

Rural Women in Egypt

This pocket size book gives in 164 pages a survey of the conditions of rural women in Egypt. The author, Atef Adli el-Abed, is a researcher who has to his credit a number of field studies on the topic. The results of his work are presented in an abridged form, depicting the social conditions of women in such fields as home up-bringing,

school-education, work, marriage, and political rights and problems they have to face. It also makes suggestions aiming at change and improvement.

The book contains a short introduction pointing out to the development of the women's liberation movement in the world and its beginnings in Egypt. According to a 1976 census, 2883 books and studies had already been published about rural women, who represent 27.7% of the Egyptian population. Yet there is still a large need for further study and despite the spreading consciousness regarding women's role in society, discrimination against women persists in every walk of life. As soon as she is born, a girl is made to feel that she is different. Her ears are pierced for earrings. She is oriented towards housework, while her brother is free to play outside. The family is ready to sacrifice money for the boy's education but not for the girl's.

The Egyptian State has been actively encouraging women's education by opening primary schools for girls. In 1978-79, the number of girls enrolled at this stage was 39.6% of the total number of primary students. In Khedive Ismail's time (1863-1879), higher education for women was introduced when a maternity school opened in 1832, preparing midwives and women physicians. Between 1929 and 1930, women were admitted as students at universities. In 1976-1977, higher education for women at all levels and in all fields attained 33.8% of the whole student body in liberal colleges, and 23.6% in professional ones. Government help came in the following ways: raising the minimum age for marriage, increasing the number of elementary and secondary schools, establishing free education at all levels, allowing college students to marry, ensuring a larger variety of professional and technical schools for women.

Women and Work:

In 1976, the proportion of women working outside their homes reached 9.6% instead of 4.8% in 1960. Agriculture is the chief outside occupation for women. It included 43% of all working women in 1961 and 25% in 1971. The difference represents a shift toward technical and industrial occupations whose percentage rose from

8% in 1961 to 19% in 1971. The number of women engaged in secretarial and journalistic work rose from 2.5% of the whole body of working women in 1961 to 10.7% in 1971.

Political Rights

In 1956, Egyptian women were granted equal political rights with men. In 1975, only 16% of them took advantage of their right to vote. The Women's Union was organized in 1975, with 242 committees and 249,862 members in 1976.

Since, 1965, Egyptian women have the right to be elected to People's Councils, but their number remained very low: 2% of the total number in 1971. President Sadat decreed in 1979 that women should have the right to 30 seats in 30 electoral districts. Since then, their number rose to 8.7%.

Factors Contributing to Women's Enslavement

Local traditions and stereotypes are considered by the author as the chief obstacle to women's emancipation. Rural districts, generally isolated and closed to outside influences, are the permanent homes of traditional thinking and behavior.

The principal signs of underdevelopment among rural women are: complete sexism in family upbringing and treatment sexism in society, family arranged marriages, divorce as the privilege of husbands, polygamy, illiteracy, approval of early marriage, inequality of the sexes in civil law and in the laws of personal status including those of inheritance, divorce, guardianship and so on and distorted image of women in fiction, mass media and school books.

The author emphasizes the harmful influence of the folkloric heritage, particularly common proverbs and adages, in shaping people's attitudes towards women. Proverbs stand as a source of sacred wisdom; they are regarded as the standard by which men support and justify their behavior.

Factors Contributing to Women's Emancipation

According to the author, there are two sets of factors that may contribute to the emancipation of rural women. The first set is general in nature. It includes the extension of education, the increase in the number of cooperatives of every kind, the disintegration of large properties. The spread of religious reform and the establishment of a democratic government.

Other factors are: the improvement and extension of mass media and form of communication with urban life and with developing countries, and the contribution of returning emigrants and government officials established in the village.

The second set of factors directly influencing women are:

The increase in the number of girls' schools and the improvement of their standards.

The development of women's work outside the home

The modernization of laws of personal status which give working women equal rights to men at the same time, allowing them certain rights and privileges which alleviate their double burden

The instauration of social projects contributing to the improvement of rural life (such as the projects of Rural Pioneers)

Economically productive families

Rural services

Village fairs and exhibits

Using radio and television as means of instruction and enlightenment regarding women's needs.

Field Studies Performed by the Author

The results obtained through the author's field studies and interviews (performed in 1978 – 1979 in a traditional Egyptian village) serve to show the importance of broadcasting programs and other mass media in changing the attitude of rural people regarding women. The respondents who listened to radio programs and read papers and

magazines were generally more disposed to adopt a positive attitude with regard to women's liberation. As an example, 87.5% of respondents who listened

to radio broadcasts were in favor of women's education, against 6.9% of those who did not.

Other factors affecting the respondents' approval or disapproval of girls' education were: the annual income-parent's level of education and contact with the outside world. A higher degree of approval existed when the family income was higher, the parents were literate, and had contact with the printed media and the outside world.

The same results were obtained regarding the questions dealing with women's work outside the home, their practice of political rights, their right to free choice in marriage and to respectful treatment within the family.

Conclusion

The value of this book rests on its comprehensive character, enhanced by the large

number of references as well as an abundance of statistics covering the period between 1956 and 1979. While it is true that most of the statistics revolve around Egyptian women in general and are not restricted to the conditions of rural women, the author devotes to the latter the chapters dealing with factors of women's enslavement and those leading to their liberation, besides the important section presenting the results of field studies and interviews he made in 1978-1979 (pp. 121-164).

The book is part of the series of monthly publication issued by Dar-el-Ma'aref under the general title: "Iqra'" (Read), for the benefit of the large public which is in bad need of reliable information about women, particularly the neglected rural women of Egypt.

Readers who are familiar with the problems of Arab women will notice that most of the needs which the book attributes to the rural women of Egypt are shared by the rural women of other Arab countries.

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