



Women's Representation in the Egyptian Parliament (2015-2020)

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Abstract

The study is based on an assessment of Egyptian women's role and representation in the 2015 and 2020 parliaments. Women participated in the 2015 and 2020 parliaments like never before. In 2015, It was the first time for 90 women to become members of parliament. 15% percent of the Egyptian parliament seats were reserved to women. This would not have been possible without the quota stated in the parliamentary law. Few studies have tackled women's representation and performance in the parliament. This study conducts interviews with female parliamentarians and a content analysis of the parliamentary records in order to estimate the participation of women in the discussions, women's participation in the standing committees, women's role in proposing different bills especially those focusing on women's rights, women's response to the challenges confronting their parliamentary performance. The study addresses whether the huge representation of women in the parliament contributed to advancement of women's rights and changed legislation in favor of women. Moreover, the study gives special attention to the notion of "critical mass"; were women able to develop a critical mass in the 2015 parliament and with the increase of women seats to nearly 26% of the parliament seats in the 2020 elections. It seeks to unravel the dynamics of issuing legislations in Egypt relying on primary data analyzing interviews and parliamentary records. The interviews are



conducted with women parliamentarians from different governorates, educational background, religious background, age groups, and political affiliations.

Key words: Women Parliamentarians – Legislation – 2015 House of Representatives – 2020 House of Representatives and Senate – Critical Mass – Critical Acts- Egypt.

Introduction:

Since 1957, two women, Rawia Attia and Amina Shoukry, became members of the Egyptian parliament for the first time.

¹Since then, women have been always present in the parliament. Despite this fact, massive presence of women was always linked to quotas as in 1979 and in the 1984 parliament when the quota was issued to reserve thirty seats to women and in the 2010 parliament that was formed after the 2009 amendment when 60 seats were reserved to women. Otherwise, women only occupied only 2% or 3% of parliament seats. ²

Women have struggled from different obstacles confronting their presence in the parliament. These obstacles were cultural, social, economic and political. Cultural and social obstacles such as stereotyping women as housewives and linking them to their reproductive role without concentrating on their productive role in the society as a whole. In addition to framing them as inferior to men intellectually. Also there has been attacks on women when they discuss or propose bills that concern women's issues which are usually highly contested topics. Women are also afraid that they can be attacked to become politicians from the viewpoint of being women. As for the

economic obstacles, some scholars perceived that woman are more occupied with their jobs and struggling to be economically empowered and this is a huge burden on women so they don't have the time to pursue any political career.

Also, from the political standpoint, women were usually not enlisted in any political parties' quotas or parliamentary quotas. They were given several chances through appointments by the president or through quotas stipulated by constitutions and parliamentary laws. In addition to that, women faced several problems regarding the electoral system, the party recruitment processes, and the political resources and motivation that women bring to the pursuit of elected office especially in this historically male dominated institution.

Through quotas, women guaranteed their presence in the parliament despite these obstacles. There was a significant rise in the number of female parliamentarians in the 2015 parliament to 90 women. The rising tide of women in elected office has raised expectations about their role to address women's issues. These women were from different political parties, various educational and religious backgrounds. Currently the number of the female parliamentarians in the 2020 parliament is 162 women which constitutes around 26% from the total number of seats in the House of representatives.³ This is the greatest number of female representatives in the Egyptian parliament. The study addresses whether the rise of the number of women will lead to a change in the legislative agenda. The question is "Whether the presence of



women changed the agenda of parliament to include more legislations in favor of women rights? “

The study addresses this question through narrative interview method through semi-structured interviews with fifteen female parliamentarians “ Nadia Henry, Basant Fahmy, Anisa Hassouna, Abla El Hawary, Manal Maher, Abeenr Gamal, Nihal El Megharbel, Suzy Rafla, Samaa Soliman, Noha El Sherif, Doha Assi and Gihan Zaki held in November and December 2020 and in July and August 2022 .The legislative role of female parliamentarians is to be analyzed through this narrative interview method in order to elicit narratives and stories that manifest their life experiences as women in the Egyptian parliament in the aftermath of two revolutions (2011) and (2013) in addition to an analysis of the periodic newsletter of the House of Representatives and a number of studies that dealt with evaluating the legislative role of women parliamentarians .

The paper is categorized into different sections. Section one starts with elaborating on the role of women in the Egyptian parliament since 1957. Also, this section sheds light on the nature of Egyptian political system. Section two and three present the theoretical framework mentioning the difference between descriptive and substantive representation through the studies that tackled whether the increase in the number of women leads to a substantive change. Then the study addresses the difference between two notions: critical mass and critical acts. Section four explains the research method used in the paper

focusing on the narrative interview method and the procedures of conducting interviews. In section five, the study tackles the legislative role of female parliamentarians in the 2015 parliament focusing on their perception of their roles and duties, the bills proposed by them especially those concerning women rights, the obstacles women face in the parliament and who supports their bills. Section six is comprised of the conclusion and findings.

I. Women's representation in the Egyptian parliament prior to the 2011 and 2013 revolutions:

Women were usually represented in the Egyptian parliament for around two or three percent of the whole parliament seats except for two times with the introduction of the quota system in 1979, 1984 and 2010. That we witnessed a rise in the percentage of women in parliaments to around 8% and 12.7% in 1979 and 2010 respectively. However, women's presence in high numbers in the 2010 parliament could not be assessed as it was dissolved then the 2011 revolution erupted. It was not until 2015 that Egyptian parliament witnessed the highest representation for women around 15 % and in 2020 the Egyptian parliament witnessed a high representation for women accounting for 26% of the total number of seats.

Few studies focused on the representation of women parliamentarians in Egypt either prior or post the 2011 and 2013 revolutions especially after post 2011 and 2013 and from here stems the importance of this article.



Wahby (2005) in her study tackling the women parliamentarians' performance in Egypt in the period (1957-2000) gathered material about women parliamentarians related to their party affiliation, education, job, leadership positions acquired by women in the parliament, the standing committees that they joined, governorates representation. She addressed the main political, social and economic issues raised throughout the period of 1957 till 2000. Her analysis was focused on several issues such as the social background and political convictions of women parliamentarians, the issues that concerned them, their statements and urgent request, fact finding and briefing used, to what extent there was coordination between female parliamentarians and between the female and male parliamentarians, also to what extent where their legislative initiatives accepted.⁴

Khodair and Farrag (2016) tackled the issue of women representation/misrepresentation focusing on women's presence in the 2015 parliament. It discussed whether elected women signify the majority of Egyptian women or specific classes or categories. Moreover, the study shed light on the importance of quota in increasing women representation in the 2015 parliament. However, it pinpointed that nineteen women could win parliamentary seats through the single member district not the list.⁵

Abdel Gawad and Hassan (2019) tackled whether the female legislators were different from male legislators regarding their socio-economic backgrounds and they examined if the rise in the number of

women legislators will lead to a change in the legislative agenda. The authors conducted a content analysis of selected parliamentary scripts to pinpoint the topics raised by female members of parliaments. They chose three topics to analyze: an economic, women-issue. political oversight topics.⁶

And before discussing women parliamentarians' performance in the 2015 parliament, this is basic information about the Egyptian parliament. Egypt had its' first parliament in 1866 "*Majlis Shura El Nuwwab* ". According to the 1923 constitution, Egypt was parliamentary system with the parliament given vast powers along with the king. After the 1952 revolution, Egypt became a semi-presidential system. Most of the time Egypt had a unicameral legislature then since 1980, we had a bicameral legislature when the Shura council was established. After the 1952 revolution, in 1957 "*Majlis Al Umma* " was formed in 1957 then later the parliament was named People's assembly "*Majlis Al Shaab*". In 1980 another chamber was formed "the Shura council " which remained only an advisory body.

Nevertheless, the Egyptian political system is a semi-presidential system. The executive is more powerful than the legislature. The legislature was an arena of contestation between the ruling regime and the opposition. Opposition parties sought to acquire more seats in the parliament and the ruling regime sought to secure an absolute majority of parliament seats in order to guarantee that the bills pass without getting blocked by opponents.⁷

As for the relation between the president and the parliament, according to the 1971 constitution the president had legislative powers to initiate laws and to veto bills. In addition to his right to issue decisions equal to legislations in power. ⁸ The 1971 constitution preserved the president’s right to dissolve the People’s Assembly if deemed necessary and after a referendum of the people (Article 136)⁹ The Egyptian political system, throughout history, was characterized by several pillars such as that the head of state (being a Sultan, King, President, etc.) plays a key role. The head of state is perceived as the center of the Egyptian political system as he has many jurisdictions constitutionally and in practice. ¹⁰For example, in the 1923 constitution (Article 24) “Legislative power is held by the king in participation with the Senate and the House of Representatives”.¹¹

Focusing on women, along history, they were effective in the parliament either as supporters of the ruling regime or as part of the opposition. yet, their presence was not in high numbers before 2015 and this is clear in the following table.

Parliament	Number of members	Women membership	Ratio	The electoral system
1957	350	4	0.6	Individual

1960	600	7	1.2	Individual
1964	360	8	2.2	Individual
1969	348	3	0.9	Individual
1971	360	8	2.2	Individual
1976	360	6	1.7	Individual
1979	360	35	9.7	Proportional representation
1984	468	38	8.1	Proportional representation
1987	458	18	3.9	Proportional representation
1990	454	10	2.2	Individual
1995	454	9	2.0	Individual
2000	452	11	2.4	Individual
2005	442	9	2.0	Individual
2010	512	65	12.7	Individual
2012	506	11	2.2	Individual with women quota
2015	569	89	14.9	Individual and list with women quota

2020 ¹²	579	162	26%	Individual and list with women quota
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Source : Abou Rida, Mohamed Ali (2016), The political and social structure of the Egyptian House of Representatives 2015, Amr Hashim Rabei (ed.), **House of Representatives elections 2015**, (Cairo : Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies),p.201

This study concentrates on the role of women in the 2015 parliament because it is the first parliament in the aftermath of the 2013 revolution and in light of the 2014 constitution. The 2015 parliament was a unicameral parliament consisting only of the Egyptian House of Representatives (Majlis Al Nuwwab).

II. Descriptive versus substantive representation:

To answer the question as to whether the increase in the number of women in the parliament will lead to a change in the legislative agenda, we have to tackle the descriptive representation versus substantive representation dichotomy. By descriptive representation, we mean the number of female representatives by counting the number of women represented in legislatures. By substantive representation, we mean the significant role played by women to advance women rights and to change the agenda of parliaments to focus on women issues and to include women issues on the legislative agenda.

Research focusing on descriptive representation represents a more mature research field. This is partly because of the longer history of this tradition; as early as the 1950s, Duverger highlighted the role of electoral systems in determining the number of women elected.¹³

Few studies have tackled substantive representation as to whether the increase of quotas and the increase of women leads to real representation. Zetterberg's research on Latin America, for example, finds little relationship between sex quotas and women's levels of political interest, trust in politicians or political parties, and perceptions of political knowledge.¹⁴

Moreover, research on substantive representation is less mature and that can be traced to the way parliaments function as institution, also female politicians meet certain obstacles but they are not studied thoroughly. Also, there is no evidence regarding what an increased number of women in parliament will most affect: Internal working procures? policy outcomes? Trust in government?

Anne Phillips presented an interesting link between descriptive and substantive representation through her concept of "Presence" as that whenever women are present in the parliaments this will lead to a substantive representation. In 1995, her influential book "The Politics of Presence" was published. The theory of the politics of presence suggests that female politicians are best equipped to represent the interests of women; thus, the theory predicts a link between descriptive and substantive representation. Phillips's argument is built upon the concept

of Gender and the differences between women and men in their everyday lives, such as differences relating to child-rearing, education and occupations, divisions of paid and unpaid labor, exposure to violence and sexual harassment, and the fact that female politicians, at least to some extent, share the experiences of other women

So, Phillips believed that women can change the nature of topics addressed but was doubtful about the possibility of changing the nature of the institution. She used the expression a “shot in the dark” to reflect the struggles faced by women to change political institutions. She believed that parliaments are rigid; parliaments do not change easily.

Phillips’s arguments in “The Politics of Presence” is an example of mainstream literature in women and politics studies: that women have distinctive interests especially in proposing bills related to women interests. And that stems from the fact that they are faced by problems that arise from their exposure to violence, discrimination, social and political exclusion.

Feminists have emphasized that a necessary condition of the representation of women’s interests is the presence of women in political institutions and other places where decisions are made. ¹⁵Women’s presence in the parliament with huge numbers may lead men to act in favor of women’s interests and issues.¹⁶

Wangnerud (2009) conducts empirical research on western democracies such as Sweden . She finds that female politicians contribute to strengthening the position of women’s interests.¹⁷

By applying on a number of cases in the Arab region and beyond. Studies emphasized the importance of both descriptive and substantive representation. Blackman and Jackson (2021) study addressed how voters in Tunisia view female politicians. They find that all respondents are more likely to prefer candidates who prioritize security issues over women's rights.¹⁸

Moreover, Ayşe Güneş Ayata, Fatma Tütüncü (2008) drew their analysis based on in-depth interviews with 20 women MPs and parliamentary debates in Turkey. They studied women's impact on politics without their constitution of a critical mass in the parliament.¹⁹

III. Critical Mass versus Critical Acts ... From the politics of presence to substantive representation:

Another response, besides Phillips arguments, provided by the studies claims that the mere presence of women as to the number of women in the parliament is not the crucial factor to decide whether they will be effective or not.

Much feminist theory through writings by Phillips, Mansbridge and Dovi suggests that women's substantive representation is much more likely to be undertaken by the (relatively few) women representatives present in legislatures. Two concepts are used to predict substantive representation: critical mass and critical acts.

Critical mass is a term borrowed from physics by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) to assess and evaluate change in organizations.²⁰ The term

is usually understood to hold that, once women constitute a particular proportion of a parliament, politics will be transformed because a tipping point of some kind is reached. The term “critical mass” implies that the size of the minority is crucial and if women reach a percentage of 30% for example, they can introduce change to politics.

In her study of women in a big American corporation, Moss Kanter mentions that the size of minority is significant. For her, Proportions, that is, relative numbers of socially and culturally different people in a group, are seen as critical in shaping interaction dynamics. Moss Kanter does not talk clearly about a “critical mass, she discussed how the gradual change takes place when the minority grows larger in an organization. The discussion of a critical mass adds to this the question of a possible point of acceleration in the influence of the minority when reaching a certain size for example 30%.²¹

Dahlerup’s article emphasizes that it is not critical mass or the numbers of women who are present but critical acts that are important. She shifts the focus of the argument from an emphasis on mere presence of women in the parliament to what happens when women are present to what else happens when the numbers of women change. It is an argument for the consideration of substantive representation in addition to the significance of presence.²²The size alone, critical mass, is not sufficient but critical acts matter. Based on the experience of women in Scandinavian politics, Dahlerup discusses six areas for which an increase in the proportion of the minority might lead to changes in for instance

the political culture, the political discourse about women or the reaction to women as politicians. The article suggests that the concept of a critical mass is replaced by one of critical acts, which would seem to be more relevant when studying human beings.²³ A large minority might make a difference even if still a minority.

The question is whether a critical mass leads to a real change in the agenda. “Does 30% of women in politics lead to this? As shown in the article it is difficult to apply the idea of a turning point following from a growth in the size of a minority to political science as social science. Critical acts not critical mass matters.²⁴ A critical act is “the willingness and ability of the minority to mobilize the resources of the organization or institution to improve the situation for themselves as members of parliament and the whole minority group for women in politics”.²⁵

IV. Methodology:

The study adopts a qualitative method. It is “case study “based. It provides a focused and in-depth analysis of women parliamentarians’ representation in both the 2015 and 2020 parliaments. Moreover, the study focuses on the context in which women parliamentarians played a critical role in the 2015 and 2020 parliaments.

To answer the research questions of the study, in depth interviews were conducted with fifteen female parliamentarians “Nadia Henry, Basant Fahmy, Anisa Hassouna, Abla El Hawary, Manal Maher, Abeer Gamal , Nihal El Megharbel, Sanaa El Saied, Hend Rashad, Hadia Hosny El Saied, Samaa Soliman Noha El Sherif, Doha Assy, Gihan Zaki and



Suzy Rafla” . Interviews were held in November , December 2020 and
July, August 2022 .

Member of parliament	Her Party	Governorate	Date of joining the parliament	Elected or appointed	Location of interview	Location of interview
Nadia Henry	Free Egyptians Party (Hizb al-Masryeen al-Ahrar)	Cairo (Masr El Gedida constituency)	2015	Elected	Phone interview	45 minutes
Basant Fahmy	Independent/Non-partisan politician	Cairo	2015	Appointed by the president	Phone interview	30 minuted
Anisa Hassouna	Independent/Non-partisan politician	Cairo	2015	Appointed by the president	Phone interview	I contacted her and she agreed to conduct an interview . She asked me to send her the interview questions via whatsapp and she replied to all my questions as a text as she was very sick at that time . She passed away in March 2022
Abla El Hawary	Nation's Future Party (Hizb Mostaqbal Watan)	Sohag	2015	Elected	Phone interview	60 minutes

Manal Maher	<i>Independent non-partisan politician</i>	Sohag	2015	Elected	Phone interview	60 minutes
Abeer Gamal	Nation's Future Party (Hizb Mostaqbal Watan)	Beni Suef	2020	Elected	Phone interview	30 minutes
Nihal Megharbel	<i>independent / non-partisan politician</i>	Cairo	2020	Appointed by the president in the Senate	Phone interview	20 minutes
Suzy Rafla	No party affiliation	Cairo	2015	Appointed by the president	Phone interview	30 minutes
Sanaa El Saied	Egyptian Social Democratic Party	Assiut	2012 2020	Elected	Phone interview	30 minutes
Hend Rashad	Nation's Future Party (Hizb Mostaqbal Watan)	Cairo	2020	Elected	Phone interview	20 minutes
Hadia Hosny El Saied	The <i>Coordination's</i> Committee of <i>Party's Youth Leaders and Politicians</i> [CPYP]	Sharkia	2020	Elected	Phone interview	20 minutes
Samaa Soliman	The <i>Homeland Defenders Party</i>	Cairo	2020	Appointed by the president in the Senate	Face-to face interview At the Senate	80 minutes
Noha El Sherif	No party affiliation	Cairo	2020	Appointed by the president in the Senate	Face-to face interview	80 minutes
Gihan Zaki	No party affiliation	Cairo	2020	Appointed by the president in the House of Representatives	Face-to face interview	80 minutes
Doha Assi	Tagammu party	Mansoura	2020	Elected	Face-to face interview	80 minutes

The aim was to conduct semi-structured interviews with the female parliamentarians in order to document their narratives and stories in the 2015 and 2020 parliaments.

The following table summarizes basic background information about the seven female parliamentarians: who is the member of parliament, what is her party, from which governorate, when did she join the parliament, what is her age, in what system was she elected or



appointed to the parliament, how long was the interview, and where did the interview take place?

The research method adopted in the research paper is the narrative interview method. The study of narratives has become vital as a research method in political science. Story-telling plays a vital role in shaping social phenomena. The narrative interview encourages an interviewee to tell a story about some significant events in their life²⁶ and that is a documentation of an important juncture in the history of Egypt.

This narrative related to the case-study of Egypt is important as this is the first parliament after the 2013 revolution and the data gathered in this paper from the interviews is primary data that can be helpful to researchers who will work on the Egyptian parliament or parliaments in the Arab world.

The “Narrative interview method “has been used in research papers in political science recently. Besides interviews, the researcher relied on data available in the press and on the Egyptian House of Representatives website. This is the data available especially that the full parliamentary sessions are not aired and also the records of parliamentary sessions are not accessible.

The interviews were held over the phone as it was not suitable to hold it in person due to many restrictions because of the spread of corona at that time so members of parliament suggested doing the interview on phone. This is a random sample of interviews. I chose those women parliamentarians specifically because they are influential female leaders in their fields and they are well known public figures mentioned a lot in Egyptian media and press. It was not easy to interview them because the interviews were conducted during the time of preparation for the parliamentary elections 2020 and due to corona restrictions so they were held over the phone. Interviews that were conducted recently in July and August 2022 were held face-to face.

V. The legislative role of female parliamentarians in the 2015 and 2020 parliaments:

The house of representatives according to the constitution is given the right to legislate. Since electing two women in 1957 Rawia Attia and Amina Shukry as the first two parliamentarians, women parliamentarians have played a significant role in the parliamentary life.

During the 2015 parliament, there was a reconsideration of a great number of political, economic, social and cultural laws that discusses the status of woman and her economic and political empowerment and the issues related to it as the rights of women and children. Women's vital presence in the parliament was a result of the 30th of June 2013 revolution. The number of female parliamentarians increased in the



parliament under the legislative umbrella to 90 women nearly 15 % of the number of the 2015 parliament. According to the electoral law of the 2015 parliament, women were to have 21 seats in the electoral list comprised of 45 seats and 7 seats in the list of 15 seats.²⁷

In the 2015 parliament, 76 women were elected and 14 were appointed by the president. Most of women elected were elected through the electoral lists and few were successful to win individual seats.

The article sheds light on the legislative role of women in the 2015 parliament with a special focus on women rights laws.

Although women occupy more than 25 % of the House of Representatives exactly 162 seats. However, they still constitute a minority in the parliament previously viewed as a male dominated institution. Questions are thus raised as to whether how this traditionally underrepresented minority group will act after it acquired a lot of seats though still, they are a minority but a minority in the rise.

After two decades from issuing the law of initiating divorce, the right of woman to initiate divorce (Khol') there are amendments to some laws such as personal status law, harshening penalties to sexual harassment and female genital mutilation (FGM).

Women Parliamentarians perception of their role and duties:

Article (101) of the Egyptian constitution 2014 stipulates that the two main functions of House of Representatives is to legislate and to monitor the performance of the government (oversight). The article is as follows: “The *House of Representatives is entrusted with legislative*

authority, and with approving the general policy of the state, the general plan of economic and social development and the state budget. It exercises oversight over the actions of the executive authority. All the foregoing takes place as set out by the Constitution.” ²⁸

Despite this fact there is a stereotype of the image of the member of parliament in Egyptian culture often portrayed in Egyptian cinema that s/he is a services member of parliament as s/he provides services to the citizens and that s/he is present with them in the district and is always present with them in the different celebrations and funerals.

But through several interviews with members of parliament, they mentioned that they believe that their main role is legislation.

Member of the 2015 parliament Manal Maher said that she perceives that the most important role of the member of parliament is to legislate as the social and economic effect of legislations is crucial. For a member of parliament, it is important to read and understand the arguments of the opinion whether pro or against the legislation. According to her, women had a leading role in legislating in the parliament and this is manifested in the large number of words given to women and the amount of time given for women to present their bills and suggestions. And that was very significant especially after a long time when the parliament was not present from the 2013 revolution till early 2016. ²⁹

Member of the 2015 parliament Abla El Hawary mentioned that the process of law-making is very hard as any law drafted has to be in



accordance with the constitution and the legislative structure of the state. As she was a member in the constitutional and legislative committee, she was very meticulous to all the details of the legislations. She was specifically concerned with many bills related to women issues as the new personal status law.³⁰

Member of the 2015 parliament Nadia Henry mentioned that the legislation is very crucial to support any societal issue. Law affects culture and can change it. For her, the real problem that women face right now is culture. And in addition to law, media and cultural institutions can support the application of laws supporting women rights in the society. She was concerned with a number of laws such as amending the penal law which discriminates against women. She also presented a bill for creating the antidiscrimination commission.³¹

Some other parliamentarians as Basant Fahmy said that she was not concerned about women legislations as such but was concerned about economic legislations that will have an effect on the society as a whole. The legislation related to women solely is not important as she was concerned about legislations related to the public interest. She was a member of the economic committee and was concerned about economic legislations that will benefit both men and women. She believes that if we have a strong economy this will lead to social, educational and health security. She was concerned with legislations to increase the states Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which affects that average individual's income and state revenues. At the economic committee they discussed different

laws in this regard such as investment laws, Anti-corruption laws, Suez Canal economic zone laws, public-private partnership law.³²

Member of the 2015 parliament Anisa Hassouna mentioned that women were very active in the different sessions within the parliament. Women discussed the different bills that sometimes lasted till late at night. Women were given a huge time for presenting words. But also, women parliamentarians represented Egypt abroad in international forums such as Rania Elwany who was chosen to represent Egypt in the interparliamentary union (IPU) and she was the president of the youth conference in Lusaka, Zambia, she was also a member in the IPU forum of young parliamentarians. Also, member of parliament Dalia Yousef who visited Washington D.C. to attend a conference held by the American Senate to celebrate the International Women's Day.

Member of the 2012 and 2020 parliaments Sanaa El Saied said that she believes that the role of the parliamentarian is to participate in the development of Egypt. She participated in politics after being so active in social work. She used to work at the agricultural bank in Assiut. Then she became a member in the local council in Assiut (Upper Egypt) in 2008. Afterwards she was a candidate in the 2010 elections. She didn't win at that time. But she won in the 2011- 2012 elections and became a member of the 2012 parliament. Also, she became a member of the 2020 parliament. And as a member too in the national council for women and as a chairwoman for the committee of political participation in the



national council for women she is keen on organizing workshops to raise the awareness of women to participate politically. ³³

Member of the 2020 House of Representatives Abeer Gamal said that she is a member of the woman committee in the Republican people’s party and that prior to becoming a member of parliament the party provided many opportunities to raise awareness for women’s issues through seminars. She mentioned that she cares a lot about the economic rights of women especially in rural areas and she is keen on proposing legislations pro women economic rights. ³⁴

Moreover, women were very active in many legislations such as increasing the maternity leave for women to four months, working women laws, the added value law, building churches law, civil service law, law of national council of women as an independent institution, combating the illegal disclosure of examinations and laws of antidiscrimination. ³⁵

Bills proposed by women parliamentarians:

Women in the 2015 parliament were concerned with many laws aimed at protecting women rights such as inheritance laws, personal status laws, harshening punishment over female genital mutilation, laws to protect elderly women and breadwinner women such as “Takaful and Karama “program.

Women were members in the different standing committees such as the labor force committee, constitutional committee, economic committee, social solidarity committee.

Member of parliament El-Hawary presented a bill related to personal status laws to redefine and reconceptualize marriage, engagement, divorce, expenses such as food, social and health insurance. She presented a whole bill comprised of five chapters and 224 articles that covers all what is related to child and family and laws and child marriage. She suggested articles related to vision and hosting in addition to articles related to engagement. If the engagement is broken, who receives the gifts.

She believed that other laws are crucial such as harshening penalties over sexual harassment and the appointment of women as judges, and to protect women and children from violence.³⁶

Other parliamentarians such as Hala Aboul Saad introduced some amendments on the personal status law to maintain a healthy family life and protect children.³⁷

Member of parliament Henry mentioned that the penal law discriminates against women in some issues. Also, she presented a bill for “the appointment of women as judges “women judges are still not appointed at the state council and public prosecution and that is only for very conservative and false claims. She presented laws to criminalize female genital mutilation and to criminalize violence against women and another bill for not giving women their inheritance.³⁸

Member of parliament Maher was concerned with the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) law and the localities law as she emphasized the necessity of the presence of women in local councils as

according to international reports, women are less corrupt than men and also women are capable of understanding the roots of problems in the localities more than men.³⁹

Member of parliament Suzy Rafla said that the parliament was concerned with a huge number of bills supporting women rights such as criminalizing genital mutilation by harshening penalties of female genital mutilation and criminalizing not giving girls their inheritance especially in upper Egypt, harshening penalties over kidnapping and amending the prison laws to support the female prisoner and treat her in a decent way from the medical, humanistic and social perspective. Some laws were discussed but still not issued such as personal status laws which discusses the issues of marriage, divorce, child rights and there were many clashes and debates inside the parliament about this law. women according to Rafla had proved themselves well in all the posts they have been given through their success.⁴⁰

Member of parliament Hassouna mentioned that she presented laws such as anti-discrimination commission, creating an entity to combat corruption, censorship committee for protecting public institutions via cameras.

She used to different monitoring and censorship tools as she presented urgent requests for highway accidents, and briefing request for health services provision, urgent request regarding the necessity of live streaming of the house of representatives' sessions and the marriage of young girls.

Sometimes she faced some pressures when using the parliamentary tools. She used several tools as motion of asking a minister or request to deliver an urgent speech.

She insisted to present and discuss the anti-discrimination commission law but it wasn't discussed in the general assembly. She was concerned about lifting discrimination against women and the right of women to get appointed in all public posts.⁴¹

Member of the 2015 and 2020 parliaments Maisa Atwa who was the vice-president of the labor force committee was concerned about many laws related to working women specifically social pensions laws, personal status laws, laws related to working women in the private sector.

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Member of the 2020 Senate Samaa Soliman mentioned that the Senate is well known to include experts who participated in all walks of public life for a long time. She said that she believes that the role of the member of parliament is not to provide services but to legislate. The obstacle now, in her opinion, is that most parliamentarians carry the duty of the localities in the absence of local councils. The role of the member of the parliament is to legislate so she proposed a number of laws and also, she presented amendments to a number of bills in the first and second parliamentary sessions. From the bills that were discussed private sector labor law. Women parliamentarians participated extensively during discussing this law specifically to guarantee women rights in terms of leave and equal pay.⁴³

Member of the 2020 house of representatives Doha Assy who is a novelist as well is concerned specifically with the cultural scene in Egypt. She mentioned that there was a bill proposed entitled “The law against hitting wives “but she suggested changing its’ name to “Domestic violence law “. From the bills that were proposed in the parliament by the head of the Musicians syndicate and were discussed at the parliament a law granting the Musicians Syndicate judicial *police* powers. She said that she refused this bill completely and called for blocking this bill as unconstitutional and against the freedom of creativity. She is a member of the media and culture standing committee in the parliament and she was against the bill completely and though the bill has got accepted by the majority of votes in the media and culture committee but it was rejected by the majority of parliament members in the plenary session.

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Member of the 2020 House of Representatives Gihan Zaki is a professor of Egyptology at Sorbonne University. She is the first women parliamentarian as a specialist in Egyptology . Zaki is mainly interested in heritage conservation and also in cultural diplomacy. She has participated in a number of bills during the first and second parliamentary sessions regarding mainly emphasizing the importance of conserving architectural heritage in Alexandria. Zaki mentioned that member of parliament Mona Omar has proposed a bill to protect and conserve heritage which is really important. Till now it has not been issued. Zaki added that member of parliament Solaf Darwich, a member of Nation’s

Future party *Mostaqbal Watan* also proposed a bill to preserve Arabic language. Both bills are really vital. She added besides the important role of women parliamentarians as legislators, they have a really important role in oversight of cultural institutes in Egypt such as cultural palaces and television and radio channels in the different governorates.⁴⁵

Member of the 2020 Senate Noha El Sherif who is a member in the committee of foreign, Arab and African affairs mentioned that she has worked specifically on laws related to economic issues such as the new insurance law. And from the laws that women were keen on participating in laws harshening penalties against sexual harassment and from the important laws still discussed is the personal status law. The personal status law is really vital and it affects all houses. Everyone is affected by this law. More work has to be done to address women issues in the different governorates. This can be done through proposing new laws to address this.⁴⁶

Women rights laws proposed and supported in the parliament:

Historically laws related to women rights are linked to the role of women organizations supporting women rights. The national council of women had a huge role to present and support bills for women rights. Some of these bills were linked to the names of wives of presidents such as Jehan El Sadat, the wife of former president Sadat, the personal status law therein was named “ Jehan’s law “ . Jehan El Sadat supported divorced women who were ousted from their homes. Personal status laws were amended in order to support those women.



In 2000, a new law was issued that pinpointed the procedures of filing suits regarding personal status affairs called “Initiating divorce law ‘Khol’ “called in the press Suzan law. She was the first president of the national council of women. She was concerned with laws related to women and adopting gender sensitive policies.

In the 2015 parliament, there was coordination between the national council for women and female parliamentarians around women issues. The interplay between women parliamentarians and interest groups as women organizations such as the National Council for women is highly vital.

There are meetings between women parliamentarians and the National council for women headed by Dr. Maya Morsi. There is a WhatsApp group for discussions.

In addition to the support of men in the parliament as even with the 15% ratio of women in the parliament is not enough for women only to support a law. The presence of men to support a law.

There was coordination between ministries and the national council for women and parliament to guarantee women’s rights. Member of the 2020 senate and the previous deputy of the ministry of planning, monitoring, and administrative reform mentioned that there was an effort to guarantee the application of sustainable development strategy in Egypt’s vision 2030 to guarantee the marginalized and breadwinner women interests throughout the programs applied by the government.

Efforts were exerted to guarantee the participation of women in the various economic activities.⁴⁷

Also, there was a political will to empower women in the various decision-making positions either in the legislative or executive branches and through issuing bills to guarantee the political, economic and social rights of women. Members of the 2015 parliament agreed that without the political will that provided the real golden opportunity for women to be present in the political arena they would not have been present and effective.⁴⁸

Member of the 2015 parliament Hassouna mentions that women's quota supported by the president led to the empowerment of women who were very active in the parliament. Women were then able to be a chairwoman of two standing committees, deputies of seven committees and secretariats of five committees.⁴⁹

Member of the 2020 Senate Samaa Soliman said that the political will to empower women is vital in addition to the role of the national council for women a lot of men support women's rights specifically men specialized in women rights laws.⁵⁰

Member of the 2020 House of Representatives Hend Rashad mentioned that women nowadays in Egypt are given great opportunities to hold public office by the political leadership. This is manifested in the occupation of women high positions in both the executive and legislative branches. It is a golden age of women in Egypt.⁵¹

Women rights laws that have not been issued:

Some studies mentioned that a significant number of women laws were not issued and this can be traced back to the absence of coordination and alliances between female parliamentarians. There were attempts to form an alliance named “The Voice of Egyptian Women parliamentarians “but this was not created.

Member of parliament Hassouna mentioned that female parliamentarians found it necessary to create a coalition for women rights and interests. Fifteen women parliamentarians gathered inside the parliament to coordinate over different issues and this meeting was to form a woman coalition inside the house of representatives as Nadia Henry said that this formation is aimed at combining the visions of women over the national issues and concerns. Hassouna mentioned that some women parliamentarians felt it is necessary to have such a coalition to exert pressure for women issues. The first step towards the formation of “The voice for Egyptian women “ *Soot na’ebat masr*” was a meeting with the Egyptian parliament speaker Dr. Ali Abdel Aal that lasted more than two hours to present their problems after they found it hard to request a statement or talk in public discussions as men , also not having the right to travel in parliamentary delegations .Dr.Abdel Aal responded that those problems will be solved soon.⁵²

Some other laws such as personal status laws, appointment of women as judges, non-discrimination and equality laws, combating violence against women.

VIII. Challenges and obstacles confronting women:

The challenge of being chair womans or deputies of standing committees. Few women were able to be deputies such as Maisa Atwa labor force deputy, Magda Bakry deputy of the Education and scientific research committee, Rasha Ramadan the deputy of the social solidarity committee, Galila Othman the deputy of the media, culture and antiquities committee, Mai El Batran, the deputy of Communications and information technology committee, and Sahar Talaat Mostafa the chairwoman of the civil aviation and tourism committee. ⁵³

There are also cultural challenges, El Hawary mentioned that she has faced a lot of traditional cultural challenges in Dar El Salam district in Sohag, upper Egypt in the 1990s. She dreamt of becoming a member in the local council, she was faced by criticism from the mayors and sheikhs but she insisted and then they agreed after she insisted but didn't want her to launch any campaigns in the streets but they told her they will support her by launching a campaign for her. She then became a member in the local council for three consecutive terms. She was then appointed as the first woman from upper Egypt to become a member in the Shura council. ⁵⁴

Member of the 2020 House of Representatives Hadia Hosny El Saied who is also an Assistant Lecturer at the faculty of pharmacy, British University in Egypt and a badminton champion mentioned that there is a change regarding cultural obstacles confronting women, She wasn't confronted by any challenges when she ran for the 2020 elections



especially in Kafr El Khodeiri village, in Hehia, Sharkia governorate . They were just taking care of the corona pandemic restrictions but there weren't cultural obstacles. She mentioned that she met with a lot of citizens in Sharkia and that they were very happy that women and youth are running for elections. They were happy with the new faces that presented new ideas. She used to go down with her colleague member of the 2020 parliament Amira Yousry who is a very young lady only 26 years old. She added that the presence of women in the 2020 is a continuation to women's presence and role in the 2015 parliament as there were successful parliamentarians and sports champions as Rania Elwani and Caroline Maher.⁵⁵

Also, there should be support from non-governmental organizations to support women parliamentarians. More coordination is needed between the government and non-governmental organizations to guarantee the application of laws on the ground.

The quota is really vital as now we have a quota of 25% for women in the House of Representatives, previously in the 2015 parliament it was 15%. Women without quota used to gain around 2% or 3% only of the seats. In 2009, there were amendments to the law for women to increase the number of women to 60 women through a quota.

Also, media outlets remain an obstacle, media can play a huge role in changing the culture and stereotypes of women. Long featured and documentary movies can be produced.

In order to help unexperienced women in politics, a number of sessions and training programs can be organized in order to train women on using parliamentary tools and thus empower women.

To empower women, it is important to provide them with opportunities to increase their access to information and skills, provide them with the skills and expertise to join political parties, to understand the rules and guidelines of the political game. It is to be noted that it is crucial to support women by training programs to help them acquire the expertise needed to become active members of parliament.

V. Conclusion and Findings:

Egyptian women would not have dreamt of occupying nearly 15% of parliament seats. There was a great opportunity with the presence of women in the parliament with this huge number to form a critical mass and they were not only a critical mass but they performed critical acts. Those critical acts, however, were mainly regarding presenting legislations with a specific nature to advance women rights but did not target a change in the nature of the parliament as a male dominated institution.

The increase in the number of women in the political scene either in the legislative or executive branches started with the 2013 revolution. It is clearly stated in the 2014 constitution that women will have suitable representation in the 2015 parliament. And also, this was manifested in the 2015 House of Representatives law. Then 2017 was coined the year of Egyptian women by President Abdel Fattah El Sisi.⁵⁶



Evidence shows that women were able to propose bills and the time allocated to women increased to raise women issues. Most women parliamentarians that I interviewed were supporting bills that advocate women rights but they were not in favor of creating a coalition inside the parliament for women. And that's why the attempt to create an alliance within the parliament in support of women causes “The voice of Egyptian women “failed during the 2015 parliament.

However, women parliamentarians have formed a critical mass and have suggested some bills that can be considered critical acts and here are some examples of critical acts by women in the 2015 parliament:

- Women spoke more frequently and this was witnessed by the increase in the number of words given to women.
- New legislations:

Women have played a significant role in legislations focused on women rights such as the new inheritance law, harshening penalties over female genital mutilation and over sexual harassment, maintaining the secrecy of information of sexual harassment victims.

- The active presence of women in the 2015 parliament led to an increase in the number of women parliamentarians in the 2020 parliament.

Also, a question now follows as what the future holds for women's presence in the 2025 parliament with the current percentage of 25% of House of Representatives seats in the 2020 parliament. It is clear that culturally the presence of women in the parliament is still debatable, few women were elected in the House of Representatives in the individual

seat such as MP Nashwa El Dib in Imbaba district. ⁵⁷ As for Senate elections, All the women candidates who ran for the individual seats (89) failed to win. ⁵⁸If we follow the comics about the parliament on social media pages, we'll find out that one of the first comics about the parliament was about a woman parliamentarian talking via her mobile in the opening session of the parliament and there were several comments accusing her from a gendered perspective.

The composition of the 2020 parliament with the house of representatives and the senate shows that there are women from different backgrounds who hold a legislative agenda with a special focus on women's rights. ⁵⁹

Moreover, women parliamentarians mentioned that they do not face any obstacles during their work either in urban or rural areas because they are women. Member of the 2020 House of Representatives Hadia Hosny El Saied mentioned that she did not face any such obstacles during her electoral campaign in Hehia, Sharkiya. Also, member of the 2020 House of Representatives Doha Assy mentioned that she doesn't face any such challenges in the village in Mansoura city, Dakahlia,

As for quota in the Egyptian parliament, it wasn't really effective prior to the 2015 so it was hard to estimate as in 2010 parliament did not last in order to analyze if the quota was significant or not. The 2010 parliament was short-lived so the experience was not tested. But some conclusions can be drawn from the 2015 parliament. ⁶⁰



women in the 2015 parliament raised several women issues and were able to propose bills that advanced women rights. Those bills would not have passed without the support of men as the ratio of 15% is not sufficient for a bill to pass. Also, women formed a critical mass but not in terms of a coalition inside the parliament but in form of a number of prominent women parliamentarians who worked on suggesting more legislations not pro women rights solely but also towards proposing new bills and enacting new legislations that help in solving social problems.

A number of important bills initiated by women have been turned into laws, this proves that the women parliamentarians did not develop a critical mass together according to Moss Kanter definition as their actions were done in an individual manner as critical acts. They could not form the mass together. Even though women parliamentarians acted in harmony together, they did that without constituting a critical mass. The state's role was conducive to women's presence in the parliament and to encouraging women to develop critical acts.

Also, a critical mass can be reached in Egypt with the rise of the number critical actors and influential female leaders in both the 2015 and 2020 parliaments.

Women were critical actors through suggesting new topics supporting women rights such as the anti-discrimination commission and the "Appointment of women judges" law. Women were able to make use of this historic rise in the percentage of female parliamentarians to advance women rights.

And this is likely to continue in the 2020 parliament. Evidence for that can be witnessed as one of the first bills discussed was imprisonment of husbands who hit their wives. Also, women's role was clear either in women's role in legislation or oversight.⁶¹ Besides their critical role in legislation, women parliamentarians had oversight powers. For example, member of 2020 House of Representatives Doha Assy mentioned that she supported the workers rights in the Delta company for fertilizers and she provided a briefing request regarding the culture palace of Mansoura.⁶²

To conclude, the increase in the number of women in the 2015 and 2020 parliaments, i.e., descriptive representation, led to the advancement of women rights through more legislations in favor of women rights which is to be described as substantive representation.

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