

***Egyptian Feminism:***  
***The Effects of the State, Popular Trends and Islamism on the Women's Movement in Egypt***  
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**The Search for Islamic Order, Block 1-2**

In the Islamic world, feminism is a difficult and controversial subject to address. In some cases, it is viewed as a construct of the Western world, imposed upon the Middle East and North Africa by imperialism and as such, no reforms of any kind should be implemented. Others choose to believe that women's rights should be accommodated only insofar as they can be justified within an Islamic framework. In Egypt, the gains of the women's movement have been inconsistent, at best. Egyptian feminism is unique in the Islamic world, partly because of its early exposure to Western and capitalistic forces, and the extraordinarily long period during which independent feminist organizations were free to operate (Keddie 90). The reforms of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who controlled Egypt from 1952 to 1970, made great leaps in encouraging women to become educated and to work outside the home, but also banned independent feminist organizations and left the patriarchal structure of both law and culture mostly intact (Keddie 122). Today, it seems that what gains Egypt has been seeing in women's liberation over the years are being abandoned and invalidated by the growing popularity of Islamism in the populace. Large numbers of women are returning to the veil, to traditional Islamic views about work, and the support of greater use of the shari'a in the Egyptian law. Many see the new Islamism as utterly antithetical to women's liberation of any kind and predict that women will soon lose all rights in Egyptian society. However, another viewpoint is that the types of feminism previously present in Egypt either result from a mindless and unproductive imitation of Western culture or are unfairly imposed by the state. These people are encouraged by the apparent desire of modern Egyptian women to return to their Islamic roots. Nawal Sadawi, an Egyptian feminist, writer, and doctor, believes that though some of the current changes are negative, the overall effect of

the Islamist trend will not be to strip women of all freedoms and possibilities, but to give women the opportunity to redefine feminism for themselves through a framework of Islam, without imperialistic influences from the West (Graham-Brown 27). When it comes to Egyptian feminism, the fundamental question is whether the newfound piety of the culture represents a step backward for the women's movement or an opportunity for Egyptian women to discover their unique identity within their own culture.

Egypt has one of the longest and most varied feminist traditions in the Middle East. Early feminists tended to be from the urban upper class and were primarily concerned with personal freedoms for women and the nationalist movement. Mostly, they committed themselves to charitable work and were unlikely to produce any radical change in society (Graham-Brown 24). These early activists had little idea of the general exploitation and rampant poverty present among women of the lower classes. A census in 1914 showed that only 20,000 women were part of the wage-earning workforce at the time. This group would have been comprised of women and girls forced by the poverty of their families to seek work in factories and ginning mills, in addition to their household responsibilities. Working days exceeded fourteen hours, the pay was dismally low, and the work was so exhausting and debilitating that women would automatically be discharged after four or five years of work because, by that point, they were practically useless. It was these poor working women who were the first to strike and demonstrate for shorter hours, higher pay, and simple considerations like maternity leave, which was completely nonexistent at the time (El Saadawi 140). In addition to campaigning for their own rights, women from both upper and lower classes got actively involved in speaking out and demonstrating for their country, against the influence of the West and imperialism. Working women in both industrial and rural areas participated in the revolution of 1919 and became

martyrs when they died in the name of nationalism. In 1923, upper class women began to form the first women's organization in Egypt, which would campaign for basic rights like suffrage (El Saadawi 141). Despite heavy Islamic influence in the country, when necessity arose, women were willing to put aside their religious and cultural stigmas to do what was necessary for the defense of their country and their own basic human rights.

This widespread involvement in the political life of the nation led to changing expectations in terms of women's roles. This is not to say that the government or society in general ever advocated widespread women's liberation. In 1923 the government issued a decree setting the marriage ages at sixteen for girls and eighteen for boys, but the law was not strictly enforced and voting, divorce, and marriage laws still remained firmly in male control (Keddie 93). However, the general trend in the society supported increased women's education. The goal of this was not to encourage women to work outside the home or to aspire to fill traditionally male roles. In contrast, it was thought that an increase in women's education would make them more effective housewives and mothers. The movement focused on improving female knowledge of childcare, hygiene, and nutrition, rather than academic interests, critical thinking, or religious scholarship. The thought was that increasing the effectiveness of domestic females would improve society because mothers have the power to shape obedient, intelligent citizens. As a result, a few advancements occurred for female education in this period, including the beginning of the first state secondary school for girls in 1925. However, opportunities for women to work remained limited. Nursing was discouraged, working with heavy machinery was forbidden, and for a long time, teaching remained the only respectable position for a woman to hold (Keddie 91-94).

During Nasser's regime a phenomenon known as state feminism was implemented. Within the framework of his very authoritarian regime, Nasser sought to implement reforms in women's roles from the top down, in order to improve the efficiency of his increasingly modern Egyptian society. The new system was essentially a welfare state which committed itself to public equality for women (Hatem 231). The 1956 constitution gave women the right to vote, as well as gender equality in jobs and payment. Nasser also instituted mandatory education for six years, and he guaranteed jobs in the bureaucracy and free health care to college and high school graduates. In addition, progressive labor laws were introduced and birth control was approved (Keddie 123). ). This is not to say that the state committed itself formally to women's rights. Despite the progressive idea of the system, conservative views about women's position in the family and in politics were left unchallenged by the regime (Hatem 231-233). Despite this fact, Nasser certainly did more to further the feminist cause than his successor.

The presidency of Anwar Sadat, following Nasser's death, actually hurt women's rights, though his policies were, in many cases, an attempt to mirror the Western world. His scheme to open a market economy in Egypt led to greater dependence on the West, and increased unemployment and economic inequality (Keddie 123-124). The economic liberalization of Egypt undermined Nasser's economic state feminism by affecting the demand for female labor, women's working conditions, and the types of employment open to them. Despite its failure to challenge the patriarchal systems and laws of the time, state feminism had enhanced the equality and liberty of Egyptian women, while the economic and political liberalization of Sadat's regime effectively reversed many of the gains of Nasser's system (Hatem 239,248).

Even so, the public response to Nasser's superimposed feminism had not been overwhelmingly positive. The Muslim population was not happy with the idea of the

government forcing women to move outside the traditional roles prescribed to them by their religion. Nasser's reforms didn't make feminists entirely content, either because, despite the major changes, he did not allow women independent action, attempt to reform family law, or place women in top positions of government (Keddie 123). Even the educational reforms are called into question by feminists who believe that the further education of women is not necessarily liberation, but rather another form of oppression and brainwashing. Nawal Sadawi said in an interview that she had "little reverence for the value of the education system itself" and that it is "not necessarily a means of enlightenment." She said that the public schools do not create "creative people who can rebel against the system," which are exactly the kind of people needed to instigate change in backward societies. After all, she contends, "education is a tool of oppression, also." (Graham-Brown 26).

Individual beliefs about feminism are almost too numerous to categorize in Egypt. However, three basic varieties can be identified. The most familiar to a Western audience is secular feminism. This has the most in common with Western constructs about what feminism should be, in that it advocates women having all the basic rights in society that are guaranteed to men. It attempts to separate itself from association with religion of any kind, expressing women's rights as basic human rights rather than something prescribed by a religion. Then, there is Muslim feminism, a slightly more ambiguous phenomenon, but again, not inconsistent with a lot of Western ideas. This group attempts to achieve greater rights and autonomy for women through an Islamic framework, but continues to encourage women to work outside the home, to focus on their careers and to choose their own husbands. It tries to move beyond the traditionalist interpretations of Islam in order to justify women's equality through a Qur'anic lens. Lastly there is Islamist feminism. In truth, these two terms can be seen as mutually exclusive

and impossible to reconcile with one another. In many ways, it can be seen as a contradiction of terms because the very foundation of Islamism is the return to the traditional, fundamental values of Islamic society which include women existing only within the private sphere as wives and mothers. Most Islamists openly abhor the term “feminist” as a Western idea that fosters the destruction of traditional values and social systems (Karam 21-24). In Islamist terms, feminism is synonymous with colonialism and Western immorality, and brings about the breakdown of traditional values as precipitated by the changing face of a woman’s role in modern society (Cole 404). In fact, Islamist feminists are of the opinion that women are oppressed because they try to be equal with men. As a result, women are placed in unfair situations and forced to compete with men in humiliating ways. Since Western feminism advocates the impossibility of total equality between the sexes, it creates an unnatural state of being. In contrast, Islamist feminism holds the view that a just Islamic society would promote “a recognition and respect for compatibility between the sexes instead of competition between them (Karam 21).

Opposition to radical feminist agendas often comes from the common belief that feminist reforms are just another form of Western imperialism, an attempt to control the Islamic world and mold it to better fit Western ideas of modern, equitable societies (Graham-Brown 24). In Egypt, the strong nationalist spirit combined with increasing trends of piety and the failure of Sadat’s pro-West economic schemes have made both the population and the government consistently opposed to appearing too friendly to Western ideas. This fact, alone, makes any kind of large-scale radical women’s movement virtually impossible. This is not to say that radical, secular feminists do not exist in Egypt. Rather, opinions and beliefs over how far women’s rights should be taken are too varied to form one coherent group capable of gaining the kind of popular and political support necessary to fundamentally change the fabric of a society

that is militantly returning to its traditional Islamic roots. The Islamist movement has sprung from a variety of different influences on modern Egyptian society. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the desire to rebel against modern consumerism, materialism, and all negative influences of Westernization. Then there is the growing trend of increasing piety and religious observance in society. On the other hand, there is the opinion that because these ideas mesh so well with current government positions that these female Islamists are attempting to curry favor with the government so that they can gain political support and begin to change society both through organizations and official reforms. One of the most convincing arguments is that the newfound piety can also be attributed to economic issues. Declining economic fortunes and widespread female unemployment are very real concerns in modern Egyptian society. Some claim that the return to Islamic dress helps to conceal economic misfortune and gives women a way to rationalize the difficult decision of returning to the home when work cannot be found (Hatem 239).

In view of these considerations, perhaps it is incorrect to associate Western-style feminism with Islamism. However, the fact remains that many women are actively involved in campaigning for the movement and leaving traditional roles behind, even as they advocate the return of to the private sphere and the retreat from public life. Consistent with the obvious contradictions of the movement, Islamist feminism seems to produce changes both in keeping with and contrary to the desired goals of the Islamist movement as a whole. Veiling has, indeed, become increasingly popular among Egyptian women, especially in the middle and upper classes, who, incidentally, were among the first to remove it in the early reform movements. Increasing numbers of women are also taking the opportunity to return to the home and are focusing on being better wives and mothers, rather than on their careers (Keddie 125).

The very fact that women are speaking out for the movement can also have the opposite effect on the perception of a woman's role than the one Islamists intend. Some even argue that the actual goals of some Islamist women may be a kind of feminism, because they might be attempting to insinuate themselves within the mainstream in order to more gradually introduce equal rights for women, without leaving a strict, traditionalist Islamic framework. Whether or not this rather underhanded and sneaky view of Islamist feminists is valid on a large scale, it does appear that Egyptian women are not returning to the complete domesticity of earlier areas despite their growing emphasis on the role of wife and mother, the veil, and the retreat from public life. In 2000, studies showed that 22% of Egyptian households were headed by women, and that no one viewed this as either a "breach of culture or tradition" or an "imposed values system" (El Dawla 51). Support for women working outside the home also remains widespread, despite the tenets of the Islamist movement. A survey performed in 1993 on attitudes toward working women showed that 72.5% of Egyptian women approve of working mothers and 72.5% think that their husbands and fathers approve of working women (Papps 103). It turns out that economic prerogatives are enough to encourage the increasing role of women in society, even as they can also discourage it. It turns out that, as in most situations, economics rule the choices and norms of a society, and "where economic factors are concerned, even tradition sometimes retreats..." (El Dawla 51).

Many feminists assume that Islamists are "dangerous forces of darkness" that will invalidate any and all gains of the feminist movement in Egypt, so far (Karam 18). However, the fate of women within such a pious culture is not quite as dire as some would have us believe. To a Westerner, it may seem as though this Islamist brand of pseudo-feminism will never make any great leaps in terms of the empowerment and liberation of women but, actually, this movement

has a far greater chance of influencing society than those that can qualify as truly feminist in a Western sense. Part of this comes from the fact that Islamism is a popular trend among the Egyptian people, and the government hesitates to support any reform that seems too Western. In truth, secular groups which advocate women's marriage and reproductive rights are unlikely to receive any substantial political support in today's Egypt. The groups that will be authorized and funded by the government are the ones that generally share the same political and religious opinions (Karam 18). Contrary to popular belief, Islamist women have actually reversed traditional ideas about a woman's place in society and succeeded in earning greater general respect for women's superior knowledge of the home and the raising of children. As a result, there are not any major efforts by moderate male Islamists to force their female compatriots back to the home (Karam 23). Women will continue to be active participants in the Islamist movement for some time to come.

Surprisingly, despite the apparent strictures of Islamist feminism, it does not question the value of women's education or of marrying for love, and only gingerly challenges women's right to work. In fact, it has been argued that the return to traditional roles and dress is not so much a return to older ideas as a new movement in a new direction (Abu-Lughod 243). The implications of this idea are that Egypt is not falling back into its former views of a woman's place, but coming to its own evaluation of where women fit in society, through an Islamic framework, rather than a Western one. This brand of feminism may not be appealing to outsiders, but the popularity of Islamism among Egyptians demonstrates their desire to define themselves in an Islamic way. They may not be moving toward the vast sexual, educational, and professional freedom of Western women, but this rejection of modern materialism, Westernization and

secularism may lead Egyptian women to find a kind of freedom that will be more compatible with the morals and mores of their culture.

Feminism has had a long and colorful tradition in Egypt since the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite gains made in the past in legislation for women's rights, it may appear to Western eyes that the women's movement is taking a turn for the worse with the advent of Islamism. However, just because women are returning to wearing the veil and rejecting the idea of feminism does not mean that the society will lose all regard for women's rights in the future. Despite the new pious trend in Egypt, women continue to work outside the home, marry for love, and speak out in the public arena. What is being redefined is not necessarily women's rights themselves, but how women wish to express their rights in society. It may take this drastic swing in the direction of religion in order to encourage Egyptian and other Middle Eastern women to define their own kind of feminism within the framework of their unique culture. The fact remains that their society will never completely accept a feminist movement as long as it appears to be a Western construct. For Egyptian women to be free, they must "find an identity of their own—not only separate from men, but also challenging the negative view of their culture and society which is a legacy of colonialism and imperialism" (Graham-Brown 27). The path to liberated Egyptian women must be found, not by duplicating a Western model, but by exploring feminism through Islam and Egyptian culture.

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