Women's Unveiling in the 2011 Egyptian Uprising: Political Opportunities and Modesty Politics

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Abstract

Using the case of women's unveiling during the 2011 Egyptian uprising, I investigate how momentous political events have transformative impacts beyond the overtly "political" sphere of policies and institutions. I trace the choice to unveil among some women protesters to their involvement in collective action and show the different mechanisms that led to their decision. Specifically, I identify three pathways to unveiling: shifts in political opportunities, innovations in the repertoires of contention and the framing of unveiling, and exposure to new mobilizing structures and networks. The data for this project build upon original field research and interview data with women who removed their hijab during the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The article adds to the literature on gender and contentious politics by demonstrating the gendered effects of political opportunity structures on women's choices around veiling.

Keywords: social movements; modesty; veil; movement consequences; Egypt

In the years since the 2011 Egyptian uprising that led to the ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak, the number of women taking off the hijab has been increasing in Egypt. While there is no official count of the number of women who have removed the veil, the phenomenon has been increasingly covered, debated, and discussed in media and popular accounts (*The Economist* 2015; Egyptian Streets 2020; Farid 2015). In the period immediately following the uprising, Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) held the interim presidency, and Islamist political parties held legislative power and later the presidency until 2013. During this period, an increasing number of protesters started to take off the veil. In this article, I ask, why did women protesters take off the hijab during this period?

The literature on contentious politics highlights the effects of political opportunity structure on social movements and their outcomes (Giugni 2008; McAdam 1988; Neveu and Fillieule 2019; Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004). Feminist contributions to the literature further identify how political opportunities influence women's engagement in contentious episodes and their future biographies after the decline of collective action (Barnett 1993; Katzenstein 1999; Sapiro 1990; Taylor 1989; Whittier 1995). In analyzing the political opportunity structure and its gendered outcomes, social movement theories, including feminist contributions, have not traditionally engaged with modesty politics in protests in the context of the Middle East. Scholars of social movements have paid little attention to the effects of political opportunities in either reproducing traditional modesty discourses or opening them up for debate. In this article, therefore, I investigate how shifts in opportunity structure influence women's choices around veiling and their modesty practices within the context of contention politics. Using the case of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, I show the different mechanisms that led to the choice to unveil among some women protesters.

Specifically, I argue that the decision by some protesters to unveil can be traced in part to their participation in the uprising. I identify three pathways to unveiling: shifts in political opportunities, shifts in the framing of unveiling, and exposure to new social and political networks. In the first pathway, I highlight that when regimes invoke a gendered morality discourse to discourage women's political participation, they open up that discourse for debate, allowing women to question some of its practices and vocabularies, including the veil.[1] In addition to this dimension, with the rise of political Islam to power, women framed their action of unveiling as a repertoire of contention against Islamist politics and its views on gender equality and women's rights. In terms of the last pathway, I emphasize the effects of the experience of participation and how it introduced women to new political and social networks with different understandings of piety and modesty. As a result of their exposure to new networks, organizations, and openings during collective action, the analysis also shows that some women questioned family hierarchies and taken-for-granted social norms and religious symbols of modesty passed on by their families.

The analysis presented in this article adds to the literature on gender and contentious politics in three ways. First, the analysis, for the first time, investigates the gendered effects of mobilization on women's choices around veiling. My work shows that the target of women's action can be much broader than how it is typically understood in the literature on contention. Studies of momentous political change usually focus on the impact of these events on overtly political outcomes, like new government policies or restructured political institutions. There is much less research on how these events transform cultural and religious practices or gender relations. In this sense, studying the dynamics of unveiling following the 2011 uprising contributes to our understanding of how momentous political events have transformative impacts beyond the overtly "political" sphere of policies and institutions.

Second, the article looks at an unexplored time period, tracing women's decisions to unveil during the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The literature on the veil

has largely focused on the twentieth century, set against a background of independence struggles, modernization projects, nationalism, and the rise of Islamic revival (Abu-Lughod 2013; Ahmed 2011; El Guindi 1999; Göle 1996; Macleod 1991; Obermeyer 1979; Zuhur 1992). In this article, I focus on women's choices around the veil within the context of democratic movements and the 2011 Arab uprisings.

Third, and related to my second contribution, my work moves away from viewing women's decisions to unveil as a homogenous response to political projects. The literature has traditionally presented unveiling as a result of modernization projects that discouraged veiling, and more recently, scholars have examined unveiling as a symbol of civil resistance to mandatory veiling laws and practices. The veil in Egypt—in its presence or absence—has not been compulsory, and thus taking it off is not merely a response to or in line with the state's projects and visions for society. Rather, my article highlights the multiple and different pathways to unveiling among women.

The article proceeds as follows: First, I survey how variations in political opportunity structures have historically affected modesty politics and practices in the Middle East. Second, I put forward a framework to explain the different mechanisms leading to the choice to unveil within the context of contentious politics. Using original field research and interviews with women who removed the hijab during the 2011 Egyptian uprising, in the analysis section, I show how shifts in opportunity structure, innovations in the repertoires of contention, and exposure to new political and social resources and networks influenced women's choices around veiling.

In analyzing the question of the veil, I often find myself faced with the conundrum of how to discuss the topic of unveiling without feeding and repro-ducing the orientalist fixation with Muslim women, their bodies, and modesty practices. Notwithstanding the controversial nature of the topic and the mixed history surrounding it, the topic of unveiling should not be off-limits to careful analysis. The answer is not to divorce the personal from the political when looking at women's decisions and modesty practices in the Middle East, but rather to understand their diverse and sometimes entangled effects. This article acknowledges that the personal does not exist in a void and that our personal decisions are not free floaters—they are influenced by and have influence on various social and political structures.

Veiling/Unveiling and Modesty Politics

Feminist literature on body politics in the Middle East shows how modesty politics have been central in defining the character of the state and society. By "modesty politics," I refer to the regulations around women's bodies, gender roles, and dominant norms of femininity and masculinity in society. These regulations outline a crosscutting web of religious and extrareligious meanings and are embedded within them. Their meanings are not static; they are situated within shifting relations of power as well as resistance that change across different contexts and at key historical junctures.

While veiling/unveiling is only one aspect of modesty politics, it has been dominant in these debates. Postcolonial scholars writing on modesty politics in the Middle East highlight two interdependent points. First, scholars show how shifts in political structures in the region affected modesty politics, and especially the veil as one of the visible aspects of these policies. Second, they document the different ways in which women used the veil as one of their repertoires of contention to contest dominant morality discourses imposed by regimes and in societies.

First, postcolonial feminists have shown the different ways in which women and their bodies played edificatory roles in projects of modernization, nationalism, and later Islamization across the Middle East and North Africa (Abu-Lughod 1990; Ahmed 2011; El Guindi 1999; Göle 1996; Lazreg 2009; Macleod 1991; Zuhur 1992). For example, early modernization projects in the region reflected the modernization (read: Westernization) narrative that places Islam outside of modernity. Male reformists, such as Qasīm Amīn (1865–1908) of Egypt, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1923–38) of Turkey, and Reza Khan, the shah of Iran (1925–41), echoed the colonial view of the West as the beholder of cultural superiority and unveiling as a precondition for modernity. Their discourse gave rise to a wave of unveiling in the early twentieth century. Feminist studies have demonstrated the ways in which women and their modesty, under this discourse of unveiling, carried the dual function of manifesting the nation's modernity and morality (Ahmed 1992, 2011; Göle 1996).

As the colonial powers advocated the importance of unveiling women as part of the modernizing process, feminists documented how the veil was put forward by some nationalist movements in the region as a symbol of resistance. For example, the traditional North African white veil known as *sefsari* in Tunisia and *haik* in Algeria functioned as a powerful political symbol against French colonialism and the obsession over unveiling as a symbol of modernity (Fanon 1963; Ghumkhor 2012). However, scholars have noted how, following independence, the veil was transformed from a symbol of anticolonial resistance to a signifier of cultural backwardness in the new postcolonial regimes (Charrad 1997, 2001; Ghumkhor 2012). For example, former Egyptian president and nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser mocked the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in a 1958 speech for asking him to make the *tarḥa*, a piece of cloth used to cover women's hair, mandatory for women in Egypt.[2]

This trend of unveiling reversed following the Islamic Revolution in 1978–79 in Iran and the al-Sawha al-Islamiyya (Islamic awakening) movement in the 1990s across the region. In Iran, the veil became compulsory for women under the law. Scholars have noted that in many Arab societies, the veil yet again became a symbol of resistance to neocolonialist discourses, a sign of defiance against oppressive regimes, and a signifier of the increased influence of Islamist groups in society. While the resurgence of veiling opened up the debate over modernization and tradition and juxtaposed Islam with the West, the veil was not strictly linked to narratives of tradition and family honor. As Saba Mahmood (2011, 158) explains using the case of the piety movement in Egypt, veiling as a symbol of modesty was increasingly seen by women as integral as it "trains oneself to be pious." The new generation of women, especially those from the

middle and upper classes, also presented the veil as a means to resist neocolonialist impositions and the discourses of modernity that excluded their experiences.

Beyond veiling/unveiling, scholars have shown how shifts in opportunity structures affect other aspects of modesty politics and gender norms in society. For example, recent contributions by feminist scholars show how women's engagement in the Arab uprisings left enduring effects on women participants and introduced important challenges to gender norms in their societies. In my own study of the gender landscape after the uprising, I show the biographical effects of participation on women (Allam 2019). For example, several participants in my research attributed their career changes to their experiences during the uprising. Sherine Hafez's (2019) work also underscores the changes in questions around bodily rights and integrity following the uprising in Egypt. On religious values and structures, Nareman Amin (2021) demonstrates the shifts in family relations and understandings of filial piety among women. When women's choices clashed with their parents' wishes, women renegotiated what it means to be a dutiful daughter and questioned the expectations inscribed by the religious mandate of obedience to one's parents. Karin van Nieuwkerk (2021) also observes how, in the period following the uprisisng, many young Egyptian women began to contest piety discources around the veil and cast it off. Beyond Egypt, Nicola Pratt (2020) eloquently demonstrates how major geopolitical events—including the Arab uprisings—in the Middle East and North Africa region have often produced new gender dynamics (see also Al-Najjar and Abusalim 2015; El Said, Meari, and Pratt 2015; Hasso and Salime 2016).

Second, feminist scholars within Middle East women's studies have documented the different ways in which women have used the veil as one of their repertoires of contention to contest the morality discourses of oppressive regimes. As much as the veil signified defiance against some oppressive regimes that banned the veil, in other societies that imposed veiling, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, taking off the veil signified a form of civil resistance. In Saudi Arabia, despite Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman's seemingly progressive views on women's dress (Kalin 2018), the kingdom's strict clothing codes are still intact. Women in Saudi Arabia have taken to social media and launched online campaigns to protest the kingdom's strict dress code. Campaigns such as "SolidarityWithTaraf," "Abaya_InsideOut," and "TheNiqabUnderMyFoot" went viral and gathered substantial support and solidarity from women across society. While women's campaign against the veil went viral and sparked online solidarity, they also spurred major public outcry, hate, and backlash in the kingdom.

In Iran, women used the veil during protests against the shah in 1978–79, before the Khomeini regime made it mandatory. More recently, women took off the veil as a protest tactic in public, or by posting photos on the internet without the veil. In a sign of defiance of the Iranian regime, female protesters participated in nationwide protests in 2017 and challenged the compulsory hijab law (Dehghan 2018). The series of protests came to be known as the Girls of Enghelab Street (Girls of Revolution Street) (Dehghan 2018). It was part of a larger protest movement fueled by the political and economic situation in Iran. While the protests on the ground waned in early 2018, female protesters continued their

campaign of civil disobedience on social media using the hashtag #WhiteWednesdays. Social media campaigns such as "My Stealthy Freedom" and "White Wednesdays" challenged the compulsory law that forces women to wear the veil in public (My Stealthy Freedom 2019; Oskouie 2018). On September 20, 2022, the death of Mahsa Amini while she was in the custody of the police for allegedly breaking the country's compulsory hijab law sparked widespread protests and collective action against the regime.

The foregoing survey shows feminists' contributions to the literatures on veiling, body politics, and political upheavals. Their studies show that shifts in the political opportunity structures impact modesty practices and illuminate women's role in negotiating veiling politics and gendered moral accountability structures in society. However, the mechanisms through which these structures and experiences of contention affect women's decisions and choices around veiling remain largely understudied. Insights by feminist social movement theorists can help us identify some of these mechanisms. Next, I use the case of unveiling among women protesters during the 2011 Egyptian uprising and put forward an analytical framework to offer a systematic way to explain the mechanisms that led to the decision by some women to unveil in the context of the uprising.

Political Opportunities, Veil Politics, and the Middle East

Unlike the acts of unveiling discussed in the feminist literature on body politics and political upheavals the Middle East, women protesters in Egypt took off the veil in a spontaneous and noncoordinated way. Their actions can be described as a form of social nonmovement. Asef Bayat developed the concept of social nonmovements to capture the actions of marginalized groups in societies, namely, the subaltern, urban poor, women, and youth, and their potential to introduce change under autocratic regimes in the Middle East. At the most basic level, social nonmovements refer to "the collective actions of noncollective actors" (Bayat 2013, 15). Actors act individually and separately, but their fragmented yet similar activities encroach on the regime's status quo and transgress the social codes in societies. While they are not organized by movement leaders or guided by ideology, their actions spread by simply observing each other in public spaces or in mass media. For example, the women in my interviews described how, following the uprising, they began noticing female protesters around them taking off the hijab. Gihan, a feminist activist, explained that she was attending a workshop on political participation and noticed that every week a new colleague would "show up" without a hijab. "I never thought this [taking off the veil] was possible until I saw people around me doing it," she explained.[3]

To understand the mechanisms through which subtle fragmented changes, such as unveiling, take place following momentous political events, I apply an analytical framework of the key concepts put forward by the political process model—namely, political opportunities, framing, and mobilizing resources—to show how the uprising affected women's decisions to unveil.

The political process approach in the contentious politics literature offers a framework to understanding social movements and their outcomes by examining political opportunities, mobilizing resources and structures, and collective action frames. Political opportunities are at the heart of the political process approach. Political opportunities are defined as the social, political, and economic conditions that allow the movement to emerge, expand, and resonate (McAdam 1985; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 1998, 2012; Tilly and Tarrow 2006). Among the commonly cited political opportunities are the openness or closure of the political system, stability among elite networks and allies and the state's capacity for repression (McAdam 1985; Tarrow 1998).

Mobilizing structures include formal as well as informal networks, resources, and organizations through which participants mobilize for collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Moghadam and Gheytanchi 2011). Collective action frames identify the problem, the parties responsible for causing it, and the possible resistance repertoires (Gamson 1975; Snow and Benford 1988). Unlike earlier generations of social movement theorists, scholars within the tradition of political opportunity structure consider the mechanisms and processes that link the movement's internal and external elements and affect its outcome (Johnston and Noakes 2005; McAdam 1985; McAdam and Tilly 2001, 199; Tarrow 1998). According to the political process approach, shifts in the political opportunity structures combined with the movement's ability to galvanize organization and the participants' perceived likelihood of success catalyze protests.

While the political process framework has inspired large bodies of research on activism and collective action, feminist scholars have criticized it for paying less attention to the effects of gender. They have extended the analysis of political opportunities to consider gendered structures and the ways in which political opportunities, mobilizing resources, and collective action frames are gender differentiated. Their contributions add to our stock of knowledge on social movements generally and the literature on political opportunities more specifically in three ways. First, feminist scholars have highlighted the gendered pathways to political participation in collective action. For example, in her study of the Montegro and anti-pass movement, M. Bahati Kuumba (2001) argues that the differential experiences and structural locations of women and men in society affected their engagement and participation in political struggle (Barnett 1993; Robnett 1997; Taylor 1989; Walker 1991). Second, feminists have emphasized the effects of opportunities in shaping women's demands and framing strategies. In my own study of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, I show how the political opportunity structure of the uprising was gendered, shifting, and dynamic (Allam 2017). The absence of complete autonomy for feminist groups, the policies of state-sponsored feminism, and the place of gender in other political groups opened spaces for women's participation in collective action but not for voicing gender-based demands. Finally, on the effects of opportunities on gender relations following protest movements, a growing body of literature has examined the effects of political engagement on the biographies of former women protesters under Western democracies. Building on the work of scholars such as Doug McAdam (1988), Verta Taylor (1989), and others, scholars demonstrate that experiences of mobilization leave lasting effects on

women and contribute to developing their gender consciousness (see also Katzenstein 1999; Sapiro 1990; Whittier 1995).

Feminist contributions to social movement theories, however, have not traditionally engaged with modesty politics in protests in the context of the Middle East. Scholars of social movements have paid little attention to the effects of political opportunities in either reproducing modesty discourses or opening them up for debate. The experiences of women taking off the veil during the Egyptian uprising thus add to social movement theories and complicate our understanding of movements' outcomes. My analysis underscores the effect of contentious episodes on modesty practices in society and examines the mechanisms through which subtle fragmented changes, such as unveiling, take place following momentous political events.

Variation in Pathways: The Case of Egypt's Uprising

To trace the different pathways to unveiling in the context of the Egyptian uprising, I draw upon 17 interviews with women who took off the veil during or shortly after the 2011 uprising. Between 2012 and 2017, I carried out fieldwork in Egypt; I was then studying women's engagement in the 2011 Egyptian uprising that led to the ouster of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. During my fieldwork in Egypt, I observed that an increasing number of women protesters were taking off the veil. Women cited their decision to cast off the veil as one of the effects of their participation in collective action and among the changes in their life choices following the uprising. I started studying the topic and carried out additional rounds of fieldwork between 2017 and 2021.

In identifying participants, I circulated recruitment materials among women whom I had interviewed in my past research project in Egypt. The research also utilized a snowball sampling technique, which enabled me to access participants who were otherwise hard to reach. The interviews were carried out in Arabic in person in Cairo, Egypt. In 2020, I began carrying out the interviews online to protect the health and well-being of my participants amid the COVID-19 pandemic. I personally carried out the in-person and online interviews.

While all my interviewees had participated in the 2011 uprising, their participation varied across a diverse range of activities and reflected different degrees of engagement. Twelve participants had no history of political activism prior to the uprising, while five had been active in civil society organizations before the uprising. All participants were no longer active in politics or members of any political organization at the time of the interviews, which is likely attributable to the closing of the political landscape and the crackdown on activists following the election of Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in 2014. To protect the privacy and security of participants, I use pseudonyms in place of their real names.

Participants in the study mainly lived in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, at the time of the interviews. The majority of them had lived all their lives in Cairo; five interviewees were originally from small towns and had moved permanently to the city after taking off the veil, and one continued to live in a small rural town

while working in Cairo. Not all participants grew up in religious families, and some described that they faced objections from their families when they first put on the hijab. The majority of interviewees started wearing the hijab in their early to late teens; only one participant began wearing it at a significantly young age, when she was eight years old. Interviewees were in their twenties to fifties, and all had university degrees.

The interview guide included questions on the following themes: participants' experiences wearing the veil, their decision to take it off, and the reason(s) underpinning their choice. The analysis in this article presents their accounts and their experiences of taking off the hijab within the context of the uprising. Next, I discuss the dominant themes that emerged from the interviews.

The Multiple Pathways to Unveiling in the 2011 Uprising

It is hard to pinpoint the exact time when women began to remove their hijabs given the absence of figures and any form of official tracking of the phenomenon in Egypt. In my interviews, however, participants pointed to the interim presidency of SCAF and the 2011 parliamentary elections following the January 25 uprising as the starting point of the wave of unveiling. Building on the participants' accounts, I identify three factors that influenced women's experiences during this period and contributed to their decision to remove the hijab: the uprising's shifting of political opportunity structure and its impact on opening up the gendered morality discourse for debate; the effects of the experience of political Islam on framing unveiling as a contentious repertoire; and exposure to new social and political resources and networks. I in no way suggest that these reasons are exhaustive or that they fully capture the complex dynamics within which women situate their actions and choices. These factors offer only a glimpse of why some women during the particular time of the uprising decided to remove their hijabs.

The Uprising's Shifting Political Opportunity Structure

The political opportunity structure of the uprising was marked by mixed openings and closings for women. Different regimes and political actors violently targeted women protesters to curtail their participation in politics and engagement in collective action. They relied on gendered morality discourses to justify their violence against protesters. Invoking traditional morality discourses to justify the repression of women protesters, however, opened up those discourses for debate as women questioned some of their structures and practices, including the veil.

Interviewees described that an increasing number of colleagues, friends, and family members began taking off the veil under the interim presidency of SCAF and following the election of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Freedom and Justice party to the parliament in 2011. During this period, women were marginalized in formal politics and targeted during their participation in collective action. Amira, a political activist and unionist, claimed that she began noticing a rise in the number of women taking off the hijab following the "Aḥdath Maglis

al-Wuzara" (Egyptian cabinet sit-in).[4] The refence here is to the massive sit-in carried out by protesters in December 2011 in front of the cabinet's building. Protesters demanded the transfer of power to a civilian government and protested the appointment of former prime minister Kamal al-Ganzuri, who had served as prime minister during the 1990s under the ousted Mubarak regime (BBC News 2011). The sit-in was dispersed with much brutality, and army soldiers violently attacked female protesters (Coleman 2011). A woman protester was dragged, beaten, and stripped to her jeans and bright blue bra by a solider during the sit-in. The anonymous woman became known as "Sitt el-Banāt" (The Lady of All Ladies) in Egypt, or the "girl in the blue bra" in Western media. Following a massive march organized by women's groups to condemn the army's brutality, military officers promised to conduct an investigation of the incidents (*National Post* 2011).

The army's brutal attack on Sitt el-Banāt and the subsequent media campaign against her is an example of how the regime used gendered morality discourses to justify violence against protesters and to preclude moral outrage in response. At a press conference following the attack, General Adel Amara defended the army, commending officers on their "self-restraint" and thanking them for their service to the country.[5] While some mainstream media commentators expressed sympathy for the protester, many others squarely placed the blame on the woman. A controversial TV host asked why the victim had not worn an extra layer of clothing under her long dress and used the absence of an undergarment as evidence to implicate her.[6] Several commentators, including Islamist television host Sheikh Khaled Abdellah, asked why the young woman had put herself in harm's way by participating in the protests.[7] The underlying objective of these questions and comments was to reproduce the view that "respectable" women do not protest, do not get angry, and do not participate in collective action, since such actions deem them immoral. These views functioned to exclude women participating in protests from state protection and restraint, thus effectively justifying violence against them.

Attacks on women protesters continued to escalate in the coming months, and with every attack, prominent SCAF officers criticized the female protesters and questioned their chastity. Islamist political parties, who held the legislative power and later the presidency, also attacked female protesters and blamed them for the rise in sexual assault, citing women's presence in the public space as the reason behind the attacks. In doing so, SCAF and Islamist parties reinforced and reproduced patriarchal norms and gendered moral accountability structures that limit women's participation in the public and political space.

Amira explained in our interview that many women activists decided to take off their hijabs as a way to demonstrate that they were not going to be "a plaything in the hands of the SCAF or the Muslim Brotherhood … where they drag and beat us to prove that women are useless and should stay at home." Another participant, Maha, who worked as a journalist at the time of the uprising, explained that she decided to remove her hijab to challenge the paternal logic embedded in both SCAF's and Islamist political parties' discourses toward women.[8] Both, she argued, reproduced patriarchal views of how a decent woman should act, and where she should or should not be, with the final objective of

silencing dissent and controlling women and their bodies. While political opportunities suggest a defection among elites as a source of opportunities, the case of women protesters in Egypt, underscores that when elites converged in their gendered discourses, they further pushed women to challenge them and expose and reject their gendered moral rhetoric.

Violence by state and nonstate actors against women activists and protesters also brought to the fore questions related to women's bodily rights and their place in society. Reflecting on her own experience facing sexual harassment during the uprising, Zena explained,

> The violence against protesters exposed the contradictions in our society and the moral contradictions of the regimes in power. It exposed how flawed our morality discourses are and how they erase women's bodily rights. The same discourse that asked women to act modestly, to cover her body, also blamed her when she got assaulted, deemed her immoral, and told her that you were assaulted because you went out, you attended a protest, you practiced your right, and you participated as an equal citizen.[9]

Through the protesters' firsthand experiences of violence in the public space and in official discourse, activists and protesters refashioned their understanding of women's bodily rights and their place in morality discourses in society. Their encounters with the regime's discursive and physical violence contributed to their understanding of how gender violence is connected to and embedded in modesty politics and morality discourses. These discussions, Hala Kamal (2016) argues in her study of the feminist movement in Egypt, gave rise to fourth-wave feminism, with a focus on woman's bodies, gender violence, and sexuality. Such a focus challenged the traditional gendered morality structures in society and helped change the language surrounding modesty and the veil.

For example, Samia, a feminist activist, emphasized the shift in the vocabulary surrounding unveiling in the period following the uprising.[10] She remembered how, prior to the uprising, only one friend from her social circle removed the hijab. Her friend explained at that time that she took off the veil because she felt less attractive while wearing it. Following the uprising, Samia said, at least 12 of her friends removed their veils and framed their decisions using the language of personal freedoms and bodily rights. It is not possible to discern Samia's friends' intentions, but her comments at the most basic level reflect a change in the aesthetics of the conversation surrounding women's choices and the veil.

While different regimes invoked gendered morality discourses to justify violence against women, by invoking these discourses, they opened them up for debate. Some women questioned the morality and modesty discourses that were dominant in society and rejected some of their vocabulary and practices, including the hijab. The hijab was viewed by some during that period as aligning with the gendered moral accountability structures imposed by SCAF and the Islamist political parties on women protesters—thus, taking off the hijab communicated a rejection of gendered rhetoric and an assertion of women's bodily rights. The experiences of Egyptian women encourage us to expand our view of what constitutes an opportunity, how gender mediates opportunities and

constrains protest movements, and how opportunities spin off from initial challenges.

The Experience of Political Islam and the Framing of Unveiling as a Contentious Repertoire

> "I did not put on the hijab because of the Muslim Brotherhood, but I took it off because of their politics."[11]

Recounting her experience of putting on the veil, Hadeel opened our interview with the foregoing statement. Her statement captured the complex dynamics of deconstructing and reconstructing the veil as a symbol of Islamist politics and how these processes affect women's decisions around veiling. Hadeel was not the only participant to link her decision to unveil with the experience of political Islam—almost all the women in my study pointed to the experience of political Islam as one of the reasons behind their decision to take off the hijab. The experience of political Islam contributed to framing unveiling as a contentious repertoire against Islamist politics. Participants framed taking off the veil as a symbol of defiance to Islamist politics and their gendered rhetoric.

Formal politics "exposed Islamists," Maha emphasized, "the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, all proved to be *Togar Dīn* [religious hypocrites], and thus people wanted to distance themselves from them and from whatever symbols they embrace." *Togar Dīn* is an expression used in colloquial Egyptian speech to describe individuals who falsely claim religiosity and use religion to cover up and secure their own ulterior motives. The experience of political Islam in Egypt indeed complicated the relationship between Egyptians and political Islam. The 2018–19 Arab Barometer public opinion survey showed that support for the involvement of religious leaders in the political process is generally in decline in Egypt, with more than half of Egyptians (54%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that religious leaders are as likely to be corrupt as nonreligious leaders (Arab Barometer 2019).

In addition to Hadeel and Maha, other interviewees described how women felt compelled to distance themselves from Muslim Brotherhood's ideologies given the group's attack on the agenda of women's rights. The hijab suggested tolerance, and even conformity for some, to Islamist political parties and their ideologies toward women and gender equality.

I found this new meaning ascribed to the act of unveiling and the interviewees' suggested association between the hijab and Islamist politics interesting, since the participants did not associate the hijab or view it as a symbol of Islamist politics prior to the uprising. All interviewees—except one—denied that their decision to wear the hijab was directly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood's or other Islamist groups' ideologies. They acknowledged that the Muslim Brotherhood had influenced the social life and the Islamic revival in Egypt in the last few decades. When they decided to put on the veil, however, the women did not view their decision in terms of accepting Islamist groups' ideologies or lending support to Islamist groups. That is, while the ideologies of Islamist political groups did not directly influence my participants' decision to put on

the hijab prior to the uprising, their politics contributed to their decision to take off the hijab following the uprising.

My interviewees' new reading of the hijab and the political motivation underpinning their decisions to take it off underscore the ways in which religious symbols are fluid: they can be interpreted in a variety of different and shifting ways. Each interpretation is also encoded not only by religious but also by, for some, political and gendered meanings. These meanings can coexist together, but under certain circumstances. some meanings became more prominent and overshadow the others. For example, Amira explained during the interview that while she did not take off her hijab to challenge Islamist political parties, she remembered her colleagues taking it off to communicate their public rejection of Islamists, their ideologies, and their increased influence in society. However, for her, "removing your hijab was not an effective way to pressure Islamist groups or to communicate dissent." Removing the hijab as a means of dissent during this period ran the risk of reducing the hijab to a symbol of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi politics. This association between hijab and Islamist politics is problematic as it overshadows other meanings of the hijab as a choice exercised by women. While the veil continued to signify different meanings and sentiments after the uprising, taking it off became a definite sign of rejecting Islamist politics. It was not the presence of the hijab as much as its absence that came to signify rejection of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi style of Islamism in Egypt.

As I discussed in the literature review, the use of the veil as a symbol of resistance is not new. The feminist literature on body politics and resistance shows how women took off the veil as an act of civil resistance in Iran and as a symbol of defiance in Saudi Arabia. The case of Egypt, however, complicates the literature because, unlike other cases of unveiling the hijab in Egypt is not compulsory; the wave of taking it off was not part of an organized effort; and in the last few decades, veiling was not inherently a political action or sign of support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

While in Egypt, veiling was not an inherently political action in the period prior to the uprising, it became one when Islamist groups secured power and attempted to inscribe certain regimes of moral accountability on women and female protesters. Removing the veil in post-uprising politics signified, for some women, a public assertion of their right to reject Islamist political ideology and identity. This shift in the meaning of the veil among participants in Egypt underscores how religious symbols are iterative in relation to the wider relations of power as well as the political culture in a society.

Exposure to New Political and Social Resources and Networks

"The uprising turned our heads upside down. What happened to women during the uprising has shaken them, but also what women have done during the uprising has shaken the whole society. Some of us for the first time joined political parties, women's organizations, and feminist initiatives. Many of my values and beliefs definitely shifted during this period."[12]

While the discussion so far has focused on the challenges that women faced in the shifting political structure of the uprising, many of the women I interviewed throughout my research reminded me that the uprising also opened up opportunities for increased public engagement and introduced participants to new social and political networks and organization. Gihan's quote introducing this section eloquently captures how the new social and political networks were among the mobilizing structures and resources that mobilized women and contributed to shifting some of their beliefs. Through exposure to new networks, women began to rethink taken-for-granted social norms, ideas, and expectations.

Similar to Gihan, Amira emphasized the effect of the uprising in widening her social networks as well as introducing her to the "other." She described how, during the protests, she met and eventually formed new friendships with people with drastically different social norms, such as women who dressed very liberal, drank, smoked, and physically embraced their male colleagues. "Until then, I never had such friends in my circle of friends or even acquaintances," she explained, "hanging out with them challenged my view about morality and modesty, these were the most courageous women I have ever met." Amira and Gihan, however, also revealed that not all of their former friend groups and social networks supported and welcomed their decision. While not conclusive, their experiences suggest that exposure to new networks affects women's decisions around veiling, and the decision to veil or unveil also opens up access to some groups and networks while closing off others.

Exposure to new networks is not always an inherently liberating experience. Sabah recounted that while her colleagues in a what could be described as a secular political party welcomed her when she first joined the group, they shortly began to question her feminist credentials because of her hijab.[13] She described feeling "bullied" and "mocked" by some of her colleagues who viewed her veil as a "sign of backwardness." While unwelcoming views of the veil are not new among some secular leftist and liberal circles in Egypt, the political contestations between secular and Islamist groups following the uprising brought these views to the fore. Sabah shared that while attending a panel on the future of Egypt's political system, she found herself at the center of an argument between a colleague from her party and another panelist from the Muslim Brotherhood:

Sabah: They both argued over whether my decision to wear the hijab was grounded in religious reasons or a result of societal pressures. Both were hoping to score a point. If I answered it was due to societal pressure, my colleague would prove his point that secularism wins, and if I answered it was religious the other one [Muslim Brotherhood panelist] would prove his point that Islamism rules.

Interviewer: I have to ask; did you end up answering their question?

Sabah: I told them keep me out of it. But deep down, these conversations affect one's decision, like I had to rethink some of my ideas.

At one level, Sabah's experience captures how there were certain ideas and expectations around the ideal female member within these organizations and groups. Female members who did not align with this ideal faced pressure from

their colleagues to adopt it. At another level, the debate between her colleague and his Muslim Brotherhood counterpart also reflects a broader tension within Egyptian society in the period following the uprising. The period following the uprising witnessed an intense debate over the place of religion in politics and in the public space. The debate raised heated discussions and tensions between secular and Islamist groups over the identity of the state and the collective identity of the society and the nation. Different groups—whether secular or Islamist—grew more forceful in demarcating their identity against the others, and not surprisingly women and their bodies were at the center of these debates and played an important role in marking its contours.

Women's exposure to new networks and the processes of cultural and identity demarcation that took place within these networks thus had an effect on women and their choices around veiling. Scholars studying the veil and women's choices emphasize how everyday experiences "lend a practical edge" to women's understanding of the veil and "their perceptions of themselves as Muslim" (Read and Bartkowski 2000, 398). In Jen'Nan Ghazal Read and John P. Bartkowski's study of the veil among Muslim women in the United States, they rightly point out that "the meanings attributed to the Muslim veil are not endemic to the veil itself; rather, they are produced through cultural discourse and vast networks of social relationships" (397). Some women challenged understandings of modesty passed on by their parents, and others revisited their own understandings as they became engaged with diverse friends' groups and new political organizations and social networks with different social norms.

Several interviewees described how the experience of mobilization and participation left enduring effects on their personal lives as well as on their family relations. Within their families, they pushed for new openings, expressed different choices around veiling, and voiced different social values even after the decline of collective action.

Tamara, a political activist, described how she acquired the title *el-ostaza* (the professor) in her family after her participation in the uprising.[14] Bestowing the title of *el-ostaza* on her was a marker of earned respect and elevated intellectual status. Tamara's family began to view her work as important and to respect her views as they watched her on TV and listened to reporters asking for her expert opinion. Her new status within the family and experience in collective action, she explained, made it possible for her to face them with her decision to take off the veil. They fiercely opposed her decision; but she remembered, "I told myself, I faced *el-da7'liya* [security forces] and their guns, am I really unable to face my family?" *El-da7'liya* is the popular name for the Ministry of Interior in Egypt, which directs central security and the national police and is notorious for using force in suppressing protesters and silencing dissent. Tamara's comments underscore how participation in collective action not only affects politics, but also has diverse effects on participants' biographies and personal relations.

During the interviews, the women described "feeling ready" to face their families and their social networks with their decision to remove the hijab. However, some believed that their families opposed their decision because, among other reasons, they "were not ready" to face their immediate and distant social circles. To give just one example, Maha recounted her discussion with her

father and her heated argument with her younger brother after she removed her hijab. She emphasized that she was not forced by her father to put on the hijab but chose to embrace it at the age of 14, while going through puberty. Her father, however, was firmly against her decision to take it off and grounded his position in social and not just religious arguments:

Maha: Right away, he brought up the "this is *ḥaram* [forbidden in Islam] argument," and that he will carry my sins if he lets me take it off.

Interviewer: And how did you respond?

Maha: I told him, so you want me to believe that you are worried about carrying my sins for removing the veil, but you are not carrying your son's sins for sleeping around. And you know I just said I am not asking you for your religious blessing, I am asking that you respect my choice.

Interviewer: That must have made him very upset.

Maha: Yes of course, but his response made me even more upset, he said his colleagues at work and my aunts [her father's sisters] will not ask him about his son's decisions, but they will shame him for my decision.

Her father's worry that he would "carry her sins" is rooted in the ostensibly religious principle of male guardianship, which has been socially interpreted to mean that men are expected to police the morality of the women in the family. A woman's decision to deviate from certain norms and expectations exposes not just her but also her family—and especially the men in her family—to criticism, since, according to the principle of guardianship, her male relatives should keep her behavior in check. Maha's decision to shift the conversation about the hijab away from the constellation of religious arguments and to situate her decision within principles of gender equality underscores how the debate surrounding the veil is shot through a web of crosscutting power relations. Women selectively ground their decision—whether to veil or unveil—within frames that promise to expose unequal power hierarchies and open them up for debates.

For Maha and other women, the uprising ignited a revolt not just in the political landscape and in the public space, but also in gender hierarchies and in family dynamics within the private space. Maha originally lived in a small town outside of Cairo and used to travel every week to Cairo for work; however, following the uprising, she decided to move to Cairo in spite of her family's opposition. She explained how the move was a way for her to exercise her choice to remove her veil.

Crucially, Maha was not the only participant to move from her small town to a big city after taking off the veil. A recurrent theme in my interviews with women who originally lived in small towns was their decision to move to a big city after they decided to remove their veil. Single women are expected to live with their family in Egypt, and so a woman's decision to move out of the family home, even within the same city or town, is largely frowned upon across different classes in Egypt. While not conclusive, of course, the women's accounts in the interviews and their experiences moving out further suggest a shift in opportunities and

openings within the family hierarchy following the uprising. Access to these openings, however, varied along the urban/rural divide. For example, two participants who were originally from small towns reported that they occasionally put on their veil—after they had removed it—when they went back to visit their families. Their families knew that they had taken off the veil, and they did not support their daughters' decisions to remove it. For the family, their daughter's move to Cairo was, however, a sort of a compromise in which the families agreed that their daughter could take it off only there, and for the daughter, moving to Cairo was a way to exercise her choice.

Not all the woman I interviewed were successful in convincing their family of their decision to take off the veil or reaching a similar compromise. Hana described how she wore the veil on and off for a year, and when she decided to face her family with her final decision to take it off for good, her mother collapsed and was admitted to the hospital.[15] She described her conflicted feelings:

> Everyone blamed me, and honestly, I did feel guilty. I knew then and I still know now that it is my choice. I knew then and I still know now that it is so unfair, that the cost for exercising my choice is my mother's well-being. I told my brothers I will take it [hijab] off, and if they do not let me decide how to live my life, I will leave. And if they dare touch me or try to stop me, I will file a police report. I had my bags packed and I have already arranged to stay with a friend in case things got out of control. But my mom, my mom, seeing her collapse, rushing her to the hospital, it just broke me.

Even when some women are successful in convincing their families of their choices, they still face moral policing from the broader society. For example, Mona shared her experience trying to change her veiled photograph on her identification card.[16] She described how the employees harshly judged her and questioned her decision to take off the veil. Other women reported harassment by border officers[17] and exam proctors[18] upon seeing their old veiled pictures on their identification cards. Their accounts underscore how state bureaucracy can be weaponized to exercise moral guardianship over women's bodies and to police their actions. Women did not only have to negotiate and negate power hierarchies within their family, but also—and not surprisingly—within the border society. Their experiences during the uprising and participation in new political organizations and social networks, however, opened a space for women to manage the complicated social dynamics that surround unveiling.

Conclusion

This article has underscored how momentous political events have transformative impacts beyond the overtly "political" sphere of policies and institutions. Using the case of unveiling among women protesters in Egypt, I have demonstrated how shifts in external political opportunities, innovations in the repertoires of contention and the framing of unveiling, and exposure to new mobilizing structures and networks influenced women's choices around veiling. The analysis highlights that when regimes invoke a gendered morality discourse to discourage women's

participation in collective action, they open up such discourse for debate as women question some of its practices and vocabulary, including the veil. Women protesters faced mounting repression during the 2011 Egyptian uprising at the hands of different regimes and political actors. SCAF and Islamist political groups used violence to deter women's political participation, and they often evoked gendered morality discourses to justify their attacks against women protesters and to place the blame on the survivors rather than the perpetrators. By invoking these morality discourses, they opened them to debate, allowing women to bring to the fore questions around women's bodily rights and challenges to the broader gendered moral accountability structure in Egyptian society.

The analysis also demonstrates how women's repertoires of contention expand to include new symbols at times of contention. With the election of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the hijab came to suggest tolerance, and for some even conformity, to Islamist political parties and their ideologies toward women and gender equality. For some women, the act of taking off the hijab represented a repertoire of contention to communicate political sentiments against Islamist political parties. Notwithstanding these challenges, protest movements also offer a space for women to participate in politics and introduce participants to new networks with different understandings of modesty. The uprising in Egypt was a time of change and possibility. Many women described how their participation and exposure to new networks gave them the grit to challenge long-standing norms, ideas, and power relations within and outside their families and social networks.

The findings add to the growing literature that has sought to explain the outcomes of social movements broadly (Giugni 2008; McAdam 1988; Neveu and Fillieule 2019; Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004) and their effects on women participants more specifically (Barnett 1993; Katzenstein 1999; Sapiro 1990; Taylor 1989; Whittier 1995). They also add weight to the scholarship on veiling and body politics under autocratic regimes (Abu-Lughod 2013; Ahmed 2011; El Guindi 1999; Göle 1996; Macleod 1991; Obermeyer 1979; Zuhur 1992). The experience of unveiling among Egyptian women in the context of the 2011 uprising refashions our understanding of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and movements' outcomes. For example, while scholars of the political process model emphasize fractures between elites as sources for opportunities, in the case of women in Egypt, the convergence between elites in their gendered morality discourses created an opportunity for women to challenge them both. The case of unveiling among protesters in Egypt also shows how exposure to new networks is not always a liberating or positive experience. Women described how some of the groups inscribed their own version of the ideal women on their members and explained how negative attitudes toward the hijab among their new networks contributed to their decision to take it off.

The findings also contribute to debates in the literature on veiling/unveiling and modesty politics. Women's experiences underscore that as much as veiling is not and should not be viewed as synonymous with oppression or a response to state-sponsored projects, taking off the veil is not merely a reflection of foreign discourses or regime ideologies. Women's decisions to take off the veil during the uprising reflected political trends, cultural currents, and social attitudes. The

veil, in its presence and absence, is thus layered with multiple meanings and interpretations.

To further push the literature forward, scholars need to study much more systematically how women's decisions during the uprising might have shifted understandings around modesty in the broader society. For example, beyond the protesters' communities, an increasing number of women have been casting off the hijab in contemporary Egypt. Some preachers, such as Mustafa Hosny, have also somewhat revised their earlier discourse on women's modesty while still stressing the mandate of the hijab. Hosny is among a group of satellite televangelist Islamic preachers who emerged in the early 2000s. Unlike the traditional image of imams with their long robes and traditional sermons, this new young group of *duaas* (preachers) resembled evangelical preachers in their modern upper-middle-class styles of clothing and modes of preaching. In 2009, Hosny aired an episode on the hijab in which he displayed five veiled mannequins.[19] Using a stick, he pointed to the mannequins' clothing, which, according to him, did not follow proper hijab practices and would arouse young men. In 2020, following a number of high-profile cases of sexual harassment, Hosny posted a video criticizing in strong words the association between women's clothing and harassment. Unlike his earlier note, he emphasized that the onus is on men to control their lust regardless of women's choice of clothing and whether they wear the hijab or not.[20] A closer analysis of the cultural and social effects of the uprising and its influence on gender relations and modesty discourses will advance our understanding of movement outcomes beyond politics.

Furthermore, future analysis should interrogate women's relationships with religion and spirituality and how they influence their decisions not only to embrace the hijab but also to distance themselves from visible forms of piety. For example, in all my interviews, women who had taken off the hijab described their experience of rethinking what it means to be a good Muslim and revisiting their understanding of modesty. Many of them often stressed that they are not less pious without their hijab. They viewed the veil as another sign of outward religiosity that does not necessarily reflect inner piety. Some described that they no longer believed that it was prescribed by religion, and the majority stressed that unveiling does not signal that they become less religious but rather subscribing to a different interpretation and reading of religiosity and modesty.

The veil, its absence or presence, is thus situated within women's personal narratives, collective histories, and political currents. Through their decisions and actions, women contribute to creating and spreading certain meanings and understandings of the act of veiling and unveiling. These meanings and understandings are neither homogeneous or stagnant but shift and change across social, political, and historical contexts.

Notes

1. I use the terms "veil" and "hijab" interchangeably to refer to the head scarf used by women to cover their hair.
2. "Gamal Abdel Nasser Laughing at Muslim Brotherhood Hijab Requirement in 1958 (Subtitled)," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIqdrFeFBk (accessed March 30, 2021).
3. Gihan, Zoom interview by author, June 2021.

4. Amira, personal interview by author, Cairo, Egypt, December 2019.
5. "Moʾtamar Al-Maglis al-ʿaskarī Bishaʾn Aḥdāth Maglis al-Wuzaraʾ" [The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' press conference in relation to the events on Maglis al-Wuzaraʾ], 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTyjBmdlZP0 (accessed January 3, 2021).
6. "Tawfīq ʿukasha Yatahakm ʿala Al-Fatah al-Shugaʿa" [Tawfīq ʿukasha criticizes the brave girl], 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=SqdDWERqtlQ (accessed January 2, 2021).
7. "Al-Sheikh Khaled Abdellah Yaskhar Men Taʿryat al-Fattah al-Muntaqibah" [Al-Sheikh Khaled Abdellah mocking the stripping of the veiled girl at Tahrir], 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=gskGjtZMC_s; see also Kirkpatrick (2011).
8. Maha, personal interview with author, Cairo, Egypt, December 2019.
9. Zena, Zoom interview by author, May 2021.
10. Samia, Zoom interview by author, May 2021.
11. Hadeel, Zoom interview by author, May 2021.
12. Gihan, Zoom interview by author, June 2021.
13. Sabah, Zoom interview by author, May 2021.
14. Tamara, Zoom interview by author, May 2021.
15. Hana, Zoom interview by author, May 2021.
16. Mona, Zoom interview by author, May 2021.
17. Samia, Zoom interview by author, May 2021.
18. Gihan, Zoom interview by author, June 2021.
19. "Khadaʿuka Fa Qalau: Episode 22," 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KceqtQ3gzg8&app=desktop (accessed December 1, 2020).
20. "Al-Mutaḥarsh Wa Libs al-Banat," 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7_ZNjEbhbM&app=desktop (accessed November 18, 2020).

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