

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STATUS OF EGYPTIAN  
WOMEN, 1991-2010**

*Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis entitled “**Socio-Economic and Political Status of Egyptian Women, 1991-2010**” submitted by me for the award of the degree of **Master of philosophy** by Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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***I DEDICATE THIS WORK TO MY  
MAA AND DEUTA***

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*Chayanika Deka*  
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## **Abbreviations**

AAW	The Alliance for Arab women
ACT	Appropriate Communications Techniques
ADEW	Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women
AL	Arab League
ASU	Arab Socialist Union
AWSA	Arab Women's Solidarity Association
EFU	Egyptian Feminist Union
ERSAP	Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
IHCR	International Conference on Human rights
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPCD	International Conference for Population and Development
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOSA	Ministry of Social Affair
NCW	National Commission for Women
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NU	National Union
NW	The New Women
NWRC	New Women Research Centre
TNC	Trans National Corporation
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America

UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
USAID	United states Agency for International development
WB	World Bank
WWCC	Wafdist Women's Central Committee

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**CHAPTER-I**  
**INTRODUCTION**

## **CHAPTER-1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

By and large women's status as defined by United Nations denotes to their access to knowledge, economic resources, and political power as well as their individual autonomy in decision making process. However, it remains one of the most important and intensely debated issues in contemporary period, especially in the Islamic world (Moaddel 1998: 108). Of late the overlooked situation of Muslim women has come into sharp focus across the world. There is a general perception that women in Islamic society are still not being treated as equal. Islamic faith is often seen as leading the women of these societies a life of seclusion, covering their bodies from head to toe with the exception of the face and hands i.e. veiling and barred from performing certain social functions, that portrays an inferior status to men. However this stereotypical depiction of women in Islam as passive victim of patriarchal oppression has changed over time. The slogan has spread that women represent the half of the population and needed to be educated and become the part of public life. Thus, status of women develops through assimilation of modern ideals like equality, democracy, citizenship and so forth.

With the arrival of globalization, gender participation in the social order has greatly changed. Globalization can be defined as a 'complex economic, political, cultural, and geographic process in which the mobility of capital, organizations, ideas, discourses and people has taken a global or transnational form (Moghadam 1999: 57). The impact of Globalization has been varied with both positive and negative outcomes on the status of women. Women are allowed to perform larger roles in the domain of society to which they were not previously allowed and thus lessen the space between masculinity and feminine constructed in society.

With regard to the status of women in Egyptian society at large, they are in a better off position unlike their counterparts in other countries in Arab world. Egypt is one of first countries in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region where the women's

empowerment has been incorporated in government policies. In September 1981, Egypt signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and thus became the First MENA Country leading the path of women empowerment. Moreover, Egyptian women have achieved constitutional rights to decide on their marriage contract, to get a divorce by a court, and since 2004, are allowed to pass their nationality to their children when they are married to foreigners.

Hence, a new Egyptian woman has emerged in contemporary scenario representing a rather small although rapidly increasing segment of women college students with a qualitatively strong presence. They represent a social entity with a definite cultural message in a more authentic accommodation of modernity into their religion and culture. However, a massive portion of women has remained vulnerable and uneducated and not able to pose for their demands. Therefore, the role and status of Egyptian woman has been a great issue of concern in present era. Egypt reached the heights of industrialization and economic development, but women's position in the society is trivial in contrast to men.

Today, there is almost no field into which Egyptian women have not ventured, yet their status in society remains unequal to that of men. Women still have to struggle against legal boundaries, political obstruction and conservative patriarchal principles (Al-Ali 2003:217). The recent public dialogue in Egypt is under the control of conservative polemics of the Islamists and the state, in its attempt to restrain the Islamists, has subordinated women's issues to its own concerns for security and legitimacy (Guenena and Wassef 1999).

### **Demographic profile of Egypt in relation to gender**

Before delving into the subject of women in Egypt in greater detail present; let us look at the demographics of the country with respect to gender.

Notably described as the Gift of the Nile, Egypt is situated in the northern part of Africa on the bank of the great river Nile. Egypt is one of the ancient civilizations of the world which is about five thousand years old. It has been a truly homogeneous country and has enjoyed an identity throughout the history (Sawant 2004: 54).

## Map of Egypt



### Source:

[http://www.google.co.in/imgres?imgurl=http://www.in2egypt.com/assets/images/db\\_imagesmegypt1.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.in2egypt.com/html/maps\\_of\\_egypt\\_0.html&usq=\\_5Fe\\_rIweuCODW](http://www.google.co.in/imgres?imgurl=http://www.in2egypt.com/assets/images/db_imagesmegypt1.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.in2egypt.com/html/maps_of_egypt_0.html&usq=_5Fe_rIweuCODW) (Accessed 8 March 2011).

Egypt is well located in both North Africa and West Asia. It shares its boundaries with Gaza strip and Israel in the North West, Sudan in the south, and Libya in the west, Mediterranean in the north and Red sea in the east. Consequently location of Egypt in Africa, Mediterranean area, Middle East and Islamic world grant the country a sense of transcontinental position.

Egypt is the second most densely inhabited country in African continent and the population mostly settles more or less of the Nile basin. It has mixed population mainly of Egyptians and Arabs. Egypt embraces a large number of populations which comprises different ethnic groups and races. About 98% of the total population is Egyptians, while Bedouin, Nubian and Beja and other ethnic groups constitute about 1%. Europeans mainly of French and Italian origin along with Americans and Greeks inhabit the rest 1%. The religious belief of Egyptian is mainly Islam. (90% of the total population), most of which are Sunni Muslims. Rest practice Christianity with primarily Coptic communities. According to 2006 census, the population of the country is approximately 78,887,007 of which 46.4 % are females. The sex ratio of Egyptian population is around 1.017 males per female. As a result of combined effect of decreasing mortality (from 8.9% in 1990 to 5.7% in 2006) and decreasing fertility (from 4.3 children per women in 1990 to 2.9 in 2006), the population has been increasing by 1.8 -1.9% every year. Hygienic sanitation and living condition have improved in the recent times based on the data on child mortality or life expectancy at birth. The rise of both male and female life expectancy from 71 in 2000 to 74 in 2006 is a positive sign. The illiteracy rate for women are remarkably low compared to men. More than 30% of women are illiterate whereas the percentage stands at 20% for men. As far as enrolment in primary education is concerned, Egypt has attained its targeted goal. But in case of enrolment in secondary education women are far behind men. On the other hand, in the domain of higher education women are showing tremendous improvement. Women represented 49% of enrolments in higher education in 2004-2005 (Egyptian State Information Service). Egypt has a very low female labor force as well. According to Human Development Report (2010), Egypt, at mere 18.5% has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the world. Egypt was ranked bottom in a World Economic Forum study, 'Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap' of 58 countries evaluating women's empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2005). The country was given lowest marks in all five areas of study: namely economic participation,

economic opportunities, political empowerment, educational attainment and health and well being. According to UNDP gender empowerment measures (GEM), Egypt was ranked at number 112 out of 177 countries (UNDP Human Development Report 2008). If we look at Egyptian economy we find that between 2004 and 2007 both GDP and GDP per capita growth increased to reach the level levels of around 7% in 2006 and 2007. However, there is stark unequal distribution of wealth among the population. The richest 10% of the population accounts for 27.6% of the income of the country, while the poorest 20% must survive with 8.9% of the national income Patriarchal tradition is still prevalent in the Egyptian society in a staunch form and it adheres to rigid gender norms which consider complementary roles of males as bread winners and females as home makers.

### **A Brief History of Women's status**

In order to understand and analyze the existing status of Egyptian women, we must have an idea of life and conditions of ancient Egyptian woman, first in pre-Arab era and then their way of life in 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century which shapes the current status.

The country had a supreme position before coming under Islamic influence of Arab world. Egypt, as an independent nation was ruled by many rulers. Egyptian woman had almost equal legal and economic rights along with men which were unheard of in the other ancient civilizations. The rights of Egyptian woman enlarged in all the legally defined areas of society. Women had the rights of managing and ordering their private property, which included land, portable goods, servants, slaves, livestock, and money. Under Egyptian property law, a woman had claim to one-third of all the communal property i.e. the property which accrued to her husband and herself after they were married. Women in Egypt were constantly ultimate maxim in contracts including: marriage and divorce settlements, engagements of wet-nurses, purchases of property, even arrangements for self-enslavement. Women functioned as leaders. The position of women in Egyptian society was distinctive in the early world. The Egyptian female had much of the same legal and economic rights as the Egyptian male contained by the same social class. The Arab conquest of Egypt in the seven century A.D changed the faith of Egypt from great Pharaohs traditional culture to Arab culture of Middle East. The country was introduced to a new religion i.e. Islam with the spread of Arabic language. And gradually Egypt became an

Islamic society (Islam is followed by 90% of the population) with the dominance of patriarchal custom. This had severe repercussions on women's status in Egypt.

The modern history of Egypt could be traced back to Mohammad Ali dynasty in the earlier years of 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the French and British invasion of Egypt during this period, the country became exposed to Western civilization. The fundamental traits of imperialism like commercialization of agriculture rise of mono culture and corrosion of indigenous craft industry impinged on women and family life. Colonialism both had constructive and harmful effects as far as lives of women are concerned. For one hand, due to the rise of Middle class with European interest expansion of education took place among upper class women though they still lived in secluded harem receiving services of lower class women as entertainers, peddlers, cosmologists and mid wives. While on the other hand, rural women's day-to-day lives were severely gloomy. Commercialization of agriculture led to erosion of family economy and they became economically marginalized. Rural women also lost their means of livelihood as indigenous industry came under tough competition with European companies. Indeed migration of rural women to urban areas happened frequently for petty trade and domestic service which were essentially considered as unorganized sector of the economy.

However on a positive note, Women were encouraged to embark on broader economic activities and to enter the professions or working class. In the sphere of politics, women were involved in a range of informal political activities held at family and community level despite their total exclusion in formal politics. Apart from this, women became visible in many peasant uprisings and rural revolts. At the time of the 1919 Egyptian revolution, upper class women organized all female demonstration to protest the ongoing British occupation. But in spite of all these efforts by women, they were debarred from attending the opening of the parliament they had struggled for except in the capacity of wives of ministers and high officials (Badran 1995). This segregation stimulated the growth of feminist movements in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Changes in women lives throughout 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in ideological clash between Islamic reformers or Modernists and the conservative scholars. The reformist called for a revitalization of Islam to upgrade women's position in society, calling for abolition of polygamy, end of female seclusion and expansion of educational opportunities. As a sharp reply to this, the conservatives on the

other hand hold that men and women were unequal and that calls for women liberation were part of imperialist plot to weaken Egypt (Nashat and Tucker 1999).

The expansion of modern entrepreneurial economy and emergence of state's arbitrary role in economic matters highlight many of the changes in women's lives in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Migration forced men to move to bigger cities in search of wage labor left women behind the household. The enlistment of women with the expansion of higher education opened vast number of professional opportunities for upper and middle class women. The most significant triumph was the women's entry into the Egyptian National University in 1928. The main focus during this period was on the education and training of female teachers and health care providers. However cultural attitude did not alter much. The definition of ideal women referred to those who remain at homes caring for her husband and children, woman who work for wages outside household lose status. The political arrangement in the post independent period remained unsympathetic towards women despite their significant involvement in many nationalist movements. Women take part as demonstrators, organizers, speech makers and even fighter In Egypt's war of independence. But this did not necessarily make any permanent or revolutionary difference in women's position and power (Danforth 1984: 35-54). The chance of women's entry into formal politics in post independent state was very little. It strictly remained under man's monopoly though Egyptian constitution granted women citizenship and political rights in 1956. Apart from Personal Status law most of most of the laws of the land had been reformed. The personal status law controlling inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody and family relations in general was very much into practice favoring man's superior social position. Under the leadership of prominent feminist Huda Shaarawi the upper and middle class women of Egyptian Feminist Union protested significantly for the reform of personal status laws especially those governing divorce and polygamy with a view of eliminating legitimate oppression of women in the early twentieth century. However it was only in 2000 the law has been revised almost after fifty years of struggle.

### **Women's status in current scenario**

Now coming to the present status of women in period of globalization and post globalization, we demonstrate that that roles and position of Egyptian women are changing in course of time. Globalization appeared in Egypt in the form of structural adjustment



program and economic reform from 1991 onwards. A lot of factors including Gulf War (1990), the decline in oil prices, the loss of remittance due to return of hundreds of thousands of Egyptian nationals from Iraq and Kuwait in the wake of Gulf Crisis, the decline in income from tourism industry, the need for foreign exchange to pay accumulated debt and the pressure exerted by domestic bourgeoisie for economic reform, forced Egypt under president ship of Hosini Mubarak to enter into ERSAP (Alam 2004). From a state controlled economy with bubble-like industries, the nation state moved into a more open and liberalized economic atmosphere. This policy has two main characteristics, firstly stat's withdrawal from welfare services and secondly, transformation from state controlled economy to market based economy. This has numerous effects on women's lives all over the world. There is mixed effects on women's lives in the era of changed political economy and globalization. The number of women in labor force market is at an increase level. Women are no longer living a life of seclusion following hijab and performing responsibilities of wives and mothers. They are coming out of their homes breaking their Islamic traditions. Women's literacy rate has been increased. They have been mobilized socially and politically and capable enough performing multiple jobs at same time. Thus demarcation between home and work place are shrinking with more and more Egyptian women coming to workplace to support their family and become self independent. However they try to preserve their Islamic culture against western influence by veiling themselves in order to maintain growing religiosity in the peninsula. They are no longer passive accepters of the status quo, of the ideology that men are in charge of women. Labor migration came into force crating women centered household and absent fathers (Farnea 2000:185-193).The void shaped by the absence of male member contributed women empowerment and shrinking of male power. As a result of this, women engage in almost every areas of life such as labor force, religious organization, and politics and so on. Not only in teaching and social service, women also continue to work as domestic laborers, cook and nannies as well as part-time agricultural workers during harvest, and piece-workers at home, though these efforts are generally not counted in official labor statistics.

However one could dispute that, though this new women's involvement is vital in education, the labor force, and religion, it is still not touching political life. According to international standards, women participation in politics is one of the lowest in the world. Women's participation in the formal politics is limited. Although Egyptian constitution

granted women full citizenship and political rights in 1956 Egyptian women have indistinguishable representation in politics. Egyptian women are less represented in political parties. Despite political parties advocate standing for the rights of women, in practice they work against women empowerment. For an instance, Wadf party has only two percent of its membership for female in spite of being ideologically liberal. Egypt has seen its first female judge; a female university president and several female cabinet ministers appointed by the President Mubarak recently in 2003. In the 2005 Legislative election women secured only nine seats out of 454 seats. Only four were elected and rest of them appointed by the president. Women face obstacles which always prevents them from a meaningful participation in political life (Zeid 2006). These include: Restrictions on political parties have led to a weakness in democratic participation, low rates of literacy among women and as a result of low political awareness can lead to women's vote being used by others (Al-Hadidy 1996). Traditions force women that lead to their exclusion from direct participation in decision making process, economic restrictions include low standards of living, incomes and unemployment rates and finally the social restrictions include: lack of political awareness due to illiteracy, household responsibilities, Discriminatory legislative laws concerning family, nationality, right to travel and right to work, traditional norms which restrict women from going out or mixing with men and so forth. As a reaction against women lack of participation in politics, women movements and organization started in Egypt since in the turn of twentieth century. Women have been active on their own behalf and struggle on many fronts against legal restrictions, political barriers and patriarchal values. There is evidence that women's involvement in civil society organizations and social movements aiming at increasing female representation in parliament and other social institutions is rising (Singerman 2003). In the post globalization era, the changes in international level have brought the issue of women participation in decision making to the fore front. The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the 4<sup>th</sup> International conference of women in Beijing in 1995, the first Arab women Summit in Cairo in 2000, the Second Arab women Summit in Casablanca in 2001 have encouraged Egyptian women activists to address issues like abortion, violence, reproductive rights, equal rights, political participation, structural adjustment, the personal status laws in collaboration with non-governmental organizations as political space for women is gloomy. There is splurge of independent

women organizations in Egypt as a response to harsh social, political and economic realities.

However, the impact of Structural adjustment and later neo liberal policy on women's lives has been complex, leading to both positive and negative consequences in all economic, political and social spheres. The socio-economic status of women has an inherent relationship with women's status as far as education and employment are concerned. Although female literacy rate is increasing in Egypt, but it is considered to be lower than men. Educational achievement is still based on gender paradigm and traditions which prefer men's education more cost effective than women. However as far as enrolment in primary education is considered Egypt has attained its targeted goal. But women are far behind men in case of enrollment in secondary education. There are myriad of reasons for this lower rate of registration among women for higher education, especially in rural Egypt. Orthodox societies, poor economic conditions, insufficient schools, marriage at early age all these hamper women's education at the secondary level. In the domain of higher education women are showing tremendous improvement. Women represented 49% of enrollments in higher education in 2004-05. Egyptian Women's participation in the labor force market is one of the lowest in the world. The family usages and traditions still continue to view female as dependents on males and reproduction and childcare are seen to be their prime responsibility compromising their economic rights to men. There is almost 60% of women population dormant in the analysis of ILO School to Work Transition Survey. This is more frequent among married women and the reasons are family objection, child care, workload of household chores and marriage. In Egypt, there are numerous impediments regarding women's participation in economic life especially in formal labor force. Due to the long working hours, higher level of job insecurity, absence of social protection measures like maternity leave and social insurance in the private sector, women have a preference for public sector jobs. Agriculture in Egypt account for 30% of the employment in which women's participation stands at 45% which is generally informal. The service sector has a similar percentage in terms of employment of both men and women and accounts for 46% of the total employment. The lowest participation of women can be seen in industry which stands at only 6%. Most importantly there is gender discrimination as far as wages are concerned. Men get higher wages than women even if

women are equally skilled. The Infitah<sup>1</sup> or open door policy has led to (de-feminization) in non-governmental jobs and creation of a wide gap in wages between the two genders. Women's role has been reverted to domesticity which can be viewed in terms of labor migration, increasing women's social burden. There have been high rates of unemployment for women. Finally, as the state also withdrew itself from providing social services, Islamist groups came to dominate political rights of women calling for their return to home. Gender wage gap has increased with wages consistently higher for men than women. Despite lower wages, women still prefer jobs in the public sector due to the social security schemes and equal opportunities. However female economic participation in Egypt is one of the lowest with high unemployment rates. The economic conditions of the country have also work against women exercising their political rights. Labor migration came into force leaving many women as the head of the households, increasing their social burden (Zayd 2002). Many Islamists groups came into force as the state took a backward position in providing welfare services to the Egyptian population more specifically women. Islamist started promoting hostile political ideology towards women, calling for their return to home marginalizing women's role in political forum.

The harsh economic and political realities greatly threaten the very existence of women. Therefore, contemporary situations such as vague government policies, suppression of civil societies and prevailing dictatorial political culture and rising tide of Islamism in the region result in diverse women's movement throughout the country.

The founding of Women's organizations is not only as reaction to Islamist movements but also to harsh, social political and economic realities. The neoliberal policy agenda necessitates nongovernmental public action (Moghadam 1998). Women are becoming more involved in civil society organizations providing health, educational and social services to the poor sections of the society with a view of bridging the gap between rich and poor created by economic restructuring. This new women movements are taking up of illicit issues such as contraception, clitoridectomy, abortion, violence and reproductive rights which were previously not covered by women organizations within a limited range. However there is evidence that women's involvement in civil society organizations and

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<sup>1</sup> Infitah is an Arabic word means openness. Egyptian President Sadat's policy of opening the door to private investment is often called as Infitah ('open door').

social movements aiming at increasing female representation in parliament and other social institutions is rising (Singerman 2003). The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the 4<sup>th</sup> International conference of women in Beijing in 1995, the first Arab women Summit in Cairo in 2000, the Second Arab women Summit in Casablanca in 2001 have encouraged Egyptian women activists to address issues like abortion, violence, reproductive rights, equal rights, political participation, structural adjustment, the personal status laws in collaboration with non-governmental organizations as political space for women is gloomy.

Followed by the women's movement, the Egyptian state itself has also shown recently in an interest in enhancing women's role. Women's issues were no longer considered as issues as gender differentiation but issues that concerns that affects the society. This new outlook was manifested in the form of positive steps for example the National Council for women was established in 2000 which encourage women to enter public life and acted as a forum to express the voice of women in areas which influence their lives. These all developments have led to increased participation of women and find the place in public arena.

In summery one observes that despite women's involvement into all possible fields, their status remains inferior. This will be drawn through a series discussion on demographic distribution, Egyptian tradition in the pre-Arab era, women movement and their situation in the country since the last century. Demographic discussion reveals that women's participation in the labor force is less and illiteracy is high compared to men. However there is good participation of women in higher education which perhaps had the most crucial impact in mobilizing women into socio-economic and political arena. This trend is visible since the beginning of the 20th century. The distinctive equity status that Egyptian women enjoyed in its pre-Arabic history and custom might also have added a traditional momentum into such women movement which was then aided with economic reform and globalization during recent times as Western influence has slowly grown in Egypt's Islamic culture. Despite such encouraging signs, vague government policies, suppression of civil societies and prevailing dictatorial political culture and rising tide of Islamism in the region has resulted in diverse women's movement throughout the country.

This research reflects status of women in Egyptian scenario. The study has provided an overview of current socio-economic status in relation to strict cultural norms and patriarchal structure. It also explores the rationales for women's inferior status in comparison to men. In the next section, the study deals with women's involvement in political process with a general overview of political system of prevailed in the country. It also focuses on rise of independent women's movements owing to limited space in political arena. Finally, the study attempts to find out whether feminist activism has been successful to advance the situation of Egyptian women.

**CHAPTER-II**  
**SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF EGYPTIAN WOMEN**

## **CHAPTER-2**

### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF EGYPTIAN WOMEN**

Socio economic status is one of the most crucial aspects in analyzing women's position in society. The status is often evaluated with amalgamation of income, education and occupation. By and large, socio-economic status is looked upon as the public eminence of an entity as individual group. The study of socio-economic condition of a particular group exposes disparities in allocation of wealth, earnings and access to resources. Socio-economic status influences everyone; women in society, in particular. Following a line of investigations and research specifies that socio- economic status have decisive impacts on the quality of lives of women with the consequential effects on the existence of families and children i.e. the welfare of the future age group.

Although education and employment prospects for women are at a rising level in Egypt, still they face discrimination and challenges in promoting for social, political and economic equality. Women's rights exist only in official document, not in practice which is clearly apparent in Egypt (Ziada 2008:8). Either at work, in public or at home, women undergo a lot prejudices on the basis of gender on a regular basis.

Islamic culture and male dominated family system endowed women in modern Egypt with an inadequate scope to assert their own identity. Egyptian women fought a long struggle against patriarchal traditions and customs, autocratic state institutions and brought an equitable society in the turn of twentieth century. Today there is almost no arena untouched by modern Egyptian women, but their status remains unequal to that of male in spite of Egyptian Constitution pledges parity for all citizens. However, data reveals that prevalence of male dominance on different levels and in different aspects e.g. education, employment and political participation allow women little scope to participate in all sphere of existence, impeding their progress. The state's ambivalent attitude towards the cause of women and growing influence of the Islamist constructs a predicament into their lives and responsibilities. On one hand they are expected to perform traditional duties of mother and wife, on other hand their role and real demand in the daily life in a developing society are incompatible with this persistent traditional values and roles (Haddad 1998: 10).



To comprehend women's socio-economic status in Egyptian scenario, first, we should have a glance of their role and position under Islam and patriarchal structure which still plays an important role in deciding women's behavior concerning educational and employment opportunities available to women.

### **Women, Islam and Patriarchy**

Nashat and Tucker (1999:101) mention that the women's questions or issues in a Muslim society are closely linked to religious discourse which still regards as crucial vis-à-vis women's standing in a society. The marginalization and oppression of Egyptian women can be correlated to the preponderance of Islamic way of life that imparts an inferior and subordinate position to women. Although Islamic doctrine recognized the perception of individual accountability for both men and women stressing respect for both sexes and their privileges, it contains discriminatory clauses regarding women's role and position under the axis of family life. The holy book of Islam, 'Quran' in chapter IV in its 34<sup>th</sup> clause affirmed that "Men have authority over women, because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart, and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them" (Howard-Merriam, 1990: 18). Due to the natural difference between men and women, they had been assigned different social roles and responsibilities. Men are endowed with excessive rights in comparison to women on the matters of marriage and divorce under Quranic teachings. Although, there is impartiality between men and women in regards to performing spiritual responsibilities and commitments, but Quran always consider men superior to women for the reason that they financially support women (Nashat and Tucker 1999:43).

The Quran has granted a second class citizenship treatment for women. Furthermore, women endured in harem isolated from the external world, dressed in the veil (hijab) and black niqab(face veil) in public and reside in highly gender segregated society. As the primary interpreters of Islamic law and tradition were male, they deny women basic rights

(Esposito 1998).The fourth caliph Imam Ali referred women as necessary evil (Tucker 1999:61).Thus they steadily developed stern laws to restrict women. Moreover Islam viewed woman as sexual objects whose sexuality have disparaging strength and therefore they should reside within the household or cover themselves with the niqab in public to prevent collapse of social order. Quaran permits polygene where men are allowed to marry up to four wives only on the basis that he treats all of them in equal conduct. On the other hand, the hadith or Sunna tradition collectively known as the recorded teachings of the Prophet during his lifetime formulated a all-inclusive information of performing religious duties and obligations of Islam (Sally Baden 1992: 7). The texts and manuals of both Quaran and Sunnah developed extremely rigid Islamic Shariah law which generally remained confined to domain of family and regulated laws regarding marriage, divorce, child custody and so forth. The features of Shariah law had adverse upshots on women.

The family law is often regarded as the primary location of female oppression (Humm 1990: 60). In the process, these laws have been vested with a profound symbolic importance that deeply complicates any effort to promote social change (Freedman 1991: 4). This Islamic law remained historically intact. Family law continued to be unscathed at first and then it was improved rather than replaced.

The changes in social and economic conditions as result of modernization and development process of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the emergence of modernist Islamic discourse in Egypt. Instigated by Muhammad Abduh, Islamic modernism came into force that presented Islam in a progressive way capable of transforming itself attuned with the pillars of contemporary world (Esposito 1998: xiv).Abduh disputed legalized malpractices rampant in Muslim society such polygyny, seclusion and called for renaissance of Islamic doctrine (Nashat and Tucker 1999:100). Other Muslim reformers like Qasim Amin, Ahmad Khan, Chiragh Ali also challenged conservative Islamic principles and stressed on women's natural right to education and work in the spirit of equality with men. Islamic modernist reinterpreted Quranic ideals through an inclusion of both traditional and modern paradigms The Islamic reformers argued that women were meant by Islam to play an active, if not equal role in society where as conservatives underscored the wide distinctions between genders including disparities in mental, physical and moral capacities (Nashat and

Tucker 1999:101).The twentieth century brought innovative transformation in Egyptian society. National set of laws were adopted to control economic and political life, frequently influenced by western political, economic, social and legal codes but Shariah which influence the family law remained untouched. The governments and religious authorities had been unwilling to change Personal status laws (PSL), personified Islamic principles and practices. These laws were later reformed rather than replaced with great energies and efforts of women's movements. Personal status laws strengthen patriarchal family structure which is rampant in Egyptian society till date (Badran 2008).

### **Personal Status Law**

As derived from the Islamic shariah, the law projected to offer the basic principle for relationships between men and women in marital affairs through all its stages i.e. the contract, respective duties of the spouses towards each other and towards their children respectively. However, these laws extended privilege status to men in the family, in areas of marriage, divorce and child custody with denial for women rights. The law treated women as an element of factor for the association of family, not individual with their own separate and equal rights .This constructed a power hierarchy in the family with male dominance. The law was declared in 1920 and later modified in 1925 by Law no. 25/1929. It sustained till 1979. However, when there was rising regarding the amendments of the law; there were constant protests among the conservatives against the amendments. During 1979, both conservative Islamists and modernists stood against the modifications of the law which included the right of wife to keep the family home after divorce, the right of the first wife to be informed in case of husband's marriage to another, as well as her right to demand a divorce on that basis. Owing to the widespread objections to the law, a new amended version of law was passed in 1985. It made shariah as the sole foundation of personal status law .Along with this; a new marriage contract was drafted. But it has not approved till yet.

Thus, Islamic culture has assumed an important role in deciding conduct of women in Egypt. According to article 11 of the constitution, "The state undertakes to reconcile the duties of women towards their family with their work in society and guarantees their equality with men in political, social, cultural and economic spheres of life, with due regard for the provisions of Islamic Shariah". The social structure revolves around the aegis of the family and maintaining its high status. Within the household men are regarded as the ruler of the family and women are often regarded as their property. This dominant male supremacy and custodial moral standards imposing upon the women precludes them from enjoying their basic rights. Patriarchal attitudes dictate that women should stay at home and serve their husbands, while men contribute to household income. There has been a marked increase in the number of Egyptian Muslim women wearing the veil (hijab), and the black niqab (face veil). The promotions of customs and traditions limit women's activity and confine their existence to the framework of household. The family roles follow a hierarchy where the conditions of 'lower status roles' are defined by the husband and are followed to by the wife (Hay-Yahia 1998; Zhihong Sa 2004:6). In Egyptian family, the patriarchal domination is reflected in men's domination of household decision making and women's low autonomy. Thus dominance of Islam and patriarchal society which imparts an inferior and subordinate position to women has been negatively causing women empowerment in Egypt (Hatim 1992).

### **Rise of Islamist movement**

The emergence of Islamist movement in contemporary Egypt is unique in its character affecting every Egyptians in each societal class and the entire walks of life (Abdo 2000). It does not discard modernity, instead contemporary Islamists combine religion with modern pillars of development. Contemporary Islamists are determined to attain their goal of self sufficiency through the adherence to Islamic laws and ideals. This revival of Islamism has penetrated deep into Egyptian society. Egypt's "Popular Islam," a grassroots movement rising from the streets, aims to transform the social structure of Egyptian society from the bottom up, creating an Islamic order (Abdo 2000:5). This movement appeals to varied groups of masses consisting of doctors, engineers, students, religious leaders and the whole middle class citizenry.

To (Abdo 2000:6), the contemporary religious revival dates back to 19<sup>th</sup> century when Jamal Eddin al-Afghani and his disciple, Mohammed Abdu embarked on Islamic movement against foreign aggression against Egypt. Although they were highly critical of western culture, but they embraced some optimistic facet of Westerners and tried to adopt it in the path of Islamic way. Sharia remained as the heart of Islamic personality.

Another root of Islamic movement can be found in Muslim Brethren (Muslim Brotherhood) founded in 1928. Placing Islam as unify force with the intention of struggling against British imperialism, Hassan Al- Banna created Muslim Brotherhood. Once more Sharia as the spirit of Islamic culture was apparent in their rational. Banna yearned for constructing an Islamic world through infiltration of religious ideals into economic and political sphere. They believe in social equality recognizing different roles and responsibilities for both men and women. However, Muslim brotherhood turned into fundamental in their activities during 1940's and 1950's which had far reaching effects on women's lives. They demanded imposition of the veil (hijab) and for closure of nightclubs, theaters and cinemas as essential measures to prevent the Western flows into Egyptian culture. It had posed a great threat to liberation of women's rights as they adhere to stringent and imprecise Islamic elucidation. Muslim brotherhood assumed a decisive role in the revolution of 1952 by lending a hand to the free officer. However, the regime which came to power in 1952 gradually banned Muslim Brotherhood to prevent the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country. With the coming of Sadat into political arena, Muslim Brotherhood again gained prominence due to its non violent activities and it embarked on social services. However their critical approach toward to western culture remained constant.

In the 1970's ambiance of intense and visible religiousness developed in Egypt following the defeat of Egypt in 1967 Arab-Israeli war (El-Guindi 1981:469). It has been popularly referred as third wave of Islamic activism which is still in the process. The failure of the state to bring about economic and political advancements and the growing embracement of Western culture created a sense of vacuum among the masses. Meanwhile, in the zeitun area of Cairo when a few Egyptians saw the glimpse of Virgin Mary, it made them believed that the defeat of the country occurred as the will of God due to the lack of religious faith

among Egyptians. This event marked the beginning of a new trend toward the politicization of religion in public life (Hatem 1998:91). There was a growing temperament of religious zeal, backed-up by the state, which contributed to the emergence and growing influence of the Islamic groups (Jamaat), and their proliferation first within and then beyond national universities( Guenena and Wassef 1999:7). In the later years of 1970's, the movement was divided into two groups; one who believed in non- violent method to preserve Islamic state whereas on the other hand there existed extremist who advocated revolutionary methods to bring down the government and to create a state based on Islamic faith (Abdo 2000:7).

Today in Egyptian society, there are both moderate and radical Islamists, promulgating Islamic morals. While the later confine much of their activities in the periphery, the moderate joined Muslim brotherhood who became non violent and peaceful in the process. The political alliance began between the government and Muslim brotherhood.

In the contemporary times, there are emergent coalition of sheikhs, informal street preachers, scholars, doctors, lawyers, and women to re-interpret Islam fitting to a modern era. They have newly defined social and religious norms progressively. The contemporary Islamic activity accentuates value of family, traditional sexual customs, and cultural authenticity (Abdo 2000).

The status and role of women has changed in contemporary period. Although modern day Islamist stresses on women empowerment, there is difference of ideology regarding women's behavior in Egypt (Arab Human Development Report 2005). For an instance, Salafite movement<sup>2</sup> has an unenthusiastic attitude towards women's right movement. They are against of women playing a public role. They maintain that women should involve in household activities i.e. childbearing and motherhood to be their prime responsibilities. There is basic division of labor between men and women in the society. They continue to view female as dependents on males and reproduction and childcare are seen to be their prime responsibility compromising their economic rights to men. On the other hand, Muslim Brotherhoods hold a liberal view towards women's position in the society. They

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<sup>2</sup> Salafite movement consists of group of radical Sunnis who consider themselves as the sole spokespersons of the Koran and champion violent means to promote their ideas.

approve of women's political rights and support their insertion into political arena. However, they remain unenthusiastic of modification of Personal Status law regarding polygamy, reproductive and divorce rights of women.

There is the notion of strict sexual segregation in Egyptian society. Practices such as veiling, gender segregation at schools, work place, sexual modesty, concepts of honor and shame are perceived in terms of women's seclusion. Family honor depends on sexual behavior and reputation of women. Within family, patriarch centric interaction and norms prevail. Within the family, father's influence over his children, husband's over his wife reflects male dominance. Thus, the inheritance of patriarchy is deep rooted at all economic, social, political, legal and cultural levels. This has important implications on the lives of women. Gender biasness raises violent behavior on women. Eventually, domino effect is political melancholy, enslavement, domination and isolation of women. This has created women's avoidance of public activities and giving up of employment opportunities (Ziada 2008). Moreover rise of Islamism publicize cultural values that strengthen traditional gender roles and values, often giving them a sacred value by promote justifying them on religious grounds (Abdo 2000). There has been a discernible increase in the number of Egyptian Muslim women wearing the veil (hijab), and the black niqab (face veil).

So, the above statements explores that religion still plays a larger role in adjudicating the conduct of Egyptian women in day to day life. Although the effects of modernization have felt by most of the women, they cannot entirely depose their traditional customs and norms. Large numbers of Egyptian women experience a dilemma as most of the time traditional values are incompatible with their new status (Haddad and Esposito 1998:10). This has great impact on their educational and employment status. There has been rise in educational achievements among women, but it has not led to encouraging participation of Egyptian women in the formal labor force. In the following section, I would like to provide present status of women concerning education and employment.

The socio-economic status of women has an inherent relationship with women's standing in society as far as education and employment are concerned.



## **Education and Women Empowerment**

Education is generally considered to be the vital force in infusing in the individual a set of mind-set appropriate for modern life in the contemporary world (H-Merriam 1979: 256-270). Education has a powerful influence in inculcating values for change, adopting democratic approach in the social order in the midst of dismantling traditional norms and customs and forecasting egalitarian future for all. It is one of the key policies to progress individual's welfare and society's economic and social enlargement.

United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights states right to basic learning is a human right. Accordingly, education is an imperative mechanism through which people can advance their lives and which facilitates empowerment of the weaker sections of society. It is one of the most important dimensions of women empowerment which include Economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment and health and well being along with educational attainment (Mowla 2009:10). The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, recognized that women's literacy is a key to empowering women's participation in decision-making in society and to improving families' well-being (UN platform of Action 1995). In addition, the United Nations has expressed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which comprises of goals for improved education, gender equality, and women's empowerment. The MDGs emphasize education's essential role in building democratic societies and creating a foundation for sustained economic growth. Studies in fact clearly show that girls' education leads to a whole range of social benefits, including increased family incomes, later marriages and reduced fertility rates, reduced infant and maternal mortality rates, better nourished, healthier and more educated children and families, lower childbirth-related death rates, greater opportunities and Life choices for more women (including better chances to protect themselves and their children from HIV/AIDS), and greater participation of women in development, and in political and economic decision making (N. Rao and I. Smyth 2004).

Thus, Educations helps in achieving other dimensions for female empowerment specifically political mobilization, better health and well being and improves their status in



family. It also reduces violence against them, gives them a more autonomy in shaping their lives, improves their status within the family and gives them a greater voice in household decisions including financial decisions (Malhotra and Mather 1997:599-630; Mowla 2009: 10).

### **Female Education in Modern Egypt**

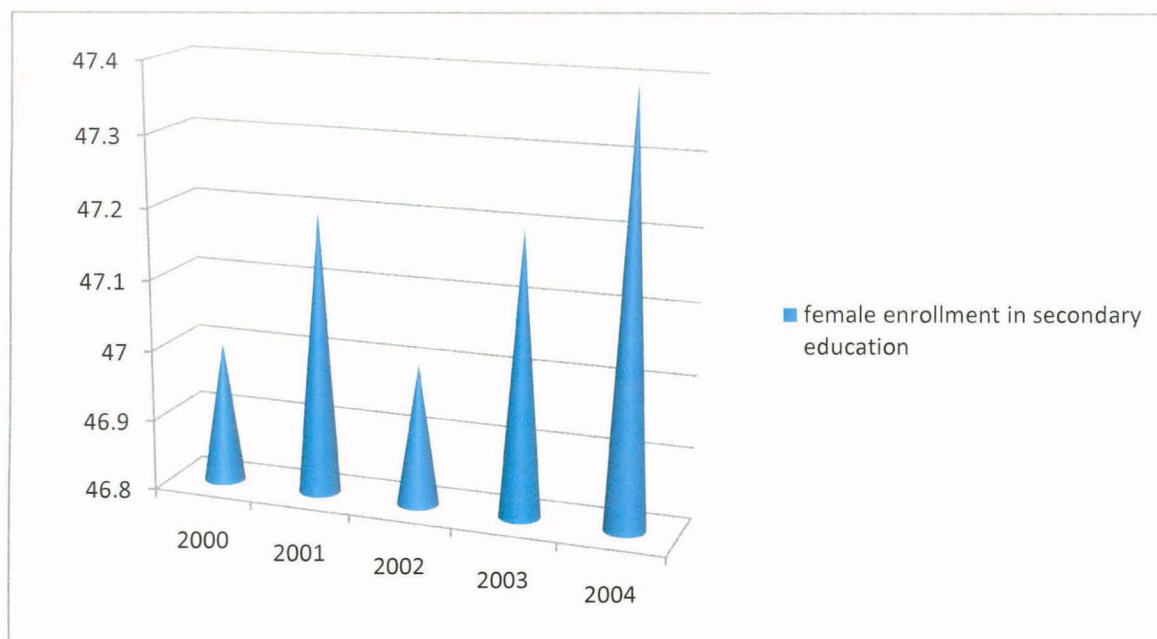
Education enlightened Egyptian women, a group historically lagging in educational opportunities because of the cultural norms affecting all classes in this transitional society (H-Merriam 1979: 256). The instrumental functions of education first influenced city women, then it extended into the lives of rural women. The goal of education in Egypt had been realized through a fusion of religious conviction, imperialism, modernity and ruling authority in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the nineteenth century, the ground was sowed for the entry of female education. “ The main endeavor was to build a dichotomy of cultural outlook shaped by the introduction of a State school system replica of European schools and the expansion of the missionary and foreign community schools, placed over on the religious Kuttab system... the elite. Religious schools continued to provide a rudimentary education for the masses in the form of the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic), while the modern government schools provided a secular European style of education for the existing and aspiring elite”(Nelson 1984:217).

The opening of first primary school for girls occurred in 1873 while the first secondary school for girls came into existence in 1921. The constitution of 1924 extended obligatory elementary education for girls teaching the same curriculum along with boys. Women joined Cairo University for the first time in 1928. However, the turning point in female education in Egypt came with the revolution of 1952. The 1952 military officers in their commitment of building a modernized state expanded educational opportunities to achieve goals of establishing a just society and nationwide progress coupled with the its belief of education as an important key to success (H-Merriam 1979: 256). The goals for improvement of educational opportunities have been the universalize tion of primary education, the extension of the compulsory education period from 6 to 9 years, further development of scientific, technical and vocational education and the reorganization of private education and, in general, the upgrading of facilities (Szyliowicz 1973: 264; H-

Merriam 1979: 258 ). Amongst all the policies of Nassir's regime, women's entry into higher education has proved to be most the prominent one.

One of the strongest associate of globalization is, increasing education and reducing gender gap in education (Amin and Al-Bassusi 2004: 1288). Consequently, Egyptian government has laid down determined goals for civilizing the female adult literacy rate and reducing gender disparity in primary and secondary education. In 1993, government began a project for educating girls who did not join formal education through one-class and community schools. Thus, as far as enrolment in primary education is considered, Egypt has attained its targeted goal. But Women are far behind men in case of enrollment in secondary education. The root cause of this is multi faceted .One of the main reason is poverty which directs parents to prefer sons over daughters when they cannot afford all their children to go to schools due to direct and indirect costs. Lack of employment opportunities for women, lack of nearby school, old-fashioned traditions of early marriage for girls and early motherhood for cultural and economic reason prevent girls from attending school and to get benefit from their investment in education.

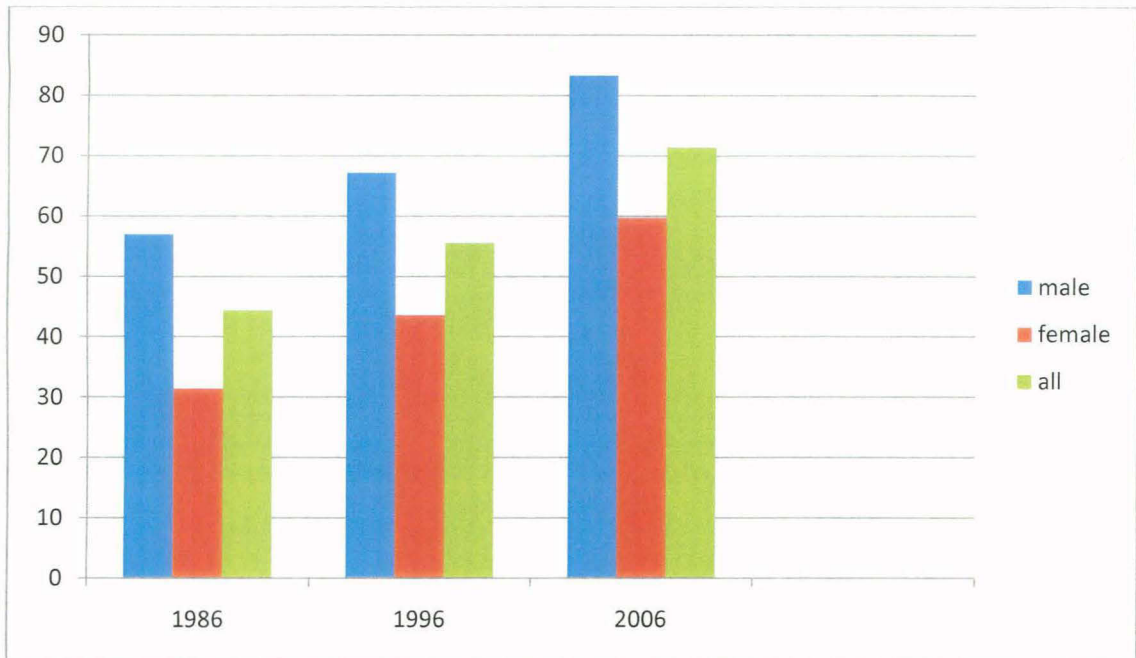
**Figure 1: Female enrolment in Secondary education (% , public and private, all programmes), 2000–04**



**Sources:** ETF (2009), European Training Foundation, “Women and Work in Egypt: Case Study of Tourism and ICT sectors”, [Online: web] Accessed 9 November 2010 URL:[http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/\(getAttachment\)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/\\$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/(getAttachment)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf)

Female literacy rate is increasing in Egypt, but it is considered to be lower than men. If we compare both male and female, we find a considerably more women are illiterate than males (62% among females as opposed to 38% for males). The Egyptian constitution affirms the right to free education for both male and female. But in practice, Girls have the lowest rank of enrolment at the various level of education. For every 100 boys enrolled in primary school, only 84 girls’ enrolled (National NGO Committee; Guenena and Wassef 1999: 32) These inequalities are more pronounced in rural areas, with fully one-third of 10 year old girls not enrolled in rural Upper Egypt(El-Tawila et al. 1999; Guenena and Wassef 1999: 32).

**Figure 2: Adult Literacy rates (%) by gender**



Sources: ETF (2009), European Training Foundation, “Women and Work in Egypt: Case Study of Tourism and ICT sectors”, [Online: web] Accessed 9 November 2010, URL: [http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/\(getAttachment\)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/\\$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/(getAttachment)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf).

Educational achievement is still based on gender paradigm and traditions which prefer men’s education more cost effective than women. In view of this negative scenario, the National Council for Women has initiated a project in collaboration with the Elderly Education Organization and with the help of non-governmental organizations intending to eliminate illiteracy among women aged 15-45 years as well as implementing an arrangement for total eradication of illiteracy among those aged 15-35 by the year 2006.

However, the amount of female undergraduate in Egyptian universities has been increasing over the time. According to Egyptian State Information Service, women signified 49% of enrolments in higher education in 2004/05. As a result of modernizing policies of the government, the number of women enrolling in science and engineering colleges has enhanced significantly given that education in Egypt is state sponsored. Even medicine has attracted lot of female entry into medical services. Women represents 55.4% in pharmacology, 45.5% in medical schools, 58.1% in dentistry, 45.4% in veterinary, 45.8%

in science colleges (physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, and geology), 37.4% in computer science, and 24.5% in engineering in 2002. Moreover, the prospects of women with high scholastic records studying overseas are growing provided scholarship funded either by government or foreign universities

**Table 1: Total number of graduates and percentage of female graduates, 1996/97-2003/04**

	1996/97		2003/04	
	Total number	Female graduates (%)	Total number	Female graduates (%)
Humanities				
Language	599	70	1,617	78
Economics and political science	261	56	593	79
Art	215	67	291	79
Literature	20,725	58	38,486	68
Information	174	68	918	76
Trade University	30,013	39	60,261	39
Law University	14,694	31	27,595	38
Technical/scientific	Total number	Female graduates (%)	Total number	Female graduates
Fine Art	1116	56	2040	63
Dental care	392	41	1741	52
Pharmaceutical	1829	38	9325	58
Medicine	3305	35	8150	48
Scientific	3975	37	8916	52
Agronomy	2889	28	5979	47
Veterinarian	817	25	2622	53
Engineering	5712	24	18132	25

**Sources:** ETF (2009), European Training Foundation, "Women and Work in Egypt: Case Study of Tourism and ICT sectors", [Online: web] Accessed 9 November 2010, URL: [http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/\(getAttachment\)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/\\$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/(getAttachment)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf).

Thus, we can see that in the domain of higher education women are showing tremendous improvements. But if we observe the real picture, there are serious loopholes. While the number of women going to engineering colleges is improving which is a positive sign, disparities still remain between male and female. The percentage of female scholar in engineering in Egypt is at an advanced stage in relation to most of developed nations, yet still distant as par men, due to conservative culture of the society which still regard engineering as a tough occupation for girls. Females are more inclined to study traditional subjects considered suitable for them such as arts, humanities, social sciences, home science and so forth, as their involvement in natural sciences is comparatively low. The percentage of female students in engineering colleges continued to be very low accounting only 25% in 2002.

Recognizing such hindrances to women's education, the state has undertaken many steps to reduce gender gap and improve educational quality for females. The General Authority for Illiteracy Eradication and Adults Education in associated with the Ministry of Education achieved success in dropping female illiteracy rates from 50% in 1996 to 41.2% in 2004. The Government also started a series of one-classroom schools for girls to endorse female enrollment in schools. The number of one-classroom schools in 1994 amounted to 213 schools entertaining 2926 female students, raised to 2649 schools entertaining 55315 female students in 2002. Other successful initiatives include community schools in rural areas to confer reasonable education to girls, Girl friendly School programme, launched in 2001, vocational training activities for women which benefitted thousands of Egyptian women.

However, despite these success and progress, gender inequalities still persist and prolong to provide strategy makers with confrontations when it comes to grant full and equal access to quality education for females. Female illiteracy rate is still high In Egypt. There is a significant gender disparity as far as access, realization and teaching in education are concerned. Cultural dynamic offers a privilege status for males, clearly demarcating gender roles both for men and women. Women are still dependants and are likely to be inferior to men. Reproduction and childcare are seen as their prime responsibilities, confining their

existence to the frame of the family unit. On the other hand, assertion of male role as bread winner makes male preference to the right to education.

### **Employment and Women**

World Bank report (2004) stated that an important aspect of women's empowerment concerns their economic participation. The contribution of women in economy enlarges their literacy level; build them as self dependent individual with greater involvement in household income and contributing to lower fertility rates. Indeed, Employment prospects assist women to gain self confidence, develop social network, learn to negotiate with men, learn about health and contraception (Kabir and Mahmud 2004).

With rapidly increase of educational opportunities; number of women in labor force participation is at a mounting level. Today, Egyptian women have been partaking in all segments of economic life including women occupying managerial role in diverse sectors. Their involvement has been growing in current years. However, despite this, Egypt has one of the lowest rates of women's economic participation in the Middle East and North Africa (World Bank 2004). Women have fewer economic prospects entitling them as unutilized human resource as smaller number women go to work outside residence and the number of women holding position in the government and in any other state authorities is diminutive.

The family usages and traditions still persist to view female as dependents on males and reproduction and childcare are seen to be their prime responsibility compromising their economic rights to men. Whereas jobs are cited as the most important reason for educating boys (62%), being better mothers was the most important reason for girls (48%; Lloyd, El Tawila, Clark, & Mensch 2003; Amin and Al-Bassusi 2004: 1289). Multiplicity of challenges and gaps are evident to thwart women from utterly participating in labor market. These are principally low participation of women in economy, high unemployment rates as per men, meager working conditions for women, higher level of job insecurity, absence of social security measures like maternity leave and social insurance in the private sector and so forth. Almost 60% of women are inactive (ETF 2009:12). Women engage in only 25% of the national labor force and are now mostly concentrated in health care and education. In addition, there is lack of official records regarding women's participation in informal sector

as women's agricultural, household and urban informal labor has been missing in national financial statement.

Employment issues for women have been restructuring over the years since the revolution of 1950. During 1950's and 60's, State feminism was highly practiced in Egypt, enhancing more opportunities for women in large public sector. The main uniqueness in Egypt was a vigorous public sector, including nationalized ventures and a miniature but emerging private sector. The role of the public sector was boosted by government's employment guarantee for every secondary and postsecondary graduate, lifetime job security and numerous other benefits such as public health insurance, associated with these jobs (Assad 1997; Haddadad 2009:9). Government played the role of initiator of jobs, committed itself to formulating state policies to draw more female into national service sector creating both white-collar and blue collar factory jobs for women. Accordingly labor laws were changed to ensure and protect women's equal standing in the labor force (Hatem 1992). Through state feminism, reproduction was made a public, not a private concern and thus it prohibited employers to fire pregnant women while on maternity leave. The Egyptian constitution in 1971 affirmed that all citizens are equal and enjoy equal opportunities to participate in economic life. However, in contradiction, the state on the other hand, accommodated more conservative social stance towards women's position in the family. They were advised family to be their prime responsibility. Both in rural and urban Egypt, migratory trend during this period (migration of Egyptian men to other countries in search of jobs) made agricultural sector dependent on female workers (Azzam, Abu Nasr, and Lorfing 1985; CREDIF 2002; Moghadam 2005:115) . The end result is that women contribution in the work force remained modest over the years with employment opportunities mainly in teaching, health and welfare.

### **Impact of Structural Adjustment Program**

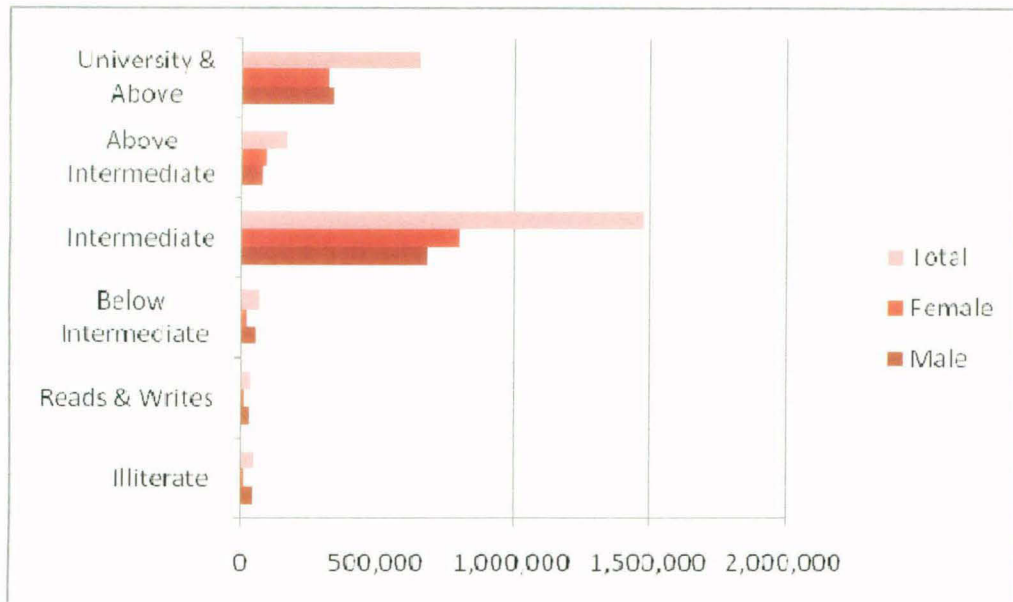
Egypt has undergone political and economic difficulties in the 1980's. The worldwide economic crisis followed by the drop in real prices of oil created havoc in oil market, leading to unpredictable and declining costs. Also Gulf war, the loss of remittance, due to return of Egyptian nationals from Iraq and Kuwait in the wake of Gulf crisis, decline of



income from tourism industry, the need of foreign exchange to pay accumulated debt and the pressure exerted by domestic bourgeoisie economic reform (Alam 2004: 72) forced Mubarak Government to adopt Structural adjustment Program with the support of IMF and World Bank. This new economic reform intended to bring alteration of economic disparities through the decrease in budget deficit, cutting food subsidy and privatization of industry. The economy of Egypt altered from state directed enlargement in the company of a huge public sector to neo liberal economy supporting spreading out of private sector. As a result, public sector workforce growth rate declined. Private employment has risen by 33% from around 12 million employees in 2001 to 16 million in 2007 whilst public sector employment has risen by 5% only throughout the same 6 year period from 5.9 million to 6.2 million employees ( Haddadad 2009: 9).

The effects of globalization in the form of structural adjustment appear mixed, bringing both constructive and negative result on Women's economic status and employment possibilities. An observed effect was an increase in the supply of job seeking women along with the emergence of very high rates of unemployment for women (Moghadam 2005:131).Rising level of education has not boosted female participation in work force. There is almost 60% of women population dormant in the analysis of ILO School to Work Transition Survey (ETF 2009:12). This is more frequent among married women and the reasons are family objection, child care, workload of household chores and marriage .There is a loss of human resources in the productive process at macro level, and women's economic empowerment lags behind that of men at micro level (World Bank 2004).

**Figure: 3 Unemployment estimates by educational attainment and sex**



**Sources:** ETF (2009), European Training Foundation, “Women and Work in Egypt: Case Study of Tourism and ICT sectors”, [Online: web] Accessed 9 November 2010, URL: [http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/\(getAttachment\)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/\\$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/(getAttachment)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf)

### **Female Share in Total Labor Force**

Data collected by labor force survey reveals that only 19% of women involve in total employment in during 2001-2007. Out of them, 26% in public sector and 16% in private sector. Male private employment reached nearly 13 million in 2007 whilst female employment consist nearly 3million (Haddadad 2009: 10).

The agricultural sector remains the biggest single basis of employment in Egypt. It is essential to the rural economy. Agriculture account for 30% of the employment in which women’s participation stands at 46% which is generally informal and unremunerated family labor in 2007. Family farm work engrosses in animal husbandry, processing of crops and storage, and harvesting, handicraft manufacture and promotion and utilizing networks like family connections, neighborhood, and friendships for loans and instructions on subsidized goods are all work inside family in which Egyptian women conventionally contribute to the family economy. They are mainly employed in farming, fishing and hunting occupation. Moreover migration of male members to the Gulf or to urban areas in

search of better income left behind their wives escalating numerous responsibilities within and outside the household (Moghadam 2005). Due to the absence of the husbands, their workload has increased. It may lead to the declining of household as they spend more time on agriculture and less time on family welfare. Also in some cases, there are instances of abandonment of lands since women are becoming more dependent on cash incomes derived from the remittances (Badran 1992:26).

The service sector has a similar percentage in terms of employment of both men and women and accounts for 46% of the total employment. However there has been minimal female presence in administrative and managerial occupation accounting only 4.3 in legislatures and managerial profession. They are still clustered in low rank inadequately paid clerical and service occupations. However, the lowest participation of women can be seen in industry which stands at only 6 % (ETF 2009: 14). Most importantly there is gender discrimination as far as wages are concerned. Men get higher wages than women even if women are equally skilled. The use of capital –intensive technologies that require few workers, along with relatively high wages for men, have excluded women's greater involvement in the labor force.

In view of low rates of female labor force participation, unemployment rates among female is much higher. It has reached 24 percent in 2005 compared to 6percent for men, i.e. three or fourfold that of men, with the highest being among the young and educated women in rural areas (World Bank, 2007).

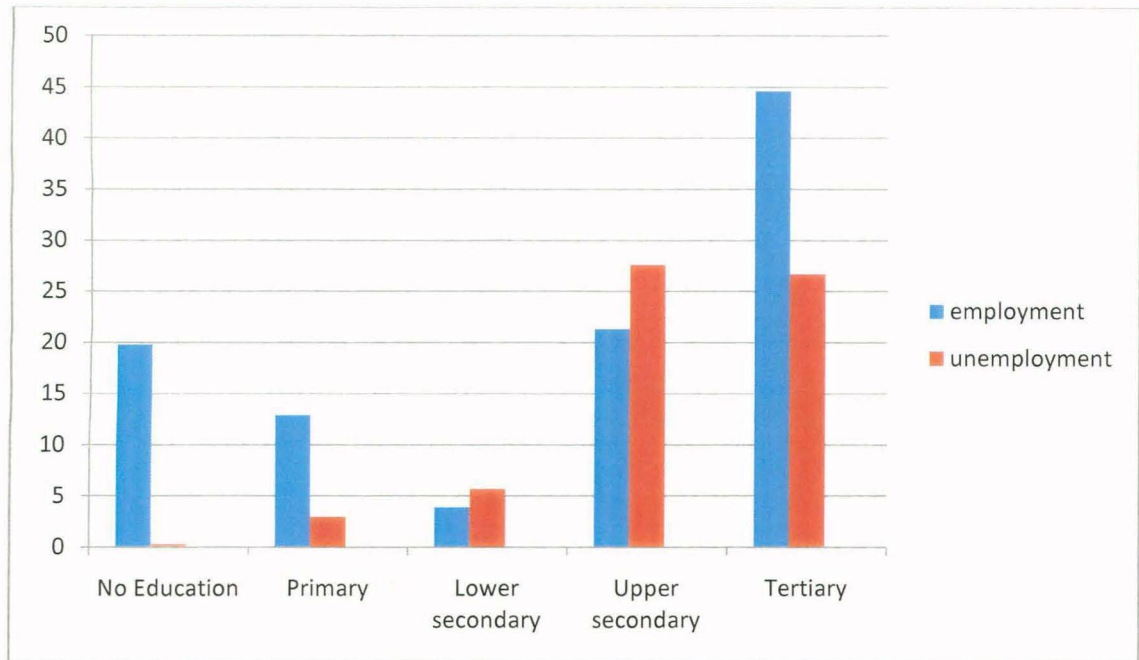
**Table 2: Unemployment and activity rates by gender and age group (%), 2007**

	Males		females	
	Unemployment Rate	Activity rate	Unemployment rate	Activity rate
15 – 64	5.9	75	18.6	23
15 – 24	17.2	46	47.9	24
25 – 34	7.7	96	23.8	18
35 – 44	0.7	98	3.9	29
45 – 54	0.2	94	0.2	31
55 - 64	0.0	70	0.0	28

**Sources:** ETF (2009), European Training Foundation, “Women and Work in Egypt: Case Study of Tourism and ICT sectors”, [Online: web] Accessed 9 November 2010, URL: [http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/\(getAttachment\)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/\\$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/(getAttachment)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf)

If we see the above table, we find out that in 2007, female unemployment rate was 18.6%, merely 24% of women being active (ETF 2009:13). Indeed, number of unemployed educated female actually exceeds male unemployed population.

**Figure 4: The rate of employed and unemployed women aged 15-64 by educational level, 2007**



**Sources:** ETF (2009), European Training Foundation, “Women and Work in Egypt: Case Study of Tourism and ICT sectors”, [Online: web] Accessed 9 November 2010, URL: [http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/\(getAttachment\)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/\\$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/(getAttachment)/D3E0FA7D21DC7D7EC1257610005A2381/$File/NOTE7UUM9B.pdf)

Also, the above table shows that female unemployment increases with higher levels of education; the unemployment rate for women with secondary and tertiary education is higher than for those with less than secondary education.

Thus, we can see that Policies of Structural Adjustment on labor market exposes gender discrimination (Haddad 2009: 23). Public sector was more preferable for a long period of time as an employment destination. This scenario has changed with the existence of ERSAP in 1991 and as a result of this public sector work force declined and privatization started to pick up modifying greatly pay and working conditions in Egypt. This has resulted in a large number of women losing their jobs and at the same time not finding appropriate alternative employment in the formal private sector. There are many reasons for this such as private sector operates in a challenging competitive environment posing many obstacles for women. Gender wage gap has increased with wages consistently higher for men than

women. Despite lower wages, women still prefer jobs in the public sector due to the social security schemes and equal opportunities. However female economic participation in Egypt is one of the lowest with high unemployment rates. The current economy of Egypt is characterized mainly by structural adjustment programs recommended by the IMF. This policy is based on two main elements: firstly the retreat of the state from the social services, primarily health and education and secondly, the privatization of state industries, transforming the economy into one based on market forces. This has harmful effects on women's lives all over the world. There are few opportunities for new entrants in the public sector, there was defeminisation of nongovernmental jobs and the gender gaps in wages increased (Assad and Arntz 2004: 431-54) . The terms of employment are becoming less attractive, and work conditions are harsher than they have been in the past.

### **Women's Participation and Economic Barriers**

It is generally believed that economic liberalization brings greater women's participation in economy, but the situation is reverse in case of Egypt. Amin and Al-Bassusi(2004) explores that patriarchal Tradition, lack of geographic mobility and male dominated household results in low rate of labor force participation of Egyptian women. The following are the obstacles hampering women's economic participation.

The established value system and associated norm of women as dependants of men dictate domesticity as the central realm of women's work. The existing patriarchal culture creates male favoritism as men contribute to household income, where as household and childcare responsibilities as the primary concern for women. Moreover, the conservative elements of the society, namely radical Islamists are opposed to female employment. To them, it is the main source of redundancy among men and stress that women should depart from the service sector (Ziada 2008:8) which hampers the full participation of girls particularly in terms of skill acquirement and occupation. Moreover, conservative culture accords women publicly conventional jobs such as teaching and medicine which again prove that there are a few job opportunities available for women.

The trend of public sector acting as replica of private sector after application of structural adjustment on Egyptian economy is pessimistically causing the lives of working women

(Karam 1999:163).Public sector is no longer providing additional benefits towards women as a part of their socio-economic welfare schemes. It becomes mandatory for women to search for job in private sector where there is absence of social security schemes and equal opportunities (ETF 2009:14). On the other hand, the private sector does not prefer employing women.

There is severe gender discrimination regarding women's entrants into work force. There is a general inclination of the employer who chooses to recruit young men rather than young women so that they can avoid paying for social insurance assistance and maternity rights associated with women employee .Women are differentiated in terms of payments and job profession. Inferior employment positions are provided to women with low wages and no benefits. The higher wages for men especially in the private sector and lower earnings prospective discourage women's access to work. Apart from low wages, women are also subjected to work in harmful conditions that can cause health problems. Women are often subject to sexual harassment and mistreatment in private sector job as there is no government control over these jobs. Egypt's economic development policy has not been susceptible to these limitations on women's labor force participation.

Women's aspiration and accessibility to play a greater role in economy has improved considerably. Yet, there is reluctance on the part of labor market to integrate women whole heartedly. Consequently, the unemployment rate among young women continue to remain higher nearly 32%, almost three fold of unemployed men.

And lastly one of key reason for low rate of women participation in economic activity has been the lack of official data regarding women's input in economic segment. In the rural and urban informal sector (mainly agriculture and household), women's income earning activities are generally unnoticed in large scale official surveys. There have been few organized studies of the informal sector in Egypt (Moghadam 2005:112).

**CHAPTER III**  
**POLITICAL STATUS OF EGYPTIAN WOMEN**



## **CHAPTER-3**

### **POLITICAL STATUS OF EGYPTIAN WOMEN**

The gender divide has been very much integrated in our society and it comes with the process of socialization. Women by default are considered to be not fit for certain functions. The ideal connotation of woman is one who abides by the societal role entrusted on her and not hungry for power, autonomy and independence to decide. With a staunch patriarchal thought prevailing in the society, women had always been considered not having the rationale of decision making and ruling and hence unable to take part in the political processes of the country. These concepts had therefore led women being denied of their right vote and seek political offices. Even in democratic governments, women were not granted these rights. Hence, women had to raise their voice and wage a struggle to gain the rights of participating in the political processes of the country. The struggle for women in Middle East and North African (MENA) countries had been tougher as there was strong believe backed by the rigid ideas of a patriarchal society that women are not meant to be rulers. Indeed for them, the struggle had been continuing until recent centuries despite the advancements the countries have seen.

Egypt, in the Middle East and African Region has been a country predominantly ruled by the strict rules of shariah of Islamic religion. Under this, dividing of responsibility on the basis of gender becomes an integral part of society formation. Hence Egyptian women have been always bound by rules of strong patriarchal society. This attitude gets reflected in the power division in the society. This shows its repercussions on way of participation for women in economy, education, societal functions of the country. Though there have been examples of strong women like Cleopetra, participation in political regime had been tough goal to achieve for them. Hence there always has been resentment and also some demands of civil society movements to increase the political participation for women.

#### **The political Process of Muslim Countries**

As many scholars have studied the political processes in the Islamic countries still shows democratic pattern. The Islamic countries have had formed democratic governments.

Scholars using the World Values Survey<sup>3</sup> explain have consistently found high support for 'democracy as the best form of government' (Hinnebusch 1984: 87). Thus in Islamic countries, the identification with Islamic religion has not come up as a barrier to growth of democracy. However, although the democratic processes have found its place in the Islamic Countries, it still represents the face of male dominated democratic process. Though Egypt has accepted the democratic faith to enlarge extent the participation of women in the political processes, but it has been very minimal and neglected. Even though in some cases, the Islamic countries have been flexible and have approved of certain political participation for women, but these have been only piecemeal approach.

The situation of political participation of Egyptian women should be studied keeping in context this conservative attitude towards women's political participation. The history of political participation in Egypt needs to be traced specifically after the globalization era and the civil society movements in the country fighting for rights of women.

### **Importance of Women's Participation in Politics**

Before embarking on discussion about political participation of women and how the issue has been handled in the MENA countries, it is important to understand the concept of political participation of women and what can be the actual demands of women when one talks about their political participation.

Historically women have acquired a lower position in the functioning of human life. Though women have been considered as the creator, they are kept bound by many rules and regulations. However, there have been voices rose against such unequal relationship and women or feminist movement have bigoted in many parts of the world. These movements have seen some amount of success and in many countries the demands have been met. The most common rights that have been denied to women were that of the right to franchise which have been attained in many of the countries. Women constitute half of the electorates and they have right to vote at present in almost all the country. The demand that they had been raising is mainly the equal share in public offices which is consequently

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<sup>3</sup> World Value survey is global research project consists of social scientists all over the world. It shows how social and political changes determine the values and beliefs of people.

achieved, and now more than 90 % of women hold public offices at present. The key grounds of women movement worldwide can be discussed under the following headings.

### **Women movements for political rights**

For long centuries women have been denied the right to participate in the political processes in democratic governments. There are instances of women ruler in monarchies but apart from these women from royal families, the general populations have hardly being asked their political opinion. It is definitely shocking that the rise of democracy which is all about fair participation of the population of the country in the political processes, it ignored vital proportion of the society which are women. Hence women had to start with struggle to make the male counterparts realize about their existence. The struggle for right to political participation started in Europe in 18<sup>th</sup> Century. France and Newzeland are the first countries to urge for political rights and introduced right to suffrage as a political right. Even in United States of America the movement for women suffrage started with the civil war and the World War I and culminated into achievement of success by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Presently almost all the countries recognize the right of women to vote and to hold public offices. In Islamic countries the movement for attaining political, social and economic right can be identified as the sole concept of Islamic Feminism. Surprisingly as the Islamic countries tries to retain a patriarchal structure of the society drawing from its religious righteousness the Islamic Feminism movement also draws its sole crux from the context of Islamic holy books. The movement finds its genesis also in the religious commandments of equality and just in the society as said in hadith and Islamic Shariah.

### **Political participation of Muslim Women**

Speaking of the whole aspect of Islamic feminism the issue of political participation of Egyptian women can be understood in relation to modernization process that has taken place. However this modernization process marked the emergence of an era which is markedly an interaction between the western civilization and modern Arab thinking (Majed 2005). Even though concepts of modernization have been the talk of the Arab nation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of Islamic brotherhood (MB) had been strongly dominant (Zeid

2003) and hence what is visible is not a western oriented process of restoring of feminist rights in modernization era. The tenants of Islamic brotherhood however do not agree with the idea of women holding political office or any power holding position of governance. Indeed the Islamic brotherhood of the country has unveiled the constitutional draft which supports this whole concept of women being prohibited from any public office. Thus, the location of women in Egyptian politics needs to be searched through the glasses of the Islamic male dominance. Apart from that it is also important to understand the politics of evolution of democracy in Egypt and how women movement can be incorporated in the whole affair. The Arabian country has witnessed many opposition from the faces beneath the veil however it is important to understand that in the battle between the proponents of patriarchal thoughts and the ideas of women not needing any political reservation and the seeker of entrusting of rights on women the former has definitely won the battle most of the times. However it is also true that the Egyptian women have unionized from time to time and have raised their demands. The changes that have happened 1970s definitely have boosted the struggle of women of restoring rights in various fields. Most important developments in this context had been the movement of the civil society organizations specifically at the international level. These developments have touched many countries including Egypt. The civil society movement had been able to restore many of the socio-cultural rights of the Egyptian women and start a very large participation of Egyptian women in civil society movements (Majed 2005: 14). However it was not so much true for political rights of women. The civil societies also had a hard time to make women's presence felt in the parliament.

### **Democratic Developments and Women's Participation in Egypt**

The democratization of rule in one country can be understood a representative politics where certain representative of general masses form the government. In this process the political parties of a country plays a very important role in the political development.

As Majed (2005: 14) comments the participation of Egyptian women in politics of the country is determined by two main dimensions which are the legal constitutional framework and the political climate and the social and cultural aspects on the other. The

issue of political participation had been one of the most important issues which have raised its head time to time. Importantly the governments of Egypt also had taken into note the fact the women can be given some rights as far as political aspect is concerned. Therefore, one can see various reforms and measures as far as the women electorates as well as office holding of Egyptian women are concerned.

### **Quota System**

The system has altered the fate of women in Egyptian political system. The quota system has actually led to an increase the number of women parliamentarians in Egypt. As per the system a broad reservation was implemented with making it mandatory to vote for two members in one electoral zone one worker another farmer, there was a requirement that one woman must be elected (A-Zeid 2003: 3). Moreover the women also had the right to fight for the posts which was not reserved for them and hence the number of women parliamentarians had increased to 35 in 1979 and 36 in 1984 (A-Zeid 2003:5).

### **Political Participation of Egyptian women: Few progresses and few predicaments**

The political participation of Egyptian women although have been obstructed by many hurdles as being discussed above, there have been constitutional arrangements, international laws, and endorsement of political rights of Egyptian women through various legal actions. As argued by Mustafa (2005: 22), the political participation of women can be understood with two man dimensions which are legal and constitutional framework and secondly the political climate and social and cultural aspects. The formation of legal framework and endorsing of political rights for women have taken place over centuries. In the case of the Arabian countries, the process of endorsing of political rights of women have extended from the developed nation to them and hence women's right political participation was endorsed (Mustafa 2005: 22).As further noted by Mustafa (2005) the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has been one such document which endorses legal and constitutional rights for women. The constitution of Egypt also has laid down certain laws which confirm the liberty of women to enjoy certain constitutional

rights. The following are the few codes laid in the constitution which actually ensure constitutional rights to women.

Article 40 of the Egyptian constitution (the 1956, and the 1971 constitutions), states

“that citizens are equal in front of the law and equal in rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination between them based on gender, origin, language or belief” (Mustafa 2003: 22)

Again there are various other instances of women being granted political rights one importantly is that of the law no 73 of 1956 (Mustafa 2005: 22)

- Law no 73 of 1956 referred women as citizens
- The law also have granted the right to women stand for parliament as long as they had citizenship were registered as voters and were at-least 30 years old and literate.

The most important question that arises after discussing the constitutional rights granted to women is whereas such endorsing of legal frameworks have been able to actually make women able to be a part of political development of the country and women are holding seats as parliamentarians . The most important way to look at the changes in the political scenario as far as participation of women it is important to look at the numerical strength of women in politics.

**Table 5: The Representation of Women in Parliament (1957- 2000)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of seats won by women (%)</b>
1957	0.5
1979	9
1984	8.25
1990	1.6
1995	2.1
2000	2.49

**Source:** Majed,Z. (2005), “Building Democracy in Egypt: Women’s Political Participation, Political Party Life and Democratic Elections” Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, [Online: web] Accessed 10 March 2011, URL: [http://www.idea.int/publications/dem\\_egypt/upload/Egypt\\_country\\_report\\_English.pdf](http://www.idea.int/publications/dem_egypt/upload/Egypt_country_report_English.pdf).

As far as participation at other levels of political bodies are concerned women still do not show a very high rate. As far as Majlis -Ul –Shura (the consultative council), another very important body of Egyptian legislature also had very less representation. The following are few figures as far as sharing of women are concerned (Mustafa et al. 2005: 23).

- The number of women members in the council was seven when the body was established.
- The number of members was 12 in 1992 and was 15 out of 264 in 1995.
- The average representation of women in the council had never been more than 5.6%

Indeed the local council also did not have adequate representation as represented by the following facts (Mustafa et al. 2005: 23)

**Table 6: Women's Representation in Local Council (1980-1997)**

Year	Women's representation (%)
1980	10.22
1991	2.1
1992	1.2
1997	1.2

**Source:** Majed, Z. (2005), "Building Democracy in Egypt: Women's Political Participation, Political Party Life and Democratic Elections" Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, [Online: web] Accessed 10 March 2011, URL: [http://www.idea.int/publications/dem\\_egypt/upload/Egypt\\_country\\_report\\_English.pdf](http://www.idea.int/publications/dem_egypt/upload/Egypt_country_report_English.pdf).

The above mentioned table depicts the low and falling representation of women in Egypt even at the level of popular councils. Apart from the fact that women had very skewed representation at all levels of governance in Egypt it also had representation of a single political party many a times. The elections at the level of local council in the year of 1997 had been particularly won by the National Democratic Party (Mustafa 2005: 23). The political participation of Egyptian women henceforth could never represent variations and confirmed to the existing political hegemony of a single party over others. Egypt can be marked by single party dominance with no liberty of other parties to have an ideology off track the existing concepts (Majed 2005: 12). Hence the meager political representation which has happened is also nothing but actually an offshoot of the male dominant politics.

Thus in the political scenario of Egypt though there have been few rays of hope none of it were actually lightening up the life of women in the country. The male dominance and sheer underestimation of women's capability have led to loss of many rights for women. The irony of the fate remains that many a times the granting of political rights to Egyptian women had been laid in the constitution but have actually never been applied in practical sense. The lack of political will becomes the major issue when one speaks of less political participation of Egyptian women. Indeed there are other reasons as well such as illiteracy amongst women of Egypt, the lack of confidence to seek rights, non oriented batch of



women parliamentarians and so forth. However these all link to the factor of dominant patriarchy and political rigidity.

However it is indeed important to understand and analyze various reasons why participation of women in politics of Egypt had never been a fully realized dream.

### **The factors responsible for unsuccessful political participation of Egyptian women**

The quota system which was adopted to raise political participation of Egyptian women actually was a piecemeal approach of the government. Though it raised the participation of women in parliament numerically the representatives could not put a face to various demands of women. The lacuna of the whole major adopted was non oriented batch of women parliamentarians. They were not able to express adequately enough in the parliament as none of them had undergone any capacity building process. The aspect of political participation of women therefore had remained non-effective as the purpose of bringing issues such as demands of women in terms of economic participation had never been fulfilled. Moreover the Egyptian society was never so ready for any such massive changes. The Reality at grassroots level for women remained the same with no changes of women's social role. Hence the reforms that had been introduced remained superfluous and totally based on a top down approach. The proponents of the granting of political rights to women argue that when half of the population is women then it is essential to have equal participation for them as well (Zeid 2003: 3). However the important part is although equal participation of women in political affairs was talked about the movement for emancipation of women in social and economic forum could not coordinate with the changes in the policy.

The other issue with women participation in Egypt had been the constant challenges faced from the side of the parties against reservation for women. There were arguments which were raised against the reservation politic and special attention paid to the women contenders. As mentioned in Zeid (2003: 3), the arguments opposing the reservation politics of the parliament are as follows:

- **A patriarchal mindset :**

The opponents of retaining reservation criteria for political participation of Egyptian women believe that men are more capable of political administration than women and they should be better represented in the parliament. They believe women do not hold the sufficient political experiences to be part of the parliamentary process.

- **The existing parliamentarians can address the issues of women:**

The group also upholds the belief the idea that women who do not have any representation in the parliament is actually a myth. The system of parliament is actually a democratic process and hence can be counted as a mirror of the society. Therefore as women are also part of the society itself it is definitely not very logical to say that they need extra parliamentarians to represent them whereas the existing parliamentarians are already elected from among the society itself.

- **Reservation of parliament seats for women is an elitist idea:**

The members of this opponent camp also find that the whole concept of reserving seats for women in the parliament is actually an elitist concept. The idea of bringing this to the picture was far from democratic. The whole policy response was a top-down approach rather than actually being an outcome of actual growth of political conscience amongst the female population. They believe that it is important for the women of Egypt to bring the changes to the society with a natural process of democratic liberation and not as a policy response from the authorities at the top.

### **Absence of a confident brigade of women**

The patriarchal thought is so much ingrained in the society of Egypt that the women have never built enough confidence to raise demands. This lack of confidence is probably rooted in the subjugated position of women and the stringent social norms. Women therefore in fact also have never been able to realize what they have been denied by the existing male-dominated society. The lack of confidence and non-realization of their rights is rooted in the social realities of the country. A massive portion of women are rural and uneducated and hence are unable to ask for their demands (Majed 2005: 11). The inherent

fundamentalist mindset has been able to rule over the minds of women and considering few actions non-feminine and incorrect (Majed 2005: 11). Therefore women have never been able to break the cocoon and find their way out. They were more and more subjugated and conforming lot of population who would never oppose what the dominant section for the society would say. The issue of political participation of women therefore had seen very less demands coming from the side of women. Raising voices for taking part in the ruling process was something far beyond the existing societal norm of women and hence most of them remained silent observer.

### **Narrow Representation of Women in Egyptian Party System**

The participation of Egyptian women in political affairs of the country also could not bring equity. The nature of the development in relation to assuring of political rights of women in Egypt has always been favoring grant and not an outcome of the actual rise of political conscience amongst the women of Egypt. The actual democratic movement in Egypt has never taken the participation of women in political affairs on serious note. Though there is a multi party system existing in Egypt it never has given equal representation to women. Indeed the parties of Egypt have very less number of women representatives in the political parties. Though in Egyptian political scenario a multi party system existed as a matter of fact it is not a representation of diverse ideas. There is a controlled pluralism that existed within the political system of the country. The parties which were not in rule could not have a radical idea different from the party in power. In fact the law of 1977 has made it necessary for the parties to conform to the same principles of shariah (Majed 2005: 11). Hence the political parties has lost the freedom to diverge from existing principle. The parties were nothing but conformist of the ideas of the ruling party which was National Democratic Party (Majed 2005:11). In such a situation where all the parties had to confirm to the existing legislations of the ruling party a very less scope has remained for the placing the issue of rights of women in the democratic movement Moreover the participation of women had been very low in the political parties of the country and henceforth in actuality there were not many representatives for upholding the cause of women. As noted by Majied (2005: 10) the highest proportion of women participants in the political parties had been only 2%.

Again the most importantly even the most liberal and the leftist parties had very less representation of women (Mustafa 2005: 24). The Wafd party which is considered as a liberal party has only 2% of female representation again the leftist Tagammu party theoretically has said to have ten seats on its central committee for women however in practice it had only four women on the committee (Mustafa 2005: 24).

The skewed representation of women, the unwillingness of the ruling party and lack of a political system which actually adopts radical ideas rather than being conformist, the discourse of women's participation in political processes of the country could never find its significance.

### **The Existing Cultural Ethos**

The set of women population fall in minority section both in terms of numbers and also in terms of raising voices. There had been cultural norms set which deter women speak against what their male counterparts would think to be right. In many a times women themselves are so much trapped that they consider raising their voices would be morally wrong and also count the women who raise their voices as rebel. The embedded socialization process has led process of making laws favoring condition of women to be a prerogative of the dominant male parliamentarians. They continue tackling the issue in a way which would never enhance the power of women in the society and keep them grounded. Therefore the government retained a charity approach even though little legislation was made in favor of them. These were only temporary measures which could be annulled completely once some danger to the existing male dominance is felt. The 1983 law which assured reservation of seats for women in all 31 districts confirming 31 seats for women was repealed and another law in 1986 found its place (Majed 2005: 14). This underlined thoughts of this law indicated the inequality that is being created in the society by giving female population of the country such a large representation in the parliament (Majed 2005: 14). Apart from this the cultural ethos have also have worked against women being part of the political processes of the country (Majed 2005: 14). The existing cultural mindset had always been against women being voted to gain an upper hand n the power

pyramid. As a matter of fact neither men nor women were allowed to vote for the female candidates as it was considered as immoral and not righteous. Therefore it was very difficult for the Egyptian women to build a think tank and think beyond the prevailing cultural ethos. Moreover the example of repealing the law also shows that the legislation system also has never allowed the thought processes to change and women come to the forefront. The society kept on preserving the idea that there is no special need of women and that they do not possess the orientation to work for themselves. There is highly voted belief that the male counterparts are sufficient to call for action for the benefit of women and hence women need not come out of their veil to run the government.

### **A Cultural Dilemma and a Top-down Approach**

The Egyptian society also deals with lots of dilemma when it comes to the existing cultural trends. Egypt has strict cultural norms which confirms with the traditional ideas. The traditional way of life has been ingrained in the lives of the people and hence it has been difficult to come out of the existing mindset. Egypt when was undergoing the phenomenon of modernization which can be understood in terms of changing of country's political approach to democracy and economic approach on the line of western countries. Thus there is a conflict between the two approaches. Whereas Egyptian policy makers still were holding the traditional ideas the tenets of much liberated society has actually started creeping in. The modern ideas were in favor of equality, democracy, rationalism, and women's rights and talks about global advocacy (Majed 2005: 15) where as the traditional ideas had reservations against few of these. Therefore the process of modernization in Egypt had always been a selective affair with very less incorporation of change of thought process. Hence the incorporation of many of the characteristics was rejected. The formation of political ideology was also affected by the dilemma of incorporating tenants of democratization and at the same time retaining hegemony of single ideology. Thus though there was scope multiple party systems the parties had to have a similar ideology. The dominant ideology was to confirm to the traditional cultural ethos and work in unison with ruling party in regard to any form of legislation (Majed 2005:16). Thus though Egypt had a political process which seemed to be democratic for outsiders, it was actually hegemony of one group of population. Indeed the Islamic nation also imposed many laws so that the

parties never even have the ability to think off the track. These laws banned formation of new parties, party activities, assembling in one place, newspapers and decision making capacity (Majed 2005 :16).The political parties had also been affected by the previous laws and most of them were never repealed. The previous existing laws had put stricter regulation of parties and their mobility to think. Despite the political development that has led the existing governance to be democratic process it actually only have existed in papers. The democratic process in Egypt is in actual sense not an outcome of amalgamation of different range of ideas and political processes rather it is a dictatorship with an obligation for all the political parties to think alike. The internal structure of the parties also never had a democratic pattern and was authoritarian (Majed 2005: 16).The political parties had structure was democratic on papers but it actually had an authoritarian base. The political parties in Egypt also were very restrictive and did not welcome any radical thoughts. The restrictive political environment, the dictatorship and pure adoring of traditional ideas have made participation of women in political affairs of the country a distant dream. The cause of women henceforth remained at the level of top authority to tackle. Therefore the laws were made and repealed time to time and the various parties only had to agree to the changes made.

### **Violence and Repression of Women**

The most important way to deter any kind of opposition from any part of the population is to adopt mechanism for repression. It is a very important issue specifically when it comes to women. The state uses repression of women through various mechanisms to cut any kind of challenges that is extended against the government. Indeed it is true for all the vulnerable population. The examples can be seen with state's mechanism to suppress the tribal movement, the peasant movement or the workers' movement in many countries. The politics of repression is important to understand in the context of how vulnerable the targeted population is. A massive amount of literature has tried to study the aspects of repression in the countries. Political repression of the weak is one of the most important mechanisms to retain hegemony. The political repression is most glaring as far as women are concerned. The societies globally have always marked discrimination against women. There is code of conducts set for them which would make it difficult for them to rise up

and challenge the existing condition. The repression of women is present in almost all the spheres of life. They never had been able to enjoy an equal share with their male counterparts in terms of education, health, economy or social roles (Henderson 2004: 1028). The repression of women is therefore an easier task when it comes to stop women from challenging an existing norm. Most importantly violence had been one of the biggest mechanisms to actually repress women. Violence thus becomes an essential part of law when it comes to punishing a woman for violating any existing law. Apart from law women find violence in every aspect of life, indeed it becomes their part from womb to tomb (Henderson 2004: 1028). Women faces violence in the form of dowry deaths, female infanticide, domestic violence and so forth (Henderson 2004: 1029). Thus while understanding about political participation of women the aspect of violence needs special attention. It is very difficult for women definitely to extend own thoughts in a society where she has to undergo so many obligations. The literature on political repression talks about violation of right to integrity as pointed by Christian Davenport (Henderson 2004: 1029).

However as argued by Ursula O Hure in Handerson (2004: 1029) the theories of political repression hardly take into account the gender aspect of it and how women are subjected to violent atmosphere. Indeed violence can be a big weapon when it comes to women. The politics of Egypt need to be looked at from these points of view of political repression of women. Women in the country always had been a subject of repression. Therefore it definitely holds true that for a country like Egypt where women have to follow a strict code of ethics political repression also comes easy with much more emphasizing of women 's role in household and not in politics.

### **Weak Civil Society Organizations Movement in Egypt**

The attitude of the existing government, the hostile environment for women in terms of violence and repression in the society have always made it not possible to be dependent on the state itself to come with radical changes as far participation of women in political affairs is concerned. Therefore the civil societies have been the considered to be one best possible way to deal with the situation. Hence the civil society organizations have drawn large attention from the women for uplifting their condition in the society. Specifically

after the CEDAW convention and the changes at the international level the civil society movement in Egypt has caught its grip along with other countries. However the civil society organizations have never been able to lay its anchor as far as restoring political rights of women is concerned. The legal environment is indeed hostile towards the civil society organizations (Majed 2005: 16). Hence, neither the civil society organizations nor the political parties could ever take care of the issue of political participation women. The civil society organization could never have been able to revolutionize the whole affair and bring radical change. Though there have been legal provisions of compulsory registration of women on the voter list since 1979 the provision is purely formal and it leaves out a major portion of women who are eligible of voting (Majed 2005: 16).

Despite the fact that the civil society movement could never been fully successful in dealing with the issue of bringing women to the political forum the development and movement had indeed played a role in changing women's identity in terms of economic role, education and so forth. The post globalization period had seen rapid development of industries and other sectors and hence also participation of women workforce. These processes definitely have been able to change the picture of women in Egypt. As they had found some amount of liberation through these processes if not any revolution in political scenario. These kinds of developments would also contribute to rise of a politically aware confident group of women who definitely would be capable for raising their demands.

As far as changes are concerned it is important to look at the civil society movement in the country. The civil society movement was something as discussed above which a very high representation of women had. Before going into discussion of role of civil society organizations in the political development of the country it is important to understand why at all one needs to know about the development of the same in Egypt. As have been discussed the political reforms of the country has had a very bottom down approach and hence cannot be called entirely an outcome of a revolutionary process. However the coming out of women out of their veil and taking part in the political affairs is itself an important matter to discuss. The lifting of the veils and coming to the public forum to join civil society movements might have no direct linkage to the political participation of women but it could have led to development of a new age women who could seek their rights , be part of the economic processes. The civil society movements at present have



become one of the most vibrant weapons of bringing change in the society and restoring human rights. In case of women movement across the world the participation of civil society movements had helped to decrease the rates of domestic violence, infanticide and many other issues. The movements have had an impeccable influence on the humankind. Hence it is important to analyze the significance of it.

The women movement has caught its momentum also because of the changing picture of the globe. The global world no longer has segments and has gone beyond boundaries. The minimizing of boundaries have been a constant phenomenon since long but however many of the nations have had opened its doors in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The civil society movement has become global movement cutting across borders with the changes coming in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus for understanding the larger impact of civil society movements it is important to trace it specifically from the globalization era. In the following segment however the civil society movement would be looked in terms of its direct and indirect impact on the political processes of the country.

### **The Role of Civil Society Organizations and Women's Participation in Egypt**

One of the basic important features in civil society movements which we need to look at is the role of women's organizations. There are plenty of them which had grown up in the Arabic countries in the process of globalizations. Indeed there has happened as termed by Jad (2004: 43) an 'NGOisation of the movement'. The women's NGO has expended in Egypt as well and have taken into account many issues that concern the up-liftment of the society. The steady growth of them actually can be seen as a challenge to the authoritarian government of Arabic countries. They had come as instruments to hasten the process of democratization and recognizing of rights of individual. The organizations that have been working for women in the Arabic countries have taken into consideration a large number of issues which range from health , education , legal literacy, income generation and rights advocacy (Jad 2004: 43). NGOs definitely had been a process of bringing the people to the picture of democracy. But however a debate revolves around the impact of the organizations and to whether they actually had been able to be the torchbearers of social change in the Arabic countries. The development of the organizations had also been looked

as a peculiar process influenced by western ideology by the fundamentalist in the Arabic countries. It is looked as the imposing of values from west and also sometimes as rise of the global elite (Jad 2004: 43). Thus the development of the nongovernmental organizations in the Arabic countries had been looked at as processed outcome of western conspiracy and not as an outcome of genuine need. This has been dominant view which actually has crippled the development of organizations in the context of Arabic countries. Egypt being an Arabic country also shows the similar kind of developments as far as the development of non-governmental organizations is concerned. The impact of the civil society organizations on the political processes of the countries also therefore is difficult to calculate keeping in view the power held by the fundamentalist. The conspiracy theory of organizations and the reasons for it not being able to bring the desired impact needs to be looked through the process and the context of its developments.

The development of the civil society organizations in Egypt can be considered as a part of the process of modernizations in the country. The progress can be seen in two aspects which are growth of Islamic modernism which aims at rescuing the religion from the erroneous interpretation of the religion and on the other hand secular nationalism which believed in building a new independent nation and women were also looked at as important participant in that process (Jad 2004: 44).

In the context of this new thinking the Arab women also have started reframing their set of mind towards achieving a position in the society. They had looked forward to this new nation in which their demands were granted and their role was recognized. Hence the development of organizations in those countries also was shaped with this view in mind. It was a hope to achieve independence for the Arab women. Egypt also has had similar process of development. The Islamic modernism and the growth of this concept of building a new nation was very much part of this process.

When the Islamic nation was rethinking its shariah laws the women movement in the country also had got its shape. The women in Egypt had been granted few rights by the government with a piecemeal approach the women in Egypt had formed their own organization. The women of Egypt had been influenced by the Marxist and nationalist

perspective and had build organization to express them. These groups had tried to take the public forum and expressed rights of women in various contexts. The women groups had formed the following kind of organizations:

- The Women's Committee within the Reporters' Union was formed in 1979.
- The Federation for Progressive Women, affiliated with the Marxist, National, Progressive, and Unionist party, was established in 1982.
- Finally, the Permanent Committee on the Conditions of Women of the Arab Lawyers' Federation joined these other affiliated groups in 1984
- Bint-Al Arad another female organisation was formed in the year of 1984
- Tadamun al-MarDat al-'Arabiyya (The Solidarity of Arab Women's Association) was formed in the year of 1985.

These organizations were formed with the idea of creating a forum for women and also restoring their rights. The organizations had considered ideologically women to be core of the development processes of the country. They had advocated for having equal rights for women in the economic forum, the political forum and all other matters. Indeed these organizations were also getting funds from various international organizations as the women feminist movement in Egypt was very much conforming to the existing global movement. These women organizations had made an effort to mobilize the middle class women.

However the organizations which have been discussed above though had been considered to be the representative of women's interest it has never been ideally been able to portray what it aimed. The process of formation and the creating membership itself was faulty. The organizations had not been able to create magic due to following reasons:

- The organisations many a times were dominated by single dynasty and actually had monopoly over the whole functioning, for example one of the organisations Tadmum actually worked as a family enterprise where the father and daughter are actually holding the entire authority.

- Secondly it also had very less number of women participant in the organisation. The sole ideology was definitely focussed on restoring rights of women; however the main dominant member there were the men. The organisations hence hardly could meet its said target.
- The women were also not welcome in leadership of the organisation. They hardly could reach up to the lather of being leaders in the organisations.

Thus it is important to note that the women of Egypt hardly could organize into one body and break the patriarchal structure of the society. The organizations which were developing in the country only had a philanthropic notion and could not actually deal with real issue of women. They also were dominated by male members and hence could never reflect the actual problems of women. Gender equality therefore was a distant dream for the women of Egypt which was never taken seriously.

The civil society movement in Egypt is highly patronized and actually is a conformist movement in many cases. In the context of political participation of women it never actually has been able to forge a battle which would bring revolutionary change. It though has been constantly supported by the international organizations in terms of funding it could not much break the social reality of the country. The movement also has failed in terms of conforming to the ideas of the international conventions and organizations which were being convened and being formed to bring equality in the society in terms of gender. The failure of civil society movement in the Egyptian context is a failure in the following context:

- Not being able to bring the batch of women who are in actual need of having forum to express their views. Also most importantly it only could include the elitists of women in that category.
- Not being able to conform to the principle of bringing equity in terms of political participation promised in the international conventions.
- Not being able to break the patriarchal structure of the country.

The civil society movement in Egypt thus has been a big disappointment in terms of advection any constitutional changes. It had achieved a few successes in the initial period but never has been able to actually be a revolutionary process.

The civil society movement in other aspects also could not yield much positive results and bring equity in the society. The civil society movements although had been able to achieve few successes it could not have complete liberation of women. The movement is subjugated to the political developments and the dominance of single party.

To conclude civil society organizations though probably has eased the battle for the women of Egypt it could only had reached half success and could never had been able to bring a revolution to lift the veil and bring the status of women.

It had been traced that Egypt indeed had political developments which were pro changes in terms of bringing democracy to the picture. However the underlying fact remained that it never had practically followed the tenets of democracy.

Firstly though the country had accepted a multi party system in reality those were only puppets at the hand of the dominant party. What actually remained in the name of democracy was actually a system of dictatorship.

Secondly the prominent idea that ran through all the parties highly drew its base from patriarchal context. The parties never had actually gone beyond the ideas of patriarchy. It is also noteworthy that the parties could never had their own process of thinking which had made many parties keep the patriarchal mindset even if they preferred few radical changes.

Thirdly patriarchy was not only dominant in the parties it was also present in the society. Women themselves conformed to the dominant ideas of patriarchy and had never been able to seek their demands. Moreover they also have less literacy rate which makes them all the more vulnerable. The women also had meager presentation in the political parties.

To conclude it can be said the issue of political participation of women had never been addressed seriously in Egypt. Most importantly the civil society organizations which were the face of the society also hardly had representation of women. The women could only have few political rights when state has decided to grant some more as an act of philanthropy rather than a reform. Hence the issue never had received the adequate attention and political participation of women only had remained an unachieved dream.

**CHAPTER-IV**  
**RISE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN**  
**ISSUES**

## **CHAPTER-4**

### **RISE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN ISSUES**

The stereotypical attitude of patriarchal tradition that women are not intellectual enough to rule a nation and tyrannical practices against them in the name of gender has resulted in various women's movements on Egyptian soil. In entire MENA region, Egyptian women were the first one to begin their crusade against authoritarian establishments as well as conservative and harsh treatments meted towards them in name of saving their dignity and honor. Badran (1994:3) addressed the rise of women's movement as the most effective force in the creation of modern Egypt. The offshoot of Egyptian women's movement dates back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed an article titled "New Women of Egypt Struggle to End Age-old wrongs" published in the New York Times in the summer of 1928 glorified rise of women's movement in Egypt (Hiroi 2009). Egypt saw the budding of an organized feminist movement as early as the 1920's with the formation of Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923 (El-Mahdi 2010: 382). Since then Egyptian women are no more passive victims, their voices have been raised on every occasion to advance the position of women in all political, economic and social spheres.

The contemporary context of Egyptian women's movement represents a diverse situation. There is no single homogenous women movement. There are many extremely active women groups and organizations working on various issues like environment, health care, family planning family laws, labor laws without cooperation among each other (Karam 1998: 103). In Egypt there exist different forms of women organizations and plurality of feminism i.e. individual feminists who attempt to re-read and construct women's right within Islamist narratives. There also exist broad women based movements such as Muslim sisterhood (women branch of Muslim brotherhood which includes women under the umbrella of a broader movement seeking social and political change. These also co exist with individual non- religious based women rights NGOs and individual secular feminists. However, there is lack of collective non- religious based movements by various feminist movements for what they perceive as their rights or what they are against as injustices based on specifically on their gender(El-Mahdi 2010: 381).



The historical context of Egyptian feminist movement is crucial to understand the present developments experienced by present day women's movement.

### **Historical Perspective of Egyptian Feminist Movement**

The women's movement in Egypt had its underpinnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The growth of modernization with social, economic and political expansion revolutionized the lives of women across the country. The adaptation of Western ideas and life styles, budding urbanization, extension of education altogether slowly enlightened women during this period. Upper and middle class women began to raise issues on women emancipation. There happened to be revival of Islamism in the wake of modernization and women realized negative implications of veiling and segregation and protested against patriarchal character of the society. A few women organizations like Mabarrat Muhammad Ali (1909), Ja-m 'iyyah al-mar'ah al-jadidah(The New Women Society) of 1919 and Jam'iy-yah tarqiyyah al-fatah(The Society For the Progress of Young Women) of 1922 respectively provided education,hygiene, crafts and religious and national heritage available to poor women (Badran 1993).These societies campaigned against diseases like cholera, malaria and created medical awareness among the people. On the other hand, in state of affairs, the surface of feminist ideas among women provoked them to fully participate in the national liberation struggle against colonialism. The first such incident occurred in Cairo as number of rural women gathered in the streets of Cairo and threw stones against Mamluks and French occupiers and criticized their manhood during Mohammad Ali period (Tucker 1999: 89). From 1820's to 1860, women were visible participants in a number of rural uprisings (Tucker 1999: 89). The outbreak of Egyptian revolution against British occupation mobilized women from all spheres and background to dedicate their lives toward the cause of nation. This is the turning point in the history of women movement since it bestowed women an opportunity to struggle against boundaries historically placed on their activities ((Lazreg 1990; Ray and Karteweg 1999).Hence, we can pronounce that women's movement in Egypt is the offshoot of larger nationalist movement. During the struggle for independence from 1919 to 1920, "the first priority for Egyptian feminists and nationalists of both sexes was Independence" (Badran, 1996: 205).

## Women in Cairo demonstration 1919



**Source:** Daadleh, N. (2011), "Egypt 21<sup>st</sup> Century Revolution and Women Question" Accessed 8 March 2011, URL: <http://www.reasonstokill.com/2011/02/egypt%E2%80%99s-21st-century-revolution-and-the-woman-question/>

But miserably, the government which came to power remained unenthusiastic to confer women the equal opportunities along with men. Nonetheless, the state authorities were quite accommodating of women's mobilization during the time of struggle for national independence. In other way, it shows that when situation emerge, women can be treated as equal to fulfill intended purpose. For an illustration, political parties during 1919 revolution encouraged women participation whole heartedly and promised them equal rights which they did not accomplish instantly after independence. The opening ceremony of Egyptian parliament did not call women who equally were martyrs to the nationalist cause along with men (Bardan 1995). When Egyptian constitution was drafted in 1919, neither women's political rights nor their equality with men were discussed (Nadje Al-Ali 2002). This political omission caused the growth of feminist movements in the country (Tucker 1999).

Prominent Feminist and women rights activist Huda Sha'rawi created Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923 and with this feminist activism began in Egypt. EFU outlined political suffrage, reform of personal status law, and equal educational and employment rights for women as their key feminist agendas (Al-Ali 2002). Although Intellectuals were keen to associate feminist ideology in Egypt with Egyptian writer and activist Huda Sha'rawi and her association Egyptian Feminist Union respectively (Ahmad 1982; Hatem 1986; Khalife 1973; Philipp 1978; Al-Ali 2002), but feminist thoughts in Egypt was actually began in the writings of Aisha Al-Taymouriya (1840-1902) and Malak Hifni Nassef (1886-1918) (Guenena and Wassef 1999: 12-13). Both raised issues of veiling and segregation. Feminist movements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century dealt with interest motivated concerns like better health situations, education in order to generate earnings to the family along with contentious issues like veiling, segregation, polygamy and so forth. In 1923, in a spectacular way, Huda Shaarawi got rid of her veil by throwing it into the Mediterranean, while returning from a conference in Rome (Hussain 1953: 440). This manifested in the beginning of women liberation. This audacious act of Huda Shaarawi was soon pursued by other Egyptian women to discard veil which alienated them from the outside world.

**Huda Sha'rawi, right, at a women's conference in Rome after they had removed their veils**



**Source:** Badran, M. (2005), "Egyptian Feminism in a nationalist century", Accessed 8 march 2011, URL: [http://www.mediterraneas.org/article.php3?id\\_article=178](http://www.mediterraneas.org/article.php3?id_article=178)

From 1921 to 1930, the broadening of educational and professional opportunities for women enlarged feminist realization among them and women became more conscious of their rights and discrimination on the basis of gender. A small group of upper and middle class women under the leadership of Huda Sha'rawi joined Wafd party and keenly involved in nationalist struggle as the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC) which later became famous as the Egyptian Feminist Union when Wafd party failed to fulfill demands of women. The EFU was made up of Coptic and Muslim women from the upper and upper middle classes (Zulfikar 1995: 47). EFU activists stipulated social and political rights for women. Besides the nationalist agenda, modification of Personal status law (which govern family law and confer privilege status to men in areas of marriage, divorce and child custody), curbing of polygamy (Man's right to marry four times), amendment of divorce law (A man's right to divorce his wife without eyewitness or without legal procedure),

abolition of Bayt at ta'ah (a man's right to demand obedience from his wife) were the main EFU's memorandums concerning women independence in Egypt (Guenena and Wassef 1999). EFU published two journals namely *L'Egyptienne* and *Al-Misriyya* to emancipate and to get in touch with women across the country (Badran 1993: 136).

However, the EFU determined to focus on fighting for the cause of women's rights such as education and setting a minimum age for marriage by law as well as charity work and postponed their struggle to attain suffrage for some time (Badran 1988: 26-8, 31). Thus we can analyze that women's movement in its beginning phase mostly occupied with charitable services supported largely by women from aristocratic or ruling families.

The seeds of radical feminism which came into sight with appearance of Doria Shafik, Inji Aflatoun, Soraya Adham, Latifa Zayyad in 1940's manifested a change in course of feminist struggle in Egypt (Nadje S. Al Ali 2002; Margot Badran 1999). After the end of World War II, women's movement adopted a socialist orientation in wake of harsh economic conditions. In 1944, Fatma Ni'mat Rashid started *Hizb Al-Nisa'i Al-Watani*, (the National Feminist Party). Although it had predominantly middle class relative success in bringing social and economic reform, it did not have a broad appeal (Badran 1993: 137; Badran 1991: 212). Doria Shafik established *Bint El-Nil* (Daughter of the Nile) highlighting mainly on full political enfranchisement for women. Their organization provided community services through literacy program, Health, hygiene and sanitation campaigns for poor and rural women. Moreover at the same time, leftist ideologies became evident in feminist movement championing feminist struggle as a part of larger class movement for equal social order. In addition, Islamist feminism appeared with Zeinab al-Ghazali parting with EFU to form the first Islamic women's association in 1936 parting from EFU and termed *Sha'rawi* as westernized and spurious to Islamic culture (Karam 1998). This Muslim women's Society later united with Muslim Brotherhood (MB) (Muslim Brethren Movement) and endorsed Islam against western discourses on feminism. To them, equality between man and women is achievable under Islam. Most interestingly, there emerged three different threads of new feminism with Doria Shafik's *Daughter of Nile* fighting for equal political rights for women, Inji Aflatoun advocating social feminism and establishment of Muslim Women's society by Zeinab al-Ghazali respectively (Al-Ali 2002). Hence, women's movement took diverse stands throughout this decade. The decade



from 1940s and 1950s were quite remarkable as many of the political parties formed women's wings under their own banner. Thus, it was during this period women movement dispersed on variety of issues and emerged heterogeneous women's movements in Egypt.

However, there appeared dormancy in the belligerent and diverse feminist movement in Egypt following the outburst of Egyptian revolution of 1952. The Free officers under the leadership of Gamal Abd al Nasser abolished monarchy and came to power. The regime persuaded significant changes in economic and social domains. The new state promoted socialism with the state performing the role of sole economic actor and facilitator (Abdelrahman 2004: 90-93). The idea of state feminism was created by providing employment opportunities to a large number of women in the public segment (Hatem 1992: 231). Education and employment prospects for women had been drafted by the new regime to enlarge women's presence in public space. In addition to this, the Constitution of 1956 approved equal political rights for women affirming that all Egyptians are equal under law and prohibited intolerance on the basis of sex, ethnicity, creed or faith (Hatem 1992: 232).

#### **Rawya Attiya, the first female parliamentarian of Egypt**



Source: Badran, M. (2005), "Egyptian Feminism in a nationalist century", Accessed 8 march 2011, URL: [http://www.mediterraneas.org/article.php3?id\\_article=178](http://www.mediterraneas.org/article.php3?id_article=178)

Conversely, at the same time the new regime outlawed all the opposition parties. It also called for banning of feminist organizations. In 1956, a new law had been passed by the

government to control the rise of civil society organizations and maintain authoritarian rule in political system. Under articles 54 to 80 of the Civil Code, the rights of association were canceled with an announcement and all associations and NGO were suspended and forced to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA). The regime became dictatorial with dismissal of opposition and establishment of single party system under National Union (NU) and Arab Socialist Union (ASU) in 1957 and 1961 respectively. Therefore, representation of women in legislative body and recognized political establishments continued to be meager in spite of state's preaching of women empowerment. In the view of Emma Murphy (2003:170), in a regime which is (extremely authoritarian, there are higher chances of state feminism being dictated by the wishes of the state. The rights of women were dependent on the goodwill of the state and ruling authority tried to control over female activism through its choices and priorities. Throughout Nasser's era, issues concerning women were attached within the framework of social problems like wide spread illiteracy, restrictions on women due to their role of mother and wife, women's entry into labor force and so forth. Nadeja Al-Ali (2002: 7) observes that the position of women underwent great changes during the Nasser period with broader commitment to social egalitarianism as women were given increased opportunities and rights within the limits set by the government. There were plenty of women becoming financially independent but still they were heavily reliant on the state for welfare services like education, health and day care. Women's involvement in politics remained limited. While state feminism produced a system of public patriarchy, it did not confront the individual and familial views on women's enslavement on men that they were institutionalized by the personal status laws and the political system (Hatem 1992: 233).

In post revolution period women activism was not as robust as it was in pre revolution time. Dariya Safiq carried out hunger strike in 1953 in parliament challenging the government to fulfill women's right to vote (Badran 1991: 216). A published paper titled Al- Kitab Al-Abiyyad Lil Huquq Al- Mar'a Al- Misriyya (the white paper on the rights of the Egyptian women) came in promotion of women suffrage. In the year 1956 as the government started to interdict women's organizations, EFU was closed and it was permitted to perform its activities in the name of Huda Sha'rawi Association, a social service organization. The prominent feminist organizations like Al-Lajna Al-Nisa'iyya lil

Wa'i Al Qawmi Intikhabi (Women's Committee for Electoral Awareness), Al-Ittihad al-Nisa'i al-Qawmi (the National Feminist Union), Muslim Sisters, and Women's Committees for Popular Resistance were also silenced and banned explicitly by the state and their female leader were imprisoned. Inji Aflatoun, Latifa Al-Zayat, Zeinab Al-Ghazali and many other women activists were imprisoned due to their political views against the authoritarian government.

From the years 1950's to 1960's, social attitudes towards women had changed and their presence in education and employment were increased, but it did not alter the conventional social outlook to women's position in the family and in the political system (Hatem 1992: 232). The Personal status laws of the 1920's and 1930's which defined women as economically dependent on men and deprived them to instigate divorce continued impervious (Al-Ali 2002: 7; Hatem 1999: 232). Nasser did not allow women independent action, attempt to reform family law, or locate women in top positions of government (Keddie 2007: 123). It is important to note that tasks and actions of many women's organizations during Nasser's era were fundamentally decided by the regime's own interests (Hatem 1993:30).

In 1970's, with the presidency of Anwar al Sadat following the death of Nasser, the government began Infitah (open door) policy which changed the course of Egyptian economy. From an extremely nationalized financial system, Egyptian economic structure transformed in to a more laissez-faire market by reassuring overseas and domestic private ventures. Accordingly, new regime had collaborated with the West and the U.S.A and international institutions like IMF and the World Bank for rapid growth of the country (Al-Ali, 2000: 71). Eventually, the state withdrew itself from providing social and economic benefits and subsequently, the state's loyalty towards gender came to a standstill. The liberalization process had negative effects for women since there were few opportunities for new entrants in the public sector, there was defeminization of nongovernmental jobs and the gender gaps in wages increased (Assad and Arntz 2004; ETF 2009:4). Due to regime's increasing lack of social and economic commitment, lower-middle-class and working class women underwent enormous difficulties from reduced employment opportunities and poor working environments (Al-Ali 2000: 71-72). The state's adaptation



of open door policy diluted economic state feminism since it refused to hire women on the grounds that provision of maternity leave and child care, set by the law, made their labor costly, employers in both the state and private sector have made inequality of opportunity in the labor force(Hatem 1999: 239).

On the political front, the one-party arrangement of Nasser's era converted towards democratic system with Sadat's regime laid the stone for democratization of political structure. Sadat's decision of allowing political parties and groups to operate within the political process had opened a new chapter in Egyptian politics. However, on the other hand, the regime's intention of recognizing political parties discursively served the purpose of opposition being under the control of ruling authority. Thus, the number of opposition parties remained inadequate despite state's dedication towards democracy. Meanwhile, in initial years the Sadat's rule associated itself with Islamist groups in order to gain support and challenge Nasserites and leftists. Sadat freed the members of Islamist groups prosecuted by the Nasser regime. These Islamists were against state feminism which was highly practiced during Nasser's era. They favored women's education seeing that as a way of training them to be good wives and mothers, but were quite hesitant about women's work (Hatem 1999: 234). Islamic fundamentalism had gained momentum during this period. Resurgent Islamic movement inspired large number of youths more specifically young college going women to follow the principles and values of Islam. They espoused Islamic mode of dressing styles. These young veiled women had a strong sense of religiosity irrespective of economic background (Hatem 1999: 235). When veiled women were asked about their reasons for adopting veil, they cited (a) their conviction that this mode of dress brought them closer to God(40.8%); (b) their religious consciousness and that the fact that it was compatible with the shari'a(33.2%); (c) fear of going to hell and the desire to go to heaven (20.6%); (d) deep interest in religious teachings(10.1%); (e) having very religious families(3%); (f) peer pressure (2%) (Hatem 1999: 235). With the opening of schools, health centers, colleges and other social institutions by Islamic groups reasserted formation of traditional Islamic societies in the lines of Islamic shariah law.

The women's movements during Sadat's era suffered a doldrums. Women and youth groups were allowed to form under the banner of the party and their loyalty remained to the

head of the state. The regime was against of developing any kind of feminist leaning organization which would go against religious preaching of Islam. Hence, the 1971 constitution affirmed the commitment of the state to providing the means to resolve the compulsions women have in the family, their work in society and their equality to men in the political , social and cultural arenas provided that the above did not disobey the rules of Islamic shariah ( Hatem 1999: 241). The state's motives to influence women's groups had formed both an assured degree of official protection by means of control and exploitation as there were hardly any autonomous women organizations. Lack of independency and profound reliance on government's meticulous wishes assured limited feminist activism. The state promoted the idea of women's return to home by the means of curtailment of their public role.

Nonetheless, the later part of 1970's witnessed a change in entire feminist movement in amidst of First United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975. The ideal of state's consignment towards changing biased legal arrangement in conformity to abolish all forms of discriminations against women began in Egypt. In the meantime, with the intention of altering the image of the country in eyes of international community and to obtain economic assistance from the West and more particularly from the U.S, Sadat regime initiated reform of personal status law that dealt with marriage, divorce and the custody of the children and began so called feminization of the state. Moreover, the commencement of U. N Decade for Women in 1975 also encouraged the regime to build Egyptian's Women's organization under the umbrella of Arab Socialist Union (ASU) and a National Commission for Women (NCW) to end discrimination against women (Hatem 1999: 240-241). Welfare issues such as implementation of family planning programs, promotion of literacy campaign were the main concerns of these organizations while they stayed aloof from the controversial issues like female circumcision, polygamy and so forth which have political intention.

The most notable event in 1970's was the reform of the personal status law as a result of prolonged agitation of many women organizations and activists in association with Mrs. Jehan Sadat, although the struggle against this law began quite early with EFU under Huda Saharawi in the 1920's and 1930's. Humm (1990:60) identified family as the prime

location of women's oppression .The social structure revolves around the aegis of the family and maintaining its high status. Within the household men are regarded as the ruler of the family and women are often regarded as their property and the basis of this is the Personal status Law (PSL). Personal status codes closely linked with Islamic law that extend privileges to men in the family (in the areas of marriage, divorce, and child custody) which are denied to women(Kandiyoti 1991: 5).This law has been amended several times and more recently in 1979, 1985 and the year 2000 respectively. In 1979 President Sadat parting with Islamist groups announced the presidential decree known as Law 44and amended personal status law. The new law specified that the husband before getting married to a new wife must give notice of the names of any wife or wives to whom he was wedded previously before contracting a new marriage. The law gave the first wife the right of divorce as an injured party without requiring proof of injury provided she filed for divorce within one month of being officially notified of her husband's marriage to another woman proposing new marriage act. Besides, the law provided the divorced wife freedom within the matrimonial home to take care of minor children for the time unless the husband who had divorced her provided her with an alternative dwelling. This reformed law was known as Jehan's law due to her consistent support for the mobilization of women. Moreover, in1979 the government endorsed another law that bestowed women thirty seats in the legislative body and twenty percent of all seats in the local People's Councils. Again in 1979 Family Status Law that reaffirmed woman's right to divorce increase the legal age for marriage from sixteen to eighteen and gave her the right to travel without the husband's permission was amended (Al-Ali 2000: 73-74; Badran 1991: 224).

However, the amendment of this law attracted antagonism from all sections of political gamut. The supporters of the reform of the law had been termed as the followers of West. They rejected feminism and viewed feminists as upper or middle class, foreign educated elite women as many of the first women's organizations were founded by elite women (Singerman 2003: 99). According to them, feminism is an essential part of Western culture and therefore inherently antagonistic towards the cause of Egyptian women. Feminists had been accused of betraying authentic culture by adopting western perception. Women's associations such as The New Woman (NW) in Egypt vehemently rejected the Islamists' contention that secularism was an anomalous condition connected to the European

experience. After the modification of the personal status law, there was a heated arguments followed in the parliament regarding the validity of the law. The Right found the law as in contradiction with Islamic shari'a where as the Left refuted the law as an instance of state authoritarianism. Marvet Hatem (1999:243) stated that it created confusion among women members of the parliament.

“Their support for the badly needed changes introduced by the law was pitted against important ideological and political principles they were committed to. The women who chose to defend the law were bothered by what the opposition said it represented politically. For others more swayed by the ideological arguments, it was equally troubling to denounce the modest and badly needed changes it introduced. In other words the law created ideological discord among women” (Hatem 1999: 243).

And finally in 1985, it was declared that the amendments of personal status law to be unconstitutional and thus once again women were left without of their basic legal rights. A vast number of independent women organizations came to the forefront challenging official sponsorship of political parties. The feminist movement in 1970's saw the rise of Egyptian revolutionary feminist Nawal Al Sadawi. Her book *Al-Mar'a wa Al-Jins* (Woman and Sex) published in 1972 concerning female circumcision stirred up animosity amongst political and Islamic authorities. In this literary work, she was highly critical on a variety of assaults that were highly injurious to female body. Due to her long struggle against ruling authority, she was imprisoned in 1980's. Later she founded *Jam'iyat Tadamun lil-Mar'a Al-'Arabiya* (Arab Women's solidarity Association) (AWSA) raising women issues and combating discriminations against women at all levels.

After the assassination of Sadat in 1981, there was a state of emergency in both political and economic spheres. In that troublesome atmosphere, Hosini Mubarak came to power in October 1981 and he carried out the legacies of economic liberalization and political democracy initiated by Sadat. “The early years of the Mubarak regime were characterized by a search for stabilization and consolidation” (Al-Ali, 2000: 75). During Mubarak period, Unlike Sadat who moved away from Pan Arab collectivism, the country became more close to Arabian solidarity and accordingly, the headquarters of the Arab League (AL) was shifted to Cairo. This was arranged to bring back Arab support to the country and to re-establish ties with Arab states and to remove isolation of Egypt in whole Arab region

(Karam 1998: 69). Meanwhile, Mubarak, in his adherence to democratic ideals called upon all the opposition groups to work together with the government. However in practice, democracy was not preserved as the rigid regulations found in the constitution as well as the party and electoral laws had severely limited the scope of democracy in Egypt under the presidential system (Sawant 2004: 60). Although Mubarak was committed to destroy all the radical Islamist groups, he endorsed Islamist presence in political procedure by means of allocating Muslim Brotherhood (moderate Islamists) to contest in electoral process during 1984 and 1987 parliamentary elections (Karam 1998: 69-70). The regime wanted to use Brotherhood as a political counterweight against radical Islamic groups' organizations that were viewed as a threat to the regime (Sawant 2004: 61). Eventually Muslim brotherhood was able to gain public support and leadership position in political front by carrying out social services under the control of government in early 1980's. In order to further comprehend this purpose, the state created influential autonomous judiciary and endorsed Islamist political presence (Hatem 1999: 244). Owing to the widespread protests of the Islamist groups, the court of law expelled Personal Status Law of 1979 and provision of reserved seats for women in 1987 election as unconstitutional.

The feminist activism in the early years of Mubarak era witnessed renewed visibility of independent women's movements throughout the region that consist of women from the middle class background (Hatem 1999: 247; Badran 1991: 225).

Nadje Al-Ali (2003: 223) maintained that state controlled limited political space, rising tide of Islamism and harsh social, political and economic realities of Neo liberal era pushed middle class women to organize themselves independently and work towards gender equality. The decision of constitutional court to strike down amendments of Personal Status Law of 1979 and cancel of the reserved parliamentary seats for women in 1987 election weakened the social and political prospects for women (Hatem 1999: 244). Meanwhile the coalition of Islamist groups and existing regime suppressed voices regarding women issues and supporting preferential treatment of women in Egyptian parliament. These happenings influenced women in the sense that they become conscious to organize themselves autonomously without state's control (Badran 1991: 225).

The year 1984 saw the first nongovernmental feminist organization; Bint al-Ard (daughter of the land) in Mansura, a town in Lower Egypt. Though this group emerged to support the victims of Israeli aggression but they worked towards for enlightenment of rural women and imparted feminist ideas through organizing lectures and workshops for both men and women. In 1985, the well-known Egyptian activist Nawal El-Saadawi founded the Jam'iyat Tadamun lil-Mar'a Al-'Arabiya (the Arab Women's Solidarity Association). The United Nations granted the status of international non-profit non-governmental organization to the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA). AWSA connected the rights of women's to broader economic, social and cultural life and encouraged Arab women to work together for women's liberation on a worldwide basis. However, critics pointed out AWSA as basically a family enterprise where family monopoly prevailed in all positions of power in the association and there was not equal representation of women from all sections of society (Hatem 1999: 247). Interestingly, another women rights activist, Huda Badran initiated feminist organization named Rabitat Al-Mar'a Al-Arabiya (the Alliance for Arab Women) stressing on women's political and legal rights in 1987.

In 1985, when the modified version of Personal Status Law of 1979 (the first major revision since 1929) was abrogated, different groups of women resisted vehemently and formed a Committee for the Defense of the rights of Women and the Family to lobby a new law that would retort to the social needs addressed by the 1979 law (Hatem 1999: 245). The Committee hold meetings wrote radical articles on newspaper and magazines in their attempt to adjourn for the arrangement of a new law. However they faced aggressions from the people who were against the revised law of 1979. The Islamists and other conservative groups insulted and beleaguered the members of the committee. Although the committee accomplished in their goal of successfully bringing women issues to the public inspection, but the new law revising the earlier one mostly appeased the conventional groups of the society: The sections and provisions of the new law were relatively parallel to those enclosed in the 1979 law but it stipulated that women should prove material and moral injury that would make the continuation of her life impossible without her husband before initiating her divorce right against the husband or else she would have no rights to ask for a divorce.

On the other hand, there surfaced a national discussions regarding the transformation of Personal status Law and it divided the whole feminist movement into two camps (Al-Ali 2000: 10). Ideological differences occurred among the women's groups of the country. Nawal Sadawi and the Arab women's solidarity association supported the law of 1979 whereas Fathia Al -Assal and her Progressive Women's Union allied with the leftist Tagammu party protested against the law as due to its passage in an unconstitutional manner in Sadat era. Thus, the continuing battle over the personal status law engaged the feminist movements during 1980's.

If we analyze the role of women's movement of 1980's, we basically found that they were the spokesperson of the government. Suppression policies of the government did not provide much scope for women voices. Therefore, women organizations at that time largely worked inside the government using their connections and positions with the government, their professional expertise and their organizational bases to promote their agenda (Singer 2003). They were seen as the representatives of the regime instead of legitimate representatives of women due to their close alliance within the government (Hatem 1992: 246-247). But this situation changed in the decade of 1990's ever since women rights activists both individually and collectively began challenging prevailing structures to bring positive changes in the lives of Egyptian women.

### **The contemporary women's movements and Women's Issues**

In an atmosphere of totalitarian regime under President Mubarak who pompously check escalation of civil society organizations, implement indistinct government policies in the name of false democracy and ascendancy of conservative Islamic attitudes prevail in society, the situation of women's movement is quite pessimistic during 1990's. Yet, women's organizations grew captivating more susceptible issues like reproductive rights of women, violence against women, issue of female circumcision along with development issues of alleviation of poverty and illiteracy, rights to education, work, health care and political participation (Al-Ali 2003: 216). women's increased involvement in non-governmental and informal organization emanated from the fact that there is limited participation of women in formal political activity.

The decade of 1990s under the tenure of Mubarak regime was noticed as extremely critical for women's rights movements. Globalization manifested in the nation in the name of international capitalism. On the economic front, the global competition, technological progress in transportations and communication, increasing flexibility of labor markets international production by transnational corporations (TNCs) forced Egyptian Government to adopt structural adjustment program to draw foreign investments in the country (Moghadam 199: 57). These international institutions and aid giving countries joined with Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to present development assistances in the country for the rapid growth of the society as a whole. There emerged professional NGOs deal specifically for the women emancipation.

On the domestic front, internal political contestation and power struggle between the government and Islamists groups, the state took repressive measures against the civil society organizations (Al -Ali 2003: 218) which had ultimately limited the space for women's concerned activities. Despite this, there was splurge of women based NGO's with diverse orientations, following a number of international conferences under the support of United Nations.

The first amongst all was the International Conference for Population and Development (IPCD) held in Cairo in 1994. This conference developed the idea of 'global feminism' which gives an opportunity to Egyptian women activists to come together and commonly fight for their cause. Moghadam (1998: 60) defined global feminism as the discourse and movement for women (through greater access to resources, through legal measures to effect gender equality, and through the self empowerment of women) within national boundaries but through transnational forms of organizing and mobilizing". The groundwork for the conference itself formed an alliance of women activists from different backgrounds to discuss previously forbidden issues such as abortion, violence against women, reproductive rights in addition to laws concerning women's rights and equality (Al-Ali 2000: 11). The issues discussed in IPCD created a hostile response among the Islamist groups and they portrayed it as a plot of developed nations against Islamic nations (Guenena and Wassef 1999: 48). The Islamists were highly critical of the issues of contraception, abortion and



female circumcision discussed as the main agenda of the conference. Al-Ali (2003: 225) is of the view that the Islamist constituencies rejected the idea of gender as being imported from the west and it promoted homosexuality, pre-marital sex and adultery. In the meantime, the Egyptian government to look liberal in eyes of international community organized a committee headed by Hoda Badran to select NGOs for UN International Women's Forum in 1995 in Beijing. However, the committee only permitted NGOs registered under Ministry of Social Affairs to attend and barred non-registered NGOs from attending the conference (Al-Ali 2000: 12). All of these international symposiums discussed the necessity of women's participation at all levels of decision making process to achieve the ideals of democracy and development.

As mentioned above, a new generation of women's organizations surfaced in scenario namely New Woman Research Centre (NWRC), the Alliance of Arab Women (AAW), the Women's Study Centre (WSS), the Daughter of the Land Group and so forth. In addition to these independent groups, there emerged service-oriented NGOs with a special focus on the role of women in both development and underdevelopment such as the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW) and Appropriate Communications Techniques (ACT), the professional women organizations like the Egyptian's women's writer's Association, the Arab Women Publishing House Nour, the Egyptian Women in Film society those who are affiliated to political parties such as Ittihad Al-Nissai' Al-Taqaddummi (Progressive Women's Union) and Lagnat Al-Mar'a fil Hizb Al-Nasseri (the Women's Secretariat of the Arab Democratic Nasserist party) (Al-Ali 2000: 14). They had commenced a variety of approaches: providing services, advocacy, research, publishing, and scholarship (Guenena and Wassef 1999)

Several factors are responsible for the rise of women based organizations. Moghadam (1998: 59) talks about four main rationales for the growth of women's rights organizations in Egypt. In the first, place he discussed changes in demographic pattern like rising level of female education and female employment created new independent women who tend to organize themselves and raise their voice for egalitarianism and empowerment. Secondly, implementation of structural adjustment policies in Egyptian economy, the role of state had changed from service provider to facilitator's. Privatization of welfare services like

education, health care made working and poor people's lives measurable. This had prompted the escalation of NGOs which could be connected development program with condition and wellbeing of women. In the political arena, revival of Islamic movements and public crusading for democratic system of governance prepared women based NGOs to actively participate in movement for equal political rights along with men as they are traditionally being debarred from meaningful role in politics. Moreover, restrictive traditions and discriminatory laws and customs induced women to challenge these obstructions and appear in the public forum. Al-Ali (1997: 180) also highlights that the rising Islamic activism affected women to get structured and mobilized in reaction to women's realities and problems. And last but not least, international dynamic like United Nation's recognition to raise women issues in a global array and subsequent conferences like International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the International Conference on Human Rights (ICHR) (Vienna 1994), the World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) mobilized women from all over the world. Thus, in the present scenario, feminist movement in Egypt has broadened its activities through enormous creation of civil society organizations. Women based NGO have taken up various issues ranging from altruistic actions like providing education and better health care to poor and rural women to advancing women's participation in politics by means of advocacy, research to create awareness among the people.

The current women's movement in Egypt is tremendously diverse in terms of activities and institutional models (Al-Ali: 2000). Karam(1998: 122) divided women's NGOs into five different groups which are women's organizations working through research activities, organizations developed around certain issues like reproduction and health rights, women committees, temporary women's associations and NGOs which deals with various issues and consider women's interests as a part of their larger initiatives for the overall growth of the society.

A seven fold typology NGOs has been recommended by Moghadam(1998:61) according to their approach and course of action. These are service groups which provide welfare services, professional associations promoting women owned business, development

research centers conducting transnational research activities, human rights and women rights organizations, women-in-development NGOs offering technical assistance on issues related to sustainable development, women wings of political parties and lastly, worker-based and grass root women organizations working towards interests and justice of women workers. These groups launched women agendas to realize objectives like equality of privileges, eradicate violence against women, advancing women's participation at all levels of decision making process to eliminate gender disparities and improve status of women.

The greatest threat to women empowerment came from discriminatory legal structure which endorsed gender biases such as PSL. Therefore women's rights advocacy NGOs has commenced on legal campaigns to confront political and legal structure as well as patriarchal division of society to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and raise women awareness. The different goals and priorities in the women's movement are translated into various projects and activities: income generating projects and credit and loan programmes; legal assistance programmes; legal awareness workshops and publications; campaigns to change existing laws (particularly the Personal Status Law and the Law of Association); the establishment of a Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Task Force; setting up a network to research and campaign around the issue of violence against women; organizing seminars, workshops and conferences to address and raise awareness about certain issues; designing and distributing gender training packages among NGOs; publishing books, magazines and journals; and the establishment of Women's Media Watch (Al-Ali 2000: 16).

The issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) or female circumcision is one of the most controversial problems where women NGO's became increasingly involved for the abolition of this inhuman practice. FGM involved in partial removal of external private part which will control female behavior by impeding their sexuality in Egypt (Guenena and Wassef 1999). It was extremely harmful for physical and psychological development of women. With the intention of eliminating this harmful practice, women's NGOs formed a coalition named FGM Task Force under the National NGO Commission for Population and Development, headed by Marie Assaad in October 1994. Due to the pressure from the women groups and international community, the Egyptian government issued a decree in

1996 forbidding practice of FGM in government hospitals. The decree was challenged in the courts and reversed, but was restored back in 1997. (Guenena & Wassef 1999:50)

In age of globalization, coalition building has become common feature in women's movement where international conferences, travel, migration and electronic media greatly influence feminist activism. This transnational dimension of women's movement also felt in Egyptian feminist movement. Besides the presence of women's NGOs, a variety of associations like informal professional, political, bureaucratic, class, educational, religious networks started to form a collective initiative in a politically opportune moment that surpass their particular interests and constituencies (Singerman 2003: 103). International actors can play an enabling role to support coalitions. However Coalitions to advance women's equality are rare in the Middle East, challenged by a restrictive and professionalized political culture that discourages collective forms of agency.

In conjunction with secular feminism, a new feminist group popularly known as "Islamic Feminism" emerged in 1990's preparing an egalitarian gender discourse by reinterpretation of the Qur'an as the central source of inspiration as well as in other religious texts (Badran 2008). They have disapproved wrong explanation of Quran by male clergy that viewed women as dependent on men (Al -Ali 2003: 222). A rise in Islamist women groups and associations rendering charitable services and spreading dutiful teachings of Islam resulted in huge numbers of women back to Islamic mode of dressing i.e. veiling, to traditional Islamic views about work, and the support for greater use of the shariah in the Egyptian law (Nordwall 2008). While for some, Islamic feminism has adverse outcome on female status misplacing all their rights that women's movement struggle over the years to achieve, on the other hand, it will bring back Egyptian women to their Islamic root instead of blindly following global, feminism product of Western culture (Nordwall 2008 ). Egyptian feminist, writer, and doctor, Nawal Sadawi believes that though some of the current changes are negative, the overall effect of the Islamist inclination would provide Egyptian women a chance to delineate their own version of feminism with an Islamic agenda without being manipulated from Western capitalist interests (Nordwall 2008).

Al-Ali (2003:226) examines that contemporary women's movement in Egypt is enormously heterogeneous in its actions and organizational arrangement. Highly organized women NGOs, slackly based informal groups along with adhoc women association launching on particular issues, women committees under political parties, professional organizations and human rights groups together contribute to formation of diverse feminist movement in contemporary Egypt. There are also a large number of women rights activists and scholars separately raising their voice for egalitarian society. Singerman (2003: 100) viewed Egyptian women's movement in four main frameworks: a right frame, a development frame, a feminist frame and an Islamist frame. Right frame consists of lawyers and professional women struggle mainly for reform of legal structure concerning PSL, equality and citizenship rights for women. Women organizations with development perspective aim at advancing women overall personality development of women such as her health, education, economic status and so forth. The feminist inclined women organizations undertake assignments on female circumcision, domestic violence and other highly contentious issues. Lastly there are women organizations mobilizing around Islamic ideals by reinterpreting sacred texts, religious practice and law. They encourage traditional and authentic principles to safeguard position of women and their equality.

### **Challenges of Women's movements**

Despite a diversified and vibrant women's movement, Egyptian women groups face challenges to realize their objectives. They have to further their ambitions within a context of authoritarian political climate and dominant patriarchal society (Singerman 2003: 104).

A large number of women NGOs in Egypt are highly reliant on external financial support. United states Agency for International development USAID is one of the principle funding sources of many women groups (Moghadam 1998:61). This external funding is of limited nature and women NGOs are suffered from lack of lack of self sufficiency due irregularities of overseas sponsors. Moreover, struggle over foreign funding among the NGOs leads to hostility and corruption and intensifies separation among women activists (Al -Ali 2003: 225)

Women's organizations have restricted mass appeal and they do not embrace membership of urban poor, rural women and working class and become less concerned to the requirements of the grassroots level. They have limited constituency mostly fashioned by middle class women and have concentrated mainly in urban locations (Moghadam 1998:63). Thus, they have not reached those women who are in need of opportunity to voice their concern for women equality.

Despite of its magnitude, Women NGOs bear legal discriminations and limitations and remains as fragile an unit. Since the law 32 of 1964 provides a broad authoritarian proposal for NGOs in which NGOs are required to register under Ministry of social affairs (MOSA), constraints over civil society organizations still continue. In many cases, formally recorded NGOs are often either instigated by women from within the state machinery or are strictly limited and controlled by the state (Al –Ali 2003:222). They work in conformist situation and sometimes compromises are made at the expense of women issues.

At the time of Gulf war in 1991, Egyptian government banned Arab Women Solidarity Association (AWSA) due to its open outburst against the government's stand on the war. State remains highly intolerant of politically active NGOs. Further in 2000 onwards, the Egyptian government has narrowed down the space for nongovernmental activities (Al – Ali 2003:223).

However, Women's rights organizations and activists have gained some prominence in the last two decades. Followed by the women's movement, the Egyptian state itself has also shown recently an interest in enhancing women's role. Women's issues are no longer considered as issues of gender differentiation but issues that concerns and affects the society. This new outlook was manifested in the form of following positive steps:

Firstly, the government passed a few amendments of personal status law in the year 2000. The law allowed the family courts to facilitate divorce cases. Accordingly, Egyptian women have won the right to travel without their husband's consent along with the right to initiate divorce proceeding on the condition that they return groom's gift and dowry payments. They have also achieved the right to pass Egyptian nationality to children even if the father is not Egyptian which was not previously granted to them (Karam 1998:166).

Secondly, for the first time in Egyptian history, women became eligible to be judges in 2002 and in 2003 Tahany al-Gabaly was appointed as the first female judge in the Supreme Constitutional Court. Eventually thirty women judges were appointed to various courts. However, both the above events were tightly beached in Islamic religious sources and held to be compatible with the shariah (Badran 2008).

Finally, a National Council for Women (NCW) was created in March 2000 with Suzanne Mubarak as president and Mervat Tallawy, the former Minister of Social Affairs, as Consul General by a Presidential Decree No. 90. NCW aims at improving the status of all Egyptian women to facilitate the expansion and progress of the nation. It also works towards lessening existing socio-economic gender disparities and to empower Egyptian women in all fields i.e. social, economic and political empowerment. Although NCW claimed to be an autonomous organization; it has been presided over by Egypt's First Lady. It works within the government and maintained silence on notorious discriminatory issues perpetuated by the government. Singerman (2003:104) states that NCW is an model of state feminism and also been a medium for the elite to promote a feminist agenda "from within."

Within this framework it can be said that the contemporary feminist movement has shown a miscellaneous impingement on lives of Egyptian women. The efforts of women groups have been able to achieve some accomplishments, but state's manipulation and control at every stage make these organizations vulnerable to the state.

Moreover, the contemporary context of Egyptian women's movement represents a diverse situation. There is no single homogenous women movement. There are many extremely active women groups and organizations working on various issues like environment, health care, family planning family laws, labor laws without cooperation among each other (Karam 1998: 103). In Egypt there subsist diverse forms of women organizations and multitude of feminist thoughts i.e. individual feminists who attempt to re-read and construct women's right within Islamist narratives. There also exist broad women based movements such as Muslim sisterhood (women branch of Muslim brotherhood which

includes women under the umbrella of a broader movement seeking social and political change (Karam 1998). The individual non-religious based women rights NGOs and individual secular feminist also exist together. However, there is lack of collective non-religious based movements by various feminist movements for what they perceive as their rights or what they are against as injustices based on specifically on their gender (El-Mahdi 2010:381). In the contemporary context in Egypt where there is an upsurge of social movements criticizing president and his family, there is no collective women's movement and Women rights movements have failed to bring any revolutionary changes into the lives of Egyptian women.



# **CHAPTER-V**

## **CONCLUSION**

## CHAPTER-5

### CONCLUSION

The status of Egyptian women is complex in contemporary times. Despite women's involvement into all possible fields, their status remains inferior. Economic reform and globalization during recent times has brought both positive and negative changes into the lives of Egyptian women. However, there is an intricate situation in Egypt in present times in relation to standing of women in society. If one looks at the current picture; there is overlapping and divergent effects of economic liberalization on Egyptian women.

Although women are fairly visible in public spaces through increased opportunities in education and employment, still they still endure gender prejudices and challenges at every aspects of life. The campaign of the Egyptian government on state feminism has not able to bring social, political and economic equality between the two genders. Women's rights exist only in official document, not in practice which is clearly apparent in Egypt (Ziada 2008:8). Either at work, in public or at home, women undergo prejudices on the basis of gender on a regular basis. There exists a complex economic situation with overlapping and divergent effects of economic liberalization on Egyptian women which is not helping their cause of upliftment.

Demographic discussion reveals that women labor force is less and illiteracy is high among women. However, there is good participation of women in higher education which perhaps had the most crucial impact in mobilizing women into socio-economic and political arena observed since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition the distinctive equity status that Egyptian women enjoyed in its pre-Arabic history and custom might have added a traditional momentum into such women movement. This is further aided with economic reform and globalization during recent times when western influence has slowly grown in its Islamic culture. Despite such encouraging signs, vague government policies, suppression of civil societies and prevailing dictatorial political culture and rising tide of Islamism in the region result in divergent women's movement throughout the country. Below, I would like to summarize the findings of each before arriving at a concluding remark.

As mentioned earlier that globalization enlarges education of the masses and leads to erosion of the gender gap in education prevalent in the Egyptian society. As far as enrolment in primary education is concerned, Egypt has attained its targeted goal while the scene is not so encouraging in secondary with dismal women participation. Poverty, lack of employment opportunities for women, lack of neighborhood schooling, traditions of early marriage for girls and early motherhood due to cultural and economic reason prevent girls from attending school and benefitting from their investment in education. Although there are encouraging signs of improving female literacy rate such figures are still low compared to male (62% among men as opposed to 38% for women). Educational achievement is still based on gender paradigm and traditions which prefer men's education more cost effective than women. However, the amount of female undergraduate in Egyptian universities has been increasing over the time. But if we observe the real picture, there are serious loopholes. Females are more inclined to study traditional subjects considered suitable for them such arts, humanities, social sciences, home science and so forth, as their involvement in natural sciences is comparatively low. Despite government's initiation to reduce gender gaps and improve educational quality for women in a number of girl friendly educational projects, gender inequalities still persist. Cultural dynamic offers a privilege status for males, clearly demarcating gender roles both for men and women. Women are still dependants and are likely to be inferior to men. Assertion of male role as bread winner makes male preference to the right to education. Therefore, government should look into the relationship between education and employment and try to make educational reform according to changing time and market demand.

Along with education, traditions have an obvious bearing on the economic status of women in the Egyptian society. Although women's participation in economy is showing an upward trend, but they still have limited access to labor markets. Economic liberalization has boosted job opportunities for upper-class and upper-middle-class women. The rising level of education has increased the number of job seeking women. Despite this, the situation for majority of Egyptian women continues to be ominous even after the application of structural adjustment by the government. When Egypt preceded economic liberalization in the form of structural adjustment, there was a common credence that it would bring positive changes into the lives of Egyptian women such as better educational and employment prospects and thereby leading to destruction of patriarchal family structure

and creation of equivalent social order. But, end result could not match the above statement. Illiteracy among young women (15-24 years) continues to be higher than men i.e. 21 percent for female as compared to 10 (ETF 2009:14). Female labor participation remains low (23 percent in 2008). The policies of structural adjustment has altered Egyptian economy from state directed enlargement in the company of a huge public sector to neo liberal economy supporting spreading out of private segment. As a result, public sector workforce growth rate has declined. In some cases, public sector has started a trend of acting as replica of private sector to survive competition. It would appear, in effect, public sector has offered little additional benefits to women as a part of their socio-economic welfare schemes. It becomes mandatory for women to search for job in private sector where there is lack of social security schemes and equal opportunities (ETF 2009:14). Private sector, on the other hand reflects gender discrimination in terms of job professions and payments. Women are employed in lower grade jobs with low wages and no benefits. The higher wages for men especially in the private sector and lower earnings prospective daunt women's access to work. Moreover, increasingly harsh work conditions in the private-sector and the lack of interest of private sector employers in providing work to young women constraint women's labor force participation. Hence, despite lesser remuneration, women (40% of working women) desire to work in public sector jobs because of the accessibility of social protection system and equal job opportunities. It has led to feminization of public sector because men are greatly attracted to private sector that offer money-spinning job atmosphere. Another negative trend in women's economic status is the increasing number of unemployed women. The high rates of unemployment make it difficult to assimilate women into formal labor force; thus constraining female labor force participation. The traditional values supported by a rising tide of religious conservatism persist to view female as dependents on males and reproduction and childcare are seen to be their prime responsibility compromising their economic rights to men. Women's unemployment rate (21%) is much higher than men's (7%) according to World Bank report (2008). The high rate of unemployment amongst educated women has been showing intuition among populace that men's education are more cost effective than women which may call for curbing of female education.

Amidst of this multifarious circumstances, it is likely that government should adopt women friendly economic policies that would prohibit gender imbalance in education, abridging

wage and employment discrimination against women with introduction of strategies like the provision of childcare and maternity leave, passage of legislation prohibiting employment discrimination against women and so forth that offer gender equality and promote social and economic status of women as specified in the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals(MDGs).

The political developments are not in terms of bringing democracy to the picture. The country never virtually chased after the tenets of democracy. Although multi-party system prevailed, in reality most parties remained under the dominance of the largest party. What actually remained in the name of democracy was actually a system of dictatorship before the recent events of popular uprising. The political parties are mainly patriarchal in their orientation. They have never gone beyond patriarchal ideas and most of the times preserve patriarchal mindset. Patriarchal tradition not only persists in parties, it is very much present in society. Women themselves are conventional to the dominant ideas of patriarchy and hardly been able to seek their demands in such situation. Moreover high illiteracy rate makes them more vulnerable. Thus, upliftment of political conditions of women has never been raised seriously in Egypt. Most importantly the civil society organizations which would reflect views of the society also hardly have representation of women. The women have only few political rights when state has decided to grant some more as an act of charity rather than a transformation. Hence the issue of greater political participation of Egyptian women only has remained an unachieved vision.

Islam and patriarchal structure still play an important role in deciding educational and employment opportunities available to women. Islamic culture and male dominated family system endowed women in modern Egypt with an inadequate scope to assert their own identity. The contemporary Islamic activity accentuates value of family, traditional sexual customs, and cultural authenticity. Religion still plays a larger role in adjudicating the conduct of Egyptian women in day to day life. On one hand they are expected to perform traditional duties of mother and wife, on other hand their role and real demand in the daily life in a developing society are incompatible with this persistent traditional values and roles. Often, women are trapped and they have never been able to break the existing mindset of patriarchal values inherent in Egyptian society.

The contemporary women's movement in Egypt presents a heterogeneous temperament. There exists a broad variety of women organizations ranging from individual feminist to religious based women's movements and also from non-religious women's rights NGO's to individual secular feminists. Over the years Egyptian women have succeeded in their long struggle against patriarchal traditions and customs, autocratic state institutions and brought an equitable society in the turn of twentieth century. They have won right to education, work and right to vote. Despite these positive signs, women status still remains inferior.

The arrival of globalization has culminated a feeling of westernization into Egyptian culture. There emerged flurry of professional civil society organizations dealing susceptible issues related to advancing status of women such as reproductive rights of women, violence against women, issue of female circumcision along with development issues of alleviation of poverty and illiteracy, rights to education, work, health care and political participation. Moreover, Women's involvement in this non-governmental and informal organization has increased on the ground that there is limited participation of women in formal political activity. These groups launched women agendas to realize objectives like equality of privileges, eradicate violence against women, advancing women's participation at all levels of decision making process to eliminate gender disparities and improve status of women. The greatest threat to women empowerment came from discriminatory legal structure which endorsed gender biases such as PSL. Therefore women's rights advocacy NGOs has commenced on legal campaigns to confront political and legal structure as well as patriarchal division of society to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and raise women awareness. Followed by the women's movement, the Egyptian state itself has also shown recently an interest in enhancing women's role. This new outlook was manifested in the form of positive steps such as reform of personal status law, appointment of women judges in supreme court and the establishment of autonomous women's organization 'National Council for Women'.

However if we see the actual picture, although women's movements have gained some momentum, they are not able to mobilize women as a whole. Indeed, women's movements are facing severe challenges. The power struggle between the government and Islamists groups compelled the state to take repressive measures against the civil society organizations which had ultimately limited the space for women's concerned activities.

They have to further their ambitions inside a context of authoritarian political climate and dominant patriarchal society through largely working within the government using their connections and positions with the government to promote their agenda. Women's movements have been seen as the representatives of the regime instead of legitimate representatives of women due to their close alliance within the government. Women's organizations have restricted mass appeal and they do not embrace membership of urban poor, rural women and working class and become less concerned to the requirements of the grassroots level. This external funding is of limited nature and women NGOs are suffered from lack of lack of self sufficiency due irregularities of overseas sponsors.

On the other hand, authoritarian political setting is indirectly leading to a lack of visible women's movement in present times. Both the state and conservative elements perceive rise of women movement as threat to their power and interests. Also the lack of existing democratic models and experiences in democratic political structures poses an enormous challenge to women's right activist. Often women issues are also subordinated or sacrificed in goodwill of the other important issues.

All in all, one needs to appreciate that Egypt is one of the most important countries in the African continent with its strategic location between the Arabian Peninsula and European territories and with more than 70million population at present. More than 80% of the population practice Islam and follow Islamic culture and traditions. The rests are predominantly Christians. Naturally, it would occur that Islam and Islamic culture have been playing a dominant role in determining the status of women in Egypt throughout last several centuries till recent times. Some changes have undergone through the course of education and globalization movements but the patriarchal family is still very intact in the Egyptian society. It is universally admired that women are the bearer and perpetuators of cultural values and indemnity. But unfortunately the sharing of such rights and responsibilities in one or the way creates difficulties in overcoming certain barriers. The society, on one hand expects women to perform traditional duties as mother, sister or wife and on the other hand their important roles in other affairs of society making are neglected. In fact it is not unheard of that loud crying is made that women should go back home and maintain domesticity.

Notwithstanding, few modern Islamist have reinterpreted that Islam considers men and women to be equal. Besides the women movement seen in certain parts of Egypt could also potentially challenge the very fragment of its patriarchic societal structure. Having said that and from earlier discussion on the political scenario, it transpires in effect the masculinist interest has overshadowed the functionaries of the state and pivotal institutions (who are considered as the authorial bearer of the society) in the country. As a result, be it the equity agenda or liberal movement, they have not been able to find their way through the complex miring of religion, patriarchy and the state. That is why, on most occasions, issues of women's interest have gone unheard of. One notes, with regret, that the women movement has not been able to overcome the challenges which are standing as great hindrance their upliftment and progress in Egypt.

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