The use of political motherhood in Egypt’s Arab Spring uprising and aftermath

Anwar Mhajne & Crystal Whetstone

To cite this article: Anwar Mhajne & Crystal Whetstone (2018) The use of political motherhood in Egypt’s Arab Spring uprising and aftermath, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 20:1, 54-68, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2017.1371624

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2017.1371624

Published online: 03 Oct 2017.

Article views: 428

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The use of political motherhood in Egypt’s Arab Spring uprising and aftermath

Anwar Mhajne and Crystal Whetstone

Department of Political Science, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

ABSTRACT

Political motherhood, which uses traditional motherhood to mobilize and sustain women’s political participation, is understudied in political science. Women played a significant role in Egypt’s Arab Spring and its aftermath by “bargaining with patriarchy” and strategically using traditional motherhood to access the political sphere. In this article, we develop a theoretical argument based on the work of Gentry, Carreon and Moghadam and Amar. We illustrate it with examples drawn from news articles on women’s political activism and social media posts by Egyptian activists. Our argument explores how women’s agency and the larger political context in which women operate reveals how political motherhood takes the particular shape that it does. In the context of Egypt, we examine how the state’s choice to highlight women as “hypervisible” citizens, worthy of protection, backfired. Through a bottom-up political motherhood, women used their respectability as mothers in need of state protection against the state, thereby legitimizing anti-Mubarak and anti-Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations and challenging these governments.

KEYWORDS Arab Spring; political motherhood; Egypt; activism; January 25th revolution

Introduction

Egypt’s Arab Spring was an uprising against the government of then-President Hosni Mubarak that began on 25 January 2011. It has since become known as the January 25th revolution, which is how we refer to it. The events leading to the wider Arab Spring were sparked in Tunisia on 17 December 2010 when a young produce vendor named Mohamed set himself on fire after a police officer confiscated his license to sell produce and he was later insulted by a government agent when he tried to complain about the removal of his license (Chomiak 2011, 70). This event rallied thousands of Tunisians to demonstrate against the authoritarian government, eventually causing Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia (Goldstone 2011; Gelvin 2012). Eleven days after the toppling of Ben Ali, Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square to demand Mubarak’s resignation (Nepstad 2013).

Egyptian women were a significant part of the January 25th revolution and the events that followed. According to eyewitness accounts, “women made up 20 to 50 percent of...
the protesters in Tahrir Square” during the January 25th revolution (Hafez 2012, 37). The majority were young, but there were women of many ages present who represented views across the political spectrum. Some of these women participated in the demonstrations, while others organized and mobilized people to join the protests (Carroll 2011). The state met women’s participation with resistance and violence, including sexual assault. In March 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces administered “virginity tests” on women arrested in Tahrir Square (Amin 2011). To combat this, women activists used their identities as mothers to negotiate with and contest the barriers to their participation presented by patriarchal elements of society and the state. We show how women’s identities as mothers helped women access public spaces, legitimize their demonstrations and delegitimize the oppressive regime of Mubarak and later the government of the Muslim Brotherhood. Our study explores a recent case of political motherhood in a context outside of the Global North and Latin America, where the majority of studies on political motherhood have focused (Baker 1984; Fisher 1989; Noonan 1995; Taylor 1997; de Volo 2001; Howe 2006; Zagarri 2007; Nathanson 2008; Stavrianos 2014).

In this article, we discuss how maternal activism demonstrates the ways in which women bargained with patriarchy in Egypt’s Arab Spring uprising and aftermath. “Bargaining with patriarchy” is a term we borrow from Kandiyoti (1988), which refers to women’s negotiation and navigation of their feminine identities to legitimize their political participation. Political motherhood is a maternal framing of women’s engagement with politics that makes use of traditional understandings of femininity and motherhood (Orleck 1997; Nathanson 2008; Stavrianos 2014). While there are similarities across women’s experiences with motherhood, the type of maternal framing depends on the context in which it is deployed (Carreon and Moghadam 2015). Political motherhood is effective due to the moral authority attached to mothers as bearers and preservers of the nation and its identity (Yuval-Davis 1997; Tripp et al. 2009). Because the institution of motherhood is valued by society, mothers can draw political attention to the needs of their children (Valier and Lippens 2004). This strategy can be particularly effective in traditional societies such as in Egypt where authoritarian states have marked women’s bodies as a site of state protection (Noonan 1995; Amar 2011; Carreon and Moghadam 2015). In this article, we develop a theoretical argument based on the work of Gentry (2009), Carreon and Moghadam (2015) and Amar (2011). We illustrate it with examples drawn from news articles on women’s political activism and social media posts by Egyptian activists during and after the January 25th revolution, making the case that motherhood was deployed to legitimize women’s participation in demonstrations that challenged the state. Our argument explores how women’s agency and the larger political context in which women operate reveals how political motherhood takes the particular shape that it does.

In this article, we first describe the literature on political motherhood, with a focus on its deployment in different contexts. Second, through Amar’s (2011) work, we discuss women as “hypervisible” citizens who require the special protection of the state and introduce our argument that Egyptian women used political motherhood to access the political sphere during the Arab Spring uprising and its aftermath. In the third section, we trace past Egyptian women’s use of political motherhood. The fourth section contains our analysis of Egyptian women’s engagement with political motherhood, which provides the bulk of our empirical evidence. Finally, we conclude with a call for increased attention to the role of motherhood in processes of democratization.
Political motherhood: agent, state and society

Our study builds upon the literature of political motherhood, which has been viewed largely in terms of how political motherhood functions peacefully or violently, and in how it allows or constrains women’s agency. We take Carreon and Moghadam’s (2015) typology of political motherhood as our theoretical starting point, which categorizes the ways in which political motherhood functions. Carreon and Moghadam describe how the context in which women’s organizing takes place in turn shapes how political motherhood is used. Their typology looks at political motherhood as state-led, from the top down; as bottom-up, led by activists; as patriarchal; or as emancipatory. They examine how political motherhood varies by context, including violent contexts, revolutions, transnational contexts and environments of inequality. Traditional studies of political motherhood have mainly examined its use in the context of peace activism (Baker 1984; Berkman 1990; Zagarri 2007; Stavrianos 2014). This can be traced to the early 1800s United States, when the idea of separate spheres of public and private life was operationalized to limit women to the private sphere. American women used the “cult of true womanhood,” which situated women’s lives in the context of “hearth and home,” to justify their political participation by redefining the home as anywhere caretaking took place (Baker 1984, 630). By emphasizing their caring roles, women cemented their affiliation with morality and rendered women’s political actions seemingly apolitical since care work was assumed to come naturally to women (Baker 1984; Berkman 1990; Zagarri 2007; Stavrianos 2014). Similar notions explain the founding of the international women’s group the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) during World War I. Members of WILPF claimed that they were called upon to work in the public sphere to achieve peace as part of their maternal and feminine moral duties (Wu 2013, 195–197). Such practices continued with groups like Women Strike for Peace (WSP), a US-based women’s organization that worked towards nuclear disarmament in the 1960s. WSP members defended their controversial anti-nuclear organizing by declaring that, as mothers, they had a duty to protect their children from nuclear warfare. Through a discourse of domesticity, the women of WSP deflected the criticism that their activism garnered in the politically constrained environment of McCarthyism (Swerdlow 1990). More recent examples include MADD, or Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which emphasizes women’s maternal links to an ethic of care and their “natural role” as preservers of life (Gentry 2009; Stavrianos 2014, 67–68). To increase their access to the public sphere, women have exercised their agency by “bargaining with patriarchy” and invoking feminine, maternal identities to spark emancipatory gender norms that allow them access to the public sphere (Gentry 2009; Carreon and Moghadam 2015). While traditional literature on political motherhood revolves around women’s connections to peace in both essentialist and constructed ways, we by no means suggest that motherhood cannot be violent, a theme with which we engage below.

Much of the literature on political motherhood focuses on women’s agency. Yet political motherhood can work either actively or passively. Women’s purposeful use of political motherhood reveals that it can empower women as political agents. A passive use of political motherhood occurs when it is applied to women by others, who label women “mothers of the nation” based on their understanding as cultural and biological reproducers of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997; Gentry 2009). By taking into account the larger context in which women’s organizing occurs, it becomes clear that women “bargain
with patriarchy” by purposefully engaging with political motherhood to achieve certain ends. In doing so, women extend political opportunity structures by expanding what counts as political. While promoting mothers’ caring roles may not seem political, when these roles are used to take on the state or political opponents in civil society, it is a radical act. In the January 25th revolution and its aftermath, Egyptian activists embraced what might be characterized as women’s “traditional” connection to peaceful or caring roles, allowing them to enter the public political sphere to demand an end to the state’s violent campaign against their children. This was the case in the context of the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo, a group that took on the state in Argentina in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Taylor 1997). However, this is too simplistic a narrative. Egyptian women’s political resistance cannot be measured solely in terms of their caring roles. As we will argue, the positioning of the state in relation to women’s roles as mothers better explains why women “bargained with patriarchy” and deployed political motherhood to achieve greater access to the political sphere. In this recent case from Egypt, motherhood was utilized for different purposes, such as the recruitment of protesters for the January 25th revolution, protecting protestors from state violence and shaming the military and the security apparatus for their participation in violence against protestors, all of which challenged the state.

While early literature emphasizes political motherhood in relation to peace activism, since the late 2000s, there has been a shift in studies on political motherhood to what Gentry (2009) calls “twisted maternalism,” or the use of political motherhood for violent means. This reflects a larger turn in international relations and political science inquiry that pays closer attention to women’s roles in violence, something that has historically been overlooked. This research reveals that society denies violent women political agency by labeling them exceptions who fall outside the bounds of normal femininity. Yet women who act violently are understood in stereotypically feminine terms in order to deny that their violent aims were intended to achieve a political goal. Instead, women’s violent actions are seen only in relation to their private lives (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Gentry 2009). When violent women use political motherhood or have that label applied to their actions, it is said that women’s mothering instinct or their loss of “home and hearth,” where they were once wives and/or mothers, led them to commit heinous acts. Rather than seeking a political outcome through rational calculations or independent thinking, mother narratives ascribe women’s violence to emotional triggers (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). For example, in Chechnya, women suicide bombers are called “black widows” to draw attention to their status as women and to represent their supposed danger to Russian men. This narrative paints Chechen women as either vengeful mothers who kill on behalf of their husbands or sons lost to the Russian state or as having no choice in committing violence because of their maternal duties. This is because mothers are paid by rebels when their sons carry out suicide bombings, and women then use these payments to care for their other children. The Russian media portrays Chechen women as peacemakers and labels vengeful and violent mothers as abnormalities. This takes the focus off of the political conditions that lead women to commit violence and redirects it to discussions around women’s nonconformity to traditional gender roles (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 88–89, 94, 97–111).

Women sometimes discount their own agency when it suits them. During the 1994 Rwandan civil war, Pauline Nyiramasuhuko served as the Minister for Family Welfare and the Advancement of Women. She was a key génocidaire, or perpetrator of the genocide, linked to inciting the murder and rape of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis. In her trial at
the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Nyiramasuhuko dressed in matronly clothing to emphasize her roles as mother and grandmother, and repeatedly argued that, as a mother, she was incapable of killing (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 160–171). Such a move was an agentic act in which Nyiramasuhuko used political motherhood for her own purposes of denying her agency. Despite the recent interest in violent mothers, there is a long history of women rallying the men in their lives to take up arms – women whom Elshtain (1995, 191–193) called “Spartan Mothers.” In cases of wars of liberation or national independence movements, violent women have joined as combative mothers fighting on behalf of their children, arguing that their mothering cannot occur until their country has overcome the threats facing it (Berkman 1990, 142). Whether peaceful or violent, it is clear that how political motherhood is applied by women to themselves or projected onto them by others is an important distinction (Gentry 2009).

The focus of this article is how women’s agency in engaging with political motherhood plays out in the larger political context. One of the most famous examples of political motherhood was its use by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo during Argentina’s Dirty War (1976–83). Here, women’s agency in reaction to a particular political climate, a military junta that enacted a campaign of violence against leftist and progressive groups in the country, led women to form a mothers’ group, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Most of the victims of the military regime, mainly young activists, were kidnapped and tortured by the state and became known as “the disappeared.” Because the state promoted the institutions of the family and motherhood as sacred as a strategy to maintain political control, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo used traditional understandings of motherhood to bring attention to their missing children and to demand that the state cease its human rights violations. Once the government realized how the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were turning their own policies against them, the state began cracking down on the group (Fisher 1989; Howe 2006). This eventually led the women to redefine motherhood from a biological identity to a political concept, which imbued its members with a further sense of agency, making it an example of de facto feminist political motherhood (Taylor 1997; Carreon and Moghadam 2015). In crucial ways, the political context of Egypt’s January 25th revolution and its aftermath is structurally similar to the situation that Argentinian women found themselves in during the Dirty War. Authoritarian regimes often promote complementary gender roles, which emphasize traditional femininity and masculinity, as a means to control society (Noonan 1995). In the Dirty War, this move backfired on the military junta when the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo used their maternal femininity against the state, so that women were “speaking the same language” as the state (Fisher 1989; Noonan 1995, 96). In Egypt, the state promoted women as mothers and a “hypervisible” category of citizens whom the regime emphasized were due respect and protection. This was a top-down application of political motherhood (Amar 2011, 305). When women began to protest against the state by emphasizing their feminine and maternal identities through a bottom-up political motherhood, the Egyptian regime found itself in a conundrum.

**Political motherhood and the Egyptian revolution: mapping the context**

Our study builds upon the literature of political motherhood, which has been largely concerned with how political motherhood functions peacefully or violently, and
whether it furthers or constrains women’s ability to act as agents. Carreon and Moghadam’s (2015) typology of political motherhood emphasizes how the context in which women’s organizing takes place shapes women’s use of political motherhood. Political motherhood can be state-led, imposed by governments on women through top-down processes, or it can function bottom-up through its use by activists. Likewise, it can serve either patriarchal or emancipatory purposes. Whether political motherhood is top-down or bottom-up, patriarchal or emancipatory, is tied to the varying political settings in which women find themselves. This includes violent contexts, revolutions, transnational contexts and environments of inequality. In violent arenas, such as that of Argentina’s Dirty War, political motherhood is bottom-up, deployed by activists in social movements that seek political change. Carreon and Moghadam (2015, 22) also describe how, in Turkey, Kurdish women with the Saturday Mothers have demanded that the state return their imprisoned sons. Yet the use of traditional motherhood does not guarantee women protection from state violence. The Saturday Mothers have experienced police repression as a result of their activism. Similarly, members of the maternal group May Our Daughters Return Home, located in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, have tried to protect themselves from violence incurred as a result of their use of political motherhood as they demand that the state investigate the disappearance and murder of their daughters; nonetheless, activists have been blatantly killed because of their involvement in the movement (23).

In revolutionary environments, the state uses political motherhood in top-down, vertical processes that emphasize the narrative of women as mothers of the nation, which denies women’s role as agents (Carreon and Moghadam 2015). Nevertheless, state-led political motherhood can have emancipatory results. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas overthrew an authoritarian government and installed a series of progressive state policies that gave women paid maternity leave, access to education and a state-funded women’s organization following the mobilization of women based on their maternal identities (24). However, state-led political motherhood can easily entrench patriarchy. Since Iran’s revolution, women as mothers of the nation have seen their rights reduced (Gentry 2009; Carreon and Moghadam 2015, 24–25).

Transnational organizations engage with political motherhood by emphasizing the ethic of care and women’s roles of preservers of life, although not usually in essentializing terms. Typically, transnational activism challenges the state, so it is bottom-up, and even if does not explicitly label itself feminist, using a lens of political motherhood involves a de facto feminism that helps women address their practical gender interests and gain a sense of agency (Molyneux 1985; Carreon and Moghadam 2015, 25–26).

Finally, in contexts of injustice, women use political motherhood to become social change activists using bottom-up approaches that challenge the public/private divide. In the US, women of color have mobilized around their identities as mothers in ways that can reinforce women as the bearers of culture, but which also allow women as agents to access the political sphere (Carreon and Moghadam 2015, 26–27).

Context matters in explaining how political motherhood is framed. To understand why maternal frames resonated with the public and the state in our case of Egypt’s Arab Spring, we rely on Amar’s (2011, 305) understanding of “hypervisibility,” which is a term for the “processes whereby racialized, sexualized subjects, or the marked bodies of subordinate classes, become intensely visible as objects of state, police and media gazes and as targets of fear and desire.” According to Amar, “when subjects are hypervisibilized, they remain invisible as social beings: they are not recognizable
as complex, legitimate, participatory subjects or citizens” (305). Combined with understandings of respectability, the result is “a historically classphobic (demonizing the working class), gender essentialist moral practice consisting of self-disciplinary practices that are depoliticizing and aim for assimilation” (305). For this reason, the Egyptian state “invested … in generating and hypervisibilizing women as subjects of piety, self-policing, moralization and cultural security” (309). To overcome these constraints imposed by the patriarchal state and to increase the legitimacy of the demonstrations, various women activists used their traditional gender identity as mothers to “bargain with patriarchy.” By entering the public spaces of protest against the state, women undermined the state’s strategy of hypervisibility. Unable to delegitimize the protesters since women had been defined by the state as especially moral and respectable, the government was forced to shift tactics and call upon the colonial narrative of the hyper-masculine Orient. This narrative paints working-class Arab men “as crazed mobs of brutal men, vaguely ‘Islamist’ and fiercely irrational, depicted according to the conventions of nineteenth-century colonial-Orientalist figurations of the savage ‘Arab street,’” whereby “protesters became targeted as assemblages of hyper-sexualized terrorist masculinities” from which the state must protect women (308). For example, on 9 March 2011, at least 19 women activists were arrested by state forces (Johansson-Nogués 2013). Through sexual assault and “virginity tests,” these female protesters were marked as sexualized bodies who lacked respectability. The state’s aim was to challenge the image of the “respectable, pious woman who is a legitimate protestor against the police rather than a victim protected or rescued by the police” (311). Such brutal violence is recounted in Mona Eltahawy’s harrowing experience in Tahrir Square that saw her arrested and held for hours at military intelligence headquarters where she was sexually assaulted and beaten. Security forces groped and prodded her breasts and genitalia, and beat her badly enough to break her left arm and right hand (Ezzat 2011). While the statistics on the number of women killed, injured and/or arrested during the Arab Spring need further investigation, the literature is clear that women were specifically targeted by state forces (Amar 2011; Johansson-Nogués 2013).1

**Mothers of the nation**

Maternal activism has a long history in Egypt. In Egypt’s anticolonial period, the image of a woman struggling for her independence was used to represent the struggle against British rule in the 1919 revolution. One such example is a statue of a woman defiantly pulling off her veil as she stands next to a sphinx, known as *Nahdat Misr,* or the Awakening of Egypt (Baron 1997; 2005, 67). In the collective of the imagined community, women are often tied to the nation and/or nation-state through their biological and social-cultural reproductive roles (Yuval-Davis 1997). Egyptian women activists in the anticolonial period encouraged the connection between motherhood and nationalism, strategically using it to their benefit. They linked stereotypical gender roles of girls and women as future mothers of the nation, who would foster national belonging in children, to claim women’s role as citizens. Activists made the case that Egypt could not attain independence without increasing women’s access to education, arguing that only educated mothers were capable of raising sons to grow up to be devoted citizens (Baron 2005). Such a message emphasized the cultural importance of mothers and their authority. Unlike wives, sisters or daughters who submit to their husbands, parents and brothers, mothers possess an authoritative moral power over younger men and women.
in the household. Emphasizing their motherhood gave women “a maternal authority to engage more openly in society and politics” (36). This maternal authority was further reinforced through religion. In one of the most popular hadiths, a follower named Mu’awiyah bin Jahima al-Sulami went to the Prophet Muhammad and said, “O messenger of Allah, I desire to go on the military expedition and I have come to consult you.” The Prophet responded by asking, “Do you have a mother?” Al-Sulami replied, “Yes.” The Prophet told him, “Stay with her, because paradise lies beneath her feet” (Hussein and Imtoual 2013). Just as in the past, Egyptian women in the January 25th revolution and beyond engaged in discourses that emphasize women’s maternal and moral authority as a means to assert their agency.

In Egypt, rhetoric connecting motherhood and nationalism has historically allowed some groups previously excluded from public life to gain legitimacy and inclusion in the national struggle. It paved the way for women from various socioeconomic backgrounds to access the political arena by planning and participating in the anticolonial resistance movement (Nelson and Khater 1988; Baron 2005). Following independence in 1922, due to the decline in societal support for women’s participation in the public sphere and a lack of support from Egyptian men in power, women formed their own organizations focused on issues of social welfare, education and poverty. Following the high period of nationalist struggle for independence, the next major period of organizing in Egypt did not occur until after the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, when Egyptians began making demands on the state for greater freedoms. Despite the fact that women participated in this movement at unprecedented levels, there were no attempts by the new Egyptian state to rectify gender inequality. In an effort to quell the revolutionary movement demanding further freedoms, the state shut down most political organizing, but granted some leeway to Islamic groups, particularly in universities and other organizing venues (Pratt 2016). By 1977, Egyptian society had become increasingly conservative as seen in the rise of discourses around “female respectability.” However, women’s groups continued to exist. In the 1990s, much of Egyptian women’s organizing was coopted by the state as the government made instrumental use of women’s groups to portray Egypt as a modern promoter of women’s rights (Pratt 2016). In a top-down approach that drew attention to women as hypervisible citizens, the Egyptian state portrayed women as worthy of being protected and respected through their role as mothers of the nation (Amar 2011). It was not until the January 25th revolution of 2011 that women activists could move against the state as part of the nationalist movement against the Mubarak regime. In this context, many women assessed the political situation and decided to use the state’s definition of women as hypervisible against the Mubarak government.

**Use of motherhood in Egypt’s January 25th revolution and beyond**

We argue that, similar to the 1919 revolution, the January 25th revolution witnessed a significant number of female participants who used nationalism, motherhood and traditional gender roles to “bargain with patriarchy.” This allowed women to achieve a substantial political presence through the state’s own demarcation of women and mothers as hypervisible. For example, this strategy is readily seen in an image widely circulated during the revolution of an older Egyptian woman dressed in a scarf, kissing the cheek of a stern, male Egyptian officer of the riot police. The woman kisses the officer to shame the police for their brutal actions against demonstrators (see NBC News 2011). This
elderly woman lends moral legitimacy to the anti-Mubarak upheavals and rejects state violence against her figurative children, the protesters. This picture illustrates how some Egyptian women used “their moral authority as mothers and grandmothers to question inhuman practices and behaviors” (Sharoni 2012, 118) of the police in their mistreatment of protesters. The image emphasizes the unity of the common people, represented by the mother, who serves as an analogy for the mothers of all Egyptians, and the state, represented by the police officer who is also one of her figurative children. In this form of motherhood, “women continue to negotiate between the various available options and continue to create counter-narratives of motherhood that challenge ongoing patriarchal notions while stressing mothers’ roles in fighting oppression, inequality, and injustices” (Shalhûb-Kifûrkûnûfûn 2009, 95). This bottom-up usage of motherhood by ordinary Egyptian women contrasts with the state’s top-down labeling of women as hypervisible, respectable mothers of the nation.

Some of the women in the January 25th revolution became familiar with resistance politics through their children’s participation in the revolution. Such newly developed political consciousness is evident in the following story as told by an Egyptian mother who was in Tahrir Square during the revolution:

I am Ahmad Gaber’s mother. I am 36 years old. I am from Beni Soueif, Egypt. I am Ahmad’s mother; he got arrested in the January 25th revolution. He was sentenced to five years by the military, though it was before Mubarak stepped down. Thanks to God he got acquitted … Before the revolution I used to take care of my family, help my husband and kids with work. We had nothing to do with politics … On the Friday they called “Friday of Rage,” my phone lost coverage, and I thought it was my young kids who messed it up. My son Ahmad told me that it was the network as his connection was also lost. Our relatives were visiting us and they also lost connections. My brother-in-law told me it was “Friday of Rage.” The 5th of February was the first time I went to Tahrir Square to look for Ahmad. People had tried to scare us telling us those in Tahrir would hold us against our will and kill us if we decide to leave. But we went. God inspired us; I couldn’t sit with my hands crossed crying. Crying will not save my kid … God inspired me to go to the Giza post office, and I sent a complaint to Tantawi and another to Adel Mursi from the military prosecution. I told them what happened to my son, and if he did anything wrong, it would be breaking the curfew put in place by the government to keep people from assembling to challenge the Mubarak regime. He is 18 years old; he doesn’t know what a curfew is. I am thirty-six years old and I didn’t know what “curfew” meant until I went to Tahrir. Put those who killed the youth on trial. (Mortada 2012)

This narrative reveals how the national uprising in Egypt and the participation of the youth in these events resulted in the politicization of poor, previously politically inactive women. As a result of the attack on their children in anti-Mubarak rallies, some of whom were captured simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, any notion of the supposed dichotomy between the public and the private spheres collapsed and forced some Egyptian mothers to go to Tahrir Square to defend their families. A collective sense of purpose united the maternal activists. Mothers felt a strong sense of solidarity and connection with other mothers in Tahrir Square who were searching for their children. This is apparent in the following further comment from Gaber’s mother:

When I first went to Tahrir, I was upset at how they were insulting Mubarak. But when I saw the families of those killed and saw women crying and looking for their kids, I understood being in their shoes, and this is why [Hosni] Mubarak and [Habib] el-Adly should be put on trial, not us. Five years for my son? No. They didn’t answer my first complaint, so I sent another. And I took a piece of cardboard from a calendar and wrote on it, “We demand the release of the January 25th revolution detainees: Ahmad Gaber and Mohamad Ameen,” then I started going to Tahrir every Friday. (Mortada 2012)
This solidarity was the result of the widespread imprisonment, torture and killing of protesters that led to shared experiences among many mothers. Later, in the aftermath of the revolution, some mothers engaged in collective resistance against the new government of the Muslim Brotherhood. In their view, the Muslim Brotherhood betrayed the Egyptian revolution, and women used their status as mothers of the nation to delegitimize and reduce public support, thereby putting the Brotherhood in a difficult position: they could not denigrate those whom they had promoted as respectable, hypervisible citizens, the bearers of Egyptian citizens and the nurturers of Egyptian culture.

The next image we analyze was printed and circulated among mothers of martyrs in advance of a commemoration held a year after the revolution, which became known as the Mothers of Martyrs’ March of January 2012, a site of protest against the election of the Muslim Brotherhood. The picture shows two women dressed in black, each of whom had lost a child in the January 25th revolution. The women hold each other, comforting one another as a black ribbon in the upper left corner hangs over them, signifying death, likely the loss of their own or others’ children. The writing on the picture says, “We will defend our children’s right,” and it is signed by “the mother of the martyr.” The women use their roles as mothers to emphasize their moral authority, which enables them to shame both Egyptian regimes – Mubarak’s Egypt and the Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood. This picture is an example of how women who lost their children to political violence consciously used a bottom-up maternal mobilization to become a force of resistance against the top-down political motherhood of Mubarak’s and the Muslim Brotherhood’s governments. For instance, on 6 April 2012, the mothers of the martyrs of the January 25th revolution organized a demonstration in Port Said Governorate. The protest started in front of the Security Directorate building and wrapped around the streets of Al-Shark and Al-Arab neighborhoods in the center of the city of Port Said. The march protested the acquittal of the aide of the interior minister of the ousted president, whom many felt should be punished for his role in the killing and kidnapping of protestors. The mothers called for the punishment of all those in the higher levels of Mubarak’s government, whom they held responsible as the killers of their children (Masress 2012). This maternal discourse carved new spaces for older women in the political sphere, part of women’s “mobilizing identities … that captured basic themes and invited comparison regarding how women were appealed to and how their political identities formed” (de Volo 2001, 38). This strategy gave “traditional women” oppositional voices during and after the January 25th revolution and allowed them to exercise agency against the state, which conversely sought to define women as passive symbols of the Egyptian nation.

The deployment of motherhood as a mobilizing strategy was used further during the military coup against the democratically elected government of the Muslim Brotherhood, which occurred on 3 July 2013. In a video posted on the YouTube page of Nashron News on 27 November 2014, which has since been deleted, an older Egyptian woman dressed all in black speaks to an Egyptian soldier, scolding him,

Do not hit your brothers, my sons. Do not hit them. We are all Egyptians. We are all Egyptians. They want to inflame it between us. They want to hit us, my sons. Do not, my sons, hit your brothers. Do not hit your brothers. Be cautious for your brothers, my sons, your brothers. Be cautious for your brothers … Do not hit your brothers. (Nashron News 2014)

The mother in this video deploys kinship terminology by referring to the soldiers as her sons and by referring to the protesters as the soldiers’ brothers. She uses her maternal
authority to shame the soldiers, whom she considers her sons, for hurting their “brothers,” the protesters. The juxtaposition of the state’s description of women as mothers to be revered with actual women who used their maternal status to shame the state’s forces reveals how top-down and bottom-up political motherhood can exist simultaneously in the same context. Egyptian women’s strategic use of the state’s position allowed them to conduct their activism in a way that reduced some of the danger that they faced at the hands of the state.

For example, the strategic deployment of motherhood mobilized action against the government in various marches and events organized by or for the mothers of the martyrs. On 21 March 2014, a group of mothers publically remembered their sons killed by the military and renewed their call for retribution against the assassins “no matter how long it takes” (Abdel Aziz 2014). During the event, Samia Abdul Hadi, the mother of the martyr Ahmed Saleh, a protester killed on 20 November 2011 said, “Unite and hold tight to the rope of God and reject your differences, the hope is in you, and victory is coming on your hands because you are the best that Egypt brought into existence.” She continued, “The ruling regime ignores our demands of punishment for the murderers of our children as well as it differentiates between the martyrs, according to their political affiliation, our only hope is in you so unite on a single word.” Hadi called on the youth of the revolution to join together, imploring them to “unite to complete the goals of the revolution, which demanded to live in freedom and human dignity and social justice that nothing of it have been accomplished.” Fatima Mohammed, the mother of the martyr Jaber Salah, who was killed in November 2012, said, “[T]he interior killed my son, the seat of power will remain cursed for anyone who gets to it, if they do not take revenge from the killers of the martyrs so they can be an example to others.” On the fifth anniversary of the revolution, 25 January 2016, the mothers of some of the January 25th martyrs in Faqous, a town in northern Egypt, were at the forefront of a massive march against a regime that they believe was established by a military coup. On the march, the mothers of the martyrs affirmed their efforts to protect the legacy of the January 25th revolution, which had been hijacked by the government established by the coup (Egyptian Window 2016). The women defiantly raised pictures of President Mohamed Morsi in protest alongside pictures of martyrs and detainees (Egyptian Window 2016). In these examples, the mothers “are performing their culturally appropriate role as ‘good’ mothers and bearing witness to their own maternal suffering” (Burchianti 2004, 141). The mothers utilized their suffering as a mobilizing force to keep the momentum of the revolutionaries in Egypt alive in the years after the January 25th revolution. The mothers relied on maternal suffering “not so much [as] a rhetorical trope but as the motivating force of a form of political action that departed considerably from the mythical paradigm of motherhood” (Aretxaga 1997, 117), and as a way to use the Egyptian state’s designation of women as mothers of the nation against it. This bottom-up political motherhood diverged from the state’s political motherhood, which sought to force women into a passive, symbolic role.

Egyptian motherhood in the January 25th revolution

As we have demonstrated, much of the literature on political motherhood focuses on women’s agency. Our argument explored women’s agency and the larger political context in which women operate. By doing so, we revealed how a particular form of
political motherhood takes shape through women’s use of “bargaining with patriarchy” within traditional understandings of motherhood. Deploying political motherhood was a decision made by activists in their analysis of the political environment in which they found themselves. Women activists in Egypt’s Arab Spring and its aftermath used the state’s top-down political motherhood, in which the state designated women as hyper-visible mothers of the nation, to their benefit. Through a bottom-up political motherhood, women used their respectability as mothers in need of state protection against the state, thereby legitimizing anti-state demonstrations. This both powerfully challenged these governments and allowed women to assert their agency. A deeper understanding of how motherhood was deployed in the Egyptian context shows that women’s political resistance cannot be viewed only in terms of their caring roles. Rather, motherhood was essential to challenging the state in the Egyptian case. It served as a political and revolutionary force that increased the political participation of different sectors in the Egyptian society. Political motherhood helped recruit protesters for the January 25th revolution and shielded some protestors from state violence by allowing activists to shame the military and the security apparatus siding with the state. This makes clear that motherhood often plays a role in democratization processes, and must therefore become more of a focus in political and social movement studies.

Notes

1. At least 846 individuals were killed during the period lasting from 25 January to Mubarak’s stepping down as president of Egypt on 11 February. An estimated 4,600 others were injured during this period (Rettig 2011).
2. In Islam, hadith are sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. This particular hadith comes from Mu’awiyah bin Jahima al-Sulami, via Imam ibn Hanbal (Hussein and Imtoual 2013).
3. All translations by Anwar Mhajne.
4. The image was a caricature by the artist Abdulazez Sadiq, modified by Egyptian activists to promote the Mothers of Martyrs March and viewed by the authors at www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=451645908235625&set=pb.294178970648987. This link has since been removed.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge feedback from Anne Sisson Runyan, Amy Lind and Rina Williams on earlier versions of this article. We also thank our anonymous reviewers and Megan Daigle for her copyediting work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Anwar Mhajne concentrates on international relations and comparative politics with a focus on gender and politics. Specifically, she is interested in how political opportunity structures shape Islamist women’s political participation and is reshaped by Islamist women’s political organizing and framing strategies. Mhajne is a political science PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati. She received her MA in women, gender and sexuality studies from the University of Cincinnati, Ohio.
Crystal Whetstone focuses on comparative and international politics with an emphasis on women’s political participation. Whetstone is a political science PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati. She received her MA in international and comparative politics from Wright State University, Ohio.

References

Abdel Aziz, H. 2014. “‘Mothers of the Martyrs’: You Revolutionaries of January 25, Unite.” Alaraby, March 22, 2014. Accessed 22 April 2016. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2014/3/22/%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%87%D8%B0-%D8%A7-%D8%B0-%D8%A7-%D8%B6-%D9%8A-%D9%86-%D8%A7-%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D9%84-%D8%A7-%D9%85-%D9%88-%D9%8A-%D9%86-%D9%8A-%D9%88-%D8%A7-%D9%8A-%D9%86-%D8%A7-%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D8%AA-%D8%AD-%D9%88-%D9%8A-%A7


