

The Women's Movement in Egypt, with Selected References to Turkey

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

Women's movements in the Middle East vary in terms of specific historical trajectories as well as current ideas and practices. Yet, they are similar in that they share several historical and political factors, such as their links to nationalist movements, their links to processes of modernization and development, and tensions between secular and religious tendencies. Specificities and differences can be found in overarching general themes, as becomes obvious in the context of two case studies – Egypt and Turkey – explored in this paper.

The analyses of the women's movements in Egypt and Turkey entail a brief exploration of the historical context, that is, the emergence and development of women's organizations and feminist thought. The discussion of the historical context sheds light on its continuing significance in terms of understanding present-day women's movements in the region. Turkey, unlike Egypt, has not been colonized in modern times. Regarding other historical factors that influence the current parameters of feminist discourses and activities, Kemalism, and the specific ideology of Turkish nationalism employed by the Kemalist regime, differ decisively from Nasserist and Arab nationalist ideologies associated with the Egyptian state. Yet, in both countries, as in many other parts of the region, women's organizations were co-opted in the general effort to achieve modernization and development.

The contemporary context involves a discussion of the specific national political topography, which provides the backdrop to present-day feminist activism. In addition to questions pertaining to political economy, state-society relations, party politics, and legislation, the question of international affiliations and relations is also taken into account. The Egyptian women's movement is particularly influenced by the state's ambiguous role toward women's organizations; the growth of civil society and the severe restrictions on it (Law 32); international pressures and expectations, particularly on the part of donor organizations; and the increasing influence of Islamist constituencies. In the Turkish case, the women's movement has been able to work much more closely through existing state structures and institutions, particularly the municipalities. The Turkish women's movement seems to have been particularly influenced by the polarization between Islamist and secular constituencies, the struggles for democratization and for the institutionalization of feminist activities, as well as debates concerning the Kemalist legacy.

Comparison of the two case studies suggests that despite differing historical and political contexts, women's movements in both countries have in recent years challenged prevailing notions of political culture and institutions. By looking at the broader picture and also considering feminist activism in other parts of the region, it becomes evident that women's movements in the Middle East are potential agents for democratization, yet they are highly constrained by prevailing social and political structures, lack of clear institutional targets and ambiguous state policies.

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Résumé

Les mouvements féminins du Moyen-Orient se distinguent les uns des autres par leur évolution historique, aussi bien que par leurs idées et pratiques actuelles. Pourtant, ils se ressemblent en ce sens qu'ils ont en commun plusieurs facteurs historiques et politiques, comme par exemple leurs liens avec les mouvements nationalistes, avec les processus de modernisation et de développement, ainsi que les tensions entre les tendances laïque et religieuse. Les spécificités et différences peuvent être regroupées sous des thèmes généraux, comme le montrent à l'évidence deux études de cas, l'Égypte et la Turquie, dont il est question dans ce document.

L'analyse des mouvements féminins en Égypte et en Turquie passe par une brève exploration du contexte historique, c'est-à-dire de la naissance et du développement d'organisations féminines et d'une pensée féministe. La description du contexte historique montre quelle importance il peut avoir pour comprendre les mouvements féminins actuels dans la région. La Turquie, contrairement à l'Égypte, n'a pas été colonisée à l'époque moderne. S'agissant des autres facteurs historiques qui influent sur les paramètres actuels des discours et activités féministes, le kémalisme et l'idéologie propre au nationalisme turc employée par le régime kémaliste se distinguent résolument du nassérisme et des idéologies nationalistes arabes associées à l'État égyptien. Pourtant, dans les deux pays, comme dans beaucoup d'autres régions du monde, les organisations féminines ont été récupérées par l'effort général de modernisation et de développement.

Le contexte contemporain amène à débattre de la topographie propre à la vie politique nationale, qui constitue la toile de fond sur laquelle s'inscrit le militantisme des féministes actuelles. L'auteur prend en considération, non seulement les questions relatives à l'économie politique, aux rapports entre l'État et la société, à la politique des partis, mais aussi le rôle des affiliations et relations internationales. Le mouvement féminin égyptien est marqué par le rôle ambigu de l'État envers les organisations féminines, le développement de la société civile et les sévères restrictions qui lui sont imposées (loi 32), les pressions et attentes internationales, en particulier celles des organisations donatrices, et subit l'influence croissante des islamistes. Dans le cas de la Turquie, le mouvement féminin a pu travailler beaucoup plus au travers des structures et institutions de l'État, notamment des municipalités. Le mouvement féminin turc semble avoir été particulièrement marqué par la polarisation entre les tendances islamiste et laïque, les luttes pour la démocratisation et l'institutionnalisation des activités féministes, ainsi que les débats sur l'héritage kémaliste.

La comparaison des deux études de cas laisse à penser que, malgré des contextes historiques et politiques différents, les mouvements féminins des deux pays ont, ces dernières années, remis en question des notions couramment acceptées de la culture et des institutions politiques. En élargissant le champ d'étude et en se penchant aussi sur le militantisme féministe dans d'autres pays de la région, il apparaît que les mouvements féminins du Moyen-Orient peuvent être un facteur de démocratisation mais sont très limités dans leur action par les structures sociales et politiques en place, le manque d'objectifs institutionnels clairs et de politiques publiques ambitieuses.

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Resumen

Los movimientos de la mujeres en Oriente Medio varían con respecto a trayectorias históricas específicas, así como a ideas y prácticas actuales. Sin embargo, su semejanza radica en que comparten algunos factores históricos y políticos, tales como sus vínculos con movimientos nacionalistas y procesos de modernización y desarrollo, y las tensiones entre las tendencias seculares y religiosas. Al abordarse temas generales, se observan rasgos específicos y diferencias, como resulta evidente en estas páginas, donde se examinan dos estudios de casos – Egipto y Turquía.

El análisis de los movimientos de las mujeres en Egipto y Turquía supone un breve estudio del contexto histórico, es decir, la aparición y el desarrollo de las organizaciones de las mujeres y del pensamiento feminista. Al discutirse el marco histórico, se pone de relieve su importancia continua para comprender los movimientos actuales de las mujeres en la región. A diferencia de Egipto, Turquía no ha sido colonizada en la era moderna. Con respecto a otros factores históricos que influyen en los parámetros actuales de los discursos y actividades feministas, el kemalismo y la ideología específica del nacionalismo turco utilizada por el régimen kemalista difieren rotundamente de las ideologías naseristas y árabes asociadas con el Estado egipcio. Sin embargo, en ambos países, al igual que en muchas otras zonas de la región, las organizaciones de las mujeres participaron conjuntamente en la iniciativa general encaminada a lograr la modernización y el desarrollo.

Con respecto al contexto actual, se discute la topografía política nacional específica, que proporciona el telón de fondo del activismo feminista contemporáneo. Además de las cuestiones relativas a la economía política, las relaciones entre el Estado y la sociedad, la política de los partidos y la legislación, también se considera la cuestión de las afiliaciones y relaciones internacionales. En Egipto, el movimiento de las mujeres está particularmente influido por la actitud ambigua del Estado con respecto a las organizaciones de las mujeres; el crecimiento de la sociedad civil y las severas restricciones impuestas a la misma (ley núm. 32); las presiones y expectativas internacionales, particularmente por parte de las organizaciones donantes; y la influencia cada vez mayor de los distritos electorales islamistas. En el caso de Turquía, el movimiento de las mujeres ha podido colaborar de forma mucho más estrecha a través de las estructuras e instituciones estatales establecidas, particularmente los municipios. El movimiento de las mujeres en Turquía parece haber estado particularmente influido por la polarización entre los distritos electorales islamistas y seculares, las luchas por la democratización y la institucionalización de las actividades feministas, y los debates sobre el legado kemalista.

Al comparar estos dos estudios de casos se observa que, a pesar de los diferentes contextos históricos y políticos, los movimientos en ambos países han desafiado en los últimos años los conceptos imperantes de la cultura política y las instituciones. Al tener una visión más general y considerar asimismo el activismo feminista en otras zonas de la región, resulta evidente que los movimientos de las mujeres en Oriente Medio son agentes potenciales de la democratización, aunque están muy limitados por las estructuras sociales y políticas establecidas, la falta de objetivos institucionales claros y la ambigüedad de las políticas estatales.

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Introduction

This paper reflects on women's movements in the Middle East. In the general context of the region, the case studies of Egypt and Turkey are specific yet illustrative examples of some of the underlying issues, problems, debates and policies that constitute the backdrop of contemporary women's activism. These case studies also reveal that specific historical as well as current conditions shape women's movements and partly account for differences in the Middle East.

The first section of this paper provides a critical discussion of the Middle East as a unit of analysis, followed by a more specific analysis of similarities and differences between women's movements in the region. In the second section, the Egyptian women's movement is analysed in terms of its historical development and current political context, its constituent parts, goals and strategies. Attention is given to the role of both the Egyptian state and international constituencies in shaping and affecting the women's movement. The third section offers a similar analysis in relation to the Turkish women's movement. The paper concludes with a comparison of the two cases in greater detail, and relates emerging issues to more general debates about women's movements in the region.

Between Diversity and Similarity

The Middle East and gender

Any analysis of women's movements in the Middle East must presuppose some shared context and set of concerns among women in an area of considerable diversity – diversity with respect to geography, economic conditions, ethnic groups, social classes, religious affiliations, nationalities, and linguistic communities. Contrary to popular opinion, the Middle East is *not* a uniform and homogeneous region and Middle Eastern women and men live in cities, provincial towns and rural villages. There is no archetypal Middle Eastern woman, but rather “women in the plural, inserted in quite diverse socioeconomic and cultural arrangements” (Moghadam, 1993:10).

Given this social and cultural fluidity and tremendous diversity, caution has to be exercised before generalizing about women's movements and gender relations, or assuming that they are the same in this complex region. One could suggest, as Judith Tucker does, that the diversity of the region militates against any useful generalization: “women's lives – their access to power and economic resources as well as their social and legal standing – surely vary from one community or class to another” (Tucker, 1993a:vii).

Many scholars have argued, however, that the diversity in the Middle East is underpinned by a certain shared understanding of gender as a social category. Current discussions on women in the Middle East continue to invoke Islam as a guide to gender organization, and much of the literature on women in the area still assumes an “Islamic culture” that has everything to do with gender. In **Women in the Muslim Unconscious** (1984), for example, the Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatema Mernissi argues that there is a certain transhistorical Muslim view of female sexuality as dangerous and destructive in its power, in need of close male supervision

and control. She therefore considers Islam as being responsible for restrictions on women's lives. However, in more recent work Mernissi diverges from these stipulations and argues that Islam was largely distorted by male jurists who wished to attribute misogynist tendencies to Islam that the prophet Muhammad did not possess.

Whatever role is ascribed to Islam with respect to prevailing gender relations, it should be stressed that the Middle East was not, and is not, synonymous with Islam. Moreover, Islam itself is lived heterogeneously. And while most Middle Easterners are Muslims, there exist differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims as well as other Muslim groupings, such as the Alawite minority in Turkey. Moreover, women belonging to minority religious groups, such as the Maronites in Lebanon or the Copts in Egypt, are generally exposed to similar or the same cultural and social codes and traditions as their Muslim counterparts of the same social class (Eickelmann, 1998).

Traditions and customs are often not actually rooted in religion per se. The tradition of female circumcision is a case in point. Widely practised in Egypt among both Muslim and Coptic women, the tradition has its roots in pharaonic times and is common in various countries in Africa, such as Sudan and Somalia, but is not practised in most Muslim countries (ibid.). Another often neglected point is that religious stipulations are not only mediated by cultural codes but are also, in most cases, interpreted by a male clergy.

Linked to the assumption that normative Islamic traditions and customs prevail throughout the Middle East, allowing, perhaps, a degree of local specificity, is the notion of strict sexual segregation. This is often perceived in terms of women's seclusion, veiling, women's belonging to the private sphere (while men are seen to belong to the public sphere), sexual modesty and the concepts of honour and shame. As Nancy Tapper (1979) critically argues, the notion of sexual segregation, which up to a point was seen to prevail uniformly throughout the area, suggests the existence of a nearly total conceptual and social dichotomy between women and men. However, many recent studies have challenged the view that there is strict sexual segregation and a uniform gender ideology. Instead, these studies give evidence of great variations in interpretations as well as practices of sexual segregation.

The concept of "neo-patriarchy" has been introduced by Hisham Sharabi (1988) to describe different forms of authoritarianism at all levels of society: at the macro level of the economy and the state as well as at the micro level of the family. While his concept certainly glosses over the specificities of postcolonial state formations in the Middle East, it has been recognized as a useful tool to consider the various relationships between modernity and patriarchy, with a specific focus on the transition from "traditional" to "modernized" society, whereby a "modernized patriarchy" is labelled neo-patriarchal by Sharabi. However, in recent years, the dichotomous thinking of "traditional" versus "modern" has been criticized and challenged on many grounds. The emergence of Islamist movements, for example, cannot be described as "being backward", looking only to the past. Islamist movements, in all their variety, are modern phenomenon employing modern concepts related to the nation state, political and economic institutions and the family. Without trying to diminish the restrictive nature of many Islamist stipulations regarding

women, it would be a fallacy to explain their frameworks in terms of "tradition" and a rejection of modernization. Lila Abu-Lughod's provocative analysis of feminist and Islamist agendas in contemporary Egypt (1998) reveals a great deal of overlap between secular and Islamist attitudes toward marriage, for example, which are based on "modern" notions of conjugal love and the nuclear family as ideal.

Most scholars working in the Middle East today acknowledge heterogeneity of the region. Many have suggested frameworks in which to understand broad patterns related to women and gender, without insisting that they apply everywhere and at every given point of time.

Women's movements

The coexistence of diversity and similarity also holds true for women's movements: specific historical trajectories as well as current ideas and practices account for variations between women's movements in different nation states. Women's movements in the Middle East are similar in that they share several historical and political factors, such as their links to nationalist movements, their links to processes of modernization and development, and tensions between secular and religious tendencies. The combination of "predominantly Muslim societies' encounter with an imperialist West, the flawed nature of agendas for national development and the preoccupation with Islam as a marker of cultural identity" (Kandiyoti, 1996:9) are generally perceived to have constrained and restricted feminist discourses throughout the Middle East. Deniz Kandiyoti also points out that:

Something akin to a conventional wisdom concerning the centrality of the 'woman question' to the politics of Muslim societies has gradually developed. It is based on the premise that the emphasis on Islamic forms of regulation, such as the spatial segregation and veiling of women, has been exacerbated as a result of encounters between Muslim societies and an imperialist West. The identification of Muslim women as the bearers of the 'backwardness' of their societies, initially by colonial administrators and later by Western-oriented reformers, is mirrored by a reactive local discourse which elevates the same practises into symbols of cultural authenticity and integrity (Kandiyoti, 1995:20-21).

Manifestations of this "reactive local discourse" are the strong identification of cultural authenticity with Islam on one hand, and the denunciation of feminist discourses and practices as being mimetic of the West on the other. Yet, as Kandiyoti points out, these analyses often ignore the politically contingent nature of the relationship between Islam and women's rights from the era in which the postcolonial state was being built to the present (ibid.). This also holds true for the relationship between feminism and nationalism that has generally been described as generic and central to Middle Eastern women's movements. What needs to be explored more carefully, however, are the historically specific nationalisms and the concrete impact on and relationships with women's movements. The analyses of the Egyptian and Turkish cases shed light on the distinct trajectories of nationalism and feminism and their subsequent and evolving relationships.

According to Mervat Hatem, the nature and development of women's movements in the Middle East must also be viewed in the context of regional and international factors. The fact that

many women's organizations in the 1960s and 1970s served as representatives for regime policies toward women resulted in these official women's organizations becoming discredited:

They developed a host of functions, which ranged from welfare in Jordan to mobilization and development in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Iraq. Their function and activities were largely determined by the priorities set by the existing regimes, whether it was rational household spending and savings in Egypt, birth control in Tunisia and Iraq, education and training in traditional occupations in Syria, labour needs and/or the war economy in Iraq (Hatem, 1993:30).

In the 1980s and 1990s there is greater evidence for independent women's movements. However, the nature of the specific regime accounts for great variations among women's movements in terms of their association with or independence from the government. In Iraq, for example, no independent women's movement is feasible in a context of general political repression. In Tunisia, independent women's organizations have to be constantly on the guard against state co-option. In Egypt, the state attempts to limit the very political space that has allowed the emergence of independent women's organizations in the first place.

One factor that has helped the rise of independent women's organizations is the increased influence of international constituencies. Particular consideration should be given to the role of the United Nations Decade for Women in encouraging both the discussion of women's concerns and the creation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (*ibid.*). As seen below, this factor has become especially apparent in the context of the Egyptian women's movement.

The third factor mentioned by Hatem is the rising tide of Islamism in the region, which, in her analysis, "served to push middle-class women to organize themselves in opposition to these socially restrictive goals" (*ibid.*:31) Yet again, specific historical, political and economic factors account for differences between and within Islamist movements and their impact on specific women's movements. There is no doubt, however, that Islamists all over the region have brought about a process of reversal in relation to women's rights. As Hatem states, "the Islamists have been successful in rolling back some of the gains made by women in precisely those states where the cause of women was expected to proceed the farthest, i.e. in Egypt, the Sudan, and Algeria" (*ibid.*:31-32).

In some cases, the establishment of women's organizations is not so much a reaction to Islamist movements as a response to harsh social, political and economic realities. In the case of the Palestinian women's movement, a combination of economic and political factors have led to the establishment of women's self-help groups that exist side by side with more politically or academically focused women's organizations. The Israeli occupation and its policies have led to an alarming deterioration of the economy as well as in the supply of key services (*ibid.*). While these self-help groups refuse to subordinate women's issue to the national cause, the vast number of women's organizations, especially those affiliated with political parties, work within the parameters of a framework in which women's issues are deemed to be secondary to national liberation.

What should have become clear by this point is the fact that, despite a series of commonalities, specific local realities and demands of women have shaped women's movements in the Middle East, just as in any other region. The analysis below of women's movements in Egypt and Turkey will illustrate some of the underlying debates, issues and dilemmas of women's movements in the region, as well as reveal significant variations among them.

The Women's Movement in Egypt¹

Historical background

Many studies dealing with the Egyptian women's movement begin their analysis with women's participation in the 1919 revolution and the subsequent rise of feminist activism associated with Huda Sha'rawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) founded in 1923 (Ahmed, 1982; al-Sabaki, 1987; Ghoussoub, 1985; Hatem, 1986; Khalifa, 1973; Philipp, 1978). The EFU's feminist agenda called for political rights for women, changes in the personal status law (especially for controls on divorce and polygamy), equal secondary school and university education, and expanded professional opportunities for women. Its activism was characterized by dynamic interaction and tensions between women's feminism and nationalism.

The development of the intellectual and ideological foundations of the early struggle for women's rights is often attributed to male modernist reformers like Muhammad Abdu, Gamal al-Din al-Afghani and, most prominent among them, Qasim Amin (Cole, 1981; Haddad, 1984; Lotfi, 1978; Tignor, 1966). More recent works emphasize that women's participation in the 1919 nationwide marches, strikes and protests against the British colonizers was a continuation and extension of the activities of women in previous decades (Ahmed, 1992; Baron, 1994; Badran, 1995).

Women's contributions to both the numerous women's journals published, as well as the mainstream press, encouraged debates on social issues, as, for example, education, the role of the family, women's work and women's rights. The programmes advanced by these early women intellectuals addressed the nationalist agenda by stressing education, productivity and voluntarism (Ahmed, 1992; Baron, 1994). It has been suggested that the rise of the women's press paralleled the emergence of the nationalist movement (Baron, 1994).

Yet, the relationship between early feminists and male nationalists was far from harmonious. It had gradually become clear to many women activists that during the nationalist struggle, and certainly afterwards, men's nationalism had a patriarchal character (Badran, 1988). Initially, male nationalists accepted women's nationalist activism (demonstrations, economic boycotts, etc.). However, "after 1919, when nationalist pressures emerged in the wake of the promulgation of a constitution for Egypt, women's political rights were not mentioned. Their equality with men was not discussed" (Philipp, 1978:278).

¹ This section is based on a larger research project published as **Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

While feminist discourse and activism during the period of postcolonial state formation, and even up to the first half of the twentieth century, has repeatedly been identified with Huda Sha'rawi's Egyptian Feminist Union, Khater and Nelson (1988) have argued that the women's movement came of age during the period from 1945 until 1959. In 1948, Doria Shafik created the Bint El-Nil (Daughter of the Nile) group as an initiative for a new and invigorated Egyptian feminist movement whose primary purpose was to proclaim and claim full political rights for women. It also promoted literacy programmes, campaigned to improve cultural, health, and social services among the poor and to enhance mother and childcare (Shafik, 1955). The campaign for women's political rights was linked to the campaign for social reforms (Khater and Nelson, 1988).

In the atmosphere of general political radicalization² linked to harsh economic conditions after the Second World War, and the obvious inability of the monarchy to deal with the political and economic instability, some women considered the Bint El-Nil Union to be too bourgeois and conservative in its ideology and tactics. Women such as Inji Aflatoun, Soraya Adham and Latifa Zayyad, who had adopted socialist or communist ideologies, saw the liberation of women as a narrow battle in the more general struggle for social equality and justice. They directed most of their efforts toward class struggle, grappling at the same time with the twin issues of national independence and women's liberation (Botman, 1987; Khater, 1987).

The state's vulnerability and regular changes of government set the stage for a diversity of political voices; the most prominent of these were leftist forces, which emerged alongside Islamist tendencies. Established by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, the Muslim Brethren (*Ikhwan Muslimin*) grew rapidly. It took advantage of the Egyptian view that the Palestinian struggle represented another Western imperialist and Zionist crusade against Islamic peoples. Positioning itself as pan-Islamic, anti-Western and anti-Zionist, the brotherhood attracted increasing support from men and actively sought to increase its female membership (Al-Ali, 2000).

Zeinab al-Ghazali, who at first looked to Huda Sha'rawi for leadership, left the EFU in 1936 to form the Muslim Women's Society. The fast-growing organization focused mainly on welfare work and promoted the study of Islam among women. Its political objective was the implementation of the *shari'a* (Islamic law). Despite Hassan al-Banna's numerous attempts to persuade al-Ghazali to incorporate her association into his Muslim Brethren movement, the Muslim Women's Society only joined in 1948 when many members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested (Ahmed, 1992).

² The Palestinian national struggle mobilized pan-Arab concerns which shifted focus from the national level to the international arena. Between 1944 and 1949, Egypt had a number of "minority governments" – splinter groups from the discredited nationalist "WAFD party" – which had deteriorating relations with King Faruq. These years were characterized by an increased number of more active trade unions, an emerging leftist intelligentsia, and establishment conservative-religious groups. A series of strikes took place in the broader movement of demands for social reform (Vatikiotis, 1991). In addition, the reemergence of the Communist party during the early years of the Second World War, although weakened by approximately two decades of dormancy underground, had a significant ideological impact on Egyptian society in the 1940s (Botman, 1987:17).

It was during this period of the 1940s that the women's movement moved in different directions: the aristocratic charity-oriented "ladies of the salon" affiliated with Princess Chevikar; Doria Shafik's Bint El-Nil—a mixture of charity, feminist consciousness-raising and political protest; the Lagnat al-Shabaat (Committee of Young Women)—founded by Ceza Nabarawi and Inji Aflatoun to revive the fading Egyptian Feminist Union as it attracted "pro-communist women who were prevented by the government from establishing an organization of their own" (Nelson, 1996:165); as well as the welfare- and Islamist-oriented Muslim Women's Society created by Zeinab Al-Ghazali.

The phase of militant and heterogeneous feminist activism of the 1940s and first half of the 1950s was followed by a period of quiescence. Egyptian feminist activism receded under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952–1970) as a result of the state's strict monitoring of political activism and the banning of any kind of autonomous organization. The state monopolized women's issues and formulated them as social welfare issues, especially through the activities of the Ministry of Social Affairs. Nonetheless, the position of women underwent great changes during the Nasser period due to the broader commitment to social egalitarianism as women were given increased opportunities and rights within the limits set by the government (Al-Ali, forthcoming).

The lack of independent feminist organizations was paralleled by the state's appropriation of women's issues. Not only did the 1956 constitution and its 1963 revised version declare that all Egyptians are equal regardless of gender, but labour laws were changed to guarantee state sector jobs for all holders of high school diplomas and college degrees, irrespective of gender (Hatem, 1992). Moreover, in 1956 the state granted women the right to vote and to run for political office. The educational system was reformed to increase enrolment, both for primary and secondary education, which particularly affected female participation in higher education (Ahmed, 1992). Mervat Hatem has labelled the state's formal legal or ideological commitment to women's rights "state feminism". The term also refers to informal state policies and programmes that introduced important changes in the productive and reproductive roles of women (Hatem, 1993).

However, the impressive accomplishments of the Egyptian state in education, employment and social mobility, which projected a progressive image of Nasser's regime, was accompanied by the preservation of the conservative Personal Status Laws of the 1920s and 1930s. Hatem argues that:

State feminism under the Nasser regime produced women who were economically independent of their families, but dependent on the state for employment, important social services like education, health and daycare, and political representation. While state feminism created and organized a system of public patriarchy, it did not challenge the personal and familial views of women's dependency on men that were institutionalized by the personal status laws and the political system (Hatem, 1992:233).

Under Sadat (1970–1981), the role of the state as social and economic agent of change was reduced by withdrawing from the policies of social equality and equal opportunity, decentralizing the making of economic decisions, and increasing the participation of the private sector. Not

only were many of Nasser's official commitments to gender equality abandoned, but *infitah* (open door) policies³ also led to an increased gap between rich and poor. Yet, paradoxically, it is under Sadat that the Personal Status Law was reformed in favour of women's rights.

Women were affected in different ways by Sadat's *infitah* policies. Their integration into the economy, which had been part of Nasser's "state feminism", was replaced by high rates of unemployment and inequality of opportunity in the workplace.⁴ On the other hand, labour migration, especially to the Gulf countries, not only provided economic betterment and improved standards of living for many families, it also forced many women to take over tasks that were previously carried out by their husbands (Hatem, 1992). While a number of women might have gained autonomy as a result of the migration of male heads of household, some studies point to the demoralizing social and emotional effects of migration on working-class women (Graham-Brown, 1981; Hatem, 1992). Coinciding with the economic pressures on women, more conservative discourses emerged that promoted women's return to domesticity (Hatem, 1992).

At the same time, however, the beginning of the United Nations Decade for Women in 1975 caused the regime, which was searching for stronger ties with its new allies, particularly the United States, to promote gender issues.

Under the influence of the president's wife, Jehan Sadat, reform of the Personal Status Law (governing marriage, divorce, custody, etc.) was proposed. The reformed law, labelled Jehan's Law, granted women legal rights in marriage, polygamy, divorce and child custody; it was implemented in 1979 by presidential decree along with another law that introduced changes to women's representation in parliament. These reforms spearheaded a two-pronged strategy of undermining the strength and legitimacy of Islamists and demarcating the state's social agenda from that of the Islamists as a form of internal and international mobilization against them. While, on the domestic front, the state anticipated that the reforms would encourage the growth of a secular coalition of men and women, it hoped that the law would also serve to improve its image internationally, as a step toward gaining increased political and economic support, especially from the United States (Hatem, 1992).

However, during the Sadat period, much like under Nasser, women basically lacked independent representative organizations of their own and were dependent on the regime's particular needs. Despite the progressive laws of 1979, the state lacked an overall programme to ensure women's rights and did not encourage independent feminist activism.

What needs to be stressed is that, throughout history, Egyptian women activists have been discredited by being labelled by different constituencies as agents of Western colonialism or imperialism. The debate over the intellectual origins of the Egyptian women's movement constitutes an

³ *Infitah* not only constituted the declared economic policy of privatization and open markets, but its laissez faire undertone also extended into the realm of the government, administration, migration, foreign policy etc. (Ayubi, 1991). In other words, *infitah* did not exclusively refer to economic liberalization, but also entailed a neoliberal reform of the state sector and a realignment of international alliances, that is, a rapprochement with the United States.

⁴ Women were often not hired on the grounds that the provision of maternity and childcare, stipulated by the progressive laws of the 1950s and 1960s, made their labour expensive.

ongoing controversy among contemporary Egyptian feminists. The debate revolves around several questions, which are significant for self-definition and the struggle for legitimacy on the part of present-day activists. Most women activists today are not very much concerned with the question of whether the intellectual origins of the Egyptian women's movement have to be traced back to male reformers or women journalists. What is much more at issue today is whether the intellectual roots have to be traced back to "Western" or "indigenous" sources. The charge of emulating "Western thought" and thereby betraying "authentic culture" has constituted a continuous challenge to Egyptian feminists. From the very beginning until the present day, various constituencies opposed to the struggle for women's rights (Islamists as well as nationalist-leftists), have assessed women activists in terms of their level of "authenticity" or "Westernness". As elaborated in greater detail elsewhere (Al-Ali, 2000), it is these forces that continuously and successfully use the argument of "our indigenous culture" versus "Western culture" every time gender relations and women's rights are addressed. The "culturalization" of political issues has become so common in contemporary Egypt, as in many other parts of the Arab world, that it is very difficult to doubt the legitimacy of this practice and question its grounds.

Contemporary context

The reemergence of a women's movement

The early years of the Mubarak regime were characterized by a search for stabilization and consolidation. In 1985, the Personal Status Law, which had been at the centre of the debate on the state's legitimacy, was amended due to strong opposition from the Islamists who perceived it to be anti-Islamic. The revised law abandoned many of the rights that women had attained in the earlier version (Bibars, 1987). A strong women's lobby used the 1985 Nairobi Conference—marking the end of the decade for Women—to protest and pressure the government to reformulate the law. Two months after its cancellation (just prior to the Nairobi Conference), a new law was passed that restored some of the benefits the 1979 version had provided.⁵

The increased confrontation with the Islamists over the implementation of the *shari'a* pressured the Mubarak regime to legislate and implement more conservative laws and policies toward women and to diminish its support for women's political representation. While Islamist forces continue to constitute a powerful constituency of the contemporary Egyptian state,⁶ there has been an increasing demand that the Egyptian government adhere to UN conventions concerning women's rights. Economic dependence on aid from the United States and international donor organizations (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) compels the current regime to present itself as abiding by the values and ethos of democracy, human rights and women's rights—as promoted by Egypt's financial and political "benefactors".

⁵ By creating legal systems that more easily accommodated the conservative strands in the Islamic movement, the regime removed the sources of legal ambiguity through which women were able to manoeuvre regarding matters concerning personal status. At the same time, the High Court declared void the law establishing reserved parliamentary seating for women on the grounds of "preferential treatment". This move implied the reinterpretation of the principle of gender equality as a "hands off" policy by the state even where inequality in political representation existed (Hatem, 1992).

⁶ Among its many manifestations in public life are the Islamic schools, hospitals, banks and social welfare organizations. In the realm of the "private", a growing observance of religious rites and a stress on "Islamic values" has affected women in particular (Zaki, 1995).

The reemergence of women's activism has been linked mainly to the continuing battle over the Personal Status Law and the taking up of formerly taboo issues such as contraception and clitoridectomy (Ahmed, 1992). However, in 1985, during the national discussion of the Personal Status Law, the already antagonized women's movement experienced an actual split. While the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA)⁷ defended the law and campaigned to maintain it, the Progressive Women's Union affiliated with the leftist Tagammu party, arguing that the law was passed unconstitutionally by Sadat and should therefore be annulled. In this debate, nationalist leftist women, who opposed Sadat's policies of *infitah* and rapprochement with Israel, could be found in the same "camp" as the Islamists and the Azhar who were enraged by the reformed Personal Status Law. This debate very clearly showed the "instrumentality" of women's issues and how these were subsumed under broader political questions. What was at stake was not the actual substance of the issue, but a joint opposition against Sadat's general policies.

In an article on feminist activism in the 1980's, Akram Khater argues that the movement was divided into two main camps: Nawal El-Sa'dawi and the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) on one hand, and Fathia Al-Assal, the head of the Progressive Women's Union, on the other (Khater, 1987). However, the narratives of several women activists involved in forming a coalition at the time provide evidence of a much broader spectrum and more diversified movement than that described by Khater. The coalition called Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Woman and the Family consisted of leftists, Nasserists, Wafdists, enlightened Islamists, women from the Arab Lawyers' Union, AWSA and other interested individuals (Hijab, 1988). The committee included mainly party affiliates and independent organizations, while charity groups have been increasingly absorbed into the growing NGO movement. One of the founding members of the group Al-Mar'ah Al-Gidida, which started as an informal discussion group in 1984, recalled feeling alienated by the existing strands of feminism:

We had two examples: one was Nawal El-Sa'dawi, the other one was working through the parties. As some of us were members of the Tagammu party, we initially tried to work through the party. It really didn't work. There was consensus on issues related to public life, but anything inside the house and the private sphere didn't work. It was a disaster. During the campaign on the Personal Status Law we were of the opinion that we should suggest an alternative that will grant equal rights. We thought that we could negotiate something. We were in the absolute minority. Everyone was involved in this campaign and everyone was against us. Initially AWSA hosted it. Later, when people suggested that we should rotate, Nawal didn't want to provide her space anymore. So people met in private houses. Anyhow, the momentum was kept for quite some time (D. Summayya, in an unpublished interview conducted by Al-Ali in the spring of 1996).

The very act of forming the emergency coalition, when the constitutionality of the Personal Status Law was challenged in 1985, represented a break from prevalent nationalist- and liberal-modernist discourses in Egypt that "only focused on women's rights in the public sphere as part of creating new societies" (Hatem, 1993:42). In other words, the previously existing frameworks in which "women's issues" were discussed linked the struggle for women's rights with

⁷ In the 1980s, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association or AWSA was founded by Nawal El-Sa'dawi. The organization was based in Cairo with branches in several Arab countries and in some Arab communities in the West (Toubia, 1988).

the reform and modernization of society as a whole. The prevailing perceptions of women's rights were very closely tied to the modernist discourses of earlier male reformers, such as Qasim Amin and the more recent development discourses. According to Mervat Hatem, these discourses accept "women's public space, where they were expected to pursue public activities like education, work and some form of political participation, especially suffrage" (ibid.:40). Women's rights in the "private" family sphere are not only ignored, but also considered as standing outside the legitimate struggle for women's rights. During the post-*infitah* period, these previously unchallenged premises regarding women's rights began to be challenged from various directions, even if they continued to constitute the most widespread interpretation of women's rights.

The Summaya quote above also sheds light on the debate about the frame of women's activism. The political experiences that gave birth to the attempts to establish autonomous women groups in the 1980s are related to the disintegration of the student movement, the general crisis of the political left, and the widespread disillusion with hierarchical male-dominated political structures. Many women activists not only brought with them leftist revolutionary ideas, but also a disillusionment with the possibilities of working with leftist men, especially in the framework of traditional hierarchical party or organizational structures.

Many activists in the Egyptian women's movement view the preparations for the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo (September 1994) as a turning point in their efforts to create a feminist platform and to move from more research-oriented activism to project-oriented grassroots work. Before the ICPD, women's organizations had largely remained isolated from each other, except for a few instances of cooperation that were limited to personal exchanges between women from different organizations or the exchange of publications. In the 1990s the Palestinian *intifadah*, the Gulf War, and the passing of privatization laws, among other things, brought the various organizations and groups together for a brief moment before they dispersed again to pursue their own activities (Seif El-Dawla and Ibrahim, 1995).

The preparations for the ICPD and the conference itself created space for many women activists in Egypt to address previously taboo topics (abortion, violence, reproductive rights) or to discuss issues of common concern (equality before the law, political participation, structural adjustment, the Personal Status and nationality laws) with women from different political orientations and backgrounds. Seif El-Dawla and Ibrahim describe the time of preparation for the conference:

Women started to become interested in subjects which until then had not usually been part of their agendas. All over the country workshops were organized in which these issues were addressed and facts presented.^[8] These encounters were very fruitful and exciting and gave hope for a reemergence of a

⁸ Once a group finished its research during the preparations for the ICPD, the co-ordinator of the gender task force organized meetings in different areas (focal points). The group which had done the research on a specific topic would present and discuss its findings, a process which often led to modifications. In these encounters, Cairene women activists encountered women from all over the country and, for some, these meetings and debates with "grassroots" women from the countryside and small towns were much more fruitful and productive than the usual discussions among activists and scholars in Cairo.

movement that was restricted for so many years. Organizations met which had not known about each other before. Agreements were found in areas where organizations thought they would stand alone. At the same time, it became clear that there were some areas in which no agreement could be found, like the analysis of the role of the state, the attitude towards Islamists, the role of religion and political parties. Women did not try to overcome these differences, but respected them. Before and during the conference, no one wanted to sell out these exciting and long missed encounters for a consensus which would never have been obtained anyhow (Seif El-Dawla and Ibrahim, 1995:115).

The feelings of hope and success before and during the 1994 ICPD in Cairo were soon shattered by a severe backlash triggered by the government, the Islamists and certain actors in the NGO movement. The organizing bodies for the ICPD had been very lenient and tolerant with regard to the incorporation of all groups, even those not officially registered as NGOs. However, the Egyptian government and the national committee nominated to organize the International Women's Forum in Beijing (September, 1995), headed by Hoda Badran, put a great deal of emphasis on the legal definition of NGOs and on their registration at the Ministry of Social Affairs. The result of this approach was the exclusion of groups like the New Woman's Research Centre, which had circumvented the law of association by registering as civic companies. The very location of the ICPD also increased its accessibility for activists and groups as they did not have to apply for travel grants as was the case for Beijing.

Moreover, the Egyptian government's public display of commitment to gender equality was certainly influenced by the wish to "look good" in the eyes of international organizations and the world media. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the government's enthusiasm dwindled substantially following the conference. At the same time, women activists also suffered severe attacks by Islamists, who pressured the government to compromise on several issues and caused it to frustrate the expectations raised and promises made during the ICPD. During the ICPD, and in the presence of the international community, state officials had proclaimed their commitment to ban female genital mutilation (FGM) by law. After the conference the government was challenged by Al-Azhar, which had opposed the government's stand throughout the ICPD. Backed by the conservative medical association, Al-Azhar succeeded in pressuring the Ministry of Health into withdrawing their commitment to ban FGM. Once again local traditions, culture and religion were evoked to strengthen the Islamists' ammunition against the government, which was portrayed as having given in to Western moral codes and ethics (Seif El-Dawla, 1996).

The Law of Association

Despite Mubarak's official pro-democracy policy, repressive measures have not only been directed toward Islamic militant groups and communists, but also toward women activists. A number of laws, first established under Nasser, continue to regulate the establishment of voluntary groups, associations and organizations under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs. These laws oblige women activists to operate either as informal groups or as officially registered organizations, which are subject to control by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The approval of the Interior Ministry is required for public meetings, rallies and protest marches. The Ministry of Social Affairs has the authority to license and dissolve "private organizations". Li-

censes may be revoked if such organizations engage in political or religious activities. For example, since 1985 the government has refused to license the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), on grounds that it is a political organization.

The level of control varies, depending on the political climate. During the Gulf War—a period during which the Egyptian government experienced a crisis of legitimacy by aligning itself with the Anglo-American war efforts—the government banned AWSA, whose leader, Nawal El-Sa'dawi, had been very outspoken against the war and the Egyptian government's position on the matter. However, the influence of state power over civil society organizations, exercised by the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the apparent randomness with which organizations are allowed to operate or not, has been restrained by international influences that have largely contributed to the professionalization of the traditional voluntary sector (Al-Ali, 2000).

Several women's groups have preferred to avoid registering as private voluntary organizations or NGOs under Law 32 with the attendant danger of being dissolved by the Ministry of Social Affairs, by registering instead with the Office of Property and Accreditation as research centres or civic non-profit companies, thereby avoiding the control and restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. However, this legal loophole has been endangered by recent amendments to the ill-reputed Law 32 of 1964.

The banning of AWSA by the government led to the establishment of a coalition called Committee to Change the Law of Associations. Its members include the Cairo branch of Amnesty International, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights and the Legal Research and Resource Centre for Human Rights (Sullivan, 1994).

One year prior to the ICPD, Egyptian NGOs experienced a breakthrough in their tension-filled relations with the government, as the latter recognized and supported an elected NGO—the Committee for Population and Development (NCPD). The ongoing ambiguity of the Mubarak regime concerning women's rights was reflected in the flaring up of the continuing debate over Law 32 during the preparations for the September 1995 United Nations International Women's Forum in Beijing (*ibid.*).

Increasing opposition to the Law of Association, especially on the part of Egyptian civil society organizations but also international constituencies, compelled the state to declare repeatedly that it intended to reconsider the law. An NGO Forum for Civil Action was formed in the summer of 1998 in reaction to a bill drafted by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The proposed bill did not meet the hopes and expectations of Egyptian NGOs. However, the ministry engaged in a series of consultations with the NGO Forum, resulting in an agreed compromise on both sides. However, in spring 1999, the Ministry of Social affairs sent a bill to the Egyptian People's Assembly that differed starkly from the one that both sides had agreed on.

The bill, which passed within days, prohibits associations from carrying out any political activities, increases the Ministry's power to control and intervene in Egypt's civil society, and re-

stricts regional and international activities. According to a group of Egyptian NGOs, the law, when considered in the current political context, merely reflects the government's general intention to restrict even further the formation of independent associations, whether political parties, unions, professional associations, or NGOs. The new law constitutes a severe blow to Egypt's NGO movement in general and to the women's movement in particular.

The terrain

The contemporary women's movement in Egypt is extremely varied in terms of activities and institutional frameworks. NGOs with clear structures and decision-making bodies exist side by side with more loosely organized groups. Ad hoc networks mobilizing around specific issues or tasks are formed and dissolved by activists who are often simultaneously involved in other groups or activities. There are also several women's committees attached to political parties, professional organizations and human rights centres, as well as a number of individual women intellectuals who work independently through their profession or who are loosely affiliated with specific groups and who co-operate on specific projects.

Varying political orientations can be found among *independent* women's organizations such as the New Woman Research Centre, the Alliance of Arab Women, the Women's Study Centre: Together, and the Daughter of the Land Group. The Alliance of Arab Women, whose members are mainly professional upper middle class women in their 50s and 60s, is at the most liberal end of the broad spectrum of feminist approaches, endorsing both welfare work and women's rights activism. The Alliance is officially registered as an NGO with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the implications of which were discussed earlier. Others, like New Woman, Together, and Daughter of the Land Group have avoided the strict regulatory codes of the Ministry by registering as non-profit companies or research centres. These three groups initially grew out of previous political activism: members of the Daughter of the Land Group first mobilized around the issue of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), while the founding members of New Woman and Together had been involved in socialist politics during the student movement in the 1970s.

In addition to these independent groups—which are involved to different degrees in advocacy, research and grassroots projects—there exist service-oriented NGOs with a special focus on the role of women in both development and underdevelopment. These NGOs, such as the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW) and Appropriate Communications Techniques (ACT), combine concrete development projects with political campaigns.

By and large, the different women's organizations as well as individual activists are united by their middle-class background and their commitment to retain and expand their civic rights and equality before the law. They share a secular orientation and a concern about growing Islamist militancy, but their actual position vis-à-vis the various Islamist tendencies and discourses are as varied as their specific understandings and interpretation of secularism (Al-Ali, forthcoming). A wide range of positions and attitudes toward personal religiosity and observance can be found among secular-oriented activists who oppose religious frameworks for their political struggles. Generational differences may be discerned concerning a woman's specific attitudes toward secularism and religion; younger women tend to be much more open to the idea of re-

interpretation of religion in order to counter conservative male interpretations. Older women activists of the generation that was involved in the student movement in the 1970s by and large tend to be more reluctant to engage in religious discourses of any kind (Al-Ali, 2000).

There also exists an increasing number of Islamist women activists who have managed to gain a voice in the mainstream Islamist discourse, and to criticize and challenge their male counterparts for misinterpreting Islam. Zeinab Al-Ghazali, the most prominent Islamist woman and founder of the Jama'at al-Sayyidat al-Muslimat (Muslim Women's Association, 1924), and Safinaz Qazim, a journalist and former leftist who committed herself to Islam in the 1970s, have remained ambiguous about what constitutes an adequate women's role in an envisioned Islamic state and society. While neither of these celebrated women see any contradiction between women's public involvement (education and work) and their private lives in the family (wives and mothers), they have remained antagonistic to feminism (Badran, 1994).

A new generation of Islamist women have been more outspoken and confrontational in the way they view women's role in an Islamic state. They stress Islam's compatibility with UN-stipulated standards of women's rights and point to persisting traditions of pre-Islamic times as being responsible for the discrimination against women (Ahmed, 1992). Zeinab Radwan, for example, a professor of Islamic philosophy at Cairo University stressed that she would spread her convictions through newspaper articles, in public lectures, TV programmes and in lectures at Cairo University (Radwan, 1982). In her view, the movement of "*tahrir al-mar'ah*" (women's liberation) initiated by Huda Shara'wi only addressed issues such as education and veiling, but failed to address women's rights and position in the family, which she sees as clearly defined by Islam.

Heba Rauf Ezzat, one of the youngest and most prominent Islamist women activists, is certainly the most outspoken in the call for the launching of an Islamic women's movement. Feeling closest to the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood rather than some of the more radical tendencies, she clearly expresses her aim of changing society from within in order to realize her vision of an Islamic state. *Ijtihad*, the reinterpretation of the sources of religion and traditional values and the examination of Islamic history, are the methods chosen by Rauf to evolve an Islamic theory of women's liberation.

Islamist women activists such as Rauf, Al-Ghazali and Qazim display great differences in terms of their vision of women's roles in the Islamic state (Karam, 1998). While Al-Ghazali and Qazim propound women's traditional roles as mothers and wives, Rauf's argument that "political authority should be vested in the family as opposed to the state" (Karam, 1998:225), transcends prevalent Islamist notions of the relationship between family and state. Rauf sees a liberating potential for women in the realm of the family, as well as promoting women's leadership in an envisioned Islamic *ummah* (community of believers).

Different positions vis-à-vis the state and political parties are to be found among women working within secular and religious frameworks. Many secular-oriented women regard the Egyptian state as essentially corrupt and as an impediment to their struggles, as does Rauf,

though for different reasons. Others try to work within existing state structures, a strategy that has become particularly obvious in the various reactions toward the state's latest encroachment on civil society. Some activists decided to officially register as NGOs in fulfilment of the state's new legislation, while others continue to campaign against the restrictive law.

Goals and activities

Most of the goals and priorities of the Egyptian women's movement are concerned with modernization and development issues. These goals range from the alleviation of poverty and illiteracy, to raising legal awareness, increasing women's access to education, work, health care and political participation. Some groups also aim at raising "feminist consciousness". In recent years, some Egyptian women activists have systematically placed on the agenda previously taboo issues such as women's reproductive rights and violence against women.

The problem of violence against women has been one of the most controversial issues as it touches precisely the core of what has been sidetracked for so long: forms of oppression within the home, within the family. Unfortunately, not only conservative and progressive men but also many women activists themselves dismiss this concern as a Western imposition, not relevant to their own context. Others tend to lessen its significance by acknowledging the existence of the problem, but pointing to more pressing priorities such as poverty and illiteracy. Yet, those activists who have engaged in research about different forms of violence against women, such as wife battering, rape, and physical and verbal abuse, have become convinced of the urgency of the issue and consequently expanded their campaigns and networks.

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.

In the context of the Egyptian women's movement, the term "activism" encapsulates a variety of involvements and activities, such as charity and welfare, research, advocacy, consciousness-raising, lobbying and development, which taken individually cannot all be considered forms of political activism. Certain forms of activity, such as research, might develop into more political engagements, such as advocacy or lobbying. Moreover, at any point in time, groups and individuals might be involved in various kinds of activities (Al-Ali, 2000).

One overall problem seems to be the lack of specific institutional targets in many of the campaigns, which consequently tend to become diffused. From raising issues and suggesting ramifications, the step to actual implementation is impeded on one hand by the state's ambiguity and lack of commitment, and, on the other, by the women activists' own failure to sustain ade-

quate momentum and display solidarity among themselves. Competition and rivalry, often revolving around the wish to guarantee funding and resources, but also in terms of claims to ideological and political truths, frequently block collective action. In some instances, it seems legitimate to ask whether some activities remain short-lived because they respond more to international agendas than local ones. However, it needs to be stressed that the two might not be mutually exclusive and might, if constructively used, be mutually supportive (ibid.).

Among Egyptian women activists the issue of universality versus specificity of human and women's rights has constituted one of the main debates over the past years. The question of the cultural and political framework of feminist activism is being debated in the context of "authenticity" and the "indigenization of knowledge and activism" on one hand, and the adherence to international conventions and transnational affiliations on the other. Like the controversy about foreign funding, such debates are triggered in part by the growing presence of international organizations in Egypt and the increased involvement of Egyptian organizations in international forums. Discussions about the universality or specificity of women's rights are also aspects of the process of decolonization in which Egyptian political actors try to define their own agendas and aims (ibid.).

The manner in which debates around the new marriage contract, female genital mutilation and violence against women have developed in recent years makes one point crystal clear: women activists are not just struggling against general obstacles to women's rights, they are also battling against the increased political authority of conservative religious forces and a state that is inevitably caught between the demands of Islamist groups and pressures applied by the international community (ibid.).

International agendas and affiliations

It is important to stress that the flurry of pro-feminist activism during the recent past—and articulations of new perspectives and demands on such issues as women's political participation, women's equality in the workplace, and the more sensitive issues of women's reproductive rights and violence against women—has taken place in a context in which the government has felt pressured by international constituencies to prove its commitment to women's equality. Moreover, resources and people were mobilized around both the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (September 1994) and the International Women's Forum in Beijing (September 1995).

In some instances, individuals seem to have grouped only temporarily in response to funding possibilities generated by international agendas and to have dissipated after both conferences ended. However, some issue-oriented networks, such as the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Task Force, and a network of organizations working together on the Women and Violence project, not only continued, but also seem to have maintained their momentum. These various issue-oriented networks typify a new organizational form in the history of the women's movement in Egypt in that they consist of associational linkages in which the various groups maintain their autonomy and, to some extent, acknowledge the differences between them. The Women and

Violence project, for example, includes an independent women's rights advocacy group, a legal aid group, a human rights group, a centre for victims of torture and a health NGO (Al-Ali, 2000).

The impact of international agendas on women's activism in Egypt has been considerable, entailing both positive and negative consequences. The sense of competition over foreign funding is certainly one of the negative effects of the increased presence of international donor organizations, as it often leads to rivalry and corruption and heightens divisiveness among women activists. In some instances, projects and campaigns have been short-lived because they were more a response to the availability of funding rather than to pressing local issues and agendas. The professionalization of the previously voluntary welfare sector and political activism constitutes a more complex side effect. On one hand, it has created a situation in which careerism could override political goals, which in turn increases the danger of rivalry. On the other hand, the professionalization of activities related to health care, reproductive rights, legal issues and development entails greater specialization and expertise that has been reflected positively in the quality of various projects and publications of contemporary activists (ibid.).

Despite the fact that the struggle over resources tends to impede collective action and solidarity, and might also give leverage to foreign donor organizations to impose their agendas, some groups and individuals have used such funding productively and effectively to pursue their own goals and priorities. There are many nuances in the debate about funding, including a complex ranking system between "good" and "bad" donors. Those organizations based in countries perceived to be less politically threatening, less imperialist and more progressive in their politics toward the Third World are labelled as good. Another feature of a good funding agency as opposed to a bad one is the level of freedom or control they impose on the recipient organization. In other words, funding agencies that seem to respond more directly to the needs of Egyptian organizations without trying to impose their own agenda are much more acceptable to most activists.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give examples of the range of positions and debates around the issue of funding in the women's movement. But what needs to be emphasized is that, although women activists are often accused of being dependent on foreign funding, the problem is more pervasive and affects all sections of the Egyptian NGO movement.

Relationship with the state

Not only is the state far from being homogeneous and static, but its relation to women's organizations differs from context to context. In Egypt, the changing role and policies of the state vis-à-vis women's issues has been paralleled by the continuous pressure women have exerted on the Egyptian state to respond to their demands and needs (Hatem, 1992). The Egyptian state poses a threat as well as offering resources to women's organizations.

A useful conceptualization has been put provided by Connell, who defines the state as embodying "gender regimes" and who points to the various ways in which the state is implicated in gender relations. As he put it, the state is "constituted within gender relations as the central institutionalization of gendered power. Conversely, gender dynamics are a major force con-

structuring the state, both in the historical creation of state structures and in contemporary politics" (Connell, 1990:519). The state's power to regulate and shape gender relations can work toward the consolidation of existing gender relations, but it also has the potential to unsettle the existing gender order through reforms (Connell, 1990).

The ambiguities inherent in state policies have significant implications for feminist politics that have to work both against and through the state, depending on the specific nature of the state and its policies. Connell addresses specifically the liberal state in industrial-capitalist economies; yet, his analysis of the ambiguity inherent in the state's construction of gender relations is even more obvious in postcolonial states. Contradictions, as Kandiyoti argues, emerge in nationalist projects that simultaneously reflect portrayals of women as "victims of social backwardness, icons of modernity or privileged bearers of cultural authenticity" (Kandiyoti, 1991a:378). In other words, tensions between civic forms of nationalism (which describe women as modern citizens who share rights and responsibilities in the process of nation building) and cultural forms of nationalism (which depict women as the symbols and safeguards of "uncontaminated" culture) characterize postcolonial state formations.

Nationalism under Nasser, for example, included women as modern actors in the general scheme of redistribution, modernization and national development. The state under Nasser did not, however, challenge existing gender relations within the family, nor did it allow independent women's organizations to articulate their own agendas. Within the parameters of nationalist projects in postcolonial states, resistance to Western cultural imperialism became equated with the preservation of existing gender relations, which consequently meant the perpetuation of patriarchal control (Kandiyoti, 1991a).

The fractured nature of the Egyptian postcolonial state, its changing policies under different regimes, its internal divisions, as well as its links to international constituencies account for women activists' shifting relations with the state. Women are affected in different ways: they are on the receiving end of state policies (which may be either supportive or oppressive), and they also try to influence state policies. In this process of mobilization at the level of the state, women activists become part of Egypt's civil society (Al-Ali, 2000).

Connell's conceptualization of each state embodying as well as creating "gender regimes" provides a useful analytical tool to understand the changing and ambiguous relationship between the Egyptian women's movement and the state (Connell, 1990). Throughout its history, the Egyptian state was actively engaged in constructing gender through its policies and legal provisions. The debate about the Personal Status Laws is a case in point, as it shows the shifting and ambiguous role of the state concerning gender relations. The state can be both a means to challenge existing gender relations (by reforming the conservative Personal Status Laws and granting women more rights with regard to marriage, divorce and child custody), or it can reinforce oppressive gender relations (by abolishing improved laws).

However, most recent developments indicate that the current state works to obstruct and severely damage the Egyptian women's movement. This has not only become apparent in the recent passing of a more restrictive Law of Associations, but is evident in a series of antagonistic acts. In the autumn of 1999, for instance, the Ministry of Social Affairs opposed Nawal El-Sada'wi's initiative to establish an Egyptian Women's Union. While the Minister, Mervat Tel-lawi, initially expressed her support, she later objected to a meeting of organizations working in "the field of women". Among the various reasons cited was the fact that there was "no field of work or activity called the field of women". It remains to be seen what strategy the Egyptian women's movement will adopt and how it will manoeuvre its way out of the impasse created by the state. One might speculate that greater alliances will be sought with international women's and NGO movements to increase the pressure on the Egyptian government.

The Women's Movement in Turkey

Historical background

Since the late 1980s, we, as women involved in the new feminist movement in Turkey, pondered the conditions of womanhood and the mechanisms that sustain male dominance. We scrutinized and questioned everything that had been taught to us, including Turkish history. As a member of a feminist group, I was compelled to search for similar women's groups in Turkish history (Demirdirek, 1998:65).

Analyses and interpretations of the history of the Turkish women's movement have to be viewed in the context of debates and contestations about the Ottoman and the Kemalist legacy. Until the late 1980s, discussions about the role and situation of women in Turkey generally focus on the legal reforms introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the establishment of the Turkish state in 1923. It is a widely shared view that the reforms associated with Atatürk presented a radical change for the better in the position of women and a total break with the Ottoman past.

In more recent years, Turkish feminist scholars have not only challenged the assumption that Kemalist reforms constituted "state feminism" that brought about women's liberation, but they also attempted to reappropriate their own history by pointing to pre-Republican women's movements and activists. These studies attest to the fact that Turkish women began to struggle for their legal and human rights after the process of modernization began under the Ottoman empire. They "show how women had struggled to be equal citizens with men, had tried to expand their social life and space, and had organized to achieve their goals" (Demirdirek, 1998:66). In other words, while Ottoman women were oppressed, educated women did organize and take every opportunity to speak out and challenge existing gender relations.

Ottoman women's activities

Special attention has been given to the writings of women in various journals published by both men and women. The first magazine for women, *Terakki-i Muhadderat*, was published in 1869, and was followed by a number of other women's magazines. The women's library in Istanbul published a study about journalistic writings between 1869–1927, referring to more than 40

women's journals. These magazines are not only remarkable because they were written and produced by women, but their content also points to an emerging feminist consciousness (Tekeli, 1997). A wide range of demands relating to education, employment, marriage, and dress code paralleled the demands of women's movements around the world. However, while being supportive of, and impressed by, the women's suffrage movement in Europe, Ottoman women expressed the opinion that this was an untimely and inappropriate demand for themselves in the light of more immediate and pressing issues (Demirdirek, 1998).

Ottoman women's demands were initially discussed in the framework of Islam, but later on women started to present secular arguments as well. Many of these demands can be understood in the framework of the drive for "modernization" that can be traced to the Tanzimat period (1829-1876). During this time, a legal system based on a combination of *shari'a* and European civil law did not affect the Islamic personal status code (comprising various laws concerning marriage, divorce and child custody). However, the Tanzimat period introduced some modest reforms with respect to women's rights, such as the ratification of a treat to abolish slavery and concubinage and the 1856 Land Law granting equal rights of inheritance to daughters (Kandiyoti, 1989).

Various articles, editorials and commentaries, the establishment of women's magazines, and the publication of the first novel written by a feminist were followed by the establishment of a number of women's organizations between 1908 and 1920. These organizations differed in their approaches, goals and activities, ranging from charitable, to culture-oriented to feminist groups. In 1913, women organized their first feminist activities, such as a sit-in to force the telephone company to employ Muslim women (Tekeli, 1997). After the collapse of the Ottoman army at the end of the First World War and the occupation of Istanbul in 1918, women's organizations constituted a considerable element of the "national liberation front". There were 16 women's organizations among the approximately 50 groups that were struggling for "the national cause". Patriotic women's organizations emerged all over the country, but specifically in Anatolia, after the occupation of Izmir by Greek troops in 1919 (ibid.).

The period of the weakening of Ottoman imperial power leading up to the First World War was accompanied by a crisis regarding Ottoman culture and the political system that also put "the Ottoman family" on the political agenda: "As a result, women made an irreversible entry into political discourse and the question of their rights became a privileged site for debates concerning questions of modernization versus cultural conservatism and integrity" (Kandiyoti, 1989:127). In other words, contrary to general perceptions, the "woman question" was already central to "the different ideological and political reactions to the dissolution of the Ottoman empire" (ibid.) and did not emerge suddenly with the establishment of the Turkish state in 1923. Moreover, the characterization of Ottoman rule as presenting "traditional Islamic culture" that for centuries experienced very little change needs to be questioned.

Women in the Kemalist Republic

Factors that favour emancipation [...] have been, first and foremost, the modern legal system established by the republic, Ataturk's constant reminders of

the necessity of giving women full citizenship status, socioeconomic development, a falling birth rate, new inheritance laws, the transformations of the extended family into a nuclear family, compulsory and free education, urbanization, and the extension of communication networks (Cosar, 1978:138).

Kemalist reforms were *not* aimed at liberating women or at promoting the development of female consciousness and feminine identity. Instead, they strove to equip Turkish women with the education and skills that would improve their contributions to the republican patriarchy by making them better wives and mothers. With a goal of socioeconomic development, these reforms are hardly feminist, and their perception of the role of women and definition of womanhood would not qualify them to be taken as 'state-sponsored feminism' as done by some analysts (Arat, 1994:57).

Similar to the Egyptian women's movement, which came to a halt under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, activities by Turkish women demanding equality and rights were co-opted by the regime of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Analysts differ greatly in their assessment of the role of the Turkish state in shaping gender relations as well as the level of liberation and equality for women brought about by the regime. For some, the efforts to achieve reform in women's status culminated in what they regarded as "state feminism" (Durakbasa, 1998:139), while others strongly doubt the appropriateness of this term in the context of Kemalist reforms (Arat, 1994). Whatever position one might take in this debate, it can be safely said that a series of laws and reforms improved the legal status of women. Most notably, the adoption of the Turkish Civil Code in 1926 advanced women's position in the context of the Personal Status Code. It outlawed polygamy, gave equal rights of divorce to both partners, and gave child custody rights to both parents (Kandiyoti, 1987). Moreover, women were granted the right to vote and to be elected for Parliament. In 1934, they were granted full citizenship rights under the constitution.

Yet, only a relatively small number of women were able to use the rights granted to them by Ataturk; the vast majority of women were still tied to the land and under the social control of men (Cosar, 1978). What needs to be stressed here is that, as Turkey was a largely agrarian society, it lacked both a sizable bourgeoisie and an industrial working class (Arat, 1994).

The series of progressive laws went hand in hand with the active suppression and oppression of independent feminist activism. The government banned the first women's party and put pressure on the Union of Turkish Women to dissolve, since, as the government put it, "women had reached equality with men" (Tekeli, 1997:76). Furthermore, it is now widely acknowledged that Kemalism, although a progressive ideology that fostered women's participation in education and the professions, "did not alter the patriarchal norms of morality and in fact maintained the basic cultural conservatism about male/female relations, despite its radicalism in opening a space for women in the public domain" (Durakbasa, 1998:140).

Indeed, women were encouraged to fulfil traditional roles in their private lives, although with a "Western ethic" (Arat, 1997:187). For the vast majority of women, participation in the process of modernization meant adhering to supposedly Western values of discipline, orderliness and rationality in the household. To this end, the government founded a number of institutes and schools for girls and young women (*ibid.*). Only a relative small group of elite women became

involved in Turkey's public life and played important public roles. However, despite this dichotomy between the private and public realm concerning women's roles and position, the significance of Kemalist reforms should not be dismissed. They presented a big shift in gender ideology and relations at the time and also constituted a huge blow to the Islamist opposition.

As some commentators critical of Kemalist reforms point out, women were treated as symbols and tools of modernization and Westernization, rather than as the equal partners of men (Arat, 1994). Women were used to distinguish the newly established state from the Ottoman empire as well as to prove to the West that Turkey was a democratic country. Kandiyoti refers to Tekeli who argued that singling out women as the group most visibly oppressed by religion, through practices such as veiling, seclusion and polygamy, was central to Atatürk's onslaught on the theological Ottoman state (Tekeli, 1981 in Kandiyoti, 1989). Tekeli interprets the timing of the legislation on women's suffrage in the 1930s as an important attempt by Atatürk to disassociate himself from the European dictatorships (Nazi Germany and fascist Italy) and claim Turkey's rightful place among Western democracies (ibid.).

While Kemalist reforms are generally equated with Westernization, it is important to point out that a major influence on Kemalist ideology can be found in the writings of the Turkish nationalist Ziya Gökalp. This prominent reformer and proponent of women's rights rejected the conflation of modernization and Westernization. Instead, he developed an elaborate account of an "original Turkish civilization" in which "women were equal to men". According to this view, the decline of women's status was a result of the influence of the Iranian and Greek civilizations. As Gökalp claimed: "Turkish nationalists are both popular and feminist, not only because these two principles are values in our age, but also because democracy and feminism were two bases of ancient Turkish life" (Gökalp quoted in Arat, 1998:14).

In the framework of a "Turkish history thesis", Turkish civilization was disassociated with Islam. It was argued that Turks had contributed to civilization long before they had been part of the Islamic world and the Ottoman Empire (Durakbasa, 1998). It comes as no surprise then that the Kemalist state embraced secularization as part of its nationalist project. This very specific context needs to be taken into account when analysing and comparing the Turkish women's movement to other women's movements in the region.

Contemporary context

Ironically, the coup d'état in 1960 is often said to mark the beginning of a new era characterized by increased political pluralism. Constitutional reforms and political restructuring had both immediate and long-term implications for women's political struggles (Arat, 1998). The emergence of new and ideologically distinct groups seriously challenged the state's ability to maintain a monolithic ideology and monopoly over political mobilization. The military interventions in 1971 and 1980, and the subsequent resort to martial law and other emergency measures, certainly impeded the growth of a democratic atmosphere. Nevertheless, the space for diverse and competing political groups grew considerably (ibid.).

None of these political groups, ranging from Marxist factions to Islamist groupings, explicitly focused on women's issues and women's rights, but a number of women's organizations operated as extensions to political parties and movements (Kandiyoti, 1989). Women were used to expand a political party's electoral base as well as for fund raising activities. Young women, particularly university students, were particularly attracted to left-wing organizations, even though these also marginalized women's issues (Arat, 1998). Overall, women's political activism increased, but, as during earlier times, women were only able to operate in co-opted political structures. Women's own demands were defined as marginal or secondary to other struggles, such as class struggle or the fight against imperialism (Kandiyoti, 1989). "Interestingly", as Kandiyoti points out, "only Islamist currents accord a central place to the position of women, at least at the level of discourse, since they see keeping women in their religiously sanctioned traditional roles as absolutely crucial to the maintenance of the Islamic social order" (ibid.).

The military takeover in 1980 and its repressive politics had a contradictory impact on feminist activism in Turkey. The political antagonisms and ideological polarization that marked the 1970s were suppressed through a ban on political parties, the placing of restrictions on labour unions and the repression of organizations concerned with class politics (Arat, 1998). Consequently, the political spectrum was compressed and political activism associated with parties or older organizations became very limited if not impossible. Ironically, the restrictions imposed on general political life by the military regime helped to liberate women activists from the straitjacket of male-dominated political structures. The disappointment over their experiences with the previously existing political parties and organizations increased women's inclination to seek new venues and frameworks for their activism.

The emergence of an independent women's movement

In 1987 Turkey was a country offering, virtually in the same week, the perplexing spectacle of a sit-in and hunger strike by ultra-religious women students demanding the right to don the veil to go to classes (a right which was officially denied) and a small group of feminists marching through the streets to demonstrate against violence against women. While to an outside observer this may seem merely a healthy manifestation of political pluralism, the roots of the contemporary situation have to be sought in the specificities of the woman question in Turkey and of its evolution over time (Kandiyoti, 1989).

The 1980s witnessed the emergence of a new feminism and autonomous women's movement in Turkey. Feminists in the 1980s aimed at a more radical restructuring of society than their predecessors. A small group of intellectual and professional women—journalists, academics, lawyers, medical doctors etc.—constituted the core of this newly emerging movement. With time, they were joined by university students and less educated women (Tekeli, 1997:81). Most women acknowledged that Kemalist reforms improved women's position, but they refused to either subsume their demands under broader political movements or to work within authoritarian male political structures.

Similar to the women's movement during Ottoman times, women began to mobilize in small groups revolving around certain themes, projects, or events. Unlike other political movements, such as the leftist or Islamist movement, the primary aim of Turkish feminists, as in the case of their Egyptian counterparts, has not been to mobilize "the masses" but to strengthen solidarity,

and cement friendly relations between women activists. This can be a source of strength as well as a hindrance, as personal and political relationships become entangled and occasionally strained by this connection. However, in comparison with the Egyptian women's movement, Turkish feminists have been more successful in establishing solidarity networks, especially in the context of their campaigns against domestic violence. Overall, feminists in Turkey appear to have a larger constituency and approach mainstream institutions more systematically to bargain for their demands to be met. Similar to Egyptian women activists, contemporary Turkish women have rejected hierarchical leadership and tried to implement democratic decision-making processes.

The cultural climate of the 1980s, characterized by the emergence of new forms of print media that challenged the domination of the daily press in building the every day public agenda, was conducive to the emergence of feminist journals and magazines. These new forms of media consisted of widely distributed weekly news magazines and popular monthlies that targeted particular audiences, and identified "men" and "women" as distinct consumer groups (Öztürkmen, 1999). However, as has been pointed out by Turkish feminist scholars, there were tensions between Turkey's academic and activist feminists on one side, and the "popular feminism" promoted by women's magazines on the other (ibid.). The emergence and development of the monthly magazine **Kadicina** (Womanly) is a case in point. The magazine and its editor, Duygu Asena, were recognized for their development of a new discourse, using innovative and creative techniques as well as popularizing certain key concepts and slogans associated with the growing women's movement. Yet, academic and activist feminists criticized the consumerist content and approach, most visible in the advertisements that objectified women and were highly sexualized (ibid.).

In addition to the more popular media, feminist scholars and activists established a number of journals such as **Somut** (Concrete), **Feminist**, and **Kaktüs** (Cactus), which initiated debates on the issues of battering and sexual harassment amongst others, and began campaigns against them. Later, many of the women who were involved in these various journals started and participated in various campaigns, projects and activities that together comprised a vibrant women's movement. For example, in 1983, a group of professional women started to meet regularly to prepare a feminist page for the weekly literary journal **Somut**. Though this project lasted only one year, it helped to "sow the seeds of a feminist consciousness among the urban elite in Turkey" (Arat, 1994:103). Some of the women involved in putting together the feminist page subsequently became involved in the establishment of a publishing service and consultancy company called Woman's Circle. Several important feminist writings were published by this initiative, which also founded a book club and organized many seminars, workshops and discussion groups. The pronounced mission of the consultancy company was to support women's labour, market women's products, improve women's education, and provide consulting services concerning women's health and legal problems (Arat, 1998).

In the context of changing political structures under military rule and the rise of liberalism, the media became more and more interested in expressions of "private lives". Paradoxically, feminists were able to seize the moment to raise and address issues that had previously been taboo: domestic violence, sexual harassment and general patriarchal oppression. Personal relationships and "love"

featured alongside more overtly feminist themes such as abortion, violence against women and war. However, as Nilüfer Göle cautions, in post-1980s Turkey the popularity of certain magazines and books did not necessarily reflect the level of mobilization around women's issues:

[...] there formed a sympathetic bridge between the public and the radical movements which focused on issues previously undermined by leftist movements, such as environmentalism, women's identity and individual freedom. A lot of people were interested in, and thinking about the themes promoted by these movements without necessarily participating in, or identifying with them (Göle, 1987; and quoted in Öztürkmen, 1999:281).

Despite these reservations, there is no doubt that the 1980s marked the emergence of a vibrant and diversified women's movement. And the various magazines and journals edited and written by women contributed in different ways to an increasing feminist consciousness. This in turn paved the way for political mobilization and action. Women's groups in Ankara and Istanbul organized the first public feminist event in 1986 when they launched a petition campaign to urge the government to implement the 1985 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Turkey had signed the convention but had ignored the fact that it was far from implementing it. In the following year, the first legal street demonstration organized by feminists took place. The demonstration against domestic violence expanded into a broader and lasting campaign. During the same year, the journal **Feminist** was published, followed by a socialist-feminist magazine in 1988 (Tekeli, 1997).

In the late 1980s, the Turkish women's movement prospered with different visible trends and strands. While local contexts prompted their specific activism, feminists were influenced by feminist movements abroad. The transition from military rule to democracy and an increasingly vital civil society provided a positive background to the growing autonomous women's movement (Arat, 1998). Feminists had created new grounds of discussion in literary and academic journals, initiated campaigns against battering and sexual harassment, founded support organizations and shelters, and organized discussion groups, panels and conferences (Öztürkmen, 1998). Yet, in the beginning of the 1990s it became obvious that attempts at institution building were proving to be extremely difficult.

Attempts at institution building

Only a few of the many projects started with enthusiasm in the 1980s or 1990s lasted longer than three to four years. The bulk of the activities organized by the Turkish women's movement consisted of ad hoc committees and campaigns with flexible organizational structures. Indeed, the majority of feminists had been against conventional institutionalization and hierarchical organization. A shift in this approach can be first detected among the founders of the Association of Women Against Discrimination, who articulated the need for institutionalization in order to transform patriarchal institutions and implement CEDAW (Arat, 1994).

Attempts at institutionalization culminated, for example, in the establishment of a women's shelter (The Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation), of a women's library in Istanbul, and of a consultancy centre in Ankara. Independent feminist centres and organizations existed side by

side with newly emerging organizations founded by the state. On the national level, a Directorate General on the Status and Problems of Women was established under the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. At the local level, a number of municipalities established departments focusing on women's problems (Arat, 1998). Furthermore, several public universities established women's studies programmes or research centres.

A campaign against domestic violence began in February 1987 in response to a court case in which a judge had refused a divorce to a woman who was regularly beaten by her husband. Turkish feminists who had already discussed among themselves the significance of domestic violence protested to the judge and sent petitions to court. This initiative grew into the full-fledged Campaign Against Beating, later called Solidarity Against Beating. More than 3,000 women participated in a protest march that received positive media attention. A book based on personal accounts of women who had suffered domestic violence was published in 1988. A year later, 14 feminists founded The Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation referred to above (Arat, 1998).

Yesim Arat's account of the history and development of the shelter reveals the struggle by Turkish feminists to work in a patriarchal system while employing alternative organizational structures and collective leadership (Arat, 1998). It also shows the discrepancy between feminist goals and "male-state approaches" to women's problems. The difficulties involved in building institutions become very obvious if one looks at the conditions and events that led women to set-up women's shelters and the peculiar rules suggested by municipal governments, as for example requiring the husband's permission to take refuge in the shelter.

The founders of the women's shelter had to be on constant guard against co-option and the annexation of their project by the local authorities. They had been made aware of the dangers of affiliating with the state. In another municipality, a women's shelter that had been established under jurisdiction of the political authority was closed down when a more conservative mayor replaced the one who had been sympathetic to the shelter (Arat, 1998). By trying to maintain their independence, the feminists involved in the project were regularly accused of being amateurish in their non-bureaucratic approach to the establishment and running of the women's shelter.

The difficulties of pursuing feminist ideals of sisterhood, solidarity, and participatory democracy in an organization that operates in a largely male-dominated and undemocratic political system resulted in internal conflicts and tensions (Arat, 1998). According to Arat:

[...] feminist aspirations for participatory democracy and decision-making based on consensus strained the foundation in solving its problems and reaching its goals of protecting women from domestic violence. At times, feminist principles and aspirations faltered when natural leaders emerged or when torturous processes of decision-making undermined the goal of sheltering women (Arat, 1998:306).

Feminists involved in the Purple Roof shelter project—as well as many other feminists in the Turkish women's movement—are trying to combine both political activism revolving around women's issues with efforts to forge more democratic notions of citizenship. Thus, by the 1990s,

the different strands in the women's movement—Islamist, Kemalist, Socialist, Liberal or Radical Feminist—began to stress the need to gain and sustain autonomy and an identity independent of existing political structures. Unlike women during the Kemalist regime, contemporary feminists do not expect the state to liberate women, but they contest the restrictive nature of the state's civil rights regime.

In addition to promoting democratic values and practices, the liberal and Kemalist feminists in the women's movement also constitute a force that upholds secularism in contemporary Turkey. This is not to suggest that all activists in the women's movement are secular. A number of Islamist women also campaign for women's rights by arguing that the Qu'ran proposed equality between women and men. However, most Islamist women accept a hierarchical system based on a gender-based division of labour, as Yesim Arat's (1999) recent study of women's organizations affiliated with the Islamist Welfare Party shows. Also, they do not challenge the male-dominated hierarchical structures of the Welfare Party.

Paradoxically, women's political mobilization through the Welfare Party Ladies' Commission has been extremely successful. Arat found a wide range of motives among women for joining the Islamist women's organizations, including the influence of friends at school, religious and conservative family backgrounds, and gratitude toward the Welfare Party, which delivered useful services related to health and education (Arat, 1999). According to Arat, Islam "has been very functional in accommodating diversity and secular ideologies have to meet this need" (1999:62). In other words, Islamist women have managed to provide a political space in which women of various backgrounds and with diverse motivations manage to seek empowerment, even if the content of their rhetoric and ideology does not entail the concept of equality and does not challenge male authority.

The vast majority of those women who constitute the Turkish women's movement are certainly proponents of secularism and perceive Islam to be a threat to male-female equality. However, opposition to the rise of Islamism does not necessarily entail a feminist consciousness, as fast-growing groups such as the Association for the Protection of Contemporary Life and the Club for Atatürkist Thought reveal. These groups, which constitute a large movement of women of different backgrounds, exist all over Turkey. They campaign against Islamist encroachment, particularly on their legal rights, but are not feminist in their approach and attitude.

Conclusion

Participants in women's movements in both Egypt and Turkey reflect similar demographic characteristics, that is, they are mainly urban educated middle-class and upper-middle-class women. In recent years, these movements have to some extent broadened their bases while the middle classes have become impoverished under the pressure of economic crises and structural adjustment policies. The activities of the women's movements are generally limited to big cities, taking place mainly in Cairo, Istanbul and Ankara respectively. Even if the resonance of the

women's movements may reach small towns and villages, the ability of women to connect and communicate with each other has been limited.

The Turkish women's movement has been comparatively more successful in mobilizing women from a broader class basis. Signature campaigns against discriminatory clauses in personal status laws, mass demonstrations against domestic violence, and the establishment of institutions such as women's studies programmes, women's libraries and women's refuges have helped to raise consciousness among a broader constituency and have also strengthened solidarity among women activists. Compared with that in Egypt, the network of feminist activities in Turkey has been more wide ranging and more dispersed, partly because of the existence of institutions such as women's refuges, but also because women's studies departments have been established even in some of the provincial universities.

Unlike the Egyptian women's movement and the wider NGO sector in which it is embedded, Turkish women's organizations have been funded mainly through their municipalities rather than foreign funding. In the Turkish case, a multiparty system and relatively strong institutional backing through the state machinery, particularly the Directorate General on the Status and Problems of Women, allows for much greater independence from foreign agendas and funding bodies. Even more significantly, Turkish feminists have been able to lobby and influence mainstream institutions and legislation in a context in which government restrictions on civil society have been far less intrusive and debilitating than in Egypt.

In the Egyptian context, feminists' perceived need to "speak for" the peripheral and marginalized women in society (instead of "speaking from" their own point of departure) accounts for the great concern with issues related to political economy, such as the alleviation of poverty, illiteracy and class struggle, as well as national independence. Egyptian feminists appear to be less daring in addressing inequalities and issues that primarily affect women, such as domestic violence. These differences can be understood by looking at the historical and political context that shaped the development of the women's movements in each country. Egyptian women activists have always had to align themselves with nationalist movements—first the anti-colonial, and later the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist struggles—and could not prioritize women's issues without being accused of imitating the West. The Turkish women's movement, on the other hand, benefited from notions of Turkish nationalism that were promoted in the Turkish Republic and that equated Turkish civilization with equality between men and women.

It becomes obvious that Turkey emerges as a unique case in the Middle East, since in recent history the country has not experienced colonization. Consequently, as Kandiyoti put it, "the dilemma of the emancipation of women in Islam has not presented itself quite in the same way as it is in those countries that were former colonies" (Kandiyoti, 1987:321). This is particularly crucial since colonizers, such as the British in Egypt, took it upon themselves to promote the improvement of women's position. The somewhat paternalistic and patronizing defence of "Muslim women" led to a situation whereby women's dress codes, behaviour and roles have become measures of authenticity and independence on one hand, and concessions toward and imitations

of the West on the other. As a consequence, the women's movement's space for discourse and its political space has been subject to considerable limits in Egypt up to the present day.

There exist obvious similarities between Nasser's and Ataturk's policies toward women, namely the imposition of reforms in the framework of modernization efforts. Both regimes promoted women's rights and equality in the public realm of education, work, as well as political participation, while women's rights in the so-called private sphere of the family remained a taboo subject. Yet, an important difference between the two regimes was their respective attitude toward and relation to Islam, which in turn shapes the current women's movements. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk explicitly equated modernization with Westernization and the rejection of religion. But even the emerging "original Turkish civilization" theory developed by Gökalp that was mentioned earlier separated Turkish nationalism from Islam (see Kandiyoti, 1989). The Arab nationalism promoted by Gamal Abdel Nasser, though to some extent involving secularization, never promoted such a separation from the majority religion and cultural framework.

The need to look beyond the commonly acknowledged idea that feminism and nationalism are intertwined in the Middle East is clearly demonstrated when comparing the cases of Turkey and Egypt. What also has to be underlined is the fact that a close analysis of any given women's movement reveals considerable heterogeneity within the boundaries of one country, although these movements are similar in terms of their class backgrounds. Aside from relative levels of independence and freedom of action, women's groups and organizations in the Middle East vary with respect to their political orientation, their national and international affiliations, the terrain of their political engagement, and the size of their membership. Within the groups, individual members differ in terms of their personal and political motives for becoming actively engaged, their ideological backgrounds and orientations, their proclaimed aims, and their actual engagement in activities.

The heterogeneity of women's organizations and groups in a specific country raises the question as to whether the often disparate forms of action could be subsumed under the label "movement". Some movements are certainly more easily identifiable as collective action than others. However, agreeing with Molyneux's analysis (1998), I would argue that the number of women's groups and networks, as well as individual activists, in many Middle Eastern countries, as for example Egypt and Turkey, do in fact amount to a women's movement. Moreover, the disparity and fragmentation of the women's movement (in Egypt more so than Turkey), reflects the characteristics of many new social movements, such as those for human rights or the environment.

As the comparison between the Turkish and the Egyptian case has shown, the role played by international constituencies can be overridden by conservative forces within. Women's activism all over the Middle East—and this also holds true for Turkey—is taking place in a climate in which women have been the centre of, and most vulnerable to, the "cultural reconstructions" of Islamist discourses, in both their moderate and extremist forms. The notion of women as "bearers of authentic values" has been a powerful force in many national and ethnic processes, (Kandiyoti, 1991b), and holds in all Middle Eastern countries. However, the perception of

women as bearers of authentic values is not only significant in Islamist discourses, but also in discourses of secular nationalists and leftists.

On the basis of examples from Egypt and Turkey, one can conclude that women's movements in the Middle East are challenged to work with or through state structures, which at times are conducive to and at other times impede women's activism. Women's movements fluctuate between adherence to and opposition to existing structures, occasionally trying to manoeuvre and expand political spaces but rarely rejecting the system in its totality. A "residual acceptance of what the system offers and the reorientation of prevailing structures and discourses" (Arat, 1998:31) seem to be the strategy followed by Turkish and Egyptian women alike. It is in the process of continually shifting between confrontation and co-operation with the state, as well as national and international political constituencies, that women's movements could potentially emerge as a force for democratization in the contemporary Middle East, and for the improvement and consolidation of women's rights.

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