

Breaking Down Stereotypes of Egyptian Women: Examining Traditional Private versus Western Influenced Public Gender Roles

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Western feminists are encouraging Woman's Rights in Egypt. Stereotypes of Muslim women as passive and without agency are outdated. Access to Western education and gender ideology have opened up public roles for women in Egypt. Gender, class, and religion intersect to frame Egyptian women's lives. Elite Egyptians are well-educated career women who participate as citizens and activists while poor women struggle to feed their families. The social unrest in Egypt has turned Western feminists toward Egyptian Women's Rights but the elite bias leads to conflicting goals and strategies. This literature review seeks to fill the gap in scholarship between Egyptian and Western feminists by helping them understand the traditional, and often stereotyped, gendered roles and expectations of Egyptian girls and women.

Key Terms: Egypt, Gender, Feminism, Woman's Rights, Tradition, Public and Private Roles

Introduction

Many have heard of Egypt's 2011 so-called "Twitter Revolution" but do not realize many of the millions of Egyptians protesters were women, some in public for the very first time. Social media, graffiti, and protest signs written in English with #Jan25 in an effort to draw global attention to the people's plight. Western feminists are now concerned with Egyptian Women's rights; a survey of the *New York Times* in November 2013 shows a minimum of four articles a week focusing on Egyptian women. The protesters in Tahrir Square, Cairo were as varied as the Egyptian population. Images live from Tahrir showed women in business suits, T-shirts and jeans, and the traditional Muslim hijab with or without veils. Social media was instrumental in showing women as agents rather than the stereotype of Muslim women as passive. This literature review puts Egyptian Women's Rights in context for concerned Western feminists.

Gender determines proper roles in Egypt, but these roles vary for women of different classes. While some Egyptian women remain restricted to traditional private roles of daughter, wife, and mother,

others have established public roles as professional working women and citizen activists (De Koning 2009, Dawoud 2012). The education system has exposed Egyptian women to Western ideas of oppression and resistance, women's rights, and women as citizen activists for social and political change (Ghonim 2012). Social media has allowed these elite women to reach out directly to Western feminists thereby learning new networking and social movement tactics. The common Western belief that Egyptian gender roles are static must be abolished.

Western influence, in the academic sense, can include Europe, Australia, and/or the United States, depending on who authored the study (Wiktorowicz 2001). The American University of Cairo brings scholars from the West and Middle East together with a curriculum geared toward the modernization, globalization, and Westernization of Egypt. Other elites are educated in universities across Europe and the U.S. I use Western influence to mean strictly the U.S. to honor the current Egyptian meaning and to establish my location as an American feminist social

movement scholar who is limited to Middle Eastern scholarship published in English.

This literature review looks at the intersection of class and gender, and the resulting effects on girls and women. First, I discuss the Egyptian economic class structure which largely determines gendered expectations for women. Next, I will use the literature to shed light on the limited traditional gender roles available to poor Egyptian women. The final section discusses how Western ideologies have facilitated changing gender roles for some women. These women have established public roles which are generally ignored by Western stereotypes of Egyptian women. This literature review links Western and Egyptian feminists by helping them understand the traditional, and often stereotyped, gendered role expectations of Egyptian girls and women.

Egyptian Class: Elite versus Street

Egypt is a divided society known in the Arab world as “elite versus street” (Sherbiny 2005). The elite are Western-educated, literate in English, and hold high status jobs in transnational corporations, the military, parliament, and/or government (Ghonim 2012). Elite women are able to vote, work in transnational corporations, teach in universities and participate as citizen activists (De Koning 2009). Women of the street class are not allowed to vote, hold leadership positions, or work for pay (Oh 2010). Most street class women labor long hours at family owned subsistence enterprises; this is considered service to the family not work. The capitalist wage economy dominates the formal urban economy yet the urban slums rely on an informal economy through their social networks while rural Egypt remains pre-industrial (Hafez 2011). The street class is

widely dispersed across the nation, but the elite are concentrated in a few gated communities outside Cairo and Alexandria.

Elite men have benefitted from decades of nepotism, corruption, and concentrated wealth (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2013). In the 1970’s Egypt was encouraged by the U.S to rid itself of socialism. The U.S. and Egyptian militaries worked to remove the socialist party and instilled Gamal Nasser as dictator. Nasser died but his successor, Anwar Sadat, hastily sold off state production assets at fire-sale prices to the military generals of the day. Generals became capitalist producers and ministers in the administration. Upward mobility is not a possibility.

The elite/street divide has consequences for girls’ life opportunities. Elite families believe in gender equality - the Western notion that men and women should be treated equally, including education through the university level (Dancer and Rammohan 2007). Men of the street class legally treat women as property without rights or even thoughts (Oh 2010). Women of the street class (even when exposed to Western Women’s Rights) would prefer gender equity - the cultural feminist argument that women are inherently different from men but both sexes are to be valued in true partnerships which allow women to have opinions (Abu-Lughod 2010). The elite/street divide is especially salient in the lives of women in the areas of educational achievement, career opportunities, earnings control, and status in marriages.

Due to patriarchal laws only fathers can enroll children in school choosing instruction in Arabic or English. Children who do not learn English are unable to participate in the capitalist workforce. Traditional Islamic fathers are suspicious of

all things Western preferring schooling in Arabic (Wiktorowicz 2001). Fargues found 99% of elite men and 80% of elite women were fluent in Arabic and English (2005). By contrast, the UN reports Arabic literacy rates for all men is 89% but only 53% for all women (2011). Elite Egyptian girls are able to benefit from free Westernized education at all levels yet 40% of girls have never attended school (UN 2011). These uneducated girls are located in rural areas lacking a separate school for girls and where scant resources reserved for boys (Dancer and Rammohan 2007). Separate school facilities are required to satisfy Islamic notions of girls' purity. Scarce resources are reserved for sons who will remain in the household not daughters who will live with in-laws.

Fargues observes that elite girls and young women are spending more time in their fathers' homes by delaying marriage (2005). This growing group of young single, quasi-independent women are among the protesters who joined in the #Jan25 revolution from day one (Ghonim 2012). Western-education has helped young elite Egyptian women develop a network of acquaintances that can be mobilized via social media. Lee-Strife, et al, found access to support networks was correlated with later age of marriage (2012). Street class women must rely on familial networks and continue to be married early. Elite parents and husbands have internalized Western values where street class men reject Western ideologies as opposed to tradition.

Traditional Private Roles for Egyptian Women

The private sphere in some remote areas of Egypt has remained rigidly defined in Islamic terms for approximately the past 500 years. Patriarchal norms prescribe that

daughters live until marriage in their father's home and strong preference for boys often leads mothers to treat girls more as servants (Oh 2010). Mothers nurture sons, who will take care of both parents in old age, and train daughters to be wives. Poor girls are valued only for their marriageability and a woman's only valued role is motherhood (Al-Ali 2000). Following pubescence girls participate in a coming of age ceremony, commonly referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM), and are married (Oh 2010). In keeping with Islamic tradition, girls receive no religious instruction nor can females worship in mosques; because only males make decisions, knowledge is "wasted" on women (Cragg 1988). Islam is interpreted as the patriarchs' complete control over women.

Islam itself does not dictate the complete separation of women and men. This fundamentalist interpretation has come to mean women may not come in to contact with non-familial men nor go out in public without a proper male relative escort (Al Mannai 2010). This is intended to protect girls' purity and ensure wives' faithfulness. One's brother, uncle, or son qualifies as a proper escort as long as he is over six months old. Mothers are responsible for daily care of children but decisions like education, healthcare, and marriage are made by fathers (Baroudi 2010). Women and girls cook, clean, and serve the household. The traditional private woman's role includes anything the head of household needs regardless. Public roles are defined by influence over other males, and by default all their women. Traditional Egyptian women are not involved in politics despite their constitutional right to vote (Oh 2010). Recently elite girls have left the traditional private sphere and therefore have been able to establish public roles.

Public Roles for Egyptian Women

As Egypt has transitioned from socialism to capitalism US multi-national corporations have flooded to Egypt because of the strong base of English-speaking university graduates. These companies provide low-wage, high-status jobs for elite women. Young elite women will work for low wages because all their earnings are disposable. Elite fathers do not expect their daughters to contribute to the household no matter how long they delay marriage (De Koning 2009). High unemployment and unequal job opportunities furthers animosity between elite and street. Fluri points out that when elite women make more money than street class men could imagine, frustration can turn to violence (2011). Elite business women on the streets of Cairo are always in danger of sexual harassment or rape by street class men who believe their jobs have been stolen by women. Sexual harassment on Cairo's streets are as common as the U.S. Republican viewpoint that Mexican farmworkers are stealing Americans' jobs.

These employed women not only have a public role through paid employment but also benefit in other ways. For example, they are able to carve out a public social life where street women are restricted to socializing among female family members. Elite women's social life are facilitated by wage earnings their own wages (Al-Mannai 2010). Unmarried women cannot visit one another's home alone lest she come into contact with an unrelated male so they have turned to public spaces in which elite women can socialize. Certain cafes provide separate rooms, with separate entrances, for male and female elites. Conversations can be overheard across the barrier giving women access to political and activists' gossip. These cafes provide a safe environment for elite women to network and

keep informed (De Koning 2009.) This exposure to political talk helped female #Jan25 activists plan for the revolution. Egypt's authoritarian regime limits gatherings on the street to less than three people; outside the university elites need safe spaces far from the military to discuss social problems, form coalitions, and plan activism.

Egypt has a 100 year history of women's groups; women have organized as both secular and Islamic alliances and established formal, informal, and virtual women's networks (Al- Ali 2000). Outside the Muslim Brotherhood, the Women's Movement were the most organized coalitions which participated in #Jan25. When Mubarak allowed the Internet into Egypt in 2004, elite Egyptian women began to form a community of activists modeled after Western feminist movements (Saleh 2012). Women provided tactical input and strategic decisions, because they were the only ones with any experience protesting under the repressive regime (Ghonim 2012). Sutherlin found ignoring women's rights is a blueprint toward social unrest; indeed women "became a major spoke in the wheel of unrest ... ready to embrace mass protest" (2012: 83). Women mobilized their social networks to organize and sustain protests. Fargues predicted that women as Islamic activists would topple patriarchy, which seems unlikely, but surely this is a tribute to the growing numbers and power of women activists (2005). Activism is a public role embraced by elite women since #Jan25.

While capitalism has increased the disparity between the elite and street classes, it has also opened the formal paid labor force to some Egyptian women. De Koning found that many unmarried elite women in Cairo have established a role in the public sphere as respected professional women in

multinational corporations (2009). Having Western educated parents with more gender egalitarian and capitalist ideologies than street class parents, these working women are not held to the same gender norms as street class women. Al-Mannai found young elite women have been able to delay marriage and retain control over their earnings becoming autonomous citizens (2010). Young elite Egyptian working women, like their American counterparts, are buying out of working in the home through the paid labor force.

Conclusion: Traditional and Changing Gender Norms in the Family

A review of literature on Egyptian women shows gender is experienced differently by elite and street class girls and women. Wealthy fathers with Western values give their daughters advantages like university education, careers, freedom to socialize and become citizen activists. A few girls attend school into their twenties while most girls are married in their teens. Elite women have public roles in transnational corporations while street women are restricted to the private sphere and pronounced unworthy of education and unproductive despite their labor for subsistence and family enterprise. Activist women want legal gender equality and poor women want political reform to bring back social services to feed their families.

The Western women's movement is well-versed in the idea of "Muslim women's rights" but Abu-Lughod posits that more ethnography is needed to determine what kinds of rights Egyptian women actually want (2010). More research needs to reach elite Egyptian women to better position them to help their countrywomen. Western feminists have marshaled vast resources to help Egyptian women but lack

understanding of the pre-industrial, patriarchal lives of their beneficiaries. Future research could be undertaken to better match the goals and expectations of elite Egyptians and Western Feminists to the needs of street class women.

Women's lives are mediated through complex interactions of institutions: family, legislation, courts (both secular and shari'a) and religion (Oh 2010). Contrary to Western stereotypes, there is a rich history of women's activism in Egypt. For example, in the 1950's women gained both state welfare benefits and legislative rights within the, then socialist, state. Unfortunately reforms forced by the U. S. in the 1970's repealed these rights in return for a "peace dividend" paid by the US and European governments. The concept of Egyptian women's rights differs by one's social network and geographic location. Suzanne Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's wife, influenced policies benefitting women (Abu-Lughod 2010 and Dawoud 2011). Although Hosni instituted women's rights, they were ignored or rejected by the street class men with no chance to reach street class women. Egyptian women's rights benefit elite women only.

Activists fail to understand the social, economic, religious, and political contexts of the lives of poor Egyptian women. The volume of literature attests to global interest in Egyptian women's rights. #Jan25 has given a global audience to Egyptian women activists but the street's needs are lost on Western feminists. Some Egyptian women have access to public roles while the vast majority have been left behind.

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