

Women's Organizations in Egypt:

Emerging Women's Movements or Social Clubs?

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Introduction

A close look at the content and context of women's organizations in contemporary Egypt sheds light on the ambiguities and contradictions existent in contemporary Egypt. On the one hand, women's organizations began to flourish since the 1985 UN women's conference in Nairobi, and particularly during the preparations for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994. During this time there was increasing pressure on the Egyptian government by international organizations and western governments to adhere to UN conventions concerning women's rights. At the same time, a huge number of international donor organizations, NGOs and government bodies provided funds and resources for specific projects and campaigns related to women's issues. However, the increased confrontation with Islamists has pressured the Mubarak regime to legislate and implement more conservative laws and policies towards women and to diminish its support for women's political representation. It is no surprise then that women's organizations have been caught in the midst of contradictory state policies towards women and towards Egypt's growing NGO sector.

These tensions became apparent throughout my wider research among Egyptian women's organizations upon which this article is based.¹ Women activists constantly have to be on the guard and are fighting on many fronts at the same time. Any success with respect to increased

political freedom and specific campaigns related to women's rights is often followed by a backlash instigated by the government or conservative political constituencies within contemporary Egypt. It is not only Islamist voices but also secular nationalist intellectuals and politicians who accuse Egyptian women activists of following western feminism blindly and of side-tracking "more important issues" such as poverty, imperialism, Zionism etc. This way of arguing, of course, is not unique to the Egyptian context, but it does constitute a very powerful tool to discredit women's organizations and to hinder more constructive debates about women's issues.

Background to Research

My initial involvement with one women's group during my stay in Cairo (1989-1994) did not only influence my political outlooks but also led to nagging questions concerning the alleged goals and priorities of existing groups, their social make-up, their alliances and animosities, the actual projects and campaigns they were engaged in and the political debates and discussions within and between various groups. These questions resulted in a research project that involved interviews with about 80 women activists as well as participation and observation of diverse activities carried out by different groups. Trying to balance out the relative weight given to Islamist constituencies within much of the recent scholarship on Egypt, I decided to restrict my research to secular-oriented women's organizations and

networks. It was not my intention, however, to suggest that all women activists have to be secular or that Islamists could not be women activists. Rather, I wanted to look more carefully at the meaning and variations of the term secular within Egyptian contemporary political culture.

With 'secular-oriented' I refer to the attempt to separate between religion and politics, the rejection of the *shari'a* (Islamic law) as the main or sole source of legislation, and the use of civil law and human rights conventions stipulated by the United Nations, as frames of reference for political struggle. This, however, does not necessarily denote anti-religious or anti-Islamic positions. Indeed, the actual level of religiosity and adherence to religious practices varies greatly among secular constituencies - both Muslim and Coptic women and men.

Ideological Differences

The women I interviewed generally distinguished between *al-harakah al-nissa'iyyah* (the women's movement) and *al-harakah al-nassawiyah* (the feminist movement), the latter being a recently coined term. The majority of women activists perceive this newly invented concept of *nassa'wiyah* (feminism) as only being concerned with *abawiyah* (patriarchy)², but not including analyses or critiques of economic and political inequalities. In contrast to "the feminist movement", they argue, "the women's movement" entails the concern with national independence, class struggle, and other social and political issues. A small, yet growing number of women reject the way the term *al-harakah al-nassawiyah* (the feminist movement) is generally represented and understood. They consider themselves self-proclaimed feminists, or *nassa'wiyat*, and cautiously stress that their feminism does include the struggle against all forms of social injustice. They are not, they also emphasize, men-haters. Yet another group of women describe themselves as *nassawiyat Marxist* (Marxist feminists), emphasizing that they are Marxists fighting patriarchy, as opposed to feminists fighting class inequality.

Within these very broad labels, there exist obvious resonances with western feminist categories which correspond to the divergences between women who emphasize "equality" (liberal feminists), those who stress "difference" (radical feminists) and those whose concern extends to women's exploitation in the broader sphere of politics and economics (socialist feminist). A rigid separation of the three categories liberal, radical and socialist feminism has been hard to sustain in the West and is even more problematic in Egypt. The terms however are not devoid of meaning in either place, deriving as they do from similar broad dimensions of oppression to which women have attested in many societies.

The struggle to remove obstacles to equality - women's rights activism - manifests itself in various campaigns to change existing laws which reflect and reproduce gender inequality. It also aims to improve women's access to education and paid labor, and increase political participation.

The "women's rights" approach constitutes the main form of engagement among contemporary Egyptian women activists, since concern with legislation and equal access to education etc., is also part of the agenda of socialist-oriented activists. However, socialist activists differ from their liberal counterparts in that they reject the idea that reforms will bring about women's equality; instead they perceive women's exploitation as part of structural inequalities which are rooted in class divisions, capitalism and imperialism.

As for the western category of "radical feminism" which broadly encompasses opposing patriarchy, emphasizing differences between women and men, and focusing on sexuality as a site for women's oppression and liberation, it has not found great resonance among Egyptian women activists. Even the few activists, who have addressed the culturally sensitive issue of sexuality, cannot be characterized as separatist and do reveal a concern with women's exploitation in other spheres. Several of the liberal and socialist-oriented activists have increased their concern with sexuality, but none has made it her focus. Ironically, however, a number of women who altogether reject the label feminist for being too narrow and separatist, increasingly seek the company of other women in their social worlds and frequently express their grievances and frustrations with "men", thereby quite often inadvertently essentializing differences.

Aside from a few groups, which can be placed on either side of the spectrum in terms of emphasis on equality in the liberal tradition and a concern with political economy as part of the socialist orientations, these strands do not present clearly bounded categories. I could detect a great deal of overlap and flux among and within various groups, which also applies to the specific forms of engagement within women's activism.

Terrain of Egyptian Women's Movement

The contemporary women's movement in Egypt is extremely varied in terms of activities and institutional frameworks: NGOs with clear structures and decision-making bodies exist side by side with more loosely organized groups; ad hoc networks mobilizing around specific issues or tasks are formed and dissolved by activists, who are often simultaneously involved in other groups or activities; several women's committees exist which are attached to political parties, professional organizations and human rights centres; and a number of individual women intellectuals and artists work independently through their specific profession or are loosely affiliated with specific groups and might co-operate on specific projects.

Varying political orientations can be found among women's organizations, such as *Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida* (the New Woman Research Centre), *Rabitat Al-Mar'a Al-'Arabiyya* (Alliance of Arab Women), *Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a: Ma'an* (Women's Study Centre: Together), and *Gam'at Bint Al-Ard* (Daughter of the Land Group). The

Alliance of Arab Women, whose members are mainly professional upper middle class women in their 50s and 60s, exists on the most liberal end of the broad spectrum of feminist approaches, endorsing both welfare work and women's rights activism. Others, like the New Woman, Together or the Daughter of the Land Group initially grew out of previous political activism: members of the Daughter of the Land group were initially mobilized around the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), while the founding members of the New Woman and Together had been involved in socialist politics during the student movement in the 1970s.

In addition to these groups, which are, to different degrees, involved in advocacy, research and grassroots projects, there exist service-oriented NGOs with a special focus on the role of women in both development and underdevelopment.⁴ Egyptian women's activism is also channeled through professional organizations.⁵ The Women and Memory Forum also falls between advocacy and professional work, as it consists of a group of women researchers who aim to re-write Arab history through a gender sensitive perspective. Furthermore, women activists working within the framework of human rights organizations tend to be

involved in reformist women's rights activism; however, many are simultaneously involved with other women's groups or networks, and their specific analysis of gender inequalities is diverse.⁶ Members of women's committees affiliated to political parties are, to different extents, also involved in women's activism beyond party politics. Aside from women's organizations, groups and networks, there

exists a number of individual women who are active through their respective professions (lawyers, academics, doctors, journalists, artist etc.). Some might be temporarily affiliated to specific networks or issue-led campaigns, while others prefer to work individually. Often women are part of more than one network or organization, and many are hopelessly over-committed and over-worked.

By and large, the different women's organizations as well as individual activists are united by their middle-class background and their commitment to retain and expand their civic rights and equality before the law. They share a secular orientation and a concern about growing Islamist militancy, but their actual position vis a' vis the various Islamist tendencies and discourses are variable as much as their specific understandings and interpretation of secularism (Al-

Ali, 2000: 128-148). A great range of positions and attitudes towards personal religiosity and observance can be found among secular-oriented activists who oppose religious frameworks for their political struggles. Generational differences may be discerned concerning a woman's specific attitudes towards secularism and religion, where younger women tend to be much more open to the idea of reinterpretation of religion in order to counter conservative male interpretations. Older women activists of the generation that was involved in the student movement in the 1970s, by and large, tend to be more reluctant to engage in religious discourses of any kind (Al-Ali, 2000: 128-148).

Goals and Activities of the Egyptian Women Activists

Most of the goals and priorities of the Egyptian women's movement are related to modernization and development discourses. These goals range from the alleviation of poverty and illiteracy, to raising legal awareness, and increasing women's access to education, work, health care and political participation. Some groups also aim at raising "feminist consciousness". In recent years, some Egyptian women activists have systematically put previously taboo issues, such as women's reproductive rights and violence against women, on the agenda (Al-Ali, 2000: 149-160).

The problem of violence against women has been one of the most controversial issues as it touches precisely the core of what has been side-tracked for so long: forms of oppression within the home, within the family. It comes to no surprise then that not only conservative and progressive men, but also many women activists themselves dismiss this concern as a western imposition, not relevant to their own context. Others tend to relativize its significance by acknowledging the problem as such, but pointing to more pressing priorities such as poverty and illiteracy. Yet, those activists who have engaged in research about different forms of violence against women, such as wife battering, rape, physical and verbal abuse have become convinced of the urgency of the issue and consequently expanded their campaigns and networks.

The different goals and priorities within the women's movement are translated into various projects: income generating projects and credit loan programmes; legal assistance programmes; legal awareness workshops and publications; campaigns to change existing laws (particularly the Personal Status Law and the Law of Association); the establishment of a female genital mutilation (FGM) task force; setting up a network to research and campaign around the issue of violence against women; organizing seminars, workshops and conferences to address certain issues and raise awareness about them; design and convey gender training packages among NGOs; the publication of books, magazines and journals; and the establishment of Women's Media Watch.

Limitations

In the context of the Egyptian women's movement, the very

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term “activism” glosses over a variety of involvements and activities, which, if considered in isolation, are not all forms of “political activism”: charity and welfare, research, advocacy, consciousness-raising, lobbying and development. Certain forms of activity, such as research, might develop into more political engagements, such as advocacy or lobbying. Moreover, groups and individuals, at any given point of time, might be involved in different kind of activities (Al-Ali, 2000: 6).

One overall problem seems to be the lack of specific institutional targets in many of the campaigns which, consequently, tend to become diffused. The translation from raising certain issues, suggesting ramifications, to actual implementations is impeded by both, the state’s ambiguity and lack of commitment and the women activists’ own failure to adequately retain momentum and display solidarity amongst each other. Competition and rivalry - often revolving around the wish to guarantee funding and resources, but also in terms of claims to ideological and political truths - frequently blocks collective action. In some instances, it seems a legitimate question to ask whether some activities remain short-lived because they respond more to international agendas than local ones. However, it needs to be stressed that the two might not be mutually exclusive and might, if constructively used, feed into each other (Al-Ali, 2000: 182-83).

Linked to the problem of implementation, is the issue of the relationship with what has been coined as “the grassroots”: the majority of Egyptian women of low-income backgrounds who are living in cities and in the country-side. Those most critical of the women’s movement question that it was a movement altogether, and perceive it more as a social club for the privileged few who are totally out of touch with the every-day realities of ordinary women. Although there is certainly a grain of truth in the discrepancy between the social backgrounds of women activists and the majority of women, the women’s movement is far more heterogeneous today than it used to be historically. Furthermore, the preparations for the International Population and Development Conference (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 is generally perceived to have constituted a turning point in the relation between Cairo-based women activists and women in other parts of the country.

Unfortunately, the feelings of hope and success before and during the ICPD in Cairo were soon shattered by a severe backlash triggered by the government, the Islamists and cer-

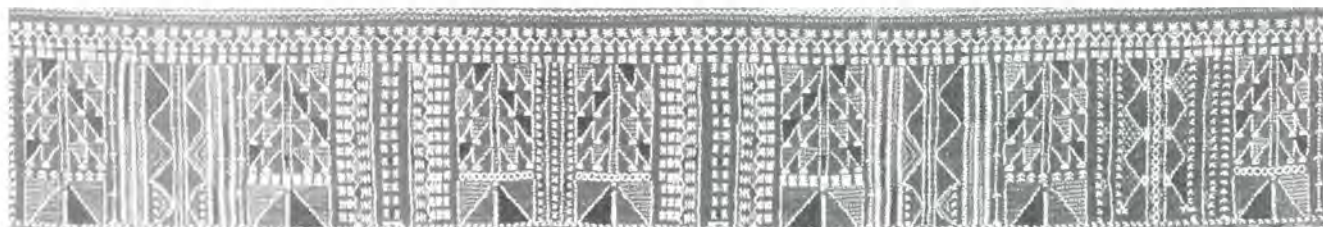
tain actors within the NGO movement. Yet, maybe more significantly in this context, is the fact that some groups more so than others are very much involved in grassroots activism and try to strengthen their links through concrete projects and programmes. In other words, while there are certainly women who spend more time sitting in hotel lobbies and conference rooms, it would be unfair to generalize this phenomenon to make a statement about Egyptian women’s activism at large.

The Role of the Egyptian State

Despite Mubarak’s official pro-democracy policy, repressive measures have not only been directed towards Islamic militant groups and communists, but also towards women activists. A number of laws, first established under Nasser, continue to regulate the establishment of voluntary groups, associations and organizations under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs.⁶ These laws oblige women activists to operate either as informal groups or as officially registered organizations which are subjected to the control of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The approval of the Interior Ministry is required for public meetings, rallies and protest marches. The Ministry of Social Affairs has the authority to license and dissolve “private organizations”. Licenses may be revoked if such organizations engage in political or religious activities. For example, since 1985 the government has refused to license the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), on grounds that it is a political organization (Al-Ali, 2000: 79-80).

The level of control varies depending on the political climate. It was during the Gulf War - a period during which the Egyptian government experienced a crisis of legitimacy by aligning itself with the Anglo-American war efforts - that the government banned Arab Women’s Solidarity Association (AWSA). Nawal El-Sa’dawi had been very outspoken against the war and the Egyptian government’s position on it. The influence of state power on civil society organizations through the Ministry of Social Affairs and the apparent randomness with which organizations are allowed to operate, has been restrained by the international arena which has largely contributed to the professionalization of the traditional voluntary sector (Al-Ali, 2000: 80).

Several women’s groups have preferred to circumvent Law 32 and the danger of being dissolved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and registered with the Office of Property and Accreditation as research centers or civic non-profit companies as opposed to private voluntary organizations (PVOs)



or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), thereby avoiding the control and restrictions set by the Ministry of Social Affairs. This legal loophole had been endangered by recent amendments to the ill-reputed Law 32 of 1964.

Increasing opposition to the Law of Association, especially on the part of Egyptian civil organizations but also international constituencies, compelled the state to declare repeatedly that it intended to reconsider the law. An "NGO Forum for Civil Action" was formed in the summer of 1998 in reaction to a drafted bill by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The proposed bill did not meet hopes and expectations of Egyptian NGOs. However, the ministry engaged in a series

of consultations with the NGO Forum which resulted in an agreed upon compromise on both sides. However, in spring of 1999 the Ministry of Social Affairs sent a bill to the Egyptian People's Assembly which starkly differed from the one agreed upon by both sides. The bill, which passed within days, prohibits associations from carrying out any political activities; it increases the ministry's power to control and intervene in Egypt's civil society, and it

restricts regional and international activities. According to a statement by a group of Egyptian NGOs, the law, when placed in the current political context, is "merely a reflection of the government's general intention to further restrict any form of independent association, be it in political parties, unions, professional syndicates, or NGOs." This newly passed law constituted a severe blow to Egypt's NGO movement in general and to the women's movement in particular. It was therefore with great surprise and relief that the most recent decision to revoke the restrictive law on the basis of its "unconstitutionality" was received.

Conclusion

Recent developments within Egypt's wider 'civil society', namely the arrest and defamation of the political sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim and a number of his colleagues from the Ibn Khaldoun Centre, have affected social and political activists in Egypt at large. Women's organizations have become even more vulnerable in an atmosphere where foreign funding is linked to imperialism, the imposition of western agendas and 'spying'. These allegations are not new, of course, but they have obtained a more threatening and immediate tone in Egypt today. While the debate around foreign funding has been regularly used to discredit certain groups and activists, it is now paradoxically the

Egyptian state that prevents activists to seek funding from international organizations. This being the same state that is the largest recipient of US Aid after Israel, which implements IFM structural adjustment policies and tries to encourage privatization and foreign investment.

Research itself - an important tool for women activists in identifying problems and solutions - has been criminalised in the media. It is not only researchers who suffer intimidation but also those who have co-operated with various researchers. Despite these difficulties surrounding women's organizations in contemporary Egypt, their continuing search for greater equity between the genders, social justice and women's rights might be the only ray of hope within Egypt's gloomy political landscape.

Endnotes

1 See Nadjé Al-Ali *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: the Egyptian Women's Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000).

2 I have adopted Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy as 'a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women. Patriarchy is thus the system of male oppression of women' (1979:232).

3 These NGOs, such as Gama'at Nuhud wa Tanmeyyat Al-Mar'a (Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women, called ADEW) and Markaz Wasa'il Al-Ittissal Al-Mula'ama min agl Al-Tanmeyya (Appropriate Communications Techniques, called ACT), combine concrete development projects with political campaigns. Markaz Qadaya Al-Mar'a Al-Masriya (Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance) provides legal assistance for women at the grassroots level and also offers literacy classes.

4 Among the professional organizations are Lagnat Al-Maria fi Ittihad Al-Mohameen Al-'Arab (Women's Committee of the Arab Lawyers Union), Gama'iyat Al-Katibat Al-Masriyat (the Egyptian Women Writers Association), Dar Al-Mar'a Al-'Arabiyya Nour (the Arab Women Publishing House Nour), and Gama'iyat Al-Cinemat'iyat (the Egyptian Women in Film Society).

5 For example, Markaz Al-Dirasat wa Al-Ma'lumat Al-Qanuniyya li Huquq Al-Insan (the Legal Rights and Research Center - LRRC), Markaz Al-Qahira li Dirasat Huquq Al-Insan (the Cairo Institute For Human Rights Studies-CIHRS) and Markaz Al-Mussa'ada Al-Qanuniyya li Huquq Al-Insan (the Center for Human Rights and Legal Aid (CHRLA)).

6 These laws, most notable law 32 of 1964, have restricted the formation and activities of voluntary organizations with regard to their field of activity, number of members allowed, number of organizations in a particular region, record keeping, accounting and funding. Law 32 has also given the government authority to intervene by striking down decisions by the board of directors or even dissolving the entire board. Several women's groups preferred to circumvent Law 32 and the danger of being dissolved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and registered with the Office of Property and Accreditation as research centres or civic non-profit companies.

Socialist activists perceive women's exploitation as part of structural inequalities which are rooted in class divisions, capitalism and imperialism