

Introduction

The contemporary situation of women in Egypt – who are at the centre of and are reacting to apparently contradictory discourses and interests – is emblematic of tensions and dilemmas characteristic of many post-colonial societies. Inherent in the power struggles and conflicts within these societies are fierce debates about modernization, its relation to westernization and contestations of ‘authentic’ national culture and traditions. Recent writings within the broad and diverse field of post-colonial studies have documented political contestations linked to processes of decolonization and state-building. They have particularly pointed to the emergence of powerful local elites which tend to reproduce unequal relationships between classes, gender and religious groups (Chatterjee, 1993; Hall, 1996a; hooks, 1990; Kandiyoti, 1991, 1995; Maiello, 1996; Prakash, 1995; Rattansi, 1997; Said, 1993; Spivak, 1988). Caught between the pursuit of modernization, attempts at liberalization, a pervasive nationalist rhetoric of ‘authenticity’ and ongoing imperialist encroachments, women are often the focus of conflicting and ambiguous interests.

In the Egyptian context, growing Islamist currents have further limited the discursive horizon of the debates and the choices available to women. This holds particularly true for those who are actively engaged in contesting existing gender relations and various forms of inequality and injustice within the hegemonic narrative of ‘the Nation’. Egyptian women activists, whose efforts have been historically rooted in nationalism and the struggle against colonial powers, have inevitably run the risk of being stigmatized as anti-nationalist and anti-religious. They have increasingly been accused, particularly by Islamist movements and conservative nationalist forces, of collaborating with western imperialism by importing alien ideas and practices and disseminating them throughout society. These very intimidating weapons have given rise to a specifically Egyptian feminist phobia that has silenced many voices.

By focusing on one specific, yet heterogeneous, segment within post-colonial Egypt, namely secular women’s activism, I hope to unravel many

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of the tensions and conflicts that mark the complex processes of decolonization and continue to affect contemporary political culture. Egyptian women's activism today is very much shaped by the fear of transgressing the norms and values deemed permissible within the national fabric. The question of identity is as central to their activism as concrete struggles over women's rights and aspirations. For secular women activists even more is at stake as their rejection of Islam as the only possible framework for political struggle and nation-building evokes suspicion and doubt about their place within the indigenous landscape of 'traditions' and 'authenticity'.

In this book I attempt to provide a detailed ethnographic account of the context, content and political significance of contemporary Egyptian women's activism. This is mainly achieved through my analysis of interviews with members of women's groups and individual activists. However, it is my argument throughout this work that women's activism cannot be analysed without contextualizing it in the wider political culture in which it takes place. Subsequently, I will explore a range of factors, such as the Egyptian state, Islamist constituencies and the political left, as well as international organizations and agendas which all, in one way or another, have an impact upon the forms, content and discourses of women's activism.

A critique of modernity in the Egyptian context will enable me to examine the traditional-modern and indigenous-western dichotomies which are not only conspicuous in academic writings about women in the Middle East, but also constitute forceful oppositions in the cultural, historical and political discourses within Egypt. In the context of scholarship dealing with Islamist movements, the categorization of 'modern' as opposed to 'traditional' has increasingly come under scrutiny. Despite Islamists' call to return to 'the glorious past', many writers have pointed to the 'modern' and 'modernizing' character of Islamist trends (Al-Azmeh, 1993; Ayubi, 1991; Esposito, 1992; Moghadam, 1993; Munson, 1988; Paidar, 1996; Sayyid, 1997; Zubaida, 1989, 1993). Not surprisingly, the rigid opposition between 'modern' and 'traditional' has proven to be more difficult to challenge with respect to women in the Middle East, but several recent writings reflect this endeavour (Abu-Lughod, 1995b, 1997, 1998b; Badran, 1995; Baron, 1994; Kandiyoti (ed.), 1996; Macleod, 1991; Moghadam, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Paidar, 1996). Perhaps even more difficult to unsettle is the categorization of 'western' versus 'indigenous', which even underlines some of the writings that self-consciously oppose the 'modern' versus 'traditional' dichotomy.

I perceive this book to be as much about unsettling a rigid East-West divide and its implications as it is about secular Egyptian women's

activism and the political culture it is embedded in. I shall therefore take issue with essentializing and homogenizing constructions of 'difference' between cultures, which as Partha Chatterjee (1993) so lucidly put it, actually reproduces those perceptions and representations which were originally created by the colonizers. At the same time, I hope to offer a detailed and in-depth ethnographic account of a movement that has often been analysed and categorized in a rather removed and homogenizing manner.

Finally, the book presents an attempt to contribute to the contemporary Egyptian women's movement by providing an in-depth account of the broad range of secular women's activism. My ambition has been to produce a perspective, however partial and limited, which may be used as a resource by Egyptian women activists. My very position as a researcher might have facilitated the acquisition of insight into a broader range of activities and attitudes which may be concealed from someone totally involved in the activities in question. The tension between researcher and activist was never totally resolved in the course of my research, however, and I continued to struggle with its implication in the process of writing up my findings.

Conceptual considerations

While being aware of debates about whether the often disparate forms of action of contemporary Egyptian women activists could be subsumed under the label 'movement', I espouse the view that there are different forms of women's movements. Some movements are certainly more easily identifiable as collective action than others; however, agreeing with Molyneux's analysis (1998: 223), I would argue that the relatively large number of women's groups and networks, as well as individual activists in Egypt, amount to a women's movement.

As for the questions of what constitutes a 'group', my starting-point would be Dawn Chatty's definition of a group being constituted by a collection of individuals who interact with each other on a regular basis, and 'thereby shaping the identities each form of themselves and of others in the group' (Chatty & Rabo, 1997: 8). For the purpose of my study, I will modify the criterion of regular interaction between members, as membership and activism of Egyptian women activists can be sporadic and irregular, yet they may still form a group. Chatty distinguishes between primary groups, such as families, where there generally exists face-to-face interaction between all members, and secondary groups where 'most members are linked to each other through more complex organizational relationships' (ibid.: 9). Furthermore, she distinguishes between informal

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and formal groups, the latter being perceived to be more stable over time with more stated rules. However, Chatty points to the fluctuation between the two categories that concurs with my own research findings. Throughout this book I am using 'organization' and 'group' (as in formal group) interchangeably. A 'network', on the other hand, refers to a more or less loose association of formal and informal groups and possibly individual activists linked together on the basis of common objectives. Networks are generally established in order to tackle very specific campaigns or tasks, as, for example, the female genital mutilation task force in Egypt.

From the outset there was a filter through which I selected organizations, groups, networks and individuals, since I had decided to focus on secular women activists. It was not my intention, however, to suggest that all women activists have to be secular or that Islamists could not be women activists. Rather, my decision was based on several reasons which I will elaborate in greater detail in the course of this work. Aside from the fact that I had been involved with a secular group prior to my research, I had noticed the tendency to overlook secular constituencies in much of the recent scholarship dealing with Egypt where the emphasis was on Islamist tendencies and activism. Moreover, if dealt with at all, secular constituencies, such as secular women activists, tend to be homogenized and presented in an undifferentiated manner, almost as a residual category: those who are *not* Islamist.

As one of my aims in this book is to problematize the notion of 'secular', I will only provide a very preliminary working definition at this point: 'secular' refers to the acceptance of the separation between religion and politics, but does not necessarily denote anti-religious or anti-Islamic positions. Furthermore, I suggest that secular women activists do not endorse *shari'a* (Islamic law) as the main or sole source of legislation; but they also refer to civil law and human rights conventions, as stipulated by the United Nations, as frames of reference for their struggle.

My use of the term 'women's activism' rather than 'feminism' is related to the fact that many of the women I interviewed reject the label 'feminist' for pragmatic and ideological reasons. The English term 'feminist' evokes antagonism and animosity, and sometimes even anxiety, among a great number of women activists, who seem to have internalized the way feminists are being portrayed in prevailing Egyptian discourses: men-hating, aggressive, possibly lesbian (but most likely to be obsessed with sex), and certainly westernized women.¹ The reluctance of many Egyptian women

¹ Paradoxically, western feminists often have to face very similar stereotyping and hostility within their own societies. Consequently, many women shy away from using the label 'feminist', even if they are engaged in various forms of political struggle for women's

to identify themselves with feminism is not only related to its negative image in society, but is also linked to the conviction that it detracts from such 'larger issues' as imperialism, class struggle and Zionism (Al-Ali, 1997).

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

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

The struggle to remove obstacles to equality – women's *rights* activism – manifests itself in various campaigns to change existing laws that reflect and reproduce gender inequality. It also aims to improve women's access to education and paid labour, and increase political participation. The 'women's rights' approach constitutes the main form of engagement

rights, against socially defined roles for women, against sexual and economic exploitation and so forth (Kaplan, 1992: 21–2).

² I have adopted Heidi Hartman's definition of patriarchy as 'a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women. Patriarchy is thus the system of male oppression of women' (1979: 232). It is important to stress, however, that forms of patriarchy vary historically and cross-culturally.

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

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

Aside from a few groups, which can be placed on either side of the spectrum in terms of emphasis on equality in the liberal tradition and a concern with political economy as part of the socialist orientations, these strands do not present clearly bounded categories. I could detect a great deal of overlap and flux among and within various groups, which also applies to the specific forms of engagement within women's activism. I will therefore document the heterogeneity of women's activism by exploring the attitudes and positions of group members and individual activists with respect to specific issues and debates that have meaning in contemporary Egyptian society, rather than along the western feminist categorization of liberal versus socialist.

The very term 'activism' glosses over a variety of involvements and activities, which, if considered in isolation, are not all forms of 'political activism': charity and welfare, research, advocacy, consciousness-raising, lobbying and development. What justifies the label 'women's activism' for a broad range of engagements is the fluid nature of this field in which certain activities, not strictly defined as activism, such as research, for example, might develop into more political engagements, such as advocacy or lobbying. Moreover, groups and individuals, at any given point of time, might be involved in different kinds of activities, some not strictly 'activist' and others more so. Thus for the lack of a better label, I will use

the term 'women's activism' throughout this book to refer to the broad and fluid range of activities and involvements in the women's movement. Throughout this book, 'women activists' specifically alludes to women involved in *qadiyyat al-mar'a* (women's issues) and the Egyptian women's movement.³

Typology of women's activism

A useful analytical categorization of women's activism is furnished by the tripartite model deployed by Maxine Molyneux in her analysis of women's movements historically and cross-culturally (1998). She suggests three ideal types corresponding to their respective organizational principles and conceptions of authority: groups may be (1) independent, (2) associational and (3) directed. '*Independent organizations*' are characterized by 'independent actions, where women organize on the basis of self-activity, set their own goals and decide their own forms of organization and forms of struggle' (ibid.: 226). Molyneux emphasizes that autonomous female collective action is not necessarily feminist in the sense of presenting 'real gender interests', but could also perform self-help activities of various kinds, pursue goals not directly related to gender issues, or even abrogate women's rights. For the purpose of my research, I will narrow down her categorization to those independent women's groups that are expressive of any of the broad feminist approaches outlined above.

Sometimes independent women's groups choose to form alliances with other political organizations while maintaining their own goals and institutional autonomy. This second type of women's organization, characterized by '*associational linkages*', calls for the constant negotiation of power and authority and could present a model for democratic politics. An acknowledgement of diverse and sometimes conflicting interests, a sense of trust and established procedures of accountability are key to avoid the co-option of women's organizations' agendas by their associational partners (ibid.: 228).

Molyneux contrasts these two types with her third category, '*directed mobilisations*', in which 'the authority and initiative clearly comes from outside and stands above the collectivity itself. The women's organization or movement is therefore subject to a higher (institutional) authority, and is typically under the control of political organizations and/or governments' (ibid.: 229). In the case of these women's groups, the directing authority characteristically uses gender issues, if addressed at all, as

³ Some of the women I interviewed referred to themselves as *munashattat* (activists).

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means to achieve other goals. Historically and cross-culturally, three different types of directed mobilization emerged: (a) women are mobilized to help achieve a general goal, such as overthrowing the government, or bringing a party to power; (b) a general commitment to advance women's interest but within the general commitment to social change, such as expressed in modernizing nationalisms and socialist movements; (c) women are mobilized for causes which may abrogate rights they already have in the name of collective, national or religious struggle (*ibid.*: 228–31). While all three different sub-categories of directed mobilization may be found in the course of the history of the Egyptian women's movement, I will confine myself to the second type of directed mobilization in which general goals of social change include the support of women's rights, but no independent organization or alternative definition of women's rights is permitted.

It is obvious that the various 'ideal types' suggested by Molyneux only present heuristic categories and do not necessarily occur in reality in this 'pure form'. Often, women's organizations fluctuate in their level of autonomy or dependence, depending on several factors such as the nature of the state (or other forms of authorities, such as political parties and their policies) and their access to political and economic resources. And here I believe we also need to differentiate a more recent phenomenon that has arisen due to development of international authorities such as UN organizations and international funding agencies. These have given rise to semi-independent/semi-directed mobilization which, while it remains largely autonomous from state authority and political groupings within the state, is nonetheless heavily shaped by international intervention.

The ethnographic field

Prior to the actual research for this book, which took place in 1995–6 over a period of fourteen months, I had lived, studied and worked in Cairo for about six years. During that time the city had become much more than the mere site for fieldwork, as I had established many friendships over the years and had become rather involved in Cairo's dazzling social life. When I returned to Cairo in September 1995 there was a sense of 'coming home' and a comforting familiarity after having spent a year in 'strange' London. I knew where I was going to live, with whom, where to shop, how to find my way around the city without getting lost (most of the time that is). In brief, all the practical arrangements, which tend to take up lots of time and effort in the initial phases of fieldwork, were already sorted out. After intense socializing with friends and acquaintances, catching up with

the latest gossip and telling them about my life in London, I could plunge myself into work.

Because of my prior involvement in women's activism in Egypt I was already aware of a number of key figures and groups. However, I spent the first weeks trying to map out a 'field' by speaking to numerous people – scholars, funding agencies and women activists – about their perception of which groups and which individuals were significant in the contemporary women's movement. In the course of these discussions it soon became obvious to me that the contemporary scene of women's activism is extremely varied in terms of activities and institutional frameworks: NGOs with clear structures and decision-making bodies exist side by side with more loosely organized groups; *ad hoc* networks mobilizing around specific issues or tasks are formed and dissolved by activists who are often simultaneously involved in other groups or activities; several women's committees exist which are attached to political parties, professional organizations and human rights centres; and a number of individual women intellectuals work independently through their specific professions or are loosely affiliated with specific groups and might co-operate on specific projects.

Reverting to the first of Molyneux's three categories, varying political orientations can be found among independent women's organizations, such as Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida (the New Woman's Research Centre), Rabtat Al-Mar'a Al-'Arabiyya (the Alliance of Arab Women), Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a: Ma'an (the Women's Study Centre: Together) and Gama'at Bint Al-Ard (Daughter of the Land Group). The Alliance of Arab Women, whose members are mainly professional upper-middle-class women in their fifties and sixties, exists on the most liberal end of the broad spectrum of feminist approaches, endorsing both welfare work and women's rights activism. The Alliance⁴ is officially registered as an NGO with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the implications of which I will discuss in chapters 2 and 5. Others, such as Ma'an, Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida and Bint Al-Ard, have circumvented the strict regulatory codes linked to the ministry by registering as non-profit companies or research centres.

All three groups initially grew out of previous political activism: members of Bint Al-Ard were initially mobilized around the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), while the founding members of Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida and Ma'an had been involved in socialist politics during the student movement in the 1970s. Despite Bint Al-Ard's concern with issues related to economic exploitation, imperialism and religious

⁴ I will occasionally employ the abbreviations of group names which are commonly used in Egypt.

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sectarianism, the group can be placed closer to a liberal women's rights activism than either Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida or Ma'an. The latter represents the most empathic group in terms of socialist ideology and approach as its older founding members and the younger generation within the group emphasize issues pertaining to political economy, considering themselves *nassa'wiyat Marxiyat* (Marxist feminists).

The group Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida is frequently referred to as the most radical feminist group in contemporary Egypt, which, as I explained earlier, carries the negative connotation of being westernized and merely focusing on the issue of patriarchy. It is certainly true that members reject the subordination of *qadiyyat al-mar'a* (women's issues) to issues related to economic exploitation and national independence and also endorse the recently coined term *al-haraka al-nassa'wiyya* (the feminist movement). They do, nevertheless, include those issues associated with socialist and nationalist agendas in their analyses and activities. Although the group has taken on board the culturally sensitive issue of sexuality (in relation to debates about female genital mutilation and violence against women), they are not separatists between men and women, nor, as I will show throughout this book, are they blindly following western agendas.

In addition to these independent groups, which are, to different degrees, involved in advocacy, research and grassroots projects, there are service-oriented NGOs with a special focus on the role of women in both development and underdevelopment. These NGOs, such as Gama'at Nuhud wa Tanmeyyat Al-Mar'a (the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women, known as ADEW) and Markaz Wasa'il Al-Ittissal Al-Mula'ama min agl Al-Tanmeyya (Appropriate Communications Techniques, known as ACT), combine concrete development projects with political campaigns. Members of these NGOs vary in terms of their specific analyses of gender inequalities in a way that liberal and socialist-oriented approaches exist simultaneously.

Under Molyneux's second category, 'associational' activism, can be subsumed those groups and activists who are either affiliated with political parties, professional organizations or human rights organizations. As for professional organizations, although some might themselves be independent, the goals and interests related to their professional umbrella might override the specific aims related to women's activism. Some members of the Lagnat Al-Mar'a fi Ittihad Al-Mohameen Al-'Arab (Women's Committee of the Arab Lawyers' Union), Gama'iyat Al-Katibat Al-Masriyat (the Egyptian Women Writers' Association), Dar Al-Mar'a Al-'Arabiyya Nour (the Arab Women Publishing House Nour), and Gama'iyat Al-Cinimai'yat (the Egyptian Women in Film Society) have been most outspoken and active concerning the plight of women.