

# A Background to the Feminist Movement in Egypt

By Homa Hoodfar<sup>(\*)</sup>

The discussion of feminist movements in the so-called "Third World" often explicitly or implicitly assumes that such movements are not indigenous, but rather merely recent imitations of the West. This mistaken view is then echoed by third world conservatives with the intention of discrediting local women's movements. In fact, feminism has not been imposed on the Third World by the West, nor is it so new. In many Eastern countries its history dates back to the nineteenth century (1). Feminism, like other social movements, is engendered by socio-economic changes affecting women. Similarly, the goals and characteristics of women's movements are shaped by their particular socio-cultural contexts. What is particular to such Third World feminist movements is that they are inseparable from anticolonial, national movements.

During the reign of Mohammed Ali (1805-48), Egypt was a forerunner among Eastern countries in attempting to introduce a systematic plan for industrialization and its attendant social restructuring. Modern education was introduced to produce a suitably skilled labour force. In this context, the issue of female education took a political dimension. Upper class girls had always been educated at home, but the question was whether or not changes in women's role were essential for "development"

According to the published material that survives, the debate was initiated by male reformers and it was only later that women participated openly. There are two broad opposing views. Conservatives, including many religious leaders from al-Azhar university as well as many secular, western-educated nationalists argued that women were by nature assigned to tasks of nurturing which were best

performed within the domestic domain. They used Islam to justify their position. Conservative nationalists suspected that any change in the education of girls, the mothers of future generations, was intended by the colonial power to destroy Egyptian identity and culture.

Religious and secular nationalist advocates of reform argued that a strong nation cannot deny basic rights to half the population, women. Although not everybody in this camp agreed on the agenda for change, they did agree that education and the improvement of women's intellectual abilities was essential. In reply to Islamic conservatives, Kassim Amin (1865-1908) wrote the highly controversial books *Women's Emancipation* and *The New Woman*. He argued in favor of education for all women, condemned polygamy and the divorce laws and supported his claims with quotation from the Koran

Like most other reformers, he claimed that it was not the true Islam, but rather corrupt practises maintained in the name of Islam, that prevented women's advancement. The reformers viewed the backwardness of Arab women as determined to Arab society and sought to rectify in order to build a strong Arab nation.(2)

Simultaneously with these developments women of the upper classes organized themselves in groups, large and small, to debate issues related to women's position. By 1914 there had already appeared in Arabic fourteen specialized magazines on women's issues, founded and edited by women (3). The major demands of women were the right to education for all women and the reform of family law. They also started to scrutinize the Islamic origins of the veil. The women's movement

remained upper class mainly because these issues were primarily of concern to this class.

Ironically, women of the privileged classes were subject to greater restrictions. Poorer women always played an active economic role, particularly in the delta region (Tucker 1985). Polygamy was very rare, since men were not able to support two families or to come up with the mahr which is a sum specified in the marriage contract (in accordance with Islamic law) to be paid to the bride at any time during or at the termination of marriage. This practically prevented easy divorce for men. The right to education was also irrelevant, since neither men nor women of modest origin could afford to join the feminist movement at that time.

Women adopted various strategies to overcome the social and familial opposition to their organizing themselves and taking public position. Since Muslim women have, by law, full control over their wealth, they were able to found many charitable organizations such as hospitals, schools and training centers where they worked as nurses, school teachers, and managers. In this manner, they created tolerance for these new and unconventional roles. The engagement of upper class women in these jobs boosted the status of women and made it easier for women of other classes to take up such occupations.(4)

Women also joined nationalist parties and participated in anticolonial movements. This initiative afforded them many more sympathizers. And despite their participation in anticolonial movements, they retained their political independence and continued agitating for the improvement of the position of



women. Further, they used the charity institutions they had founded as a channel to mobilize women of all classes (al-Sayed Marsot 1978). In 1919, women boycotted British goods and organized a demonstration in the streets of Cairo against the British. As the London Times reported:

... (the women) descended in large bodies into the street, those of more respectable classes still in veil and shrouded in the loose black coat, whilst the courtesans from the lower quarters of the city who also caught the contagion (of political unrest) disported themselves unveiled and arrayed themselves in less discreet garments. In every turbulent demonstration were well to the front shouting for "independence" and "down with the English" and waving national banners... (quoted in Philip 1978, p.289).

Despite the partial success of the nationalists in winning a new constitution, women gained little. In response, many more women's groups were established. Huda Sharawi, one of the most militant activists, founded the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923. It became the main association concerned with women's issues but also supported anti-colonial activity.

In 1924, returning from an international feminist meeting in Rome, Huda Sharawi and two other women decided to de-veil and, in a symbolic action, threw their veils in the sea at the port of Alexandria. Later, they organized a march where upper-class women marched unveiled in the streets of Cairo. This act rejected not just the actual veil but also an ideology which incorporated seclusion. Egypt thus became the first Islamic country to de-veil without state intervention.

The more recent assessment of the de-veiling has dismissed its importance, on the grounds that the

veil only affected a limited number of upper class women. But, although women of low income classes never veiled their face, and wore dresses which do not prevent movement, they nevertheless regarded the upper class veil as an ideal. It was not ideology which prevented them from taking "the veil", rather it was the lack of economic possibilities.

After 1924, feminists continued to agitate for change. By stressing their respect for true Islamic teachings, while rejecting "corrupted traditions" which they claimed were designed to keep women backward, they were able to diffuse much of the opposition

recognized and a very liberal labour law gave women maternity leave. Education became free and compulsory for Egyptians, male and female. Family law, however, was only slightly reformed. In 1957, the first time women could vote or stand for office, two women were elected as members of parliament. In 1962, only five years after Ellen Louks Fairclough became the first Canadian woman to hold a federal cabinet position, Hekmat Abu-Zaid was appointed the first female minister in Egypt.

In the period between 1957 and 1970, despite the increasing participation of women in all levels of education and the labour market, the feminist movement declined. It suddenly found itself facing a regime which not only recognized most of its demands, but also actively reinforced them. In the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1950s, the women's organizations and activists were incorporated into the state and the women's movement lost its momentum.

During the 1970s many elite women used their personal contacts to reform the personal status law governing marriage. This pressure was identified with

Jehan Sadat, the president's wife. As a result, a broad spectrum of more enlightened social forces, usually associated with the left wing and anti-establishment politics, did not actively support the reform. In 1985, after the assassination of President Sadat, the newly revived religious political groups successfully pressured the parliament to repeal the reformed laws.

Shortly afterwards, feminists scrambled to enter the political arena to ensure that no ground was lost. Ironically, the attempt by Islamic conservatives to impose their limited view of what constitutes women's Islamic rights and what should be their



to the reforms they sought. In 1942, the feminist activists established the Women's Political Party. In many ways it resembled any other secular, nationalist Egyptian party, except that constitutionally it gave as much weight to women's equality and the revision of family law as the anticolonial cause. Since many of the existing women's organizations joined the party it became a center for coordinating feminist activities.

By 1952 women had become such a political force that no party could afford to ignore them. With the winning of independence in 1956, women's full political rights were



# The Women of The Maghreb

Reviewed By Rose Ghurayyib

social role has given a new life and impetus to the feminist movement in Egypt. Hundreds of active women's groups, large and small - representing all shades of the political spectrum, from Islamic to socialist and radical feminist - have been born during the last few years. •

**I had** the chance to meet a few of them at a conference organized by IWSAW. Highly educated women who have assimilated the best of Western culture. They spoke and wrote in flawless French. Their dress, conversations and manners revealed a modern, good taste, free of ostentation and artificiality. Their foreign education did not prevent them from developing a powerful national identity, which aroused their revolt against the traditions impeding the awakening of women compatriots and the development of their countries as a whole. Emerging at the beginning of the century, following many years of colonization, their liberation movement grew slowly. Lately, the development of international relations and contact with the United Nations Organization helped create a movement of cultural cooperation between East and West.

A pamphlet about the women of the Maghreb *Femmes du Maghreb* was produced, by the Women's Committee of CEAD (Center of Arab Studies for Development) (1) in Canada. A committee of nine women, members of CEAD--supported by ACDI, the Ministry of Cultural Communities and of Immigration and the State Secretariat, Canada--worked together to produce this thirty page report of which we give the following abridgement.

## Algeria

In Algeria, the FLN (Front of National Liberation) which won the battle of independence in 1963 and dominated the country as a unique political party, had to face various internal problems, particularly a severe

economic crisis which led to the increase in national debts, overpopulation and unemployment. Consequently, the fundamentalist (religious) group, moved by Wahhabite influence and the intrusion of the Muslim Brotherhood, took advantage of the situation. Accusing the political system of being a failure they preached a return to fundamentalism. Thus, political sermons invaded the mosques; schools were filled with Islamic zealots; and a revolt against the one party regime broke out in 1988. The party called IFS, Islamic Front of Salvation, became popular. Accordingly, Algerian society, in its thirst for social justice, refused to build its economy on the capitalist principle of giving priority to economic interests. It preferred the social fundamentalism acclaimed by the IFS. In 1990, the municipal and departmental elections resulted in the victory of the fundamentalists with 50 percent of the communes and 33 percent of the electoral body. Immediately, several reactionary measures were imposed: the family code of 1984 considered women as minors for life; men were granted the privileges of polygamy and divorce; even the right of women to vote was threatened by the new wave.

On March 8 and May 10, 1990, women's organizations joined in large demonstration (2), claiming the abolition of the code of 1984. The legislative elections which took place in 1991 expressed the determination of each of the antagonistic parties running for election. The struggle is supposed to continue until the emergence of a third party having the democratic tendencies needed to earn the confidence of the general public and the support of the Women's Liberation Movement.

## Notes:

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(1) For a summary of feminist movements in selected eastern countries, see Jayawardena 1986

(2) See Abdel Qader 1988 for a full discussion on the debates.

(3) See Philipp 1978, p. 280, for a list and date of these publications.

(4) For a more detailed discussion about the strategies women adopted in order to participate in the public and political life of their society, see al-Sayyid Marsot 1978.

## Sources and suggested further readings:

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