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## Article

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Review of Economics and Political Science (REPS)

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*Suggested Citation:* Abdelgawad, Hala; Hassan, Mazen (2023) : Women in the Egyptian parliament: A different agenda?, Review of Economics and Political Science (REPS), ISSN 2631-3561, Emerald, Bingley, Vol. 8, Iss. 6, pp. 558-576,  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/REPS-06-2019-0076>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/316097>

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# Women in the Egyptian parliament: a different agenda?

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Received 4 June 2019  
Revised 18 August 2019  
Accepted 2 September 2019

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Theoretically, the quality of representation is likely to be enhanced when more societal segments are included in formal political structures. An interesting question, however, is whether a similar correlation holds empirically outside established Western democracies. In the 2015 Egyptian parliament, women representation achieved an all-time high of 14.9% of total seats – nearly four times the historical Egyptian average. It is asked whether female legislators riding this unprecedented tide were different from their male colleagues in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds. But more importantly, the authors examine whether this increased representation led to any change in inclusion of more women's issues in the legislative agenda, and how traditional topics are debated.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors conducted a content analysis of selected parliamentary scripts – generating on an original data set – to trace the topics and interventions raised by female MPs. The authors draw on the extensive literature on women's representation, giving special attention to the structure versus agency dichotomy in this quest.

**Findings** – The authors conclude that female MPs were as active in parliamentary debates as to their male colleagues. Moreover, women did stress women issues more than men. The results indicate that the inclusion of traditionally under-represented groups does affect parliamentary agendas.

**Originality/value** – The authors conducted a content analysis of selected parliamentary scripts – generating on an original data set – to trace the topics and interventions raised by female MPs based on a case study of the 2015 Egyptian parliament.

**Keywords** Women representation, Egypt, Parliament, Content analysis, Legislative agenda

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Egypt granted women the right to vote and run for elections in 1956 – the first Arab country to do so and well ahead of some of today's democracies at the time, including Switzerland and Portugal. In the 1957 election, eight women ran for the parliamentary elections, two of whom managed to win seats representing urban districts in Giza and Alexandria. Subsequent developments, however, pushed Egypt back from a regional pioneer to a global and regional lagger. Despite the early start, women's representation in parliament continued to be quite small (between 2 and 3 per cent) until the 2011 uprisings. The only exceptions were the 1987 and 2010 parliaments, during which gender quotas were applied. Both

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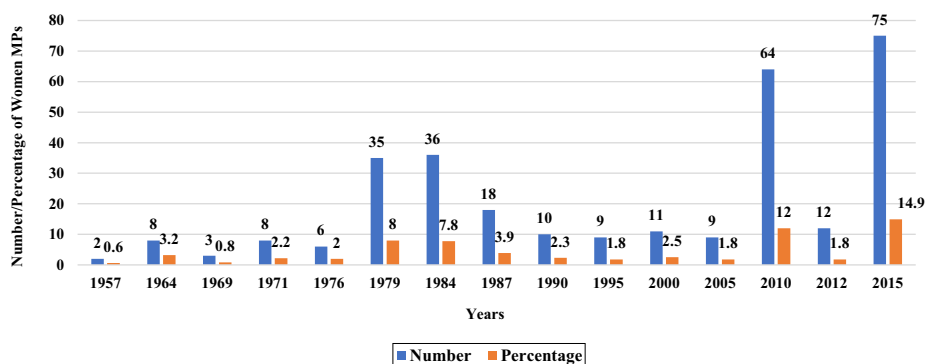
We would like to thank the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University for supporting the analysis done in this paper. We also like to thank Marwa Shalaby and Kadir Yildirim for commenting on earlier versions. Any mistakes remain solely ours.



parliaments, however, were short-lived. The limited inclusion of women in the executive branch tells a similar story of minimal female representation. The first female member of cabinet was Hekmat Abo Zeid, who became minister of social affairs in 1962. Since then, the average number of women in cabinet ranged between one and three women, out of a cabinet that recently reached around 30 members.

The 2015 parliamentary election, however, was a trend-disrupter (see Figure 1). It resulted in a historic rise in female representation. A total of 75 women were elected to Egypt's unicameral parliament (the House of Representatives) out of a possible 568 seats, a change mostly driven by gender quotas. An additional 14 women were appointed by the president. In total, 89 female members currently hold seats in parliament, making up 14.9 per cent of all representatives.

Although Egypt still lags behind both the world and some Arab countries in women's representation (Table I), its recent progress represents a watershed. An interesting question is whether this substantial political experiment of increased representation has introduced a new agenda to parliament or different approaches to the old agenda. Theoretically, this change also provides an opportunity to examine a question central to the dynamics of political representation: If a traditionally underrepresented group abruptly gains greater political representation, how would its representatives behave? Would they act in similar ways to other groups that were not subject to underrepresentation, or would they focus on advancing the issues most relevant to their own group? This paper aims to tackle these questions.



**Figure 1.**  
Women's  
representation in  
Egyptian parliaments  
(1957-2015)

Region	Single or lower house (%)
Nordic countries	41.7
Americas	28.2
Europe – OSCE <sup>a</sup> member countries, including Nordic countries	27.5
Europe – OSCE member countries, excluding Nordic countries	26.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	23.5
Asia	19.7
Arab States	18.2
Pacific	14.6
World	23.5

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>OSCE: Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe

**Source:** Inter-Parliamentary Union, [www.ipu.org/](http://www.ipu.org/)

**Table I.**  
Women  
presentation's in  
parliaments in  
various world  
regions

First, this paper investigates whether female legislators are different from their male colleagues in terms of demographic characteristics. Indeed, one of the interesting questions is whether the introduction of new electoral quotas would actually lead to the election of a relatively different brand of politicians. Second, the paper examines whether this increased representation led to any change in:

- The inclusion of women's issues on the national legislative agenda; and
- How traditional topics are debated.

To address these two sets of questions, we analyze the socioeconomic backgrounds of female MPs. Second, a content analysis of parliamentary scripts – generating on an original data set – is conducted to trace the topics and interventions raised by female MPs and their content.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical framework and argues why differences in parliamentary dynamics should be expected as a result of increased women's representation. Section 3 discusses the political and social status of Egyptian women after the 2011 uprisings, demonstrating how the situation continues to allow for enormous progress to be made. Section 4 presents the data and results. Section 5 provides conclusions.

## 2. Women in parliament: traditional representatives vs feminist vanguards

The issue of representation has always been at the heart of studies on politics and democratic thinking. In this extensive body of literature, there seems to be a consensus that building inclusive polities requires the integration of as many societal groups and interests as possible in decision-making bodies (Mill, 1993). Moreover, history is replete with evidence that the more representative a system is, the more stable and durable it is likely to be (Lijphart, 1984). More inclusive governing bodies pave the way not only for better decisions by politicians but also for fewer grievances, a greater sense of belonging, and a higher level of system support within society at large (Easton, 1975).

However, opinions diverge on how best to achieve this inclusiveness. The traditional *structure vs agency* dichotomy is reflected strongly in this debate. Regarding structure, institutionalists point to electoral systems (favoring proportional over majoritarian formulas), electoral quotas, campaign finances, and incumbency advantages (Norris, 2004). Culturalists, on the other hand, focus on structural factors like the overall level of socioeconomic development in a society, a country's experience with party system plurality, the ideological nature of the party system and the state's dominant religion, which is taken as a proxy for culture (Reynolds, 1999).

Those who value agency, on the other hand, see a specific role for parliamentarians themselves. Early theories on representation (Madison *et al.*, 1987; Burke, 1790/1968) saw parliamentarians as either “delegates” (who presumably follow the expressed preferences of their constituents) or “trustees” (who follow their own understanding of the best action to pursue). Several other contributions to the concept expanded this – perhaps too normative – categorization (Mansbridge, 2009 for a review). Pitkin (1967) introduced the idea of *descriptive* and *substantive* representation. In descriptive representation, representatives resemble those whom they represent, from a demographic and sociological point of view (Pitkin, 1967; Birch, 1993; Griffiths and Wollheim, 1960). Women, for example, would thus be best represented by women, and ethnic minorities by those who share their respective cultures. Substantive representation, in contrast, focuses on the actions of representatives and examines whether these actions advance the policy preferences that serve the interests of the represented.

In this paper, we argue that increased female parliamentary representation is more likely to produce a greater emphasis on women's issues and concerns, for a number of reasons. First, from a general perspective, marginalized groups share similar life experiences. Although quite an economically and socially diverse group, Egyptian women share certain social roles distinct from those of men. They are traditionally expected to bear the responsibility of raising children and attending to their well-being. A recent survey by UN Women and Promundo revealed that 86.8 per cent of Egyptian men and 76.7 per cent of women believe that a woman's most basic role is to take care of the home and cook for the family (El Feki *et al.*, 2017). Around 50 per cent of male respondents doubted that women can effectively combine the roles of politician and homemaker at the same time, and 98 per cent of men and 85.2 per cent of women agreed that changing diapers and bathing and feeding children should all be the mother's responsibility. In fact, only 13.2 per cent of men agreed that women can be heads of state, while 37.8 per cent of women supported this view. These perspectives, traditional as they may be, point to distinct societal gender roles in Egypt. This distinction is likely to result in female representatives in parliament adopting a distinctive agenda.

Williams (1998) highlights how life experiences are likely to affect representation. According to Gilligan (1982), women tend to "speak in a different voice" based on these differentiated social roles. Previous literature found that women legislators indeed have a different perspective on what is required of them compared to men. They tend to view themselves as surrogate representatives for all women (Reingold, 1992; Childs, 2005; Carroll, 2002; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008; Saint-Germain and Metoyer, 2008; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Smooth, 2011) or "supermadres," extending their role as mothers to a similar role for the broader population (Chaney, 2014). The first hypothesis of this paper, therefore, is that women would tend to focus on so-called *soft issues*, which originate from the traditionally differentiated role they have in society, especially in a conservative society such as Egypt. Examples of such topics include education, health care, and welfare.

Second, female representatives usually tend to have different socioeconomic backgrounds than the average woman. Instead, women legislators, especially in developing countries, are likely to hail from better socioeconomic status and be better educated. This is because it requires more financial and social resources either to contest a two-horse race in a majoritarian system or to be picked to be included on a list in a proportional representation system. Winning an electoral battle from an underdog position – which most female candidates find themselves in – usually requires the underdog to be a higher-than-average candidate. This in turn encourages women legislators to see their role as "advocacy representation" (Urbainati, 2000), having a passionate link to the electors' causes but also a relative autonomy of judgment. Women legislators are thus likely to be more assertive on women's issues than the average woman. Research in behavioral economics finds that individuals usually tend to assume the role that is socially expected from their positions. This is why guards tend to act more violently, those in subordinate positions tend to be more submissive, and those in positions of power tend to be more authoritative (Haslam and Reicher, 2003). Female representatives, in this regard, might find themselves as the vanguard of women's interests. This is especially the case if they are elected according to a gender quota system; they are likely to fulfill the role implied by the quota system – to be the vocal representatives of women – and thus adopt an agenda that focuses more on women's issues.

From their media discourse, there is much evidence that Egyptian women MPs are keen to advance women's issues and rights. Amna Noseir, a Professor at Al-Azhar University and an MP, voiced criticism of the fact that no woman has ever been a member of the Al-Azhar

Committee of Senior Clerics (*hay'et kebar al-olamaa'*) – a body that decides on core issues of scriptural interpretation. She claimed that it should have been a “normal step” for women after having previously been promoted to Azhar professors. Noseir argued that this still symbolizes the idea of “patriarchy” and “domination [1].” Another female MP, Dina Abdelaziz, predicted that one day a woman will definitely be a prime minister in Egypt[2].

Critical mass theory explains a third dynamic by which increased female representation could make a difference in legislative priorities. Indeed, there is evidence in the literature that a sudden increase in representation for long underrepresented groups might lead to a different kind of politics that goes beyond district representation and party affiliation (Childs, 2005; Lovenduski, 2005; Mansbridge, 1999). For traditionally disadvantaged groups, group boundaries are established by past experiences – what Williams (1998) calls “memory,” or having certain shared patterns of marginalization – rather than via simple principal-agent terms (Mansbridge, 2009; Rehfeld, 2005). Limited representation of disadvantaged groups might not lead changes in the political agenda, but once a critical threshold of representation is passed, such a change is likely, according to critical mass theory. Kanter (1977) puts this threshold at 15 per cent, whereas Thomas (1994) considers 30 per cent representation to be the threshold that will yield greater articulation of women’s interests and concerns (Sapiro, 1983). In other words, female politicians would be more likely to make a distinctive contribution to politics if there were more of them.

Taken together, these different mechanisms provide the theoretical structure by which increased women representation could be consequential. The advantage of the case of Egypt is that its 2015 parliament is the first one with a high level of women representation. Previous studies have indicated that many of these mechanisms tend to wane over time if increased women representation becomes the new normal (Broughton and Palmieri, 1999; Murray, 2010). Analyzing the Egyptian case at this very early point thus allows for observation of the effects of such greater women’s representation before such impacts dissipate. Egypt is also quite important because the social status of Egyptian women lags behind that of women in many countries in the world, which is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

### 3. Women in Egyptian politics and society Post-Arab spring

Women actors and women’s issues have been at the forefront of Egyptian politics since the 2011 uprising. On one hand, the 2011 protests and many of the protests that took place after Mubarak’s ouster have included noticeable participation by women activists and ordinary women, perhaps on an unprecedented scale in the Egyptian context. Some commentators even likened the 2011 protests to the 1919 protests against the British occupation, traditionally seen as the first major event of women’s political action in Egypt’s modern history. Women’s issues have also continued to surface in public debate post the 2011 uprising – usually in connection to women’s political rights – in a way that made women’s rights a salient issue in the secular-Islamist divide that has gripped Egypt.

Perhaps the first major fault line was whether to establish a gender quota in the first post-Mubarak parliamentary election, a move several Islamist forces viewed as highly controversial. Conservative Islamists in particular pushed at the time to limit the legal obligation to only including female candidates on their lists, rather than to reserve seats for women. Many parties took advantage of that rule by placing their female candidates at the bottom of their lists, thereby decreasing their chances of getting elected. The Salafist al-Nour Party – which adopts an ultra-conservative ideology to the right of the Muslim Brotherhood – famously refused even to put pictures of their female candidates in campaign posters, instead representing women with a picture of a flower. It was no surprise, then, that



women's representation in the first post-Mubarak parliament continued with the same low historical pattern of 1 to 3 per cent (Figure 1).

Another battle in the post-Mubarak era was whether to give women equal political rights to run for president and assume prime minister position during debates on the new constitution. Although the Islamist-dominated constituent assembly of 2012 eventually did not include a clear infringement on women's political rights in the relevant articles, an ambiguous clause that subjected the articles of the constitution to religious interpretations made the actual granting of such rights in doubt. Conservative forces also deployed a misogynist public discourse against women who took part in protests against them, claiming that their place should be in the home. Beginning in 2013, the overall political context marred by political polarization and terrorist attacks affected Egyptian women in ways similar to the rest of the Egyptian society. This is despite the fact that women saw significant improvement; their parliamentary representation increased sevenfold since 2013 and their participation in the executive branch increased threefold in the 2018 cabinet. Nonetheless, though a gender quota system was adopted on an unprecedented scale in the parliamentary and local councils after 2014, some viewed it as a cosmetic move – partly directed against Islamists and partly intended to improve the country's image – rather than a genuine measure aimed at women's empowerment (El Feki *et al.*, 2017).

Indeed, on the economic and social fronts, Egyptian women continue to lack equal status. Women's participation in the workforce remains low, ranging between 20 per cent and 25 per cent, compared to a global average of 52 per cent (Center for Economic and Social Rights, 2013). Only 14 per cent of women aged 15-59 are engaged in some form of economic activity, compared to 83 per cent of men [3]. Almost half of the women in the labor force are in the informal sector and suffer from poor working conditions and low wages. In terms of education, around 21 per cent of women between ages 15 and 59 have never attended school, compared to 8 per cent of men in that age range. Seven out of 10 women had completed primary school and more than four in 10 had completed secondary school or higher. Among men, more than eight in 10 completed primary school and more than half completed secondary school or higher. All indicators taken together, Egypt ranks 136 out of 145 countries in gender equality according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2015 [4].

These statistics, troubling as they are, indicate that there is significant room for improvement if women's issues and rights are to be emphasized in public debates, with parliamentary debates at the forefront. The next section examines this in greater detail.

#### 4. Methodology, data and analysis

This section presents data that seek to answer two interrelated questions:

- (1) Are the female legislators who were elected to the 2015 parliament distinctively different from their male colleagues?
- (2) What topics did these women legislators focus on during their first year in parliament?

To answer the first question, data were obtained from the Egyptian Electoral Commission. The commission publishes a list of all successful candidates that identifies not only their names but other characteristics like age, profession, education and party affiliation. The analysis of these data is presented in Section A below. To answer the second question, a content analysis of selected parliamentary scripts was conducted. This analysis is presented in Section B below.

4.1 Background of women MPs

Descriptive statistics indicate that the average age of female legislators is slightly lower than that of male MPs – 45.7 compared to 51 (Table II)[5]. There is, however, a slight difference in terms of the minimum age but no difference regarding the top end of the scale; female MPs appear to be as young as 25 and as old as 76.

As for educational attainment, female MPs have a slightly higher educational background: 6.7 per cent of female MPs have doctorates compared to 4.7 per cent of male MPs, and 2.7 per cent of women have an MA/MSc. compared to 1.4 per cent of men (Figure 2).

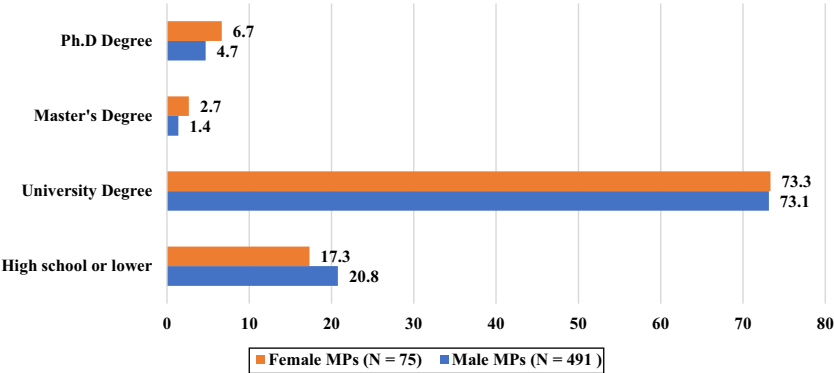
In regards to party affiliation, female MPs are less partisan: 77.3 per cent of women MPs are independents, compared to 57 per cent of male MPs. They are thus less represented among the three largest parties in parliament, with no female MPs representing Egypt’s traditionally liberal Al-Wafd Party (Table III). As for employment, female legislators are slightly more likely the male MPs to be employed by the government (Table IV).

What do the electoral paths by which women legislators were elected to the 2015 parliament indicate? Figure 3 shows that around three-quarters of women legislators were elected via the quota system. The quota system thus seems to be quite important in advancing women’s representation. It is reassuring that whereas the constitution scrapped the quota system after the 2015 election, the gender quota was maintained. As previous data

**Table II.**  
Age of MPs: female  
and male MPs  
compared

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Male MPs (N = 493)	51.0	10.1	26	76
Female MPs (N = 75)	45.7	10.6	25	76

**Figure 2.**  
Educational level:  
female and male MPs  
(%)



**Table III.**  
Party affiliations:  
female and male MPs  
(%)

	Independents	Free Egyptians	Future of a Nation	Al-Wafd	Guardians of the Nation	The Republican Popular Party	Elmo'tamar	Nour	Others	Total
Males (N = 493)	57	12.2	9.5	6.7	2.4	2.6	2	2.2	54	100
Females (N = 75)	77.3	9.3	5.3	0.0	2.7	0.0	1.3	0.0	4.0	100

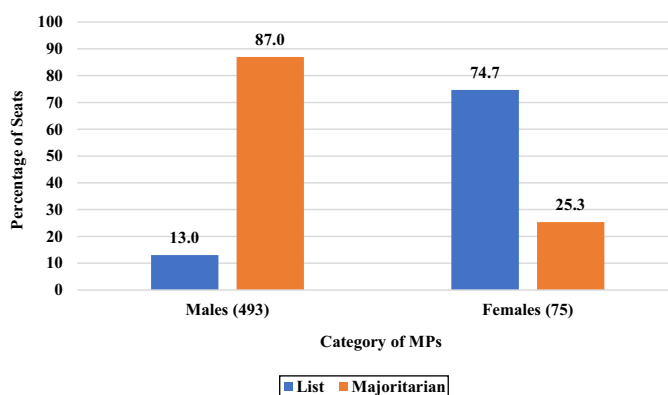


indicates, removing such a quota would probably move women's representation in Egypt back to its traditional level of around 2 to 3 per cent.

To go beyond descriptive statistics, we conducted statistical tests that examine whether the distribution of one variable (in this case, individual MPs' background) differs across two groups (i.e. female versus male MPs). Table V presents the results of these Chi square and t-tests (depending on the structure of the dependent variable in each case). For any differentiating variable to be statistically significant, the *p*-value needs to be smaller than 0.05, which then means that one can confirm – with a 95 per cent confidence level – that the average value for each subgroup (women vs men) is different. Table V shows that only the average values for age and the electoral system are statistically significant. In other words, only age and the electoral system can be said to have been significantly different when comparing male and female MPs. Female legislators – at a 99 per cent confidence level – seem to be younger than men and more electable via electoral lists than through the majoritarian formula.

**Table IV.**  
Employment sector:  
female and male MPs  
(%)

	Government/public sector	Private sector
Males ( <i>N</i> = 568)	47.7	52.3
Females ( <i>N</i> = 75)	53.3	46.7



**Figure 3.**  
Electoral system  
path: female and Male  
MPs (%)

Variable of comparison	<i>N</i>	<i>Chi</i> square	<i>p</i> -value
Government/public sector	568	0.8368	0.36
Education	566	1.7251	0.786
Majoritarian electoral system	568	148.6467	0.0000***
Age	568	0.0000***	T-test

**Notes:** \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001; *t*-test is used when the dependent variable is continuous, whereas Chi square is used when the dependent variable is dummy or categorical

**Table V.**  
Significance tests of  
differences between  
female and male MPs

#### 4.2 Legislative agenda of women MPs

The second stage of the empirical analysis in this paper is a content analysis of women MPs' participation in parliamentary debates. The content analysis aimed to answer two questions. First, are women more, less, or equally active in parliamentary debates than male MPs? Whereas some early studies found that women spoke less frequently (Kathlene, 1994), more recent ones found that such gender differences disappear over time (Pearson and Dancey, 2011; Broughton and Palmieri, 1999; Murray, 2010). Second, do female legislators give more attention to specific topics traditionally associated with women's social roles, like women's rights, gender equality, health care, protection from violence, children and family issues? (Saint-Germain, 1989; Jones, 1997; Reingold, 2000; Wängnerud, 2000; Bratton, 2002; Swers, 2005; Gerrity *et al.*, 2007; Devlin and Elgie, 2008; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008; McDonald and O'Brien, 2011) Indeed, previous research found that women were likely to be more active on female-oriented policy interests like education, health, environment and welfare (Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003; Childs and Withey, 2004; Pearson and Dancey, 2012; Thomas, 1994; Reingold, 2000; Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010).

To answer both questions, an analysis of the official transcripts of some selected parliamentary sessions was conducted. Minutes of parliamentary sessions reveal a significant amount of data on MPs' stances on different topics and are therefore quite indicative of individual MPs' agendas. The Egyptian Parliament has a reputation of recording, managing, and keeping quite detailed and extensive minutes of its parliamentary sessions that are available for public use[6]. The selection of which topics to examine – and hence, which parliamentary scripts to analyze – was guided by two criteria: diversity and saliency. To ensure diversity, the analysis included both women- and non-women-specific issues, as well as topics that address political, economic and social issues. Likewise, the topics had to be salient. Non-salient issues presumably do not provide MPs an incentive to take part in discussions in the first place and thus parliamentary action – or more precisely, inaction – in such cases would be driven by another factor. The following three topics meet these two criteria:

- (1) *An economic topic:* the 2016-2017 budget bill. The advantage of analyzing budget discussions is that they reveal MPs' preferences on an extensive array of public issues. Indeed, budget items include both soft and hard topics, programs related to traditional feminist issues and others that are not, all within the usual public finance trade-offs that parliamentarians have to make. Any suggestion to reallocate funds is by itself a public policy stance (for or against an issue).
- (2) *A women-specific topic:* toughening sentences against individuals who performed female genital mutilation (FGM). Tackling FGM tops the list of women's issues the 2015 parliament addressed in the first year of the parliamentary term. Although FGM was criminalized in Egypt for the first time in 2008, according to the 2014 Demographic and Health Survey, around 92% of Egyptian women between the age of 15 and 49 (and more than 75% of girls ages 9-12) are circumcised. Parliamentary debate on the topic started in 2016 when an Egyptian (male) MP claimed that from a medical and religious stance, FGM is necessary as long as it is performed correctly, adding that religious scholars should decide whether it is permissible. His statement sparked waves of criticism. In August 2016, parliament approved an amendment – proposed by a female MP – to the 2008 law, upgrading the practice from a misdemeanour to a felony and increasing the prison term for practitioners who perform the procedure to five to seven years instead of the previous punishment of three months to two years[7].

- (3) *A political oversight topic*: questioning the minister of supplies on the wheat sales and storage system. This incident marked the single strongest use of any parliamentary oversight tool by the 2015 parliament[8]. It came very close to triggering a motion to withdraw confidence from the relevant minister before he was asked by the prime minister to resign instead. Withdrawing confidence from a government minister has never happened in Egypt throughout its 150-year parliamentary history. The questioning included strong criticism from parliamentarians regarding the government's mismanagement of wheat purchases from farmers, in addition to criticism of the price at which such purchases were made.

These three topics were discussed over 21 parliamentary sessions. A total of 147 MPs spoke on all three topics, of which 19 were females (Table VI). The data indicate that female MPs were almost as equally active as male MPs in proportion to their total number in parliament when speaking on these topics. Women made up 14.9 per cent of all members and 13 per cent of the speakers on the three topics. Of the three topics examined in this content analysis, female MPs were most active on the topic directly addressing women's issues (FGM), making up 20 per cent of the MPs who spoke on the issue. Second in line was the budget bill (12.8 per cent) followed by the wheat sales and storage regime topic (10.2 per cent).

The unit studied for the content analysis was the paragraph, and coding was performed by hand. After the initial reading of each script, categories into which the content could be coded were defined for each of the three topics; these categories differed for all three topics. Then, in each parliamentary script, each paragraph was coded according to the closest coding category it fell under. Coding categories were not treated as mutually exclusive. A paragraph could be coded under two different categories (for example, if the same paragraph discusses both education and health care). In total, the parliamentary scripts of the three topics included 516 paragraphs. The results of the content analysis on each of these three topics are discussed below.

*4.2.1 2016-2017 budget bill.* The discussion of the 2016-2017 budget bill – the first to be approved by the 2015 parliament – lasted for six plenary sessions. Eleven categories were generated for the paragraph coding (see Figure 4 below and Table AI in the Appendix for a detailed description of these categories). Although only 10 out of the 78 female MPs participated in these discussions, some interesting observations can be made.

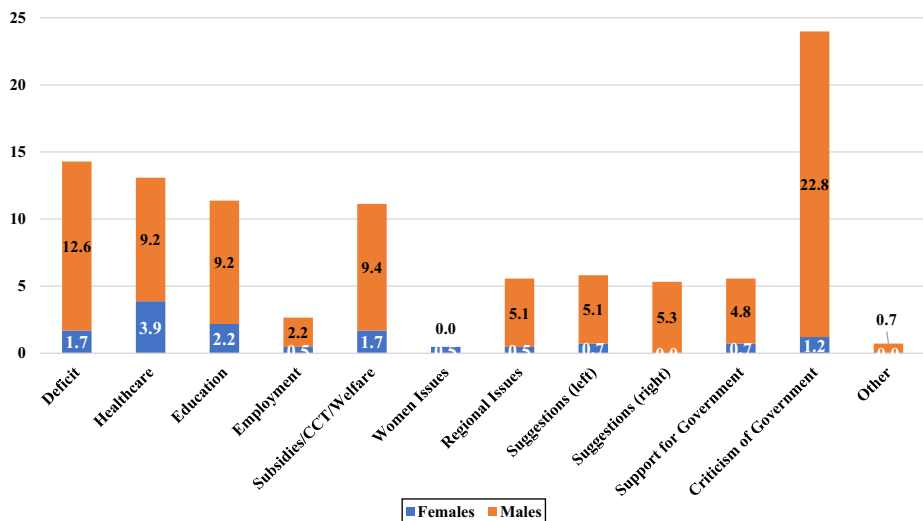
Looking at MPs' interventions regardless of gender, the three categories that received the most attention were criticism of government (24 per cent of all paragraphs), followed by the deficit (14.3 per cent) and health care (13.1 per cent). For female MPs, however, the topic they focused on the most was health care (28.6 per cent of all paragraphs attributed to female MPs addressed health-care issues), followed by education (16.1 per cent) and welfare and the deficit, which drew equal attention (12.5 per cent each). This is in line with findings of

	No. of paragraphs	Number of MPs		Males		Total
		Females <i>N</i>	(%)	<i>N</i>	(%)	
Budget Bill	413	10	12.8	68	87.2	78
FGM Bill	51	4	20.0	16	80.0	20
Wheat sales and storage	52	5	10.2	44	89.8	49
Total	516	19	13	128	87	147

**Table VI.**  
Summary statistics  
of parliamentary  
script hand-coding

Figure 4.

Interventions by MPs  
on the 2016-2017  
Budget Bill Topics,  
by gender (%)



previous studies, which found that female MPs tended to focus on “soft” issues rather than hard ones.

It is quite interesting, however, to see that female MPs devoted significant attention to the deficit. One female MP, for example, stated that the

Total deficit reached €319 billion. So where are the ways to look for revenues that could drive this deficit in public spending down so that we do not borrow more to avoid that the future generations shoulder our debt?”[9].

This fear of “burdening the younger generations” seems to fit the picture painted by previous studies that female MPs are likely to extend their role as mothers to a similar role for the broader population (Chaney, 2014). It is also quite surprising to see that no single male MP spoke on women’s issues.

The *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether these descriptive statistical differences are generalizable (Table VII). A *t*-test examines whether there is a significant difference between the behaviors of two populations (in our case, male and female MPs) and the direction of this difference. Three topics produced significant results. On both health care and women’s issues, women spoke significantly more than men; in contrast, they were significantly less likely to criticize the government than men.

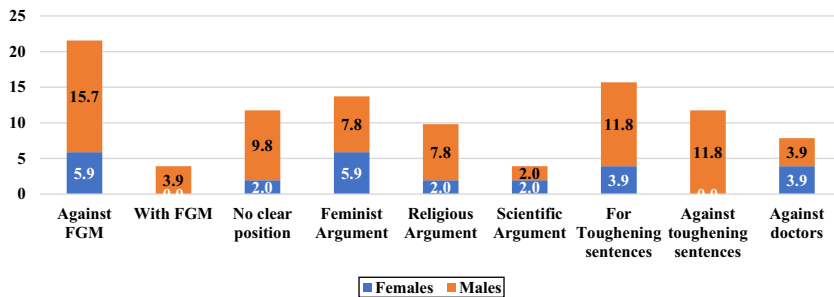
**4.2.2 Law toughening sentences against female genital mutilation.** The FGM amendment bill presented in August 2016 was discussed over five sessions. Eight coding categories were generated (see Figure 5 below and Table AII of the Appendix for a description of categories). Overall, combining male and female parliamentarians, MPs used interventions to declare their opposition to the practice (21.6 per cent), call for tougher sentences (15.7 per cent), or use feminist arguments to debate against FGM (13.7 per cent). As for female MPs in particular, they primarily voiced disapproval of FGM (23 per cent of all paragraphs attributed to female MPs) and used feminist arguments against the bill (also 23 per cent).

Two interesting results stand out. All endorsements of FGM came from male MPs – even the unclear positions on the bill were predominantly by men. Second, when arguing against FGM, female MPs were almost three times more likely to use feminist arguments than

**Table VII.**  
T-test results on the  
frequency of  
participation by  
female MPs on  
budget topics

	<i>N</i>	Ha: diff < 0 Pr (T < t)	Ha: diff > 0 Pr (T > t)
Deficit	78	0.5693	0.4307
Health care	78	0.0004	0.9996
Education	78	0.1172	0.8828
Employment	78	0.286	0.714
Subsidies/CCT/Welfare	78	0.3667	0.6333
Women's issues	78	0.0041	0.9959
Regional issues	78	0.7006	0.2994
Suggestions (left)	78	0.5149	0.4851
Suggestions (right)	78	0.8594	0.1406
Support for government	78	0.4903	0.5097
Criticism of government	78	0.973	0.027

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$



**Figure 5.**  
Interventions by MPs  
on FGM Bill, by  
gender (%)

religious or scientific ones. For example, one female MP said that FGM represents “violence against women because it capitulates part of her body”[10], whereas another female MP stated that “it is mere violence against women”[11]. Interestingly, a third female MP – who is a Professor of creed and philosophy at Al-Azhar – also used feminist remarks in calling for male MPs to “respect women and stop constraining, intimidating or hurting us” [12]. Chi-square tests (Table VIII) reveal two statistically significant results at the 90 per cent confidence level: women were more likely to use feminist arguments and also more likely to

Variable of comparison	<i>N</i>	<i>Chi</i> <sup>2</sup>	Pr
Against FGM	20	0.8081	0.369
With FGM	20	0.5556	0.456
Feminist argument	20	3.5165	0.061*
Religious argument	20	0.0000	1.000
Scientific argument	20	1.2500	0.264
For toughening sentences	20	0.2083	0.648
Against toughening sentences	20	2.1429	0.143
Against doctors	20	2.8125	0.094*

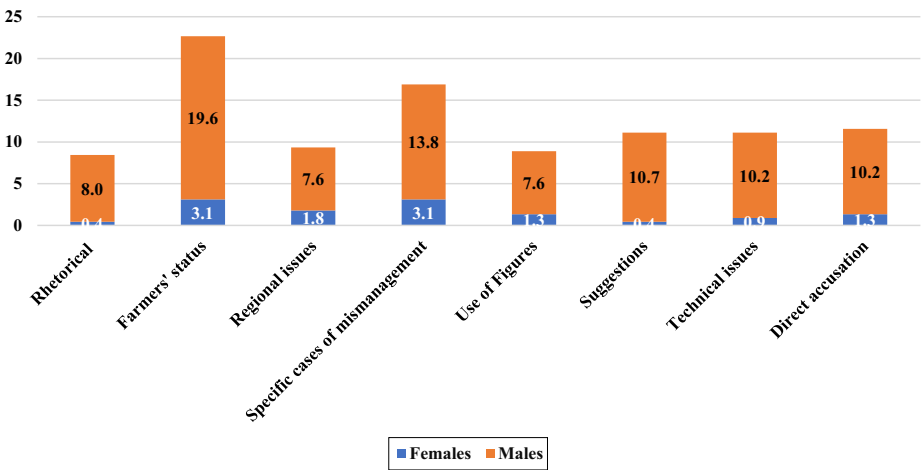
**Notes:** \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table VIII.**  
Chi square tests on  
the frequency of  
participation by  
female MPs on the  
FGM bill

blame doctors for performing such operations. The significance of women’s differentiated use of feminist arguments indicates that women chose to deal with the topic primarily from a feminist perspective. This is quite intriguing in a predominantly conservative country where most of the arguments used by the proponents of the practice justify it on religious grounds.

4.2.3 *Questioning of subsidies’ minister over wheat storage.* The questioning of the minister of supplies over the wheat sales and storage practices took place over ten sessions. Eight coding categories were generated from the relevant parliamentary scripts (see Figure 6 below and Table AIII in the Appendix for a detailed description of each category). Female MPs chose to focus more on farmers’ status and specific cases of mismanagement.

Results of the *t*-tests, however, reveal no significant difference between males and females on any of these sub-topics (Table IX). This is in contrast to the budget and FGM bill discussions in which female MPs pursued a significantly different agenda. One way to interpret this result is to deduce that women MPs addressed non-feminine issues in the same way as men. In other words, women representatives were equally capable of addressing



**Figure 6.**  
Interventions on the wheat sales and storage, by gender (%)

**Table IX.**  
*T*-test results on the frequency of participation by female MPs on wheat sales and storage

Parameters	Significance of difference between male and female MPs	
	<i>N</i>	Pr(  <i>T</i>   >   <i>t</i>  )
Use of figures	49	0.4364
Rhetorical interventions	49	0.4115
Reference to technical details	49	0.7185
Reference to status of farmers	49	0.3035
Reference to regional issues	49	0.1771
Making suggestions	49	0.3619
Reference to specific cases of mismanagement	49	0.0105
Direct accusations	49	0.743*

**Note:** \*This was a Chi squared test whose Chi squared coefficient was 0.1076

even the “dry” or “hard” topics of bread and butter with the same depth and level of sophistication as male MPs.

## 5. Implications

This paper set out to answer a question central to women’s parliamentary representation: To what extent are women MPs different from their male colleagues, both in terms of their backgrounds and their parliamentary agenda? With a focus on Egypt’s 2015 parliament, which recorded a historic 15 per cent women’s representation level, it found some interesting results. Women MPs are significantly younger than their male counterparts. They also owe much of their representation to the quota system. Moreover, they tend to focus more on women’s rights and social issues while proving to be no less active on technical and hard topics than men.

Two broad implications can be observed. First, although in terms of political dynamics and parliamentary life, Egypt is far from being characterized with the democratic culture of Western democratic political systems, some of the patterns of women’s legislative behavior in Western democracies found in previous studies – especially the focus on specific social issues (Reingold, 1992; Childs, 2005; Carroll, 2002; Smooth, 2011) – matches that of Egyptian female representatives in the 2015 parliament. This finding suggests that a country’s level of democracy does not necessarily determine women’s legislative behaviour. With some caveats, women tend to see themselves as champions of certain issues (health care and women’s issues) and try to advance them in parliamentary debates. This could be – at least partly – good news for those concerned with the impact of feminism in various contexts. It indicates that a country does not necessarily need to significantly democratize to advance women’s issues. This is encouraging especially because democratization might be a long process for some countries. On the other hand, however, without a reasonable degree of democracy, there is a high possibility of detachment between feminist activism at the grassroots level and the articulation of women’s demands at the legislative level. This runs the risk of reducing ‘women’s issues’ into the perceptions and convictions of the formal elite thereby constructing ‘legitimate’ women’s issues through top-down initiatives which are not necessarily embraced by ordinary women or materialized in women’s activism.

Second, the analysis above offers some evidence in support of the critical mass theory. Women’s representation beyond a certain threshold gives women in parliament greater solidarity and impetus to act together and stand up for women’s rights. It could also be said that such high levels of female representation makes it harder to infringe on women’s rights. The example from the Egyptian context is the FGM bill. One reason the bill was initiated in the first place was the strong backlash against a (male) MP who demanded that all Egyptian women be circumcised. This, in turn, triggered calls by female MPs for tougher sentences for those who perform the practice. It is not difficult to infer that such a response might have not materialized had there been much lower women representation in parliament at the time.

## Notes

1. Al-Fagr Newspaper, 29 August 2016, available at: [www.elfagr.com/2255045](http://www.elfagr.com/2255045) (accessed 20 December 2017).
2. Mobtada’ Newspaper, 26 March 2017, available at: [www.elfagr.com/2255045](http://www.elfagr.com/2255045) (accessed 20 December 2017). [www.mobtada.com/details/576847](http://www.mobtada.com/details/576847).



3. Ministry of Health and Population [Egypt], El-Zanaty and Associates and ICF International (2015) *Egypt Health Issues Survey 2015*. Cairo, Egypt and Rockville, Maryland, USA: Ministry of Health and Population and ICF International.
4. See <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/> (accessed 15 December 2017).
5. In this analysis, only elected female MPs were considered. Parallel information about appointed MPs could not be found.
6. For updated parliamentary scripts, see <http://parlmany.youm7.com/> (accessed 20 January 2018).
7. The amendment also imposes a stricter penalty of up to 15 years' imprisonment if the practice leads to death or a permanent deformity. Those who "escort" victims to the procedure can also face jail sentences ranging from one to three years.
8. Other tools include *motion of asking a minister*, *request to deliver an urgent speech* and *request to form a fact-finding mission*. All these tools however are less powerful than questioning a minister which is the only measure that can develop into a no-confidence vote.
9. MP Mervat Mousa, Plenary Parliamentary Session no. 74, p. 70, June 26, 2016.
10. MP M. M. Rizk, Plenary Parliamentary Session no. 95, p. 12, August 31, 2016.
11. MP Mona Mounir, plenary session no. 95, p. 14, August, 31, 2016.
12. MP Amna Nossier, plenary session no. 95, pp. 23-24, August, 31, 2016.

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#### Further reading

Mill, J.S. (1988), *The Subjection of Women (1869)*, in Orkin S, (Ed.), Hackett, Cambridge.

Topic	Definition
Deficit	Reference to the large size of the deficit/debt and its negative effects
Health care	Reference to health care issues, like underfunded hospitals or underfunded specific health programs
Education	Reference to education issues, like poor performance by students and calls for increased funding for schools
Employment	Reference to the increasing rate of unemployment and the importance of providing more jobs
Subsidies/CCT/welfare	Reference to subsidies, conditional cash transfer programs, and welfare programs in the budget
Women's issues	Reference to women's issues, including fiscal programs that support them
Regional issues	Reference to issues relevant to specific governorates or electoral districts
Suggestions (left)	Suggestions to change budget items that aim to increase spending or the government's role
Suggestions (right)	Suggestions to change budget items that aim to decrease spending or the government's role
Support for government	Support of government performance or the proposed budget
Criticism of government	Criticism of the performance of the government or the proposed budget

**Table AI.**  
Description of coded  
categories for  
discussions on the  
2016-2017 budget bill

Topic	Definition
Against FGM	Interventions that are categorically against the practice and for the bill
With FGM	Interventions that are clearly for the practice or want to allow it under specific circumstances
No clear position	Interventions that are neither for nor against the practice
Feminist argument	Use of feminist arguments to argue against FGM (i.e. it represents violence against women)
Religious argument	Use of religious arguments to argue against FGM (i.e. no clear religious rule calls for it)
Scientific argument	Use of scientific arguments to argue against FGM (i.e. referring to what studies indicate about the negative consequences of the practice)
For toughening sentences	Interventions that call for toughening sentences for anyone performing or condoning FGM (e.g. doctors, parents, religious leaders)
Against toughening sentences	Interventions that are against toughening sentences for the practice
Against doctors	Against physicians who perform FGM operations

**Table AII.**  
Description of coded  
categories for  
discussions on the  
FGM bill

**Table AIII.**  
Description of coded  
categories for  
discussions on the  
wheat questioning

Topic	Definition
Rhetorical Interventions	More style than substance. Use of eloquent style and soundbites in a cynical or sarcastic fashion
Reference to status of farmers	Reference to the negative effects of the wheat pricing and distribution on farmers' incomes
Reference to regional issues	Reference to problems related to growing, selling, or storing wheat in specific governorates or electoral districts.
Reference to specific cases of mismanagement	Reference to some specific misconducts by government officials like the waste incurred because of bad storage practices that didn't consider high temperatures
Use of figures	Use of numbers and percentages to support whatever argument is being made
Making suggestions	Interventions that suggest solutions to the problem of wheat production or distribution (mainly to decrease waste in storage)
Reference to technical details	Reference to technical issues related to wheat production, distribution, or sale
Direct accusations	Direct accusations against the minister or government

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