

*Women In
Egypt:
A Literature
Review*

Researchers in the fields of women and gender studies in Egypt have been complaining about the paucity of research, the lack of data and information and the imposed marginality on this field of research in the paradigm of social sciences. At the same time, new interest in the field is rekindled due to many factors, amongst which is the emergence of a conservative trend, clearly antagonistic to existing women rights. This trend's tactics rely on gender-biased ideological concepts, stereotypes and defamation techniques. Defenders of women's rights have little access to hard information to counter these allegations. In addition, the international concern with women's status expressed in the convention of women's UN conferences and the formulation of a UN sponsored convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women has renewed interest in gender studies. The signatory states of this international convention (Egypt is one of the signatories) are requested to apply the convention in their different legislations and policies. The state might not have enough information to implement the convention, hence the need for more indepth research on women's status. Also, promoting interest in gender studies is the emergence in Egypt of women's NGOs and different interest groups who have difficulties in access to available information, in order to design their strategies and policies.

As a first step to remedy to the needs of information on Women in Egypt, UNICEF/

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Cairo compiled an annotated bibliography on women in Egypt. The annotated bibliography is a first attempt at documentation of existing research on women and gender. This literature review is based on this annotated bibliography. The aims of the literature review are to identify major research topics; to analyze existing research paradigms; to assess current theoretical approaches to problems of women and gender in Egypt; and to identify existing research gaps.

1. Major Research Topics

The annotated bibliography identified around 450 titles, for the period 1975 - 1993, in the area of women and gender studies. 45% of the literature on women and gender in Egypt is foreign generated, (i.e, research generated by foreign researchers, Egyptian researchers working and residing abroad, and international organizations).

From a reading of subjects, listed by areas of social science research, we notice that most research has been directed to two main areas: Women's position in society with a share of 30% of all research on women and gender and women in the economy, with a share of 23%. These two areas of study account for 53% of all research in this field. Culture and health follow with shares of 10% and 8% respectively. Other areas vary from a share of around 7% to only 0.6%. This might indicate that we have enough information in terms of research on the positions of women in society and the economy. However, as it will be demonstrated shortly, the research in these areas has stressed a few topics, while major areas have been neglected.

Cultural Studies

Around 70% of cultural studies have focused on the impact of Islam on women's status. The second major area of research revolved around women's images as portrayed by the media.

Two major subjects were researched in the context of the impact of Islam on women's status in Egypt: the reemergence of the veil in modern Egypt and impact of Islamic Shari'a on women's rights. A minority of studies dealt with the effects of the fundamentalist movement on the cultural construction of identity or the use of the issue of women as a political diversionary tactic⁽¹⁾. Studies on the images of women in the media, either in radio, television, the press, novels, the cinema, etc., using different research techniques

(1) See for example: Fuad Zakaria, «The Standpoint of Contemporary Muslim Fundamentalists,» in: Nahed Toubia [ed.], *Women of the Arab World* (London: Zed Books, 1988); Hala Shukrallah, «The Impact of the Islamic Alternative on Women and Christians in Egypt,» *Feminist Review*, no.47 (November 1993).

arrive to the same result. The media predominantly, reinforces the traditional images and roles of women as wives and mothers and supports the traditional gender roles and values⁽²⁾.

Development and Economic Studies

Research topics in this area have focused on the positive contribution of women in the development process through their participation in economic development and the forms of women's economic participation. Most studies dealt with the problems encountered by working women, especially the double job burden. Some studies have tried to elicit women's perceptions of work and perceptions of problems encountered by working women such as forms of discrimination and types of harassment⁽³⁾.

Education

Research in women's education is scarce. A few existing manuscripts deal with measures of gender discrimination in education, especially primary education, effects of education on women's status and employment, and rural female illiteracy⁽⁴⁾.

Family Planning

If we exclude the numerous studies on fertility in Egypt, family planning in relation to women research is very limited. A few studies exist on the impact of family planning on women's status and the influence of socio-economic factors and cultural values on family planning efforts.

Feminism

Again this is a very deprived area of research, especially in terms of theoretical formulations. The few studies that can be catalogued under feminism deal mostly with the history of the women's movement and the biography of prominent feminists or women anti-feminists such as Hoda Shaarawy or Zeinab Al-Ghazali.

Health

Research in this area fares somewhat better than in the previous three. Research on health has dealt with maternal mortality; practices in pregnancy, lactation, menstruation; female circumcision, health information and a few studies dealing with the impact of violence against women on their health.

(2) See for example: Mustapha Suweif [ed.], *The Image of Women as Presented in the Media* (Cairo: Center for Sociological and Criminological Studies, 1983) (in Arabic).

(3) See for example: Hoda Badran, «Women and Development: Another Model for Integration,» a paper presented to the Population and Development Symposium (Cairo: Cairo Demographic Center, November 3-7, 1985), and Malak Zaalouk, *Women: A Preliminary Report*, Labor Information System Project (Cairo: CAPMAS, 1990).

(4) See for example: Nader Fergany, «Access to Primary Education in Egypt: Types and Determinants,» (Cairo: UNICEF, 1993), and Nadia Gamal Eddin, «Educational Needs of Illiterate Rural Women,» (Cairo: UNICEF, September, 1989) (in Arabic).

Only one recent study exists which deals with rural reproductive morbidity⁽⁵⁾. Recently, a women's health comprehensive book was published to publicize important health formation through an empowerment perspective⁽⁶⁾.

Law

Research in this area is also restricted. Most existing studies are information-oriented, aimed at informing women of their existing legal rights. A few studies advocate change in personal status laws from within a liberal interpretation of Shari'a⁽⁷⁾. Very few studies attempt to investigate gender discrimination in law implementation⁽⁸⁾.

Politics

A few studies dealt with women's political interest groups, women participation in the nationalist movement, political challenges facing women and the impact of state feminism on women's status.

Society

Perhaps this is the most researched area, i.e., women social position in society and in the family. Topics vary, but we notice areas of concentration such as the position of women in the family, the phenomenon of the veil, social position of urban and rural women, survival strategies of poor women, impact of male labor migration on women's position and status, etc.

2 - Research Paradigms

Research on women in Egypt adopts either explicitly or implicitly a modernization perspective, either in its functionalist or political-economy approaches. The main assumptions of modernization theory relate to an evolutionary process through time that will move women from the realm of traditional roles embedded in traditional society to modern roles through the processes of education, participation in the modern sector of the economy, and in the modern political system, etc. Development strategies as means of

(5) Huda Zurayk [et. al.]. «A Community Study of Gynecological and Related Morbidities in Rural Egypt.» *Studies in Family Planning*, vol.24, no.3 (May/June 1993), and Saneya Saleh, «Maternal Mortality in Menoufia: A Study of Reproductive Age Mortality.» (Cairo: AUC, Social Research Center, 1987).

(6) Nadia Ramsis Farah [ed.], *Women's Lives and Health* (Cairo: The Cairo Women's Health Book Collective, Dar Sina for Publications, 1991) (in Arabic).

(7) See for example: Aziza Hussein, «Recent Amendments to Egypt's Personal Status Law.» in: Elizabeth Warnock Fernea [ed.], *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1985); The Communication Group for the Enhancement of the Status of Women in Egypt, *Legal Rights of Egyptian Women in Theory and Practice* (Cairo: n.d.) (in Arabic), and Mohammed Nowaihi, «Changing the Law on Personal Status within a Liberal Interpretation of Shari'a.» in: Cynthia Nelson and Klaus Friedreich Koch [eds.], *Law and Social Change in Contemporary Egypt*, vol.2, Monograph 4, 2nd edition (Cairo: AUC, Cairo Papers in the Social Sciences, 1983).

(8) See: Amira Bahey Eddin, *A Study of the Phenomenon of Women and Violence: Violence and Counter-Violence* (Cairo: UNICEF, November 1993) (in Arabic), and Malak Zaalouk, «Violence in the Family: The Case of Wife Battering in Egypt.» *Sociological Review* (in Arabic).

modernization, especially through industrialization, are considered to be the vehicle for women liberation. Integration in the modern economy and other modern state structures, is perceived as a crucial means for changing the perceptions, the traditions and roles of women in society. Both the functionalists and the political economists adhere to this notion of modernization as vehicle for liberation and gender equality.

Accordingly, progress in the status of women hinges on ending women's seclusion within the homes, and their integration in the public sphere. This has led to the adoption in most women's studies of the famous dichotomy between the private/female - public/male domains as a major analytical tool to describe actual positions and measure change in women's status.

Furthermore, modernization theories assume that the integration of women in the public sphere will lead automatically to changes in family relations. Modern education and work in the modern sector are assumed to give women economic independence, change their traditional cultural perceptions and enable them to renegotiate their relations within society and the family towards more equality and democracy.

Most research on women in Egypt revolves around the testing of this hypothesis. Indications that integration in the public sphere does not lead automatically to changes in family relations towards gender equality, nor to changes in traditional cultural perceptions about rigid gender roles are explained as anomalies that can be referred to the dominance of a traditional culture, or the dominance of religion. Culture becomes thus the focus of most research on obstacles to improvement in women's status in Egypt, especially in reference to the position of women in Islam.

The dominance of the modernization perspective has led to a proliferation of descriptive research, especially sociological and anthropological studies which describe roles of women through the private/public dichotomy. The majority of this kind of research does not even list explicitly its theoretical assumptions. However, some studies, while perhaps not stating their theoretical assumptions, have grappled with the constraints preventing the process of modernization from achieving, if not gender equality, at least improvements in the status of women, commensurate with the degree of Egyptian socio-economic development.

Modern education is seen as the key for the modernization of women and the improvement of their status. While research in this areas is very restricted, researchers have noticed that women's education has lagged noticeably behind males. High illiteracy rates (62% of women over the age of 15) and lower enrollment rates for females in schools have been pointed out by re-

searchers. Causes of this lack of educational achievement are explained by the dominance of traditional economic and cultural factors in the rural areas, which discriminate against females' education, such as poverty, child labor or fear of shame⁽⁹⁾. However, these studies do not explain, why at the same level of poverty and economic need, females are discriminated against compared to males. The explanation by the dominance of traditional cultural beliefs may describe the fact of gender inequality in education but not the reasons or causes for their perpetuation in a so-called modernizing society.

More damaging are the indications in the available literature that education as such is not a means to change traditional cultural attitudes and beliefs concerning women.

A study on the phenomenon of veiling between university students and university graduates' women workers⁽¹⁰⁾, reveals rigid traditional perceptions and small variations in perceptions and cultural beliefs concerning gender roles between the veiled and the non-veiled. For example 67% of non-veiled working women and 63% of the veiled believe that the most suitable professions for women are teaching and medicine; 50% of the whole sample both veiled and unveiled believe that men are superior to women and around 75% of the veiled and 58% of the non-veiled believe that the main role of education for females is to train them for their expected roles as good wives and mothers.

It seems that the modernization theory's assumption that modern education leads to changes in perceptions of gender roles is not tenable in the case of Egypt. However, no research has, to the extent of our knowledge, examined the reasons of this failure.

The second assumption of the prevailing modernization theory relates to the integration of women in the labor market. Again evidence from the existing literature points out that the process of modern economic development in Egypt has failed to integrate women in the modern, formal sector of the economy. Available information indicates that women's economic activity rates did not exceed 9.2% in 1986, and that half of the active females are illiterate. Unemployment reaches 25% compared to only 10% for males. 56% of working women are concentrated in the services sector, and only 10% are

(9) See: Nadia Gamal Eddin and Mohammed Said Heikal, «Educational Needs of Illiterate Rural Women,» a study prepared for UNICEF/ Cairo, September 1989 (in Arabic), and Nader Fergany, «Evaluation of Women's Education in Egypt,» (Cairo: Al-Mishkhat, October 1993) (in Arabic).

(10) Zeinab Abdel-Meguid Radwan [ed.], *The Phenomena of Veiling in Universities: The Religious Dimension in the Phenomenon of Veiling Between Women Workers*, Report II (Cairo: The National Center for Sociological and Criminological Studies, 1984) (in Arabic).

in manufacturing. Working women are also concentrated in a few occupations such as technical and scientific occupations (especially teaching and nursing) and clerical positions. In manufacturing, half of the working women in this sector are concentrated in the textiles industry and most of them work only in one occupation that of sewing and embroidery⁽¹¹⁾.

Explanations of the failure of development and modernization process, to integrate women in the modern sector of the economy refer mostly to factors of gender discrimination, within the home and at work.

In a report to USAID, on the economic participation of Egyptian women and its implications for labor force creation and industrial policies, the authors argue that in the late seventies and early eighties, the shortages of male labor did not encourage employers to hire more female labor. This was noticed to hold true, regardless of the existence of a large female labor supply as can be gauged from job applications for available positions. The constraints to female employment seem to be: the unreliable performance by hiring more women from the point of view of the employers. Lack of formal educational qualifications, the employers' belief that women are an unstable labor force and the higher costs contingent on hiring female labor (due to the legal paid leaves of absence for pregnancy and child care), are some of the causes which prevent women's employment. The authors argue that statistics show that many women continue to work after marriage and that they are a stable labor force. They ask for a relaxation of the required educational qualifications, especially that illiteracy is very high for women and that the formal education requirements are not necessary for the performance of job requirements. The authors recognize the problems of the double roles of women, which may result in female absenteeism and thereby lower productivity⁽¹²⁾.

Malak Zaalouk in her study of the employment conditions of women in the formal sector states that the employment of women is a function of adopted development strategies. In addition three major issues impact on women's employment: job segregation, discrimination and role conflict which lead to inferior power status and rewards in the labor market.

Zaalouk seems to point to the fact that the open door and structural adjustment policies are leading to a marked deterioration of women's positions in the labor market and that the conditions of women's work are expect-

(11) Nadia Ramsis Farah, «Arab Women and Work: The Current Situation and Development Requirements.» no.18 (UNESCWA: Series on Arab Women in Development, August, 1992) (in Arabic).

(12) Hanna Papanek and Barbara Ibrahim, «Economic Participation of Egyptian Women: Implications for Labor Force Creation and Industrial Policy.» (Cairo: USAID, August, 1981).

ed to worsen further with withdrawal of the state from providing employment, resulting in more discrimination against women.

While Zaalouk adopts a political economy approach towards women employment, she has tried to incorporate measures of gender discrimination and inequality in her analysis and to assess the impact of changing political-economic policies on gender inequality and discrimination. However, the most disturbing results in her field work relate to the traditional values and attitudes towards gender roles as expressed by working women themselves. 84.4% of males and 78% of working females believe that women with younger children should abstain from work; 88% of males and 83% of females believe that women should not work if there are no economic imperatives. More damaging is the fact that 51% of the total female population do not express any desire to work outside the home⁽¹³⁾.

The same attitudes are even more pronounced for poor, uneducated urban women who are mostly employed in the informal sector of the economy. The results of a recent preliminary survey on work and poverty conditions of urban women, indicate a high rate for female headed households (29%) which is higher than the national average of (18%), and a female economic activity rate of 27%, mostly in the informal sector. Women heads of households were seen to be if not as equally conservative as male heads, to be even more conservative than women in general, in terms of their adherence to rigid gender roles. The majority believe that the main cause for women to work is economic necessity, that women with small children should not work, that working women participating in the family budget should not have a say in how the budget is spent, that males are superior to females and that women have to obey their husbands⁽¹⁴⁾.

As for women's integration in the political system, as premised by the modernization theory, one study demonstrates clearly that even the minority of elite women who form a marginal part of the political system exhibit the same traditional attitudes and beliefs concerning rigid gender roles. Elite business women express the opinion that women holding public offices have less power than men. Political women disagree and think they exercise more power than women who exercise influence through their husbands. In fact, the study concludes that while elite women have earned the right to own and

(13) Malak Zaalouk, *Employment of Women: Conditions of Work* (Cairo: CAPMAS, Labour Information System Project, December, 1990).

(14) Nader Fergany (principal investigator), «Preliminary Results of the Survey,» paper presented to the workshop on Urban Women, Work and Poverty Alleviation in Egypt sponsored by Al-Mishkhat and UNICEF /Cairo, January 10-11, 1994.

(15) Earl L. Sullivan, *Women in Egyptian Public Life* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

operate a business, or hold a public office, they did so without gross violations of social roles; i.e., expected gender roles⁽¹⁵⁾.

Anthropological, social and cultural studies document extensively the existence of two separate and differentiated social spheres in Egypt: the private/female and the public/male. Rigid gender roles and a sexual division of labor are symptoms of such differentiation, even when women are partially integrated in modern institutions. The family institution is still traditional, built on unequal power relations and different even if complementary rights and duties.

Andrea Rugh in her study of the family in contemporary Egypt, explains the persistence of the traditional family structure as an outcome of a corporate society which curbs individuality and stresses the complementarity of roles. The family is hierarchical. Sex roles within the family are rigid: males are the breadwinners, women are responsible for the children and the household. This kind of family is based on male dominance versus female accommodation and male authority versus female obedience. Women gain status through their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Employment of women is not a measure of higher status, in reality it might be a measure of economic need and the inability of males to care for their families. While women in their traditional roles can be overworked, physically abused, suffering from restricted rights and denied free movement, they still have some advantages derived from their traditional roles within the family. Women control the organization of the domestic domain and financial dispersals a good part if not all the day. They are the main forces in communication between the households. They control those things most valued by men, i.e., sex, honor, children, and a well organized household. Rugh explains the reluctance in Egypt to modify the family status laws by the fear of the reformers to destabilize society. The argument against equality within the family is that it will reduce the spouses' dependence on each other, consequently reducing their very need for marriage and family life⁽¹⁶⁾.

The above characterization of the Egyptian family, and the dependent status of women is reiterated through multiple anthropological studies relying on women's individual histories, or on field-work research of the household dynamics⁽¹⁷⁾.

While some anthropological studies might conclude that unequal gender

(16) Andrea B. Rugh, *Family in Contemporary Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 1988) third printing.

(17) See for example: Marileen Van Spijk, Hoda Fahmy and Sonja Zimmermann, *Remember to be Firm: The Histories of Three Egyptian Women* (Leiden/Cairo: State University of Leiden, 1982); Unni Wikan, *Life Among the Poor in Cairo* (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1980); Evelyn Aleene Early, «Kinship, Friendship, and Activity Networks in the Life of a Baladi Woman,» paper presented to the workshop on Family and Kinship, November 27-30, 1976, and Nayra Atiya, *Khul-Khal: Five Egyptian Women Tell their Stories* (New York, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982).

relations serve the stability of the family and society and that women are not completely deprived of power either as wives or especially as mothers in laws in the rural areas⁽¹⁸⁾, two studies on women and violence demonstrate the other side of the coin, whenever women are seen as disobedient by either the male heads or the predominantly male police and judiciary system.

Malak Zaalouk deals with wife battering. No national statistics exist indicating the exact extent of wife battering in Egypt. However police officers report wife battering as a widespread practice. Many wives file complaints in police station and resort to the courts for cases of wife battering. Wife battering is grounds for divorce in Egypt. However, the police officers and the judges attempt to reconcile husband and wife instead of encouraging women to sue for their rights. A majority of cases end up in reconciliation. If women insist to sue, then the case is brought to the courts. The penalty of wife battering is imprisonment. In reality, very few husbands are imprisoned because of wife battering. A president of the parquet expressed his views, as follows: that while wife battering is spread in Egypt and amongst all social classes, violence against women is usually brought by women on themselves. In his view, men beat their wives due to wife nagging in stressed economic conditions, or because in the absence of migrant husbands wives become adulterous. He also blamed the increased violence against women on women's liberation which leads to rebellious behavior. In all these cases the husband is justified in using violence against the wife, to make her behave⁽¹⁹⁾.

Amira Bahey Eddin, a practicing lawyer, demonstrates through actual cases and crimes reported in the press, the gender bias and different penalties dealt by the judiciary system to crimes within the family. As an illustration, a youth accused of murdering his young sister because she was pregnant out of wedlock received a suspended sentence of one year imprisonment, while a wife accused of beating her husband with a broom received a sentence of six months imprisonment, without suspension. Bahey Eddin argues that deep gender discrimination exists in the judiciary system. While men who commit crimes related to honor are treated lightly by the system, regardless of existing laws; women's crimes are harshly punished especially if these crimes are exercised against the husband or a male relative⁽²⁰⁾.

While the existing literature describes some forms of gender discrimination, only a few attempt to describe strategies to alleviate and very rarely to

(18) See: Andrea Rugh, *ibid*, and Sonja Zimmermann, *The Women of Kafr Al Bahr: A Research into the Working Conditions of Women in an Egyptian Village* (Leiden: State University of Leiden, 1982).

(19) Malak Zaalouk, «Violence in the Family: The Case of Wife Battering in Egypt,» *Sociological Review* (in Arabic).

(20) Amira Bahey Eddin, «A Study of the Phenomenon of Women and Violence: Violence and Counter-Violence,» a study prepared for UNICEF/ Cairo, November, 1993. (in Arabic).

overcome gender inequalities. Two major strategies are usually prescribed by researchers: either to seek means to facilitate the integration of women in the public sphere without altering existing rigid gender roles, or to recommend changes in public policies to ease women's integration in the development process.

To ease the integration of women in the formal economic sector, functionalist-oriented researchers recommend for example to ease the formal educational requirements for available job positions, job-sharing schemes to allow women to accommodate their traditional roles in the household with the requirements of employment in the formal sector, on the job training, etc⁽²¹⁾. Others advocate changes in the personal status laws within the context of Shari'a. These changes are usually minor dealing with increasing the age of children under their mother's custody, or restricting polygamy or the unqualified right of divorce granted to the husband under existing laws. None dares to recommend the secularization of family status laws.

Researchers adopting a political economy approach believe that change in women's status depend on the adoption of a correct development policy leading to real growth and/or state policies favoring women's increased participation in the public sphere.

In more than one research paper, Mervat Hatem has examined the impact of state feminism in Egypt during the sixties on the improvement in women's status through education, integration in the formal sector of the economy, etc. Hatem argues that the adoption of the open door and structural adjustment policies, since the mid-seventies in Egypt, has led to a withdrawal of state feminism, leading thereby to a deterioration in the status of women. The retreat of the state as a social and economic agent of change has resulted in the abandonment of many official commitments to gender equality within or outside the state sector. Hatem argues that this situation created an ideological and political vacuum that was filled by the Islamists' entrepreneurs, local and international capitalist enterprises and institutions. Supported by the state, the Islamists propagated that social mobility depends on self help solutions, commensurate with the privatizing ideals of the new open door policies. To face to rampant inflation and increasing unemployment the Islamists recommended the withdrawal of women from the formal economic sector, modest dress, symbolic dowries and shared dwellings with the in-laws to facilitate marriage in the context of the new economic constraints⁽²²⁾. However,

(21) See: Hanna Papanek and Barbara Ibrahim, *ibid.*

(22) Mervat Hatem, «Privatization and the Demise of State Feminism in Egypt (1977-1990),» in: Pamela Spaar [ed.], *Structural Adjustment and Women in the Third World* (Vienna: NGLS, 1992).

Hatem recognizes that in the heyday of state feminism in the sixties, the state did not attempt to change family status laws, creating thereby an ambiguous situation of contradiction between unequal rights within the family with the legal equality of women granted in the public sphere.

Others, with a strong belief in the evolutionary assumptions of the modernization theory have argued that certain phenomena that might indicate a withdrawal from modernization (such as the spread of the veil in Egypt during the last two decades) are means for further integration of women in the public sphere. Depending on informants, Homa Hoodfar makes the argument that while in the 1920's, upper class Egyptian women removed the veil to participate in public life, the return to the veil in the 1980's was used to increase or maintain women's participation in the labor market, while maintaining the benefits from traditional gender roles (such as economic support by the family male members)⁽²³⁾.

Nadia Youssef, on the other hand explains the failure of modernization to promote changes in women's status commensurate with the stage of socio-economic development, not only in Egypt but in all Muslim society by prevailing cultural ideals. Muslim women's marital, reproductive, educational and occupational behavior must be understood as basic choices made by women themselves, in the context of the combined effects of the tradition of seclusion and exclusion patterns. Seclusion refers to the volitional response of women to resist the forces of social modernity. Women are personally motivated to avoid seeking higher education, economic independence and participation in public life. Exclusion on the other hand refers to the sanctioned prohibitions and limitations imposed by males. According to Youssef, very few Muslim women feel the need to be self sufficient via education or employment because of the availability of males' economic support as postulated by Islamic Shari'a. Only when males' economic support becomes uncertain, the present structure of control and the prerogatives of the male family members to impose restrictions on women become nebulous⁽²⁴⁾. While not clearly stated, the implicit assumption to engineer change in women's status hinges on changing the predominant culture regarding gender roles and necessitates changes especially in family status laws.

(23) Homa Hoodfar, «Return to the Veil: Personal Strategies and Public Participation in Egypt,» in: Nanette Redclift and M.Thea Sinclair [eds.], *Working Women: International perspectives on Labour and Gender Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1991).

(24) Nadia H.Youssef, «Women's Status and Fertility in Muslim Countries of the Middle East and Asia,» a paper presented at the symposium on: Women's Status and Fertility around the World, sponsored by the American Psychological Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, August 30 - September 3, 1974.

Other researchers consider the impact of external variables, changing the family structure as a means for changing women's status. The phenomenon of large scale male labor migration in the seventies and eighties had clearly affected the Egyptian family structure in terms of the division of labor, patterns of communication, authority and decision-making processes within the family. Research on the impact of male migration on women's status reveal contradictory patterns. Migration hastened the formation of nuclear families in the rural areas. Rural women assumed more work and more responsibilities in managing existing economic assets and cash flows through the remittances. They assumed decision making powers and complete responsibility and authority over the children in the case where husbands have charged their wives with the management of the family and family resources during their absences. In certain cases, women were forced to seek employment outside of the household to manage the family budget. However, in cases where husbands relegated the management of family affairs to other male family members, women's status did not change, if it did not actually worsen. Women were forced to return to their own families or to remain under the tutelage of their in-laws without much say in their own family affairs⁽²⁵⁾.

Fatma Khafagy stated that the women left behind by migrant males acquired new power through their added responsibilities. The increased work load and added responsibilities, increased women's influence within the family, measured by the new decisions women had to make. This led to a change in relationships within the family, increased interaction with the community and a new self image. Women's control of earned income helped break down male dominance and equalized power between husband and wife. The migration of men also changed the division of labor within the family. Women were also involved in the decision of the husband to migrate. Changes were noticed in parent-child relationship. Women had to renegotiate their roles from care and nurture to roles of authority and discipline. This change in roles resulted in child mother confrontations, but women managed after a certain period of time (around three months) to establish their position of authority over children, especially males. More indicative is the more active participation of women in the public sphere. Women had to deal with governmental institutions (such as the agricultural cooperatives), however, they were complaining from gender discrimination on the part of officials with whom they were forced to deal with. While male migration increased, wom-

(25) See: Fatma Khafagy, «Women and Labor Migration: One Village in Egypt.» *Merip Reports* (June 1984); Hind Aboul Seoud Khattab and Sayda Greiss El Daeif, «Impact of Male Migration on the Structure of the Family and the Roles of Women.» *Regional Papers*, The Population Council, no.16, March 1982.

en's participation, levels of decision-making and ownership of property remained the prerogative of males⁽²⁶⁾.

While male migration from the rural areas seems to indicate some measure of women's empowerment, a study on the impact of male labor migration on the structure of the family and women left behind in the city of Cairo, found out contrary indications to the above thesis.

According to the results of a field study, Zaalouk argues that male emigration in the urban areas, has often caused greater marginalization and seclusion of women. Wives of affluent immigrants became more secluded and dependent on external labor for the household. Many of the women left behind, reverted to the protection of the extended family. To ascertain their sexual purity, they restricted their movements. They also did not participate in the decision-making process and their relations with their children became more strained due to the change in the mother's roles. These women complained of higher emotional stress, although they confessed to better relations with migrant husbands. The absence of the husband alleviated situations of friction and conflict⁽²⁷⁾.

The major research question, concerning the change in women's status under the influence of male migration, in the case where such migration resulted in women's empowerment, was the sustainability of the new roles assumed by women in the absence of the male-head of the household. No in-depth survey has been undertaken to elicit the degree of women's independence and participation in decision-making processes after the return of the migrant males. However, some indications in the literature suggest that the majority of women resumed their traditional roles while the male returnees have reassumed their authority roles, without much lasting change on women's status⁽²⁸⁾.

Most research has indicated the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and the persistence of gender discrimination, regardless of the pace of modernization. Cultural studies illustrate some of the mechanisms of reproduction and perpetuation of unequal gender relations. While not addressing themselves directly to the problem of gender inequalities, research on women's images in the media reveal the perpetuation of the portrayal of traditional gender roles. An investigation of women's images

(26) See: Fatma Khafagy, *ibid*.

(27) Malak Zaalouk, «The Impact of Male Labor Migration on the Structure of the Family and Women left Behind in the City of Cairo», *Al-Haq*, vol.2,3, Year 16 (1985). (in Arabic).

(28) Heba Nassar, «Integration of Families and Returning Women in Sending-Countries: Exploratory Study», a study sponsored by UNESCWA and UNICEF/ Cairo, December 1993 (in Arabic).

as reported by the press, the radio, the television, and novels especially religious books, report the predominance of the portrayal of traditional gender roles and a rigid sexual division of labor. The media stresses that women's first obligation is the family and the home. Women should always sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of the husband and the children. The preferred and positive qualities of good women are sacrifice, loyalty, trust, love and cooperation. Women expect from their husbands financial support, love, loyalty and interest. Their main duties are reiterated as child bearing and child care, self physical improvement and home improvement, and a submissive behavior regardless of socio-economic status. Inter-familial conflict is usually portrayed as a result of the insubordination of the modern working wife, who cannot accept subordination and seeks independence, or as a result of adulterous behavior or because of conflict between women's work and family obligations⁽²⁹⁾.

Regardless of the adopted research paradigm, the literature indicates the maintenance of rigid gender roles and the continuation of gender discrimination. Through modernization, women in Egypt managed to a certain degree to enter the public sphere, however this did not lead to changes in their status within the family. The rigidity of family gender relations has resulted, contrary to the assumptions of the modernization theory, in the limitation of women's integration in the public sphere. Moreover, women's roles in the public sphere were couched in terms of their traditional roles within the family, i.e., the entry of women to the public sphere did not change unequal family relations, and the subordinate status of women in the family was responsible for the limitation of women's public roles. More alarming, is the fragility of the gains, women have made in their strive to gain equality during this century. The dominance of a conservative ideology, during the last two decades has questioned women's right to work outside the home, challenged the minor changes which were implemented in family status laws, and reiterated the belief in women's inequality and their incapacity to assume the so-called men's roles.

The persistence of gender inequalities and the contradictions between women's rights within the family and in the public sphere are explained as the outcomes of the history of feminism in Egypt and competing political

(29) See: Mustapha Suweif [ed.], *Women's Images in the Media: Study in Content Analysis of Women's Journals* (Cairo: National Center for Sociological and Criminological Studies, 1983) (in Arabic); Mokhtar Al Tohamy, «Evaluation of Media in Relation to Rural Women.» in: Ain Shams Univ., Middle East Research Center, *Proceedings of the International Seminar on Rural Women and Development*. Cairo: December 1-4, 1980 (in Arabic); Awatef Abdel-Rahman, «The Press and Women's Roles in Development in the Sixties and the Seventies.» in: Ain Shams Univ., Middle East Research Center, *ibid* (in Arabic), and Sanaa Al Masry, *Behind the Veil: Islamic Groups Attitudes Towards Women* (Cairo: Dar Sina for Publication, 1989) (in Arabic).

agendas. Margot Badran indicates that there was a feminist agenda in the context of the nationalist movement that emerged in the 1920's which dominated until the fifties. Alongside the nationalist agenda, a socialist agenda emerged in the forties and fifties. In the sixties, the feminist agenda was articulated with the dominant ideology of Arab nationalism. Since the seventies, the feminist agenda was couched within the context of Infitah (open-door policies) and the ascendancy of Islamic fundamentalism, supported by the state.

The competing agendas led to competing discourses around the «women's question» which were about more than women. It has been about gender relations, sexual hegemony and the broader issues of power. It has also been a question through which the state, the religious establishment and Islamic movements have projected other designs. According to Badran, women themselves have helped to formulate the question on their own as feminists and as actors in the Islamic movement. Feminists generated their own terms of debate, situating the women's question in terms of national independence and secularism. Women Islamists have mainly reproduced male discourses. However, women feminists and Islamists, as actors in everyday life have assumed new roles and by so doing redefined the women's question.

The state has generated contradictory discourses and policies regarding the women's question, through different historical phases. It imposed its own agenda and attempted to define the women's question according to its political imperatives. The state has promoted new roles for women out of ideological and pragmatic considerations. At the same time, the state did uphold unequal gender relations and male authority, out of political expediency, not to challenge dramatically the religious institutions or its male constituency. During different periods the state has shifted the terms of the discourse in rhetoric and emphasis. However, the state retained a basic structure of gender inequality which does not ultimately challenge patriarchal relations nor the state's own power bases, regardless of the rhetoric or the dominant ideology.

The resistance of the Islamic establishment to drastic changes in gender relations is understandable. The state dominates the religious establishment. The establishment was powerless to resist the state attempts at secularization. The regulation of family life is the last bastion of official Islam. Populist Islam confronted the state in terms of public policy but kept a very conservative gender ideology. The state, not to be outstaged by the populist Islamic movements, became more conservative in terms of gender relations. Women Islamists joined the ranks of the Islamic movements, while secular

feminists have created the only discourse that insists upon radical changes in existing gender relations⁽³⁰⁾.

The above analysis by Badran opens the field to the examination of the problems facing secular feminism in Egypt, within the larger context of political and social conflict processes and poses the urgent question of the problems encountered by feminism to articulate its agenda and demands as a cohesive political force, not absorbed by other groups' political and social agendas.

3 - Theoretical Approaches

As mentioned above the field is dominated by the modernization theory, either in its functionalist or political economy approaches. However, most research on women in Egypt tries to avoid theoretical issues. Very rarely, theoretical assumptions are clearly stated or critically evaluated. While the literature points clearly to the failure of modernization theory in predicting changes in women's status or in explaining the contradictory and often torturous course of feminism in Egypt, modernization theory especially in its functionalist approach is still not critically questioned. The tendency to blame traditional culture as the main obstacle to modernization, relegates the research question to a black box, where culture is taken as given, enshrined in a religious context that is rarely questioned or openly discussed. As clearly stated by Amal Rassam, the question is not why traditional Islamic culture has been more discriminatory toward women, but the real question which contains policy implications for changing women status, is why Islamic society has been more conservative in its maintenance of old laws and traditions in this area than have other societies⁽³¹⁾.

Most researchers use the public/private framework to explain gender relations, especially in anthropological and sociological research. The adoption of the public/ private framework is mainly descriptive and does not lend itself to an investigation of the causes of variations in women's status. While this research can provide basic information on existing gender relations; its proliferation and dominance result in the dominance of repetitive information. Rassam argues that to take the public /private scheme as given may lead to distortion of data by trying to force it into one or the other category.

(30) Margot Badran, «Competing Agenda: Feminists, Islam and the State in 19th and 20th Century Egypt.» in: Deniz Kandiyoti [ed.], *Women, Islam and the State* (London: MacMillan Academic and Professional LTD, 1991).

(31) Amal Rassam, «Towards a Theoretical Framework for the Study of Women in the Arab World.» Institute of Advanced Studies, unpublished paper (Princeton, New Jersey, February, 1981).

She points out that the real challenge is to try to understand the normative and structural imperatives that produce and reproduce this seeming dichotomy⁽³²⁾.

Development approaches have pointed to the impact of changing development strategies on women's status. However, most of these studies are based on the implicit assumption that changes in women's roles in the public sphere are the key to changes in family relations and gender equality. This assumption has a long history in development theories which link women liberation to a restructuring of the economy and society.

Rarer are the studies which combine the political economy approach with the patriarchy theory. While patriarchal relations are usually pointed to as a main cause of the perpetuation of gender inequality, the forms of articulation between the patriarchal relations and the relations of production are rarely researched or examined. However, these studies attempt at least to explain the genesis and perpetuation of women's subordination by examining the forms of social organization of labor within the household.

Nadia Farah, in this context has attempted to use the social formation approach to explain women's subordination in the Arab countries. She argues that in pre-capitalist formations, relations of production were based on a sexual division of labor. In the context of agricultural societies, labor was the main force of production. Women because of their biological reproductive powers were entrusted with the perpetuation and maintenance of the labor force. In addition women will also perform economic functions which do not contradict their reproductive functions. In order to ensure the labor supply and to extract women's labor surplus value, the pre-capitalist Arab formations subsume women's productive and reproductive labor to males' domination. Such unequal relations were legitimized through a religious ideology, stressing male authority and women's dependence. The capitalist penetration of Arab societies, including Egypt, was distorted and resulted in an uneven process of development. While capitalism dissolved some of the pre-capitalist relations in production, it conserved others among which the traditional gender relations. This has created a dislocation between the modernizing economic structure and the cultural and ideological structure controlling gender relations⁽³³⁾.

However, stressing the systems of control on women's labor by focusing

(32) See: Amal Rassam, *ibid*.

(33) Nadia Ramsis Farah, «Women in Arab Industries,» a paper presented to the UNDP, ESCWA, Arab League sponsored conferences on: Challenges Facing Arab Women in the Nineties, Cairo, April 1990 (in Arabic).

on the gender differentiated relations of production, do not explain totally women's subordination. An analysis of the systems of control of women reproduction and sexuality has to be integrated to the classical notions of relations of production and the sexual division of labor.

Women's research in Egypt has neglected structural theories in the explanation of women's status. While structuralism and neo structuralism have played a major role in shaping social science at large during the last two decades, women's studies have stayed immune to their influence.

The importance of the structural theory in explaining women's status lies in its rich implications for the advance of women's studies. The structural theory depends on the analysis of the dynamic interrelationships between the elements of the economic structure, the political structure and the ideological (cultural) structure. Forms of correspondence and dislocations between the three structures define the specificity of a certain society in the context of the dominant international social formation. The theory as it exists does not deal with gender relations. It remains the job of researchers to adopt this theoretical approach to gender relations which can also explain the specificity of these relations in the context of different societies. Using this theoretical approach might lead to a theoretical formulation able to explain the specific dynamics in Muslim societies in general or in Egypt in particular.

On the other hand we notice the dominance of micro studies in the field, based on participant observation or small scale surveys, with all the problems this method creates in terms of interpretation of results. This state of affairs might be explained by the dominance of anthropological and sociological studies. Very few other social scientists in Egypt have attempted to devote research to gender relations. This is especially the case for economists and political scientists. This has resulted in the fact that most of existing information on women's status in Egypt relies on the results of micro research. Generalizations from the results of such micro research might lead to sweeping generalizations that might not apply in different regions or across socio-economic classes.

Macro studies are few, with the consequence of huge gaps in information based on national levels surveys, or theoretical macro analyses.

4 - Research Gaps

From the survey of the literature we can identify major research gaps that need to be fulfilled in order to advance the state of knowledge in the area of women and gender relations. These research gaps are noticeable in

terms of available data and major problems that have yet to receive adequate attention.

The available data base on women is greatly biased to quantitative data on fertility, nuptiality patterns etc.. This might be due to the importance of the state's population policy. Other available data gives overall measures of economic participation rates, education levels, some measures of health and so on.

Another problem with even available data is its discontinuity, through different points in time, which makes time analysis very difficult, if sometimes impossible. Other problems relate to documentation. Sex differentiated data might exist in the files of different ministries, but no efforts were made to document such data in any consistent way. Some of the areas, where major data gaps exist are the following:

Measures of women's political and public roles

Some of the gaps involve leadership positions in government; women's participation in foreign affairs; women's participation in local government; women entrepreneurs; women in high administrative posts; women in parliament; women as owners of business ventures, etc.

Measures of poverty

Gaps in this area involve income sex differentiated data; women in economic decision making; bank accounts owned by women; credit for women; agricultural land ownership, ownership of different economic assets, etc..

Education

Data gaps in the area of education include sex differentiated attendance rates at all educational levels; drop-out rates by gender; percentage of women in technical schools; percentage of women teachers at all educational levels, etc..

Health

Gender segregated data of illnesses, nutrition, access to medical services, are lacking.

Work

Available data concerns largely women's economic activity rates. Measures of characteristics of women's employment, especially in the informal sector are lacking.

Violence against women

No national data exist on different measures of violence against women.

Those major gaps in data concerning women also indicate major gaps in research on women in Egypt. As we have pointed above, most research in Egypt is micro research. An urgent need is to use macro analysis and to encourage research in the areas which are greatly deprived. Apart from research on women's position in society and the economy, research is very minimal in the area of politics, the law, health, theoretical production, etc.. Even research on women's economic roles is mostly sociological concentrating on women's perceptions of inequalities, women roles etc. No national research is available on the extent of gender discrimination in wages, employment opportunities, career mobility, forms of harassment, etc..

The huge research gaps might be a result of the marginalization of gender studies in social sciences in Egypt. Apart from sociologists and anthropologists, very few other social researchers have approached the area of women and gender. This is very obvious in the case of economists and political scientists.