

Egyptian and Algerian Women, the Delicate Balance Between Tradition and Modernity

Sixty years have passed since the first Egyptian woman dared to defy tradition by removing her veil and casting it into the sea. This woman who shocked public opinion then was Huda Sha'rawi, one of the early leaders of the Women's Movement in Egypt, who formed the Union of Egyptian Women (Al Ittihad Al Nisa'i) in 1922.

The newly formed union wanted to secure equal political, civil and educational rights for women, to abolish licensed prostitution, to raise marriage age to 16 for females and 18 for males, and to reform certain aspects of Family Law.

In 1984, most of these objectives have been achieved, except for those pertaining to Women's Legal Status. Marriage, divorce and inheritance laws still give advantage to men; sons still inherit twice as much as daughters, and husbands can forbid their wives from working outside the home, unless the woman includes a clause in the marriage contract that specifies her desire to work after her marriage. This is why present day Egyptian feminists will tell you that there is still a long way to go to change the traditions that impede their advancement.

Another Arab nation which fought hard, and is still fighting for the improvement of women's status is Algeria, where a seven-year struggle against colonialism left deep marks on the social structures of the country, especially on the family.

After the war of liberation was won, a new type of Algerian woman was born typified by the legendary resistance fighter Jamilah Buhayed, who said, "All of us, all of us Jamilats, were parts in the whole. Individuals don't make a cause. It's the principle that you believe in." These Algerian women who proved themselves in the fight against colonialism are finding it much harder to fight against everyday discrimination, be it at work, in legal or political rights.

In fact, what's happening to Algerian women now, is what is happening to many women living in the Arab World. In theory, the improvement of the legal and social status of women is regarded as a desirable goal by most governments (however widely their policies may vary). In practice, however, decision making is still in the hands of men and the participation of women in the political and economic life of their country is still minimal.

One of the reasons for this discrepancy between theory and reality was best put by Mrs. Amina Sa'id, who said:

We have yet to achieve a balance between the development of the form of our new societies, and the development of the content, personal and general

We cannot simply design a new person, a new society, by building an outer model. What we must do is change the person, the society, from the inside.

This indeed is a great task to be achieved not only by women, but also by men in the Arab World. This is so because we are all caught between two opposing and powerful forces: that of tradition and modernity.

The way out of this impasse, I believe, does not lie in choosing one at the expense of the other, for both are necessary and both have advantages and disadvantages. What we should do is to try and harmonize the past and the future in ways that would preserve our national and cultural identities, while liberating us from unnecessary shackles. This is how, I think, we'll be able to make the necessary strides that will take us towards the end of this century.

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