
How can the domestication of women facilitate understanding of their plight in Egypt?

En quoi la « domestification » des femmes éclaire-t-elle leur situation en Égypte ?

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ema/3495>

DOI: 10.4000/ema.3495

ISSN: 2090-7273

Publisher

CEDEJ - Centre d'études et de documentation économiques juridiques et sociales

Printed version

Date of publication: 10 November 2015

Number of pages: 27-38

ISBN: 9782905838865

ISSN: 1110-5097

Electronic reference

Dalia AbdElhameed, "How can the domestication of women facilitate understanding of their plight in Egypt?", *Égypte/Monde arabe* [Online], 13 | 2015, Online since 10 November 2017, connection on 07 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ema/3495> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ema.3495>

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HOW CAN THE DOMESTICATION OF WOMEN FACILITATE UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR PLIGHT IN EGYPT?

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to address an apparent contradiction relative to the condition of women in Egypt. Health and education indicators for women have shown continuous progress in past decades. Yet over the same period, their lived realities have been marked by a clear deterioration in terms of employment prospects, political representation and participation, as well as their right to be free from violence in both public and private spheres.

This article sheds light on the causes of this paradox, which lie in the emphasis of values connected to the cult of domesticity for women in the post-colonial state of Egypt. I will retrace the roots of this domestication, fostered by the State and celebrated by society, to the Nasserist era. These values were maintained under the different political regimes that followed, and met with an ongoing struggle from feminists and activists who resist these values. This paper situates the relatively recent upsurge in sexual violence against women in the public sphere as a reflection and extension of the gender-based violence that takes place in the private sphere.

It concludes with some prescriptive observations on how to resist that cult of domesticity in our work and activism.

This paper addresses the question of discrepancies between the enhancement of women's educational indicators, life expectancy and fertility rates on one hand, and the shamefully low percentages of female employment and political representation in Egypt, on the other hand. I will emphasize the role of domesticity and unequal relationships in the private sphere, and retrace the roots of these phenomena and their past evolution. The paper ends with the conclusion that the struggle for women's rights in Egypt must address the "cult of domesticity" attached to women, if we hope to achieve a real and fundamental change in gender power dynamics.

THE GENDER PARADOX

In 2004, the World Bank issued a report entitled "Gender and Development in Middle East and North Africa: Women in the Public Sphere." It discussed a peculiar phenomenon related to this region: great advances in the indicators related to women's education, fertility and life expectancy are coupled with unequal participation of women in the labor force and their even lower representation on the political level. The report mentioned, for example, that women's average number of years of schooling in the Middle East and North Africa increased from 0.5 in 1960 to 4.5 in 1999. Low female participation in the labor market was described as a missed opportunity for these countries; the report called this phenomenon "the gender paradox". The social and economic reasons cited as reasons for this phenomenon were the centrality of the family, the imagined role of men as breadwinners, the modesty imposed on women and more importantly, the imbalance between men and women in the private sphere.¹ The last reason is a key factor in understanding this contradiction in women's conditions in the MENA region, and more specifically in Egypt; it remains relevant after the issuing of this report. It is not a novel development and the next section will reveal how over the years, this inequality has not only been rooted in the social level, but also institutionalized by the State.²

1. World Bank, 2004, p. 1, 6, 28, 55, 94, 95.

2. I use female labor force participation as a manifestation of women's role in public life for several reasons. First, women are involved in the informal economy but this should not be equated with formal participation in the labor force, due to the problems of the precarity of informal labor in Egypt and of extremely low wages earned by women in particular, in this field. Second, formal labor participation necessarily requires female presence and activity in the public sphere, whereas informal sector work may be done within the domestic sphere; this is crucial if we are to understand women's presence in the public sphere and account for it. Finally, female labor participation is a reflection of female advancement into decision-making positions, and consequently, reaching the formulation and designing of laws and policies that influence women's lives.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE PRE- AND POST-NASSERITE ERAS

The discourse of early male champions of women's rights in the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Qasem Amin, was centered on advocating for women's education in order to make them better mothers. This domestic shadow has always haunted women's struggles; scholars have consistently highlighted the failure of early Egyptian feminists – and other feminists in the region – to win the battles of the private sphere. Even in the late twentieth century, when intellectual production of feminist knowledge was booming and accelerating through women's journals and magazines, and the importance of women's education and work was being stressed, there were also articles on how women should clean their houses, and be good wives and mothers.³ No matter what gains they were making, whether it was the right to education, the right to vote or the right to participate in public life, all the issues related to the private sphere remained untouched and harder to address. Changing personal status laws, and asserting rights to abortion and bodily autonomy were a taboo.

During the Nasserite era, the State introduced a very perplexing discourse toward women. On the one hand, the regime wanted to depict women as symbols of modernity; the State expanded female education, women gained the right to vote and to run for public office, and they participated heavily in the labor force. The discourse of championing women was omnipresent, and they were incorporated in the national postcolonial discourse as political subjects. Yet on the other hand, the State continued to use the cultural discourse of women and the private sphere. To solve the population problem, the State used a modernist discourse to publicize family planning campaigns and to convince people to opt for smaller families, but when it came to personal status law, which is based on Islamic law, feminists failed miserably to effect change. According to Bier,⁴ this failure was not due to the discourse the feminist movement then used, but to the "normative gender policy" adopted by the State, especially in the realm of the family.

Here, Bier invokes a very important point about the separation between secular and religious/Islamic discourses dealing with women's issues. What should be stressed here is how different discourses have been used and enforced to fulfill the State's and/or society's expectations of women. Thus, the State's adherence to *shari'a* in personal status law is not a form of religiosity as much as it is a tool to maintain specific norms and protect men's gains. Secular feminists argue that selective emphasis on Islamic law was only used with regard to women's rights, and was barely used at all with regard to economic policies, for example. This selective emphasis also treated women's

3. El_Sadda, 2014, p. 4, 6, 7.

4. Bier, 2011, p. 7.

struggles in the region as totally isolated from the broader globalized context and other social struggles.

However, what distinguished the Nasserite era is what Mervat Hatem calls “State feminism,”⁵ by which the State monopolized discourse in the name of women and their rights. This had a great influence on the feminist movement which had previously materialized in civil society organizations and publishing projects only; with this containment attempt, other feminist voices were muffled and the State’s voice alone dominated the scene. The shrinking public space for women in terms of organization and freedom of expression was part of the shrinking political space on all levels, with the abolition of political parties and crackdown on political dissent. We must bear in mind that despite the autocratic regime, the strong Nasserist State delivered tangible changes in women’s lives, especially in education and employment.

This was mirrored both on the levels of the State and of society. It was not just the valorization and the prioritization of female reproductive roles and home chores. More importantly, this tendency to domesticate women was gradually constituted by State discourse, in which it appeared through the years, under different political regimes. In the 1971 Constitution, article 11 stressed the State’s responsibility to advance women’s role in public life in a manner that would allow them to keep a balance between their public engagement and domestic responsibilities. This is an acknowledgement by the State that women are domestic individuals, and that housework and raising children are solely women’s responsibility. Furthermore, it suggests that women’s presence in the public sphere is an exceptional state, which must be excused and justified.

CHANGES IN CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN AND THE NGOS’ STRUGGLES

Intriguingly, that constitutional article survived all subsequent constitutional amendments and found its way into the new Constitutions that have been articulated since then. This just might reassure us on how the State is dealing with the question of women.

What happened when the State let go of the issue? Who then ended up owning public space?

Modernization efforts were translated into high rates of female school enrollment in Egypt. Women made significant strides forward, specifically in higher education and university degrees, but all of this could be understood through the State’s strong grip on society. Once these institutional guarantees for women’s participation faded away and the State’s grip loosened, a sudden decrease in female participation in the labor force was noticeable. This is also

5. Hatem, 1992, p. 231.

partially attributed to the retreat of the public sector starting in the 1970s and to intense waves of privatization during the 1990s. The private sector has usually been more reluctant to recruit women because private employers think recruiting women is a threat to productivity, since women take maternity leave and childcare-related leave. So in other words, women's reproductive role is a disincentive to hiring them in the private sector. In addition, young women, and specifically those from lower social classes, prefer to work in the public sector even if those jobs are not easily attainable or the contracts are temporary. As Ghada Barsoum found in her ethnographic fieldwork on female labor participation during the first decade of the new Millennium, women prefer government posts since they provide much better maternity care system and relatively better work conditions. This compares favorably to the private sector, in which women suffer from unequal pay, excessive workloads and long working hours, not to mention the constant threat of sexual harassment in the workplace which is much more widespread in the private sector.⁶ Moreover, the Demographic and Health Survey suggests that after marriage, women are pressured to have children early: 39% of women who have ever been married think it is appropriate to use a family planning method after having their first child, while only 2% believe it is appropriate for women to use contraception before their first pregnancy.⁷ This pressure to have a first child right after marriage definitely affects women's opportunities in the labor market and hinders them in the accumulation of work experience, compared to their male counterparts.

On the political level, the State has always reserved all cabinet posts, and positions of power – such as that of governor – for men. An insignificant number of women have been appointed at high levels, always to specific ministerial portfolios, to the extent that ministries such as the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs or the Ministry of Social Solidarity are relatively feminized. No woman was ever appointed to a key ministerial position in Foreign Affairs, the Interior, Defense and Finance. Even in the early days after the January 2011 revolution, the new draft Constitution initially only recognized men's right to run for President. This was later changed in the formal draft put to a referendum in March 2011, to allow both men and women to run.

This male monopoly on higher positions is orchestrated by the State, but also embraced and praised by the general public. On March 8, 2011, feminist organizations and individuals organized a march from the Press Syndicate to Tahrir Square on International Women's Day. I attended this march; the focus was mostly on the demand for prioritizing women's rights after the revolution and for gender equality, specifically after women's massive participation in the uprising. As the march reached Tahrir Square, groups of men started to

6. Barsoum, 2010, p. 78, 79.

7. EDHS, 2008, p. 68, 69.

attack the men and women in the march claiming that they were devilish women supported by gay men, that women do not have the right to run for President, and they should stay at home and stick to their jobs as mothers and housewives. These men even kept pointing to a fully veiled woman, saying she is the model of the Egyptian woman; she is the figure of the martyr's mother. So to these men, the only role allowed for women in this revolution is to be mothers; martyrdom is for men.

With the development of the Egyptian State, the feminist movement has also evolved toward a state of NGO-ization. The term, coined by Islah Jad,⁸ denotes the huge tendency within the movement to form NGOs during the 1980s and 1990s, and how became the dominant trend, instead of it being a grassroots movement, connected to people as a social movement should be. Jad criticized these NGOs for isolating women's issues in women's organizations and, thus doing, decontextualizing women's rights from the bigger picture of the struggle, leading to what he described as a failure to mobilize or organize and to the limitation of activities to advocacy or education. One might agree with some of Jad's critique, especially the temporality of some NGOs' projects, but it should not be generalized. Moreover, we should not discredit women's and feminist NGOs or consider their roles were minor just because they were functioning under authoritarian regimes.

In Egypt specifically, feminist and women's NGOs managed to address many sensitive issues that had remained out of reach until then. It was the women's rights and feminist organizations who first engaged with problems occurring in the private sphere. The long-term struggles of NGOs played a pivotal role in changing the personal status law in 2000 to include *khol'a*, winning women the right to initiate a divorce if they return their dowries, wedding gifts and give up all material claims on their husbands.⁹ And all this happened when the political scene was very weak under Mubarak's authoritarian rule and the state of emergency. It is a debatable gain, but it definitely is a gain – and in a very thorny area.

The battle for the criminalization of female circumcision is another example of the successes of NGOs. In 2004, NGOs won another battle for the amendment of the nationality law. The law was changed to allow Egyptian women who are married to non-Egyptians, to transmit their nationality to their children.¹⁰ After years of fighting embedded norms and being accused of adopting a Western agenda, and being spies and agents of the West, these NGOs managed to force the Egyptian government to amend the law to criminalize female circumcision in 2008. NGOs like the New Woman Foundation and El-Nadim were among the first to discuss issues of domestic violence, incest and marital rape. Specifically, these two organizations were among the

8. Jad, 2004.

9. Al Awan, 2008.

10. SIS, 2013.

first to conduct studies on this overlooked issue. Moreover, El-Nadim provided access to shelters, psychological support and rehabilitation for survivors of domestic violence. A few years ago, El-Nadim proposed a comprehensive draft law to combat domestic violence from a feminist and rights-based approach. Unfortunately, the text never made its way through Parliament to become law.¹¹

THE EXTENSION OF VIOLENCE FROM THE PRIVATE SPHERE TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In the years preceding the January 25, 2011 uprising, levels of violence against women in the public sphere increased exponentially. This phenomenon was first detected during the Eid festivities in 2005 and 2006. Groups of young men were seen encircling young girls and women in the street, and starting to forcefully strip them, grope their genitalia, and sexually harass and assault them. This was very soon after the May 25, 2005 State attacks on female political dissidents protesting against constitutional amendments during the Mubarak era. That day, the authorities hired thugs to attack and sexually assault female protesters. Many incidents of collective and State-sponsored violence have occurred since then. The severity of these attacks and incidents has further intensified since the January 25, 2011 uprising; female protesters have repeatedly been subjected to a barbaric form of mob sexual assaults by groups of men, which have reached the extent of knife rapes.¹² Another significant development is the practice of so-called “virginity testing,” in which the army subjected a number of women who had been arrested during the forcible dispersal of a March 2011 sit-in in Tahrir Square, to forced virginity tests. To defend this action and justify these procedures, an army officer declared to CNN that “The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square.”¹³ The mere presence of these women in the street was reason enough to cast doubt upon their morality. Similar discourse was used during the Ultras (organized football fans) sit-in protest of April 2012, in the vicinity of the Cabinet building: the football fans rejected the presence of women in the sit-in at night, saying it would make it easier for the media to defame the whole struggle, alleging boys and girls were spending the night together in tents, having sexual intercourse.

11. El-Nadim's draft law on domestic violence is available here: http://alnadeem.org/files/draft_law_violence_against_women_ar.pdf.

12. Zaki & Abd El-Hameed, 2014.

13. Langohr, 2013.

Social scientists and gender specialists have long contemplated the root causes of these social ills. The next section will review some of the reasons they have considered.

Domestication of Public Space

This is based on the assumption that in States like Egypt where the State is not able to penetrate or alter social norms or power dynamics in society,¹⁴ norms of the private sphere spontaneously make their way to the public sphere, so the same power relationships are transferred to it, even though the lived realities in the public sphere may be otherwise.¹⁵ Describing Egypt as a “weak state” does not nullify the authoritarian character of the ruling regime. This domestication allows men of whatever age or class to sexually harass women even if they look wealthier, more educated, or better-connected than them. This phenomenon of domestication might also explain a very common scene on Egyptian streets: that of a man beating a woman in broad daylight, with no apparent reason, and if anyone wishes to intervene, people prevent them from doing so by saying the woman is the attacker’s wife. This translates to him having the right to discipline her physically.

The explanation from the field of gender studies also resonates with Asef Bayat’s explanation of the transformation of the public sphere in cities like Cairo, Tehran, Jakarta and others. In these neo-liberal cities, people extend their private lives to the urban street.¹⁶ Asef Bayat has primarily focused on persons who are outside institutional umbrellas like housewives, street vendors and street children. Yet his analysis in terms of cities being turned inside out, could inspire us to reflect more about the consequences of this domestication of the public sphere – in other words, how the values of the private sphere are exported to the street, so the city becomes a home and citizenship is dissolved, while the superiority of men is maintained, as it is within the family.

Salwa Ismail cites failed hegemonic masculinity¹⁷ as a reason for lower-class men’s persistent view of women as inferior, as well as their patrolling of women and denial of any public role to them. Salwa Ismail captures feelings such as the frustrations men experience in Egypt due to their inability to play the role of sole breadwinner, and their crushing sense of inferiority to police officers, in what she calls “injured masculinity”.¹⁸ The concepts Ismail uses to interpret lower-class men’s perceptions of women and their value are not limited to this class, since many of these perceptions prevail across classes. This does not mean dismissal of class as a category of analysis; it is an

14. Zaki & Abd El-Hameed, 2014.

15. Scott & Keates, 2004.

16. Bayat, 2013, p. 13.

17. Hegemonic masculinity is the concept of male dominance and women’s subordination, based on the male breadwinner role and the female reproductive and sexual role.

18. Ismail, 2006, p. 96, 97, 108, 109, 120.

attempt to understand men's perceptions of women's entitlements in Egypt, especially now that media outlets tend to spread reductionist discourses justifying violence against women and disbelief in gender equality by presenting them as endemic to the lower classes. Ismail's contention might invite us to adopt a broader apprehension of hegemonic masculinity in Egypt, not limited to a specific class but actually transmitted to others, leading to the prevalence of the notion that women are not entitled to pursue a career or earn a living, even when they still earn less than their male partners.

This historical review reaffirms the fact that women do not own public space in Egypt, and more importantly, that this mirrors the power dynamics in the private sphere. Women do have the right to go to school, to work, to run errands but they are not widely recognized as having the right to occupy street corners as men do. Hence, women's presence in public space places them in a state of exceptionality which always has to be justified: "I am going to school," "I am picking up my children," "I am doing the grocery shopping," etc. Women do not have the "right to loiter," as Indian scholars put it.¹⁹

Some believe the unprecedented levels of violence against women during the Egyptian revolution have been an expected backlash to the unprecedented participation of women in the public sphere. Yet more importantly, the revolution also represented a unique moment in the struggle for women's rights. First of all, we should view women's right to participate in shaping the future of their country through protests, strikes and the uprising as the most precious political right since it is related to grassroots activism and not merely something bestowed upon them by the State, that could easily be demolished. Women have also organized themselves, along with groups of men, to resist the sexual violence they face in the public space. The emergence of these groups has been the real manifestation of the revolution within the domain of women's rights. These groups have tried to replace the absent security forces by volunteering to get women out of the "circles of hell" of mob sexual assault. Many of them have also engaged in awareness-raising activities and worked on sexual violence in other sites like the subway, schools or universities. Their groundbreaking work, along with the long struggle of women's rights NGOs, has helped articulate a revolutionary discourse that contributed to ending the long-standing practice of denial on the part of both the State and society, especially concerning sexual violence issues.

Their work has also been relatively helpful in invalidating the prevailing habit of blaming victims of sexual violence, since many survivors of these attacks have talked to the media shamelessly, expressing the idea that it is perpetrators who should be ashamed, not survivors. Moreover, these struggles have facilitated the realization of a long-awaited change in the laws related to

19. Rande, Khan & Phadke, 2009.

sexual violence. The modification of this legal framework is partial, yet it has been celebrated as a step forward and an example of bottom-up change.

In the aftermath of the June 30, 2013 events, militarization and the shrinking of public space for activism have limited the ability of these groups to flourish and form a nucleus for a real grassroots movement. This has also restricted their potential for revolutionizing the feminist consciousness.

Nevertheless, there have been gains that are difficult to roll back. Most importantly, the activism of women's rights groups and collectives resisting sexual violence has imposed a minimum level of political correctness on the mobilized critical mass who have participated actively in the revolution, and who are still active in social media circles. This critical mass would now criticize any reactionary discourse regarding women that may appear in the media or in any other institutions. In other words, they now play the role of a pressure group responsible for adjusting discourse, a role that had always been played, less successfully, by feminist and women's rights NGOs in the past. This change was evidenced in the public denunciation of a statement by Cairo University President Gaber Nassar. Following a mob sexual harassment incident on the university campus in March 2014, Nassar announced the university would investigate the incident and punish those who were found to be in the wrong, whether it was the girl or the perpetrators. Angry reactions to this statement from broad circles of activists and different groups obliged the University President to apologize for presenting the victim as possibly responsible for her assault. Similar incidents have echoed this example, confirming there has been a paradigm shift in the gender consciousness of the broader revolutionary groups.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of feminist struggle in Egypt, issues pertaining to the private sphere remained relatively deprioritized, while the battles for other rights were dominant instead; this has been the case from the right to vote to the recent battles against sexual violence against women in the public sphere. Even when women's issues within the private sphere have been picked up, the struggles over them have been much harder and the victories smaller and less effective. One example of this is the fight to criminalize female circumcision and the attempts to criminalize domestic violence.

The priority in the next phase should be further sensitizing this critical mass to gender and women's issues, especially regarding their value systems related to the private sphere. The young men and women in this critical mass might not adopt a fully progressive perception of women's rights, but at least they are willing to question their convictions. Deeply-rooted gender stereotypes, especially those related to the private sphere, need to be shaken if we are to pursue a real change in women's conditions of life in Egypt. Meaningful progress in

this regard and the achievement of substantive equality will entail moving beyond the conditional rights to education and to work, to a more comprehensive, deeper belief in all of women's rights, and ending the conditionality according to which women may work only if they have already succeeded as housewives. The problem with this "cult of domesticity" is that it is used to discredit women's professional and political entitlements by only valorizing their domestic and reproductive role. Enhancing gender equality in the public sphere cannot be achieved without tackling inequality rooted in the private sphere, so that we will no longer turn on the radio on any given day and find a debate on women's right to work and how this would affect them as mothers and their relationships with their husbands as the sole breadwinners.

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