ADVOCATING FOR GREATER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: FEMINISMS IN EGYPT AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

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Washington, D.C.
March 22, 2011
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ABSTRACT

As a powerful opposition movement in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood has a large influence on politics and takes the stance that it speaks for the majority of Egyptians in upholding their cultural and religious values. This thesis will analyze both the push for greater participation and voice by women within the Muslim Brotherhood as well as examine the opposition by women in Egypt to the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement. First, this thesis will discuss the political situation in Egypt before the February 2011 revolution and how the banned opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, fit into the political landscape. Secondly, the thesis will focus on the secular feminist movement in Egypt, its history and what issues the movement is engaged with now.

The next two chapters will explore the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic feminism in Egypt. The first part of this exploration will focus more specifically on women’s participation within the Muslim Brotherhood and their demands for greater participation and leadership roles within the Brotherhood and Egyptian politics. The following chapter will discuss Islamic feminism, the introduction of the term and the wide variety of opinions and positions it encompasses. The two movements of Islamic and secular feminism are many times seen in opposition to each other and the final chapter will discuss these divergences as well as causes the movements have in common.
This thesis finds that there are significant differences between the ideals of the Islamist and secular feminist movements but that they do have some overlapping causes and areas where they can work together. The most significant of these is in female literacy. Female Muslim scholars emphasize women’s literacy in Arabic so that women have firsthand access to Islamic texts and Arabic literacy is key to the Islamic feminist movement. At the same time secular feminism has continuously focused on female education and literacy from the beginning of the movement in the late 1800s. Today women are asking for more influential roles within the Muslim Brotherhood and the feminist movement has focused on influencing the Muslim Brotherhood because of the significant role they play in Egyptian society.
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INTRODUCTION

The banned organization, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, serves an important role in opposition to the National Democratic Party in Egypt. In a majority Muslim nation where 94.6% of the population is Muslim, the Brotherhood positions itself as a moderate Islamist group which advocates for greater Islamic religiosity in society and government. At the same time that the Muslim Brotherhood is campaigning to spread Islamic ideals in Egypt, Muslim women members are engaged in a growing movement to strip away patriarchal ideas and interpretations of Islamic texts. This movement has been labeled by some outside observers as Islamic feminism. As an organization that promotes the ideals of many Islamic feminists, women are working with the Muslim Brotherhood to spread the message of Islam and expand the activities of the Brotherhood. They are also asking for greater decision making authority within the organization and that more emphasis be placed on women’s issues. Externally, secular feminists in Egypt have campaigned against certain positions of the Muslim Brotherhood on women’s issues, arguing that the Brotherhood does not respect women’s rights in Egypt. Women both within the Brotherhood as well as feminists who are not members of the organization are working to transform the platform of the organization to give greater respect to women’s roles in Egypt and encourage greater female participation in the Islamist movement.

The Muslim Brotherhood has attempted to position itself as a moderate Islamist organization that works both politically and socially to increase the influence of Islam in Egyptian society. Socially the Brotherhood has numerous charitable organizations that provide needed public services and serve as a means for the Brotherhood to extend its outreach and message into local communities. The organization also controls student groups and professional organizations as well as spreading its message with publications and preaching. On the political side the Egyptian government has taken all measures to limit the organization’s access but they have had some success in fielding independent parliamentary candidates. One of the major debates which took place within the Brotherhood was the extent to which the organization should push for political involvement or whether they should just focus on their social and religious activities. With the organization’s main focus on an Islamic reform agenda and spreading their interpretation of Islamic practices in Egypt, they are searching for the most effective way to fulfill this mission while avoiding as much as possible repression from the government.

The intense governmental and media focus on the Brotherhood is understandable because of the threat they have represented to the National Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP has limited political participation for all opposition groups to such a great extent

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3. Ibid.
that there is almost no legitimate opposition except for the Brotherhood. This elimination of other viable opposition voices has left the Brotherhood in a position of intense scrutiny with its positions on social issues and society taking on greater importance over political activities. With western countries increasingly focusing on women’s issues in Muslim countries and particularly in the Middle East especially since the events in New York on September 11, 2001, the Brotherhood and Muslim women have found themselves defending the position of women in Egyptian society and the value that Islam places on traditional women’s roles. Female supporters of the Brotherhood and Islamist women have taken up the banner of promoting traditional female roles in society focused on the home and family. They contrast this with the campaigns of secular feminism which they see as forcing women to compete with men at all levels in society and to be “superhuman.” The Muslim Brotherhood plays an important role in defining what women’s roles should be in an Islamic society and they place an emphasis on spreading their message that only when families adopt their Islamic model will there be harmony in Egyptian society.

As women in Egypt debate female roles and promote what they believe to be the proper position of women there is an apparent divide between those advocating a secular


approach to women’s rights and some Islamic women who believe that an Islamic
to women's rights and some Islamic women who believe that an Islamic
framework must be applied in all cases. Female Islamic scholars have started a
movement to examine original Islamic texts and reinterpret them to rid current
interpretations of the patriarchal ideas and myths that have previously been associated
with them. This is a native movement that arose in Islamic countries with the rise in
political Islam coinciding with an increase in female education in Arabic as well as
access to information technology. As female scholars examine passages from the Quran
and other Islamic texts they are sharing their knowledge with other Muslim women by
giving lectures and guidance and taking on a traditional male role of preacher. There is a
wide spectrum in the positions of female Muslim religious scholars but all call for a close
examination of Islamic texts as the basis for a path to leading a morally correct life.

Many secular feminists in Egypt also look to Islam for a moral code but they
additionally frame their arguments based on a nationalist, human rights discourse.

“Secular feminism signified a model of feminism located within the context of a secular
territorial nation-state protective of religion while not officially organized around
religion.”

Secular feminists are concerned with the positions of the Muslim Brotherhood
with regards to women because they find that the Brotherhoods’ positions limit the roles

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7. Margot Badran, “Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond,”

Publications, 2009), 3.

9. Ibid.
available to women in Egypt and ignore or support patriarchal practices damaging to women such as female genital mutilation.

Even with great differences in opinions and positions, secular and Islamic feminists share similar ideas in the promoting of women’s literacy and placing greater value on women’s roles in society. Islamic Feminists are seeking a greater voice in the Muslim Brotherhood and expanded opportunities to continue their religious outreach in charitable activities and preaching in Mosques. They have found that even when supporting the same goal of spreading Islam they do not receive the full support of male Islamists who are threatened by women taking over spaces at Mosques, an area that has been traditionally dominated by men.¹⁰ As the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to increase the influence of its brand of Islam in Egypt women from within the movement and feminists outside the movement are attempting to influence the position of the organization so that they give greater credence to female voices.

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CHAPTER I
EGYPTIAN POLITICS AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Egypt was ruled by the National Democratic Party (NDP) since 1978 with President Hosni Mubarak leading the party with a firm grip on power for the past 30 years. While the country has democratic institutions in place, in reality these bodies rarely function in a democratic manner and the Egyptian State operates through authoritarian rule.\(^1\) The tight control the President and his party exerted over politics included limiting political participation especially by groups the NDP considered dangerous and/or subversive to the interests of the State. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is one of the political parties that falls in this category even though they are the most important opposition group in Egypt with a large, dedicated following.\(^2\) Despite numerous attempts throughout the rule of the NDP to remove and eliminate the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as erode their base of popular support they continue to enjoy a position as a leading opposition party which portrays itself as battling against the corrupt and ineffective leadership of the NDP.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in the late 1920s by Hasan al-Banna, a school teacher, who initially organized the Brotherhood to provide its members with


greater instruction on the correct path of Islam. Hasan al-Banna started the Brotherhood in reaction to the corruption he saw as a student in Cairo and to counteract the increasing influence of Western culture on Egyptian society. Under Hasan al-Banna’s strong leadership and ability to motivate Egyptians with his speeches and writings the movement grew and expanded. The new movement fought against competing ideologies of the time such as communism and was strongly anti-British. The strong anti-British stance of Hasan al-Banna as well as an attempted plot by the Muslim Brotherhood against British control of Egypt led to al-Banna’s brief arrest during which time he was convinced of the need to organize a secret paramilitary group which was called “Special Apparatus.” As one of many competing political groups at the time the Brotherhood added to the tense political climate already rife with street skirmishes and assassinations between different groups vying for political control. The formation of the Special Apparatus was also a response to the paramilitary group created by the Wafd party, another political organization attempting to assert control. In order to gain greater political power the Special Apparatus organized attacks against those they considered


6. Ibid.

blocking the goal of creating an Islamic State which led the government to fear the Brotherhood might be trying to organize a coup. Prime Minister Mahmud al-Nuqrashi ordered a ban against the Muslim Brotherhood in order to counter-act the militant arm of the organization. The subsequent assassination of the Prime Minister was blamed on the Muslim Brotherhood and shortly after this incidence of violence Hasan al-Banna was assassinated on February 12, 1949 mostly likely by the secret police in response to the death of the Prime Minister.

Hasan al-Banna’s solution for Egyptian Society was a return to Islamic morals in every aspect of life as a way to correct the mismanagement and chaos that engulfed Egypt in the 1930s and 1940s. Engaging youth and creating a strong youth movement was part of this process and also responded to the youth movements of other political parties and ideologies of the time such as the Communist and Wafd parties. In addition to reaching out to youth the Muslim Brotherhood also provided educational programs on Islam, started charitable medical clinics, and focused on outreach and missionary activities (dawa). The charismatic leader who started the Muslim Brotherhood movement and shaped its ideology was greatly missed as the organization struggled to find a new leader who had the same strength of vision and ability to motivate Egyptians to take action in pushing for an Islamic State. Hasan al-Banna was seen by his followers as “an example of the combination of religious conviction with moral courage and public


engagement. Not only in the past, but even today, followers of the Brotherhood portray his leadership as charismatic and appealing to the masses of believers; they describe his ideology as exemplifying Islamic ideals."

In the 20 years that Hasan al-Banna led the Muslim Brotherhood the organization experienced tremendous growth. It is estimated that by 1948 the organization had 1,700-2,000 branches with about a million followers in Egypt. Following the death of Hasan al-Banna, Hasan al-Hudaybi was selected as the general guide although it was another figure in the Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, whose writings laid out an ideology for the Brotherhood that took a different approach to the relationship with the Egyptian Government. In his writings Sayyid Qutb pointed out the lack of religion in the Egyptian ruling party and al-Hudaybi responded with "Preachers, Not Judges" arguing that the Muslim Brotherhood should focus on spreading Islam in society and not focusing only on the political authority. The Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb supported the army officers who led a coup against King Farouk in July of 1952 but after the takeover of government the new President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, failed to organize the new government according to Islamic principles as hoped for by the Brotherhood including basing the rule


11. Ibid., 10.

of law on Islamic law (Sharia). The clash in ideologies between the new government and Sayyid Qutb as well as an assassination attempt on Nasser led to a government crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb was arrested in 1954. He spent most of the rest of his life in jail where he continued his writings focused on the clash between traditional Islamic values and the imposition of Western ideas and his argument that Islam represents a complete system which needs to be the basis for an Islamic State.

Sayyid Qutb emphasized the black and white nature of the importance of looking to Islam to guide society. He divided societies into those which did not follow Islamic law as living in a state of ignorance (jahiliyya) and those who hold God’s rules and law above all else and govern according to Sharia law (hakimiyya). He thought that modern Muslim societies existed in a state of jahiliyya because they did not fully live under God’s laws and that all Muslims must engage in a struggle to make the whole world live by Islamic Law (hakimiyya). Qutb criticized Nasser’s pan-Arab ideas and lack of focus on creating an Islamic state. Qutb’s negative views on Western societies included criticism of a lack of human values, a lack of civilized spiritual values, and a critical view


16. Ibid.

17. Tal, Radical Islam in Egypt and Jordan, 37.
of the position of women in the West.\textsuperscript{18} Qutb’s writings on women in society emphasized first and foremost that the role of a Muslim woman is as wife and mother, the cornerstone of the family and responsible for the raising of future generations.\textsuperscript{19} He also compared the position of women in the West, as he experienced it during his time as a student in Colorado and through his travels in the United States, with what he believed Islam prescribed as the natural path for women. In the West, Qutb thought that women were forced to work because men no longer supported them and this in turn demeaned and exploited woman.\textsuperscript{20} In contrast, the position of women in Muslim society is an integral part of the system (nizam) Qutb espoused and in his view women must maintain their role of caretaker of the home in order for the system to function smoothly.

The role of women as prescribed by the Quran and the Hadith is part of God's general plan for man's happiness in this world and the next and can, therefore, neither be changed nor altered. The only permissible change is that which would remove all remaining vestiges of Western customs and innovations in the effort to purify society and bring it back to the Way of God. Thus we find that at the heart of Qutb's debate is the limitation of a woman's duties in society to that of wife and mother. This is not only her role but her sole identity, for marriage in Islam is seen as a central institution around which is built society and civilization. A Muslim girl should, therefore, be brought up and educated to meet this role.\textsuperscript{21}

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, “Women in the Discourse of Sayyid Qutb,” \textit{Arab Studies Quarterly} 22, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 49.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 51.
\end{itemize}
Sayyid Qutb used his writings to further explore the ideal system of government and rule of an Islamic State and created an outline for a system that many followers of the Brotherhood identified with as the ideal of what a future Islamic State should look like. Qutb’s ideology contrasted with the more moderate ideas of Hasan al-Hudaybi and later in the 1970s created a split in the Brotherhood between many younger members who called for following Qutb’s ideas which included not compromising with the Egyptian government. Qutb’s ideologies still hold resonance with some Muslim Brothers and represent one ideology within the Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood has been banned since it was accused of attempting to assassinate Nasser in 1954 and throughout the 1970s and 1980s the Muslim Brotherhood went in and out of favor with the government. After the death of Nasser in 1970 the Muslim Brotherhood was tolerated by the new President, Anwar Sadat, who wanted to portray himself as a religious man and use religion to distinguish himself from Nasser and his pan-Arab stance. Ultimately Sadat disappointed the Brotherhood with his unwillingness to completely adopt Islamic Law as well as his peace negotiations with Israel and the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978.

After the assassination of Sadat, the new President, Hosni Mubarak, also tried his own approach to dealing with Islamic groups which was to initially separate out those who advocated violence as a means to achieve an Islamic State from the more moderate

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groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Ultimately Mubarak moved away from this initial strategy to limit the power and influence of Islamic groups and their critical position of his government and lumped all Islamist groups into the same “bad” category. The violent terrorist incidents of the 1990s gave Mubarak and even greater excuse to crack down on all Islamic organizations especially after the terrorist attack at Luxor in 1997 which killed 58 tourists.

The Muslim Brotherhood has continued to experience pressure from the Egyptian government in recent years especially as they have run for and won seats in Parliament. Several Muslim Brotherhood candidates ran as independents in the 2005 Parliamentary elections and the government allowed this brief opening before cracking down again after successful Brotherhood gains during the elections. As the biggest threat to the NDP, the ruling party has done everything it can to limit political participation by the Muslim Brotherhood. The steps the NDP has taken to weaken opponents and the Muslim Brotherhood include a continuation of emergency laws which have been in place since 1981 and which allow the executive branch and the police broad authority to arrest and detain citizens for political reasons and try accused individuals in military courts.

24. Ibid.


addition to the restrictions on political expression under emergency rule, the NDP has also amended the constitution to include article 5 which forbids religiously oriented political parties.  

The harsh measures to limit the influence and activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and its members has led to internal divisions concerning the direction the organization should take with some favoring focusing on the social services the Muslim Brotherhood provides while others preferring to continue the focus on politics. “Khaled Hamza, a prominent Brotherhood member in Egypt, calls these differing approaches madrasa al-dawa (the school of preaching and education) and madrasa al-siyasa (the school of politics), each reflecting prominent strands in Islamist thought.”

As the Muslim Brotherhood searched a way forward and a path to increase their influence they had to contend with the National Democratic Party which has controlled politics since it was established by Anwar Sadat.

The first time the Muslim Brotherhood participated in elections was in 1984 when Mubarak allowed for the most open elections since 1952 including allowing more political parties to participate. The Muslim Brotherhood tried to set-up a political party to compete in the elections but their applications were continuously turned down by the Parties’ Commission and in the 1984 elections the Muslim Brotherhood candidates ran on

28. Ibid.


the list of the Wafd party.\textsuperscript{31} The alliance benefited both parties since it gave the Muslim Brotherhood a chance to field candidates and increased the number of seats in Parliament for the Wafd party.\textsuperscript{32} The brief relaxation and opening for the Muslim Brotherhood when Mubarak first came to power in 1981 ended in the 1990s when the government began a massive crack-down on all Islamist groups due to terrorist activities. In response to these harsh measures the Brotherhood protested the elections in 1990 and declined to field any candidates which resulted in a complete lack of representation for them in Parliament.\textsuperscript{33} The continued State action against the Brotherhood also impacted their performance in the 1996 elections when they were only able to have one candidate successfully elected. In the elections in 2000 the Muslim Brotherhood fielded candidates as independents and was able to gain 17 seats which was a huge accomplishment considering the pressure they were under from the government and their performance during the elections in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{34}

In 1990 the Muslim Brotherhood decided on boycotting the Parliamentary elections to protest the corruption and rigging at the ballot box only to find this left them with no power within Parliament. Even though the party was banned, in the 2005

\begin{itemize}
  \item 31. Soage and Franganillo, “The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt,” 45.
  \item 32. Ibid.
  \item 34. Tal, \textit{Radical Islam in Egypt and Jordan}, 79.
\end{itemize}
elections the Muslim Brotherhood was able to field a number of independent candidates with 88 winning a seat. This was not without the ruling party taking measures to limit the number of seats allowed to Muslim Brotherhood candidates. “In 2005 candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood won large votes in early rounds of the general election; in a third round huge numbers of riot police were deployed in many areas, with the express aim of preventing electors from reaching polling stations.”\textsuperscript{35} Despite the massive attempt of the Egyptian government to limit political participation and ensure gains for the NDP the Brotherhood still made noticeable gains in the 2005 election. The question is how many more seats they would have won without the rigging at the ballot box and fixing of the elections.

Within the NDP, Hosni Mubarak’s anticipated successor, his son Gamal Mubarak, had no plan to give the Muslim Brotherhood any room to increase their influence politically or consider allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to run candidates as a legal party.\textsuperscript{36} The webpage for the NDP emphasizes the threat of terrorism as a top priority and the importance of maintaining the state of emergency so that the State can follow-up on and observe terrorist activity.\textsuperscript{37} The NDP uses the threat of Islamist groups and terrorism to justify their ban on religious parties and keep the organizations most


\textsuperscript{36} Mohammed Zahid, \textit{The Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt’s Succession Crisis: The Politics of Liberalization and Reform in the Middle East} (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 171.

likely to gain seats in Parliament out of the elections. Other opposition parties have differing views on the Muslim Brotherhood and whether the threat they represent is really as dire as the warning from the NDP. Ayman Nour, chairman of the al Ghad party dismissed the potential for a Muslim Brotherhood takeover of Parliament in an interview leading up to the 2005 election. “I appreciate that they will be a political party; let them show themselves. I believe that if they were able to compete in an election, they would win 10 to 15 per cent. But for as long as they are forced to remain in hiding, people think there are three or four million of them; this is not true; there are 30,000 to 40,000 of them, no more.”

Even if other opposition parties are willing to accept the Muslim Brotherhood and work with them the NDP has not shown signs of budging or allowing the Muslim Brotherhood breathing room. This position will be increasingly difficult to sustain as the Brotherhood continues to gain political clout and other opposition parties call for allowing them to form a legal political party.

The gains of the Muslim Brotherhood during the 2005 elections are more impressive considering their past performance in previous elections. With 88 seats in Parliament the Muslim Brotherhood has 20% of seats which is not enough to overturn the decisions of the ruling NDP but it does have an impact on the Parliament and how the NDP has to respond to challenges from the opposition. Two of the most important changes are that the Muslim Brotherhood candidates take their role seriously and that

38. Ayman Nour, interview by International Crisis Group, Cairo, Egypt, October 4, 2005.

they show-up for votes.⁴⁰ Previously NDP candidates failed to show-up for votes but now with the large number of Muslim Brotherhood candidates there must be at least a majority present to ensure they are able to pass votes. Ali Fath al-Bab is the only member of the Muslim Brotherhood to be elected to Parliament three times and explains the difference from his first term in office, “’By the end of the night, there might be 30 NDP MPs left and they would still be passing legislation.’ But the Brothers’ regular attendance is changing that: ‘The NDP now has to have 100 people in Parliament at all times to maintain their majority.’”⁴¹

The second major change is that the Muslim Brotherhood candidates take their role seriously and the organization makes sure that the candidates are informed and organized on relevant issues which forces the NDP to also put in the same effort for their candidates. In 2000 when 17 Brothers were elected to the Parliament the Brotherhood created a “parliamentary kitchen,” as a research arm for members of Parliament which gathers information, researches current issues, and informs Muslim Brothers by bringing in civil society leaders and academics as speakers and reaches out to civil society organizations in constituent districts to tap into local opinions on parliamentary issues.⁴² By taking their roles as representatives of their districts seriously and keeping informed on local and international issues affecting Egypt as well as bringing in experts and


⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.
gathering greater knowledge resources for parliamentary members the Muslim Brotherhood is taking the seriousness of the Parliament up a notch. NDP members must not only rubber stamp government initiatives they must also compete with the Brotherhood members and be able to explain their positions as well as respond to the demands of constituents.

The Muslim Brotherhood had decided to use the legislative process as intended and exercise the rights allowed to members of Parliament.

The bloc is constantly lodging informational requests and interpellations, proposing legislation, responding to the State budget and criticizing government. One researcher estimated that during the most recent Parliamentary session from December 2005 to July 2006, 80 percent of all Parliamentary activity came from Brotherhood Parliamentarians.43

The increased activity in Parliament from the Muslim Brotherhood comes not only from centralized directives but also responds to constituent demands. Muslim Brotherhood members of Parliament are increasing the emphasis on their role of voicing the opinions of the districts they represent. Part of the resource gathering by the organization to increase the responsiveness of Muslim Brotherhood parliamentarians is listening to constituent voices and bringing these demands to Parliament. NDP candidates are feeling pressure to respond and follow this same model in order to compete. One of the ways the Muslim Brotherhood is already a step ahead in this process is through the social networks they have created with their community activities and social service programs. With

43. Ibid.
already established connections, the Muslim Brotherhood candidates are involved in regular dialogue with civic organizations in their districts.

The Muslim Brotherhood has focused on social services since its founding. During the anti-colonialist struggle many of the competing ideologies of the time such as the Communist, Wafd, and Young Egypt Party set-up private voluntary organizations to compete against others and win the support of the populace. In recent years with the decline in government provided services these organizations have served an ever important public service. Besides offering needed services such as medical care, private voluntary organizations establish networks between local residents where, in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic ideology can be shared and members recruited. When the former President Sadat undertook liberal economic reforms which have been continued by Mubarak, these changes led to a decrease in State services which especially affected the economically disadvantaged segment of the population. Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood moved in to fill the vacuum left by the State and found a way to gain strength and support at the local level. “The success of Islamic clinics lies in the State’s failure. They provide an intermediate form of care between the expensive ‘investment medical care’ and the government’s inadequate services.”

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46. Clark, *Islam, Charity, and Activism*, 75.
voluntary organizations such as the Islamic clinics directly reach individuals providing them with services and connect them with an Islamic ideology.

One of the biggest target groups for the Muslim Brotherhood are student groups and most students first become involved with Islamist activities through the social and cultural events and gatherings that are sponsored by local mosques. These activities build social networking within the community and allow a space for youth to engage in Islamic activities without the danger of political participation which can lead to government harassment and possible arrest. It also provides a forum for Islamic ideas and the goals and message of the Brotherhood to be spread to youth in a reordering of priorities or as Carrie Rosefsky Wickham describes it, a “transvaluation of values.”

This reordering or “transvaluation” of values indicates that the Islamic movement lessened graduate frustration not by providing the means to satisfy their aspirations for middle-class status, jobs, and lifestyles but by promoting goals more readily fulfilled within existing resource constraints. By redefining what was to be valued, the Islamists offered many young Egyptians a “solution” to the problems they faced in everyday life.

The “solution” of Islam gave youth frustrated by limited opportunities a path to gain some control over their situation. They were no longer unemployed or underemployed and unable to provide for their families but rather engaged in a noble battle to spread Islam and live by its principals in their own lives. These ideas are also supported by


48. Ibid., 240.

49. Ibid., 243.
others in the networks created by the Brotherhood and sustained by continuing social and religious activities.

Another area where the Muslim Brotherhood has gained control is within student leadership groups in Egyptian universities. When Sadat first took office he allowed Islamist groups to begin to take over student organizations at universities from leftist groups.50 By the end of the 1970s Islamic groups had taken control of university student organizations and used this position to express grievances with the government on political issues such as the signing of the peace treaty with Israel.51 In addition to taking control of student organizations the Brotherhood has also focused on faculty clubs at universities. Having control over these organizations has allowed the Brotherhood a voice in academic circles and the opportunity for their ideas to have greater reach.52

Part of the outreach of the Muslim Brotherhood also included controlling professional organizations. “By the late 1980s, the Brotherhood had gained control of the doctors’, engineers’, and pharmacists’ professional associations.”53 Once again, this was a sign of the influence the Brotherhood had on society and their ability to spread their message and gain further access to pushing forward the reforms and ideas they support. The NDP kept the Brotherhood out of the political process through the continued ban on

51. Ibid., 110.
53. Ibid.
the organization as well as implementation of the Emergency Law, so for the
Brotherhood their work through the professional associations and student organizations
was a means to participate in Egyptian political life.\(^{54}\) The Brotherhood was able to gain
control of these associations through campaigning against the corruption and
mismanagement of the previous leadership.\(^ {55}\) The Brotherhood was able to better
manage the professional associations but they were accused of vote buying to gain their
positions, “Under their leadership, the unions were well managed and had greatly
developed social services, increasing the provision of grants and low-interest loans,
subsidized health care, even a compensation salary to members during their military
service.”\(^ {56}\) The takeover of the professional associations worried the government and led
them to introduce legislation which limited the ability of the Brotherhood to gain the
majority of seats by declaring that 50 percent of the members of the professional
association had to vote for the elections to be valid.\(^ {57}\)

Despite all of the attempts by the government to decrease and eliminate the
influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization still remained firmly entrenched
as a major political and social force in Egypt and one of the major concerns for the ruling
NDP. After the 2005 Parliamentary elections the Brotherhood was able to expand its

\(^{54}\) Soage and Franganillo, “The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt,” 44.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.

\(^{57}\) Abed-Kotob, “The Accommodationists Speak,” 329.
reach beyond the social organizations, student groups and professional organizations and now is a significant, although still minority force in Parliament. With its multiplicity of networks the Brotherhood has a wide reach to various sectors of the population and as a moderate voice of Islam compared to violent jihadi groups the organization has gained legitimacy with a wide segment of Egyptian society. The slogan of the Brotherhood, “Islam is the Solution,” (al-Islam huwa al-hall) for many is the antidote to the corruption and continuous mismanagement of the country’s resources by the NDP and is seen as the only viable option for change. With such strict control over any opposition voices the NDP has also smothered other alternatives to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood is also seen in the dialogue about the role of women in Egyptian society. With such a large network of social organizations that touch the everyday lives of Egyptian citizens who have been left without adequate government services the Muslim Brotherhood has an important voice in the dialogue about the role women should play in the political and economic life of the country. This role mostly focuses on women as caretakers of the family. The next chapter will look in greater depth at the Muslim Brotherhood’s position on women within the movement and the role that they play as organizers and members of the Brotherhood. Many of the social organizations and formal as well as informal networks previously discussed are run by women and women have played a large role in increasing the reach of the Muslim Brotherhood and volunteering with organizations which are spreading the message that Islam is the solution. Many of the student organizations, mosque activities and clinics
specifically target women as an audience and by gaining their trust and support also gain the support of the family. As voters these women have an influence on elections and by targeting women as supporters the Muslim Brotherhood has increasing opportunities at gaining greater representation.

An organization that started in opposition to colonialist rule with a goal of teaching Islam to its members and furthering religious devotion, the Muslim Brotherhood has shifted its methods and political participation throughout the years. Much of the activity of the Brotherhood has been dictated by the government and has been a reaction to openings allowing greater activity by the organization or to crack-downs when Islamists parties contradict the government’s wishes. Despite corruption at the polls the Brotherhood has been able to have several representatives elected to Parliament and become an influential voice in Egyptian politics. Both through its political activity as well as social activities to spread Islam the Muslim Brotherhood is continuing to be a strong voice in Egypt for increasing Islamization in everyday life and calling for Islam as a complete solution to the current corruption and mismanagement of the Egyptian government.
The first mention of feminism in Egypt was in the 1920s but the feminist movement began the century before with the creation of educational opportunities for women and the beginning of dialogue on women’s issues in the press. This chapter will focus on the early history of the feminist movement in Egypt and the secular feminist movement that followed from it as well as the movement’s stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood. The government of Egypt currently sponsors institutions supporting a secular feminist approach to women’s rights issues and opposes the Muslim Brotherhood’s stance on issues affecting women. There are certain key issues where the Brotherhood and the government take opposing positions and the Brotherhood has worked to prohibit the government from adopting legislation they view as against Islam or Egyptian Islamic values.

Prior to 1832 there were no schools or training institutes available for girls or women in Egypt.¹ Most upper and middle class families kept women in seclusion although the poor were not able to afford this luxury and in the lower classes women were needed outside the home to help with labor. In 1832 the State opened the first school for women which trained slave and orphan girls to become nurses.²

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2. Ibid.
leadership of Muhammad Ali the State embarked on a program of secularization, bringing education under the control of the State and away from purely religious instruction. After the opening of the school for midwives the Egyptian governmental Council for Public Education considered starting a state school for girls but decided the timing and social conditions were not right for such a venture. Opportunities for education in schools for girls opened up later in the 19th century, mostly in missionary schools, but upper-class families preferred to have their daughters tutored at home by governesses coming from Europe.

In the late 19th century with an expanding literate female upper-class, the availability of women’s journals provided the opportunity for public discussion of women’s issues. Limited press censorship in Egypt led to the creation of a strong press in the late 1870s and women too started their own journals focusing women’s issues and the family as well as debating expanding new roles for women in society. Syrian immigrants to Egypt played an important role in the new women’s press. Due to Ottoman censorship many Syrian writers moved to Egypt to take advantage of limited


4. Ibid., 9.

5. Ibid.

censorship and opportunities in the growing Egyptian press.\(^7\) Syrian men brought their wives with them who had been educated in missionary and sectarian schools as well as with knowledge and contact with the West and European ideas.\(^8\) Born in a Syrian family living in Alexandria, Hind Nawfal started the first journal focused on women’s issues in 1892 entitled, *Al Fatah* (The Young Woman), which provided a forum for discussing women’s issues and the emerging feminist perspective.\(^9\) This first journal paved the way for subsequent journals also focused on women’s issues and championing a literary women’s movement which voiced calls for expanded educational opportunities for women in Egyptian society.

As literacy opened a new world to a growing number of young women, literary expression became a way to advance their cause. Almost anything seemed possible in a world of expanding horizons, and the enthusiasm of these years was palpable and infectious. The sense of progress and possibility was summed up by a phrase that recurred throughout the women’s press: al-nahda al-nisa’iyya (the women’s awakening).\(^{10}\)

One important aspect of the women’s awakening and literary culture in Egypt was the emphasis on women’s education. The women’s literary journals only reached a small percentage of the population who were upper and middle class and had accesses to the limited educational opportunities. But for this select minority the journals allowed an

\(^7\) Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt*, 15.

\(^8\) Ibid., 105.


\(^{10}\) Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt*, 2.
escape from the seclusion of their households and expanded contacts with other women throughout Egypt and the world.\textsuperscript{11}

Considered by some as the father of the women’s movement in Egypt, Qasim Amin’s publication of \textit{Tahrir Al-Mar’\textasciiacute{a}} (The Liberation of Women) in 1899 and \textit{Al-Mar’\textasciiacute{a} Al-Jadida} (The New Woman) in 1900 brought greater public attention to the issues of women’s education and the veiling and seclusion of women. Although the ideas proposed by Amin in his two books were not new and expanded women’s education had previously been written about in the Egyptian press, the publication of the books by someone of Amin’s stature broadened the reach and discussion of the ideas.\textsuperscript{12} As a judge from a prominent family as well as one of the founders of Cairo University, the publication of his books created an uproar in the press and was an important addition to the ongoing discussions of women in Egyptian society.\textsuperscript{13} In addition, later feminists referred to Qasim Amin’s call for the new Egyptian woman such as Bint al-Shati’ the penname of prominent Egyptian intellectual Aisha Abdul-Rahman (1913-1998) in her address on Islam and the new woman in 1997.\textsuperscript{14} Amin’s book articulated the importance

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{11} Ibid.
\bibitem{12} Leila Ahmed, \textit{Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 162.
\bibitem{14} Abdul-Rahman, “Islam and the New Woman,” 194.
\end{thebibliography}
of education for women to fulfill their main roles as members of society, mainly as wife, mother, and administrator of the household.\textsuperscript{15}

In \textit{The New Woman} Qasim Amin identifies two fields appropriate for women’s education, “the teaching and training of children, and the medical profession.\textsuperscript{16} In addition Qasim added that women could be involved in commerce and artistic professions since these do not require physical strength.\textsuperscript{17} A second area in which Qasim called for reform was in keeping women secluded within the household.

Seclusion is incompatible with human freedom, bars women from enjoying their rights under the Sharia and human laws, and relegates them to the status of legal minors. This contradicts the Sharia, which recognizes that a woman is as competent as a man and as able to manage her everyday affairs. Seclusion also means that a woman is a prisoner in spite of the law, which considers her as free as a man. These wrongs associated with seclusion should be sufficient reason for everyone who respects human rights or who experiences the joys of freedom to both shun and abhor it.\textsuperscript{18}

Amin echoed the calls of women in the female literary press and as women gained the educational opportunities he advocated, the movement built on itself strengthened by women’s activism in the anti-colonial, nationalist cause.

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\textsuperscript{16} Qasim Amin, \textit{The New Woman}, trans. Samiha Sidhom Peterson (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 44.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 65.
\end{flushright}
As the drive to free Egypt from colonial occupation expanded, women too joined the movement and called for greater opportunities for women in a new Egyptian nation.\textsuperscript{19} In March of 1919 women from Egypt’s elite staged a demonstration demanding Egyptian independence from Britain and calling for the colonial authorities to allow public demonstrations.\textsuperscript{20} This was the first time that women had taken to the streets joining the nationalist cause and even though this opened new doors in women’s political involvement the demonstrators did not advocate feminist positions or the feminist cause during the demonstrations.\textsuperscript{21} Women also became involved in the nationalist movement through political parties and women organized to start a women’s auxiliary movement to the Wafd party which led the nationalist movement.\textsuperscript{22} The first president of the women’s Wafd, Huda Sha’rawi, went on to organize and found the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), which was an independent organization focused on the feminist agenda and founded on the fourth anniversary of the women’s demonstration.\textsuperscript{23} This was also the first time that Egyptian women had organized themselves under the banner of a

\textsuperscript{19} Badran, “Competing Agenda,” 13.

\textsuperscript{20} Beth Baron, \textit{Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, Ltd., 2005), 112.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 113.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 162.

\textsuperscript{23} Badran, \textit{Feminists, Islam, and Nation}, 86.
“feminist” organization and specifically used the term féministe in French and nisa’i in Arabic in the name of their organization.\(^\text{24}\)

The Egyptian Feminist Union started its activities with philanthropic work on the premise that “alleviating the hardships of poor women was a first step toward creating conditions that would make it possible for them to gain their full rights as women.”\(^\text{25}\) As members of the Wafd party the women who started the EFU had been pushed aside when it came to politics.\(^\text{26}\) In starting their own organization the members of the EFU were still aligned politically with the Wafd but they had control over their political activities. The organization focused on providing greater rights to women with initial priorities centered on expanded education and work opportunities for women as well as the reform of Egyptian personal status laws which dealt with family, marriage and divorce issues.\(^\text{27}\) Another important issue for the EFU was suffrage for women. As part of the movement for independence and as political actors in the struggle against the British, women thought they would gain full political rights including the right to vote.\(^\text{28}\) Three weeks after the passage of the new constitution of 1923 the State passed a law which restricted the right

\[\text{24. Ibid., 19.}\]

\[\text{25. Ibid., 111.}\]

\[\text{26. Baron, } \text{Egypt as a Woman}, \text{ 163.}\]

\[\text{27. Badran, “Competing Agenda,” 21.}\]

\[\text{28. Badran, } \text{Feminists, Islam, and Nation}, \text{ 207.}\]
to vote and be elected to office to men only and it was not until 1956 that women gained the right to vote.\textsuperscript{29}

The split between secular feminists and Islamic women began within the women’s organizations of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{30} The EFU used an Islamic framework for their arguments but the sole focus was not Islam and instead they looked to the international community and based their approach on secular feminist arguments.\textsuperscript{31} The split between the two approaches to the position of women in society continued through the century with secular women’s rights groups increasingly being charged with advancing foreign ideas and concepts which contradicted traditional Egyptian societal norms. Feminist organizations have been able to have their voice heard depending which president is currently in power and even if they have the favor of the government, Islamist groups have worked to counteract proposed reforms favored by feminist organizations.

By the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, feminists struggled with the same issues as their earlier predecessors. Priority items on the agenda for feminist groups included issues of dress and modesty and marriage and divorce laws or the reform of personal status laws.\textsuperscript{32} Other issues also gained prominence including campaigning against the practice of

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

female genital mutilation (FGM) and the creation of a legal framework for women’s rights. Dress and modesty of women have always been an important issue for Islamist groups and during the 1990s the wearing of the hijab became much more common and laws concerning its prohibition hotly contested with the Muslim Brotherhood defending the right of women to wear the hijab. The reform of personal status laws has a wide impact on society and changes to these laws impact all citizens as well as regulate the personal affairs of members of a family. After years of campaigning the personal status law was revised by the Egyptian Parliament granting women the right to request a divorce provided a wife return the dowry given to her when she was married and relinquish any financial claims against her husband. In 2004 further revisions established family courts to help facilitate divorce cases and established a family insurance fund. The revisions of the personal status laws was one of the campaign items for feminists in the early 20th century and the long passage of time needed to reform the laws to grant women easier access to divorce demonstrates what a controversial issue this is in Egypt.

33. Ibid.


In the 1980s the issue of FGM gained prominence with increasing international attention drawn to the issue as a topic at international women’s conferences and the UN promoted the banning of FGM as an important addition to their agenda of women’s rights causes. In 1994 the Egyptian FGM task force was started as an umbrella organization to support research and advocacy against FGM including producing publications and media reports on the practice. The organization continues to function as a coalition of 60 NGOs working to raise awareness in public of the negative aspects of the practice. The FGM task force found that it was necessary to focus on the “why” of the practice, such as why it needs to be stopped instead of “how” which just led to suggestions that the practice be continued but in hospitals and authorized medical facilities. FGM was officially banned in 1997 but the practice still continues and as mentioned in chapter 1, Muslim Brotherhood members of Parliament have been vocal in the criticism of the ban emphasizing that FGM is part of Egyptian cultural practice.

Secular feminist in the 1990s also continued to be attacked by the Muslim Brotherhood for championing foreign ideas and trying to “Westernize” Egyptian society. The increasing influence of Islamism also created a class not just within the


38. Wassef, “Ending Female Genital Mutilation.”

feminist movement but within society at large that challenged the basis of Egyptian identity on Egyptian and Arab nationalism and focused instead on the house of Islam.\textsuperscript{40} “A new ‘factionalism’ (ta’ifiyya) emerged that challenged these older bases of solidarity. The result is an urgent need to build bridges between secular and Islamist national currents.”\textsuperscript{41} The society wide split was also evident in the diverging agendas of feminist and Islamic women’s groups including women’s groups within the Muslim Brotherhood. The campaigns of feminist organizations were attacked as being Western and introducing ideas into society which contradicted Islam and Egyptian societal norms. “Islamist women consistently showed up in large numbers at state-sponsored conferences or feminist gatherings that discuss ‘women’s rights’ to register their opposition to the secularist approaches and to present their alternative.”\textsuperscript{42} This split in perspective has continued into the 21st century as Egyptian secular feminists and women in Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood advocate for their divergent interests and agendas on women’s issues.

The government of Egypt created the National Council for Women (NCW) by presidential decree in 2000 to advance women’s issue and act as the government approved face of women’s rights both within Egypt and to the international community. The president of the council is Suzanne Mubarak, the wife of the President of Egypt.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Mervat Hatem, “Gender and Islamism in the 1990s,” \textit{Middle East Report} 222 (Spring, 2002): 44.
\item Ibid., 45.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}

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Under Mrs. Mubarak the day to day direction of the council is run by the Secretary General, Dr. Farkhonda Hassan, who is also a member of Parliament and a professor of geology at the American University in Cairo. Hosni Mubarak has emphasized the importance of women’s empowerment in Egyptian society through actions such as the creation of the NCW and continued support for the council as well as in public statements supporting women’s rights to work and new laws granting women greater protection. Women’s roles in society continue to be a controversial issue splitting Islamists and secular fundamentalists.

Even though it’s a controversial issue, one of the top priorities of the NCW has been furthering working opportunities for Women in Egypt. In a recent World Bank study on Egyptian women workers and entrepreneurs only 13% of men thought that women should work and the main reason men were against women working was their belief that women should first and foremost be at home taking care of children and the family. This is the position of the Muslim Brotherhood which emphasized that it reflects Islamic and Egyptian values. Although the World Bank study showed that the majority of men in Egypt do not support expanding opportunities for women outside of the home the Egyptian government has pushed women working as a priority. At the 35th


Arab Labor conference in 2008, President Hosni Mubarak confirmed this support in his speech. “The government is committed to implement all measures likely to achieve equal pay for men and women with the same job and to assist women [to] reconcile their family obligations [with] their work commitments. The government also seeks to achieve equality between men and women in all fields.”

According to the Egyptian State Information Service, in 2006 women made up only 22.34% of the labor force and the State Information Service attributed this lower percentage to Egyptian women preferring to take care of families after they are married. The NCW’s projects and programs include several projects focused around the economic empowerment of women including the female heads of households project, the women’s business development center, the small grants project, and the working women program. Despite cultural aversion to women working outside the home the Egyptian government is pushing forward in advocating for a role of working women in society. In this effort they have been supported by foreign donors such as the United States Agency for International Development, the United Nations, the European Union and several European governments. This support, although greatly needed to provide training and educational opportunities for women, fuels the argument that secular feminist groups are supported


by Western powers intent on introducing customs not traditionally part of Egyptian culture.

Another issue that has received increasing media attention in Egypt is violence against women, especially sexual harassment of women in public places. The Egyptian government, fearful of the negative press they could receive from the expanded coverage of this topic has denied that the problem is as bad as the media has indicated and First Lady Suzanne Mubarak stated that the media was exaggerating the problem thereby negatively effecting Egypt’s image. This position was echoed by the National Council for Women in a statement by a spokesman for the council, Mohamed Nasef, who said that reports of sexual harassment were exaggerated and happen everywhere. Although there are concerns that focusing on the issue of street harassment of women in Egypt could negatively impact Egypt’s image, a delegation led by the Secretary General for the NCW visited Washington DC and New York City this past summer to discuss violence against women issues and the creation of an Egyptian national strategy framework on violence against women with representatives from the White House, State Department,


Congress, United Nations and NGOs.\textsuperscript{52} Within Egypt, a campaign against sexual harassment is being led by the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights in an effort entitled, “making Egypt’s streets safe for all.”\textsuperscript{53} The campaign has focused on changing the public perception of sexual harassment from a taboo subject to one that is discussed in society and the media as well as encouraging women to speak out against sexual harassment.\textsuperscript{54} Other efforts, such as HarassMap seek to document instances of sexual harassment to report on the widespread occurrence of the problem. The test phase for the website which provides a forum for men and women to report instances of sexual harassment and the locations which are reflected on a map of Cairo was initiated in November 2010. The official launch of the website occurred on December 16, 2010 coinciding with the release of a new movie “678” which focuses on the harmful effect of sexual harassment and violence against women in Egypt.\textsuperscript{55}

One area where the government has passed a law to increase women’s participation in politics is with the initiation of a quota system for women in Parliament.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{52} United States Agency for International Development’s project, Combating Violence Against Women and Children funded a study tour led by the NCW with members of the Egyptian Parliament, NGOs, media, and the State Security Service.


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} HarassMap, “HarassMap Officially Launches Reporting System and Community Outreach Against Sexual Harassment in Egypt,” http://blog.harassmap.org/ (accessed December 17, 2010).
A new law passed in 2009 requires that women hold 64 seats in Parliament and it increased the number of seats from 454 to 518. The new law is only in effect for the Parliamentary elections in 2010 and 2015 after which time it will be reviewed to determine if the law should be continued. Although the aim of the law appears to give women greater participation there is also the suggestion that this is another way for the ruling party, the National Democratic Party, to further ensure their grasp on power. In a recent article in Foreign Policy magazine, Shadi Hamid, director of research at the Brookings Institution’s Doha Center, dismissed the addition of Parliamentary seats for women as a way for the NDP to maintain power and ensure that a greater number of NPD candidates, in this case women, are elected to Parliament. The perception that the quota for women’s seats was a way to cement NDP power is one of the main reasons that opposition parties including the Muslim Brotherhood are against the law. Dr. Manal Abul Hassan, a female Muslim Brotherhood candidate said that she would not run under the new quota system because the purpose was not to increase women’s participation but rather to increase NDP influence.


57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.


60. Ibid.
The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, which tracked the experiences of female candidates throughout the elections, recorded several complaints during the process.61 Most of the complaints centered on the process of registering as a candidate and the lack of understanding of official processes on the part of government administrators. Despite the complaints on election procedures both before and during the elections the government’s passage of a law requiring a quota system does show their commitment to increasing women’s participation in politics. Although most of the female candidates elected under the new system will likely be NDP supporters, this does not decrease the importance of the passage of the law as a success by secular feminists who were at the forefront in campaigning for a quota system. This success by secular feminists is another area of divergence with the Muslim Brotherhood. For the Brotherhood the introduction of the quota system is another way for the NDP to ensure they have a firm grip on power and strengthens their position of women’s issues in Parliament.

The Egyptian government and the Muslim Brotherhood continue to clash on women’s issues with the government focusing on building international bridges and balancing Egyptian traditions with international human rights. The Muslim Brotherhood on the other hand is intent on upholding Islam and Egyptian traditional culture. The main

point of attack by the Muslim Brotherhood on agenda items of secular feminists is that these issues are foreign impositions from Western cultures. Secular feminists use the justification of international human rights and standards of United Nations conventions to emphasize the need for changes in Egyptian laws and practices. The National Council for Women as well as NGOs have worked to try and bridge the gap between their women’s rights agendas and Egyptian culture and Islamic beliefs as understood by the Brotherhood but the divisions in principals continue to present challenges and instigate clashes.
CHAPTER III

THE MULSIM BROTHERHOOD’S POSITION ON WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE MOVEMENT

The Muslim Brotherhood has been accused of holding vague positions on policy issues concerning women and talking around ideas instead of publishing specific stances. On the other hand when they have issued documents, such as the 2007 draft party platform, these policies have created external concerns and internal debate showcasing the lack of consensus within the organization. Policy positions of the Muslim Brotherhood can also be found in their Parliamentary agenda which was created after the 2005 elections when a large group of Muslim Brothers gained seats in Parliament. 1 In addition the Brotherhood has produced pamphlets and booklets for women outlining the ideal role of a Muslim woman in society. The positions of the Muslim Brotherhood regarding women have been promoted and debated by women within the organization as they wish to spread these ideas to a broader public while also engaging in debates as to the role women play within the Brotherhood.

In 2007 the Muslim Brotherhood released a draft party platform to a small internal group for comments and feedback. The document was leaked and became widely read but was never completed. 2 The draft party platform is a detailed document, which eventually reached 128 pages and explained Brotherhood positions on a broad


range of issues. Although the draft document covered a variety of issues including political, social, and economic issues there were two items which caused debate and controversy both internally to the Muslim Brotherhood and externally. One issue which raised concern was the inclusion of the call for a council of religious scholars who would serve as an advisory board, providing insight on Islamic law to the executive and legislatives branches of government. What was most worrisome to some members of the Muslim Brotherhood and observers was that this body would have definitive decision making power on matters pertaining to Islamic law. In other matters not specifically within the scope of Islamic law their opinion would not be binding. This led to the accusation that the Brotherhood was interested in setting up a state not based on democratic rule but rather a theocracy in the image of Iran.

The second main issue of concern, especially outside of the Muslim Brotherhood, was only one line of the draft party platform but it opened the Brotherhood to criticism that they did not value the role and leadership of women in Egypt and wished to keep


them in a subordinate position. The clause in question denied the right of women to hold senior leadership positions. The language from the draft included, “duties and responsibilities assumed by the head of state, such as army commanding, are in contradiction with the socially acceptable roles for women.”  The section also included that senior leadership roles should only be for Muslims, excluding the important Coptic minority in Egypt. Within the Muslim Brotherhood this idea raised controversy with some arguing that Islamic law clearly reserved positions of leadership for those with certain qualifications which excluded women whereas others said that the concept of the idealized patrimonial ruler for Egypt borrowed from a set of ideas and regulations which did not apply to the modern concept of limited rule within a state with established institutions and procedures.  The debate within the Muslim Brotherhood spotlighted the clear division between those in the organization who firmly believe this is a matter of Islamic law which clearly states that women are not fit for positions of senior leadership and others for whom the individual matters more than the sex and who advocate Islamic legal reform.

The Muslim Brotherhood sees itself as a defender of the integrity and importance of the family and women’s roles within that unit. They did not want the draft party


platform to focus on a controversy where they were accused of oppressing or limiting the rights of women. In fact this was opposite to the role they wanted to play with regards to women and the controversy was damaging to the image of the unity of the movement.

The clause addressing limiting women to certain roles in society cast the organization in the middle of both internal and external debates. “While the Brotherhood would prefer to wax eloquent on the need to meet the distinctive needs of women in Egyptian society – a theme that has popular resonance – it has instead been forced to address deep internal fissures while defending itself against the charge that it harbors outdated attitudes on gender roles.”

The draft party platform highlighted a controversy and split within the Brotherhood which had been discussed before but had not been so prominently displayed. Unlike previous disputes this one played out in public with the different factions both arguing for their point. There was an attempt by the senior leadership to quiet the debate but the public was still left with the impression that there was a serious difference of opinion between the two groups. In a lecture on the Muslim Brotherhood’s draft party platform given in 2007, Amr Hamzawy, who was a senior


associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, described the two main conflicting factions within the Brotherhood. The first, the ones who favor the establishment of a council which rules on issues which fall under the purview of Islamic law and wish to ban women and Copts from holding the position of the presidency or prime minister, are more powerful and hold more influence within the Muslim Brotherhood’s guidance office. The second group, which opposes the establishment of the Islamic council and does not want to discount the possibility that women or Copts could hold senior leadership positions is made up of younger members who maybe more numerous but lack the influence and standing of the first group.  

In response to the draft party platform a young member of the Brotherhood published his views opposing some of the clauses on his blog. There was immediate critical response from another Muslim Brotherhood member berating him for bringing up internal controversies publically. This exchange started a fierce online debate but also displayed how young members of the movement are able to use technology to have their opinions heard by a wide audience. Women are also members of the blogging community and are identifying themselves online as Muslim Brotherhood members.

Female Muslim Brotherhood members use this space to describe what it means to them to


be involved in the Muslim Brotherhood and they are also using it as a venue to comment on internal debates, once again bringing issues and controversies into the open which previously were discussed only privately.\footnote{14}

The 2005 draft party platform allowed for a greater understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood’s position on numerous political and social issues and even the debate that the draft party platform started, helped to clarify that the movement had internal divisions and there is ongoing discussion but at the same time unity is still of key importance to the group. Despite the controversy over the leadership role of women, Muslim Brotherhood members still consider it an issue that can be resolved internally. In addition, the clause on leadership roles allowed to women was a minor part of the overall message the Muslim Brotherhood wishes to convey on the role of women in society which is that women are integral to the health of the nation in their position as caretakers of the home and family. In a document published by the Muslim Brotherhood on “The Role of Muslim Women in an Islamic Society,” the importance of the proper positive roles for women is stated repeatedly. “Women make up half of society and they are responsible for the nurturing, guidance and reformation of the subsequent generations of men and women. It is the female who imbues principles and faith into the souls of the nation.”\footnote{15}

\footnote{14. Ibid.}

The importance of the role of women in an Islamic society as part of the Muslim Brotherhood’s platform can be seen from their parliamentary activity focused on women’s affairs. In Parliament the Muslim Brotherhood focused on women’s issues which they thought were directly related to Islamic law and defending the rights of Muslim women. The Brotherhood has also focused on issues which concern women but fall into the category of reforming society so that it complies with Islamic law. Although the Muslim Brotherhood did not have the power in Parliament to pass legislation or ban what they consider vices, they have campaigned against the “Miss Egypt” beauty pageant, requested a ban on movies depicting sexual scenes as well as performances by female singers. They have also been vocal about supporting the right of Muslim women to veil in public and criticized Parliamentary members who argued for a ban against a full face veil in public.

Another controversial piece of legislation that the Muslim Brotherhood opposed which passed in June, 2008 was Egypt’s child law. The child law calls for the protection of Egypt’s minors and contained certain provisions which the Brotherhood considered to be interfering with Islamic law and the rights of Egyptian families to follow traditional

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cultural practices within their homes. These provisions included a ban on female genital mutilation, a ban on marriage below the age of 18 as well as allowing the registration of a child under the name of a mother if the father cannot be identified. The Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary members opposed the new regulations for various reasons but the overarching problem was that they thought the new legislation imposed Western social values on the Egyptian population and did not take into account the Egyptian social context or long practiced traditions.

Arguing against the ban on female genital mutilation a Muslim Brotherhood member of Parliament argued that it was a long established Egyptian tradition and it should be left up to families to decide whether to continue the practice. “Sayed Askar, a Brotherhood MP, argued that Islamic clerics have differing opinions on FGM and whether or not it is an Islamic tradition. ‘Why not leave it optional for parents to decide instead of criminalizing it?’ asked Askar, who went on to assert that outlawing FGM was tantamount to promoting vice.” In the same vein the Muslim Brotherhood also opposed banning the registration of marriage for youth under the age of 18. First they believed that the age of 18 ran counter to the minimum age for marriage under Islamic law


22. Ibid.
which they said was 16 years of age. And secondly the Brotherhood did not find it necessary to have legislation mandating the minimum age for marriage since they argued that this was a private family matter and Islamic law protected the right of family privacy in this case.

The Muslim Brotherhood also argued against allowing children to be registered in the name of the mother reasoning that this would lead to an increase in sexual relations between men and women outside of marriage. Sayed Askar was quoted in an Al-Ahram article commenting on the potential negative impacts of this new part of the law, “Now women will find it easy to have extra-marital sexual relationships and give birth to unlawful children without any fear of punishment.” Prior to the change mandated in the Egypt child law, Egyptian women were not able to register the birth of a child if there was no father present. This led to the problem of Egyptian children who were not citizens of Egypt and therefore not allowed to access basic state services such as education and also were not able to travel internationally or work legally in Egypt since they had no official documents. Despite the issue of children without citizenship the


24. Ibid.

25. Gamal Essam El-Din, “Children accorded greater rights.”

26. Ibid.

The Muslim Brotherhood focused on what they considered to be the most important principal at stake, which was the unity of the family and upholding an Islamic family structure. Even though there was a serious problem with unregistered children in Egypt, for the Muslim Brotherhood the most important principal to be considered was the new law’s adherence to Islamic law and the behavior and actions the law could promote.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood failed to put forward a detailed program or description of its plans and ideas concerning the position of women in society, their work in Parliament regarding issues specifically impacting women consistently follows the agenda of protecting the family according to Islamic law and defending the rights of Muslim women. In addition they also believe that they are upholding the Egyptian Constitution which states under article 2 that Islamic law is “the principle source of Egyptian legislation.” The language of article 2 reflects efforts of Islamist groups during the late 1970s to increase the importance of Islamic law in Egypt and ensure that as a predominantly Muslim nation, Egyptian law was consistent with Islamic law. Prior to 1980 article 2 read that Islamic law was “a” principal source of Egyptian legislation and for Islamist group the change of the language of this article signified that Islamic law would henceforth play a central role in determining the laws of Egypt. Pointing to article 2 of the Constitution the Muslim Brotherhood has based its parliamentary activity


29. Ibid.
on ensuring the application of Islamic law and that any new legislation proposed does
indeed reflect Islamic law. For this reason most of their opposition within Parliament on
religious, moral and family issues is based on their interpretation of Islamic Law.30

The political work of the Muslim Brotherhood within Parliament continued to be
limited because of the small number of seats they were allowed to win by the NDP. The
other major focus of the movement is on Islamic outreach (dawa) within Egypt which
includes the numerous social activities and NGOs run by women. This part of the
movement’s activities is focused on changing Egyptian society so that citizens behave in
a manner more closely aligned with Islamic values. The supporters of dawa within the
Brotherhood argue that the most important problem in Egypt is not corruption in public
but a lack of Islamic values within society.31 Women have played an important role in
spreading the Islamist message to other women through women’s meetings and religious
education classes as well as charity work which was one of the initial focuses of the
Sisters branch of the Brotherhood.

Hasan al-Banna supported the formation of a Muslim Sisters group which began
in 1932 and was formed mostly from the female relatives of Muslim Brotherhood
members.32 Like the Brotherhood the initial aim of the Sisters group was to educate

30. Hamzawy and Brown, “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Islamist Participation in a Closing
Political Environment,” 24.


members in Islamic teachings and theology and in the Sisters case this would be in women only settings. Even though the Sisters organization was separated from the Brotherhood, all of their activities still fell under the control of the Muslim Brotherhood and was subject to final approval by the Brotherhood.

The women’s organization did not have its own head; instead, it was under the authority of the Brotherhood’s Supreme Guide, who communicated with the Sisters through a female deputy. However, al-Banna soon appointed a man, Sheikh Mahmoud al-Gohary, to supervise all women’s activities and act as a link between the women activists and the Supreme Guide. Their work (activities) would be regulated during a weekly meeting of the Sisters presided over by Sheikh al-Gohary, who would report later to al-Banna.33

The Muslim Sisterhood was initially led by Labibeh Ahmad, who was experienced working with civil society and charity organizations and was involved in semi-secularist feminist activity prior to working with the Muslim Sisterhood.34 Her commitment to social activism led the Sisterhood away from participating in political activities and Ahmad focused the Sisterhood on working with the various charities supported by the Brotherhood as well as the original goal of teaching Islamic values to women. The ideal for the Islamic woman was someone who first and foremost was committed to home duties and taking care of her family but also engaged in spreading Islamic values to other

33. Ibid., 3.

women through women only activities such as those sponsored by the Muslim Sisterhood.\(^{35}\)

Although the ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood taught that women should only be focused on women’s activities there were women who worked with the Muslim Brotherhood and were influential in supporting the organization through times of crisis. Zeinab al-Ghazzali was the leader of an Islamic women’s organization, the Society of Muslim Women. Al-Banna suggested that the Society of Muslim Women merge with the Muslim Sisterhood but al-Ghazzali preferred to keep the groups separate which turned out to be of value when the government of Egypt began its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood.\(^{36}\) When the government began to jail Muslim Brothers, al-Ghazzali was able to organize the female relatives of jailed Muslim Brotherhood members into networks to communicate with and pass messages to those in jail. A supporter of the jailed Sayyid Qutb, al-Ghazzali distributed his writings to Muslim Brotherhood members and worked to build the Islamist movement in spite of the government crackdown. Even as a woman working within the Muslim Brotherhood al-Ghazzali had great influence and was considered to be among the top leaders of the organization.\(^{37}\)

Although Zeinab al-Ghazzali organized among male members of the Muslim Brotherhood and worked extensively outside the home, she continuously advocated for

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 48.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 50.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 51.
Muslim women to focus on the home and the Brotherhood’s platform with women primarily as care takers of society who must focus on the family in order to maintain the “base of Islamic society.” As an important proponent of the Muslim Brotherhood’s women’s movement, al-Ghazzali preached the message of the value of women in society as educators of the next generation of Muslims who followed the correct precepts of the faith.

Women must be well educated, cultured, knowing the precepts of the Quran and the Sunna, knowing world politics, why we are backward, why we don’t have technology. The Muslim woman must study all these things, and then raise her son in the conviction that he must understand Islam, politics, geography, and current events...Islam does not forbid women to actively participate in public life...as long as that does not interfere with her first duty as a mother.

What al-Ghazzali advocated as the role of a Muslim woman in Egyptian society is reflected in the political position of the Muslim Brotherhood today. Both the draft party platform and the political work of the Muslim Brotherhood in Parliament place an emphasis on defending the role of Muslim women in society to live according to Islamic law and Islamist ideology whether this is allowing women to be fully veiled in public or respecting the right of privacy in the home and the ability of the family to have final decision making power. At the same time there is an important role for women in

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society, after they have fulfilled their duties to the family, and this is furthering Islamic outreach amongst women.

Al-Ghazzali made furthering the Islamist cause her primary life goal and even though she spoke passionately about the importance of family and a women’s role in educating her children, the future generation, she herself did not follow that path. First married at a young age, al-Ghazzali divorced her husband without having children because he did not support her dawa activities. She later married again but added a stipulation in the marriage contract that her husband could not prohibit her from continuing to carry out her social missionary work. Al-Ghazzali was unique in the position she held as a woman in the Muslim Brotherhood. She was a key figure within the Brotherhood, responsible for political operations and was allowed in the Brotherhood headquarters sometimes delivering lectures to an all-male audience. In spite of her own unusual life and the important role she played in the political activism of the Brotherhood al-Ghazzali remained committed to the principal of the role of Muslim women as nurturers and caretakers of the family.

The appropriate role for women in society as supported by al-Ghazzali follows the line of the Muslim Brotherhood which is spread through numerous publications widely

40. Ibid., 237.
42. Talhami, The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt, 50.
available in Egypt detailing the proper way Muslims should act in society.\textsuperscript{43} Booklets published by the Muslim Brotherhood on women’s roles, “emphasize women’s domestic role as mothers, wives and nurturers and equates housewives with queens.”\textsuperscript{44} At the same time, the Brotherhood booklets remind readers that men and women are equal in faith and equally responsible for their conduct as Muslims. “People are differentiated in Islam according to their faith, God-consciousness and good conduct…A woman’s responsibility in faith is exactly the same as that of a man.”\textsuperscript{45} But men are given responsibility over women and their household in their role as directors (qawwaamah). Men are responsible for directing the family and making the final decision in family matters. “Every type of group including the family must have a leader to guide it within the limits of what Allah has ordained for there can be no obedience for a human being in a matter involving disobedience to the Creator. It is the husband who is qualified for that leadership.”\textsuperscript{46} The separate but special role of women was also echoed by the newly elected Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad Badie, who took office on January 16, 2010.

With regards to women, the Muslim Brotherhood has previously illustrated promoting all the rights of women in the economic, social and political field. ‘The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoin what

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Sherine Hafez, \textit{The Terms of Empowerment: Islamic Women Activists in Egypt} (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 64.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 4.
\item \textsuperscript{45} The Muslim Brotherhood, “The Role of Muslim Women in an Islamic Society.”
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
is just and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger’ (Tawbah, 71). We call on all Muslim women to play their role generally and to keep up to date with the current affairs as this benefits our Muslim and Arab nation.\footnote{Translation of the acceptance speech of Muhammad Badie upon his election as Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in January, 2010.}

Female supporters of the Brotherhood have worked to spread the message of the role of women in society through both passing out printed materials and discussing Islamist ideology with friends and relatives but also through their actions in civil society organizations.

In Sherine Hafez’s study, \textit{The Terms of Empowerment}, she focuses on Islamic women activists in Egypt and the importance of their religious activities on a personal level and as Islamic outreach. The women she spoke with relished the opportunity to spread the message of the Muslim Brotherhood concerning the role of women in an Islamic society and felt empowered and fulfilled in following that example in their own lives.\footnote{Hafez, \textit{The Terms of Empowerment},” 5.} In their regulated religious practice and behavior their work toward furthering the Islamic message empowered them to strive towards, “perfecting the self to gain closeness to God.”\footnote{Ibid.} Engaging in charitable work to help the community was a fundamental part of their practice of the religion and also provided a venue to share the importance of Islamic theology with other women. In cities in Egypt, women educated in Islamic theology have also taken on a role as preachers to other women. Female preachers are certified to
preach from the Ministry of Religious Endowments and are able to attract thousands of listeners who come to hear discussions on using Islam as a frame of reference to guide their actions in daily life.  

The Muslim Brotherhood has also supported women in politics starting with the 2000 Parliamentary elections although there were internal debates leading up to the decision to run a female candidate with some arguing that their role was better served as mothers and wives. Finally the Brotherhood supported the candidacy of Jihad al-Halafawi, the wife of a Muslim Brotherhood member, to represent her district in Alexandria. In spite of her popularity her defeat was ensured by the National Democratic Party through vote rigging and harassing her supporters due to her allegiance with the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood also nominated another female candidate, Makarem al-Deeri, who failed to win in 2005. One of the concerns of involving more women in politics and nominating greater numbers of candidates is that this would bring them to the attention of the state security forces and perhaps subject them to certain levels of harassment and detention now experienced by male Muslim Brotherhood members.

The decision to involve more women in the political activities of the Brotherhood as well

50. Ibid.


as give them greater decision making authority within the organization is an ongoing debate.

The push by women within the Brotherhood for greater decision making authority within the organization is mostly by the younger generation many of whom are relatives of current Muslim Brotherhood members. “Primarily, these women want a formal consultative position in the Muslim Brotherhood hierarchy.” Although groups of women are seeking a greater role in the decision making process of the Brotherhood the unity of the organization is still their primary concern. As relatives of Muslim Brothers, they understand the pressure the organization is under from the government and the importance of maintaining a unified message.

In their position on women’s roles in an Islamic society the Brotherhood places strong emphasis on the family and raising children with a sound Islamic understanding. This message is spread by female supporters of the Brotherhood through their work in social charity activities and also as preachers and community organizers. The position of women as equal in faith but with separate and honorable roles in society has been emphasized by the head of the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time in its published policy positions the Brotherhood has limited women’s leadership roles and emphasized the importance of women’s roles in taking care of the home and the family. The Brotherhood, through its booklets and spreading of information has made clear the value


55. Ibid.
of women to society and within the Islamist movement while retaining the structure of Islamic law and interpretations which limit the leadership roles for women in politics.
CHAPTER IV

ISLAMIC FEMINISM

As Egyptian women seized greater educational opportunities after the 1952 revolution one of the major changes was expanded education for women in Arabic. Education in Arabic for women allowed them first hand access to religious texts which, combined with an Islamist revival in the 1970’s, started a growing women’s religious lessons movement. Female religious scholars began giving religious lessons in mosques to other women to increase their knowledge of Islam and counteract what they considered to be a lack of religion in daily life.¹ As this movement grew and more women throughout the Islamic world became involved in the reinterpretation of Islamic texts, outside observers labeled this growing trend Islamic Feminism. The term was rejected by those inside the female scholar community as contradiction in terms, arguing that feminism is a Western concept and contains ideals that are contradictory to Islam.²

Islamic Feminists, both as members of religious organizations such as the Brotherhood and as independent scholars have campaigned for many similar ideas as secular feminists, such as expanded educational opportunities for women, but they do so within an Islamic framework. They contrast their reinterpretation of Islamic texts with the secular feminist

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platform which they regard as imposing the values of secularism and individualism on Egyptian society which they consider un-authentic to Egypt.³

The increase in educational opportunities throughout the 20⁰ century led Egyptian women to engage in the study of primary Islamic texts and combine their activism for expanded religious opportunities for women to participate in society with their faith.⁴ Fueled by an emerging greater religiosity in Egypt women provided instruction to other women on the proper way to behave as a Muslim in society as well as reinterpreting passages from the Quran which devalued the position of women. Gisela Webb has labeled these scholars as “scholar-activists,” a term that incorporates both their research and study of Islam as well as putting that knowledge to use to introduce an Islamic framework inclusive of women’s roles and combating patriarchal interpretations.⁵ Female Muslim scholar-activists work in Egypt and other Muslim communities to emphasize the importance of women in early Islam and strip patriarchal myths from Quranic interpretation.⁶ Ziba Mir-Hosseini describes how the revolution in Iran which she supported in 1979 brought changes to the position of women in society which led her


to begin questioning patriarchal interpretations of Islam which put her in the position of a second-class citizen.\(^7\) Scholar activists used the reinterpretation of Islamic texts to challenge established patriarchal beliefs and advocate for greater women’s rights within an Islamic context. Even though the label of Islamic feminist is controversial, it identifies a movement throughout the Muslim world whereby women are using an Islamic framework to argue for the justice and laws they believe are sanctioned by Islam which protect their rights as women.

In Egypt women in universities played a major role in the “Islamization” of society in the 1970’s symbolized by wearing the veil as an outward symbol of their commitment to an Islamic way of life.\(^8\) The hijab became a symbol of the Islamist movement embraced by women active in spreading the Islamist message through community outreach. The women’s mosque movement described by Saba Mahmood was part of this spreading of Islam by women to increase Islamic practice and relevance to participants’ daily lives.\(^9\) “The burgeoning of this movement marks the first time in Egyptian history that such a large number of women have held public meetings in mosques to teach one another Islamic doctrine, thereby altering the historically male-


\(^8\) El-Guindi, “Gendered Resistance, Feminist Veiling, Islamic Feminism,” 2.

centered character of mosques as well as Islamic pedagogy.”

The increase in the number of women involved in the Islamist movement who sought a deeper understanding of Islam through religious texts as well as an increase in the number of female religious scholars able to provide guidance combined to create a movement focused on empowering women through Islam and the spreading of Islam in Egyptian society.

Margot Badran provides a concise definition of Islamic feminism as, “a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm.” Badran divides Muslim women’s feminisms into Islamic and secular but stresses that both are homegrown movements and are not “Western” but rather derived from within the local culture and both value religion from the creation of the movements. Although there are many scholars discussing the Islamic feminist movement there is still debate on whether it is an accurate term and what the definition should be. Badran provides a broad definition but others say that the spectrum of view of Islamic feminism is so wide that it is impossible to give a definition at all. The definition of secular feminism is also controversial with critics labeling secular feminism as imposing foreign cultural values versus Islamic feminism as a homegrown movement. The position of secular feminism is viewed in contrast to Islamic feminism. When secular feminism is defined as “Western” or un-

10. Ibid.


12. Ibid., 2.

authentic this puts it in direct opposition to Islamic feminism instead of allowing overlap where the two movements naturally would work towards common goals such as expanded educational opportunities for women.

The activism of Muslim women, whether they be secular or Islamist, naturally overlaps in certain areas. The different ideas and methods of feminists in Egypt should be viewed as “tools of analysis” rather than ridged dividing separations.\(^\text{14}\) Instead of the two opposing views of secular versus Islamic feminisms, it is more accurate to view the different tools of analysis as part of a spectrum of views with common positions emerging in certain areas. Azza Karam divides the Muslim women’s feminist movements in Egypt into three categories: secular feminism, Muslim feminism, and Islamist feminism.\(^\text{15}\) The split between Muslim feminists and Islamic feminists lies within their view of the position of women in society. The aim of Muslim feminists “is to show that the discourse of total equality between men and women is Islamically valid. Muslim feminists try to steer a middle course between interpretations of sociopolitical and cultural realities according to Islam and the human rights discourse.”\(^\text{16}\) This is in contrast to Islamic feminists who would use only Islamic texts as a guide for society and a means to enhance the position of women not international treaties or the human rights


\(^{15}\) Afkhami and Friedl, \textit{Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation: Implementing the Beijing Platform}, 21.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 22.
discourse. Muslim feminists are concerned with both integrating Islam into all aspects of political and civil life in Egypt as well as upholding the international human rights framework championed by secular feminists.

Even though those with the label of Islamic feminists under Karam’s definition would reject the label of feminist as unnecessary, they are using an Islamic framework to strengthen the position of women in Egyptian society. Islamic feminists are seeking to raise the status of women and they actively campaign for that goal through promoting Islam. “Islamist feminists are those involved in overtly political activities, who believe that Islam negates the need for feminism and that the application of Sharia at state level would transform Egyptian society, raising the status of women through social harmony and justice.”

The rise of Islamic and Muslim feminism happened at a moment when the middle classes were feeling disaffected by the changes of modernity and political Islam provided a return to the traditional, patriarchal culture. The Muslim Brotherhood was a main participant in strengthening the position of political Islam in society and supported women as participants in spreading the Islamist message. Both the female scholar-activists and women’s Muslim student associations in universities contributed toward the push of spreading of the Muslim Brotherhood’s slogan of Islam is the solution. The


Muslim Brotherhood involved women in their campaigns to push for Islamic law as a tool to ensuring a more just society and as a solution to the social and political ills in Egypt. Female Muslim Brotherhood supporters were at the forefront of charitable activities aimed at both helping the poor and spreading the message of Islam. Although this message called for women to return to the honorable position of caretaker of the home, women continued to be publically involved in the activities of Islamic organizations.

As supporters of the movement to increase Islam as a greater influence in daily life, Islamic feminists wanted to ensure that the movement also valued women’s roles. As political Islam began to have greater influence in the Middle East, women grew concerned about the patriarchal approach that political Islam was taking in its position towards women.\textsuperscript{19} “For women in different parts of the Middle East who had long enjoyed access to employment in the public sphere and for their families who counted on their material contributions, the call for retreat to the home in the name of Islam was decidedly disquieting.”\textsuperscript{20} At the same time the rise in female education, especially in Arabic, led to large numbers of women who were able to read first hand Islamic texts and decide for themselves whether they agreed with interpretations which limited their ability to work outside of the home. Even though women had participated in the Islamic political movements in the Middle East they found that they were pushed back and placed

\begin{itemize}
\item 19. Ibid., 9.
\item 20. Ibid.
\end{itemize}
in a position of second-class citizens. What outside observers labeled Islamic feminism was a movement that strove to continue to use the Islamic framework of political Islam as a solution for the ills of society but also to provide gender justice and opportunities for women to actively participate in an Islamic society.

The rise of political Islam in the late 20th century allowed room for Islamist women to explore their rights within the Islamist framework. No longer under the control of colonialism, Muslim women had the opportunity in Egypt to imagine their place in the Islamic society espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood. As the Brotherhood’s platform for Egypt began take shape, women found that there were certain patriarchal ideas they disagreed with which stripped women of their rights according to Islamic law.

One neglected and paradoxical consequence of the rise of political Islam in the second half of the century was that it helped to create a space, an arena, within which Muslim women could reconcile their faith and identity with a struggle for gender equality. This did not happen because the Islamists offered an egalitarian vision of gender relations; in fact, they did not. Rather, their very agenda – the so-called return to Sharia – and their attempt to translate into policy the patriarchal gender notions inherent in traditional Islamic law provoked many women to increasing criticism of these notions and spurred them to greater activism.

As Muslim women engaged in Islamic outreach in greater numbers by participating with Islamic civil society organizations and listening to women preachers in the burgeoning

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22. Ibid., 639.
women’s mosque movement, they were also sharing ideas about the importance of women’s roles historically in Islam and in modern society.  

Muslim feminists contrast their position with that of secular feminists in Egypt by arguing that secular feminists have broken with Egyptian tradition and Islamic feminism provides an avenue for the liberation and elevation of women in society without using a Western model. Many of these women are participants in the Muslim Brotherhood, supporting the organization’s vision of an Islamic state.  

Female religion scholars, who all wear Islamic dress and all boast a high level of education and a prestigious job, have become the keepers of this particular interpretation of women’s individual and family rights. They tend to be more groundbreaking than their male counterparts in their approaches to women’s issues.  

Islamic feminists are involved in both political activities and civil society organizations which further the goal of an Islamic society respectful of women. Many of the charity organizations set-up by the Muslim Brotherhood do not have a political agenda but due to the politics of the state and the position of the Brotherhood as a banned organization the promotion of political Islam by these civil society organizations clashes with the control the State wishes to have over charities, especially those spreading an Islamist message.


25. Ibid., 77.
Especially after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, the lives of Muslim women have been part of the politics of portraying Muslim nations as regressive compared to the West. Some Islamic feminists would argue that the West holds a distorted view of Muslim women which stems from analyzing Islamic cultural values through a Western framework. By studying Islamic history and interpretations of the Quran and Hadiths Muslim women scholars seek to place gender debates in Egypt within an Egyptian and Islamic framework. Part of this has been to focus on social issues at the time the Quran was revealed and studying the social context of 7th century Arabia to highlight the progressiveness of gender equity in the Quran. In addition, Muslim feminists have focused on applying a feminist frame to their reinterpretation of Islamic texts and laws. The focus on historical Islamic female role models and re-interpretation of Islamic texts for gender complementarity still does not change the reality of the situation for women living in Egypt. There are criticisms that the position of women is viewed through a Western lens by secular feminists but still there is a large gap between the position of women in an ideal Islamic society and the reality of current Egyptian life. “There is a wide chasm between the rhetoric of what is prescribed in the Quran (through diverse interpretations) and what the reality for men and women is in states that are


Islamic and states with a substantial Muslim minority.”

The wives of the Prophet Mohammad are held up as an example to be emulated by Muslim women. The first wife of the Prophet Mohammad was Khadija, a woman twice widowed who was a successful merchant who initially hired the Prophet Mohammad to help her as an agent in her trade. Although Khadija sets a good example of an influential women, independently wealthy and in control of her wealth this has not translated into support for women in commerce.

Within the Muslim Brotherhood women are advocating for a greater role in the organization and full integration into the movement instead of only participating in the Muslim Sisterhood. Currently within the Muslim Brotherhood women do not occupy leadership positions but much of this is blamed on the current political situation and extensive repression by the Egyptian state. Although women are critical of their position within the Brotherhood and are asking for a greater role and voice they are not willing to damage the cohesion of the organization or threaten to upset the face of unity


32. Abdel-Latif and Ottaway, “Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women’s Activism.”

33. Ibid., 10.
which the Brotherhood seeks to portray.\textsuperscript{34} Many of the active women in the Brotherhood are relatives of Brotherhood leaders which lends more authority to their position.\textsuperscript{35} Many of the daughters, sisters, and wives of Muslim Brotherhood members are educated in Arabic and many have engaged in extensive religious studies and wish to use this knowledge to further participate in the organization. As members of Muslim student organizations and Muslim Brotherhood charity organizations they have experience with organizing and spreading the Islamist message. Spreading Islam is a religious duty and many of the women involved in the Muslim Brotherhood wish to be more active in the organization and give women a greater voice so that they can fulfill their religious duties and ensure that the organization reaches out and engages with the female half of the Egyptian population.

One way that Muslim sisters are spreading the word of their work within the Muslim Brotherhood is through blogging and other internet communication tools.\textsuperscript{36} With a younger generation who grew up using social media tools, Muslim sisters have found a new avenue to express themselves and have their experiences heard. The Muslim Brotherhood is still in the process of debating how to control these messages. On the one

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{5} Ibid.
\bibitem{6} Abdel-Latif, “In the Shadow of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.”
\end{thebibliography}
hand they want greater publicity and support but on the other hand when bloggers take control of the message or have a message which diverges from that of the leadership the Muslim Brotherhood loses the ability to speak with one voice. 37 “It can already be said that blogging is bringing into the open many of the internal debates that used to take place behind closed doors, exposing the movement increasingly to outside influences.”38 Women and others within the Brotherhood now have the ability to publically advocate for their positions and instantly reach a much wider audience. Like the elite class of women publishing women’s magazines in Egypt for the first time at the end of the 19th century, modern Egyptian women have embraced new technology as a way to reach broader audiences, have their opinions heard, and publically debate issues with immediate relevance to their lives. Accessibility to information technology has combined with greater understanding and knowledge of Islamic texts in Arabic giving women in the Muslim Brotherhood the tools to engage in reinterpretation of Islamic texts in a gender sensitive context and spread their opinions and findings with other women in the movement. As Muslim women continue to study the lives of early female Islamists and bring to light the influence these women had within the early Islamist community they are also asking for those same rights to be honored in the modern Muslim Brotherhood movement.

37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
The work of Muslim women in Egyptian society has succeeded in changing the perception of the value of traditional female roles and their importance to society. As Islamist women push for a return to the home and a focus on the family they also emphasize the value of these roles as critical to the integrity of society as women are in charge of raising the next generation and caring for the family unit. “Islamist women have successfully reversed traditional value judgments about women’s spaces. Women’s knowledge of the home and child raising have been given a higher esteem and more political significance.”39 As Islamic feminists continue to push for greater recognition of the importance of women’s roles in society they are interested in doing so through organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood because of the shared belief that Islam brought greater justice.40 As Fadwa El Guindi argues, “feminism itself is grounded in culture,” and so a feminism that developed in the West cannot be applied and does not fit into the Egyptian context.41 As women within the Muslim Brotherhood advocate for greater participation in the organization they are also bringing attention to the importance of traditional female roles within society and the high value of women in running family life and bringing up children.


Islamic feminism is a term used by feminist scholars to label a movement they noticed was emerging within the Muslim world. This movement sought to use an Islamic context to give greater value to traditional women’s roles in society while also advocating for greater female political and religious participation. The Muslim Brotherhood has engaged this trend by emphasizing the importance and honor of traditional female roles. They have published pamphlets on the importance of women’s roles in society and embraced the call to honor traditional female roles encouraging female Muslim activists to spread the message of the Brotherhood. At the same time there is hesitancy to allow women greater decision making authority and a more influential role in the management of the organization.

Another significant part of what has been labeled Islamic Feminism is the work of female religious scholars and preachers who are reinterpreting religious texts to emphasize the rights of women in Islam and argue that Islam respects both the decision making ability of women and their roles as leaders within society. A greater push for women’s education in Arabic has also been part of this movement allowing women direct access to religious texts in Arabic. The Muslim Brotherhood has internally debated what role women should take in the organization and this will continue to have increasing importance in the future as women have direct access to religious texts and want to shape the policies and direction of an organization that embodies the core of their religious beliefs that Islam is the solution for the problems in Egyptian society.
Although many within the Islamic feminist movement would reject the label of feminism arguing that it is a Western concept, Egypt does have its own native feminist movement that began in the late 19th century and grew with both secular and religious components. Feminism as a term originated in the West but the concept, the idea that women have important contributions and value to add to society has been interpreted and adapted to the Muslim world as well. Egyptian feminism emerged within an Egyptian context and Islamic feminism within Egypt has followed and built on the ideas of early Egyptian feminists. Using original Islamic texts as the sources of authority for rules on daily living, Islamic feminists have used historical context, original texts, and female Islamic historical figures to argue for the rights and honor of women in Egyptian society.
CONCLUSION

As the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood adapts to changing times, it is confronting and will continue to face pressure from women both within the movement and externally to give greater importance to the participation of women and the ideas that are important to them. As women in Egypt access expanded educational opportunities in Arabic allowing them first hand understanding of Islamic religious texts their demands in having a say in the interpretation of these texts will increase. Egypt has already witnessed the expanding women’s mosque movement wherein women are preaching to other women in mosques directing them towards greater Islamic religiosity in all aspects of their everyday lives. Involvement in Muslim Brotherhood charitable activities is one way that women seek to fulfill their religious obligations. With increased access to information and networks with other Muslim women through internet communication Egyptians have blogged and shared their ideas for the direction of the Muslim Brotherhood with regards to its position on women’s affairs. The increased communications and voices advocating for greater female decision making authority within the Muslim Brotherhood is likely to expand as wider access to information technology becomes available and women seize opportunities for increasing religious outreach.

At the same time secular feminists, who are working to promote women’s rights through a human rights framework using internationally agreed upon standards are putting pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood and the government of Egypt to respect the
laws already in place which protect women and their rights as well as promote new measures to ensure greater female participation in society. Islamic feminists have alleged that the idea of feminism in any form is a foreign concept which is not applicable to Egypt and contrary to Egyptian values. Egyptian women who promote women’s rights through a secular framework are charged with introducing foreign ideas and attempting to destabilize traditional Egyptian society. Even though it appears that Islamic and secular feminists have opposing ideas and positions, in some cases they are promoting similar ideas both in the Muslim Brotherhood and wider Egyptian society.

Secular feminism arose in Egypt in the late 1800s fed by a women’s literary movement that promoted the sharing of ideas through women’s publications. The positions of that movement including expanded educational and work opportunities for women fed directly into an Islamic feminist movement. Both originated in Egypt and responded to current social and political situations.\(^1\) Although they have different approaches and utilize different frameworks both advocate for placing more value on women’s roles in society. In Egypt, as in all countries, the ideas of feminism have been adopted by Egyptian women to fit the context of what they believe. There is a wide variety in positions that place emphasis on valuing women’s roles but they all do promote women as positive actors in Egypt who have an important role to play in society and have voices which need to be heard.

Islamic feminists call for women to return to the home and focus on their primary role as caretaker of the family. They would consider that women in modern society have been stretched too thin and tasked with an impossible number of responsibilities. Instead of trying to be equal to men, women should focus on what Islamic feminists would call their duties under Islam which are to nurture the family and raise children. Secular feminist argue against limiting women to particular “women’s roles” and focus their attention on allowing women the opportunity to participate in every level of Egyptian society and encourage the balance of females and males in the workplace. They look to an international human rights framework and agreements signed by Egypt to argue for the protection of women’s rights in society.

Between these two positions there is a broad spectrum of opinions with each clamoring to be heard. Within the Muslim Brotherhood women are asking for greater voice while respecting the cohesion of the organization. As a movement that was under tremendous pressure from the government the Muslim Brotherhood had carefully crafted its message so as to not be antagonistic to the government. Even with this effort members of the Muslim Brotherhood were under constant attack from the Egyptian government. This is one of the reasons cited by Brotherhood leadership that women should not take on greater leadership roles. The organization does not want its female members to be subjected to the same pressures the male Brotherhood members faced. Despite the risks, female Brotherhood members have called for increased positions in the decision making hierarchy and full integration in the organization. They have spread
these requests through the internet and male Brotherhood members have also used the internet to suggest changes to the positions of the organization.

Egyptian feminists both within the Muslim Brotherhood and externally have points on which they disagree as well as places where there are opportunities to work together. Both viewpoints need to be acknowledged and respected even though there might be sharp differences of opinion. The importance of expanded opportunities for women’s literacy in Arabic is important in both movements. Improving women’s literacy is important for allowing women greater access to opportunities at all levels of society while also encouraging women to read Islamic religious texts and providing them with the ability to understand various interpretations of what they are reading. Both secular and Islamic feminism are continuing to develop and change in Egypt and hopefully both movements will seek opportunities to work together to strengthen the position of women in Egypt.
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