent rise of right-wing groups and parties hostile to women's participation in public life in Egypt.

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ENDNOTES

1. For many decades trade union activism was monopolized by the state run Egypt Trade Union Federation (ETUF), as the Egyptian law (number 35 in 1976) severely restricts the establishment of trade unions outside the umbrella of the aforementioned federation. In 2011, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, lead by the Real Estate Tax Authority (RETA) independent union, was established, breaking the monopoly of ETUF. references

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