

# Egyptian Women in Perspective: Rights or Practice?

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## Foreword

The rights of Egyptian women as Muslims have been cast in the midst of international currents in the context of the increasing concern with gender issues, discussed but mostly criticized. However, any understanding of these rights cannot be separated from the cultural milieu. Islam is the dominant religion in the Arab region and, as such, cultural dynamics are, for the most part, attributed to its practices. To be understood correctly, Islam is a way of life, a comprehensive, all-inclusive religion that encompasses all aspects of the individual's life. It clearly spells out all rights and duties of Muslims. In this context, women's rights are explicitly stated. The fact remains, however, that the actual practice of these rights may reflect a discrepancy between theory and practice. The resulting situation is one where the components of Muslim culture in general, and women's rights in particular, represent a negative image highly tainted by a widely accepted misconception of the religion, especially as the media tend to blow out of proportion any negative cultural aspect and falsely blame it on Islam.

Moreover, the Egyptian constitution guarantees equality for all citizens, therefore

clearly rejecting any discrimination on the basis of gender, among other factors. Data, however, reveals the predominance of males on different levels and in different aspects – e.g., education, employment and political participation.

In this article, I will try to address the rights of Egyptian women as given by both religion and law, also revealing the discrepancy in this respect as it appears in actual practice. It must be remembered that such discrepancy cannot be generalized to include all women. Neither can it be extended to cover the whole Muslim culture.

The fact is that elements of Middle Eastern male-dominated culture tend to prevail, hence affecting gender relations, and as such allow men at certain times to enjoy the privileges granted them by religion, while ignoring those granted to women. Again it must be asserted that this situation is not the rule but it is likely to happen.

This article is not meant to defend Islam, but rather to clarify common misconceptions that have been circulating/escalating, especially in more recent years. The ongoing violence undertaken by a minority of Muslims, clearly condemned by most followers of the faith, has served to augment the negative image attributed to Islam.

## Rights versus Practice: The Discrepancy

### Ownership

Islam guarantees the woman the right to own property, as well as take care of it, independently of any other member of the family. As a single, married, divorced or widowed woman, her property is exclusively hers, with no requirements of communal/conjugal ownership. The law clearly stipulates this right, as well as the right to inheritance. Thus, it is common practice for Egyptian women, like all other Muslim women, to keep their maiden names after marriage, indicating their separate public and legal identity. The other side of the picture reveals the cultural image of the woman as the weaker sex, unqualified to handle financial matters properly, thus necessitating the interference/control imposed by a male family member.

### Education

As a worldly religion that addresses practical worldly matters, Islam guarantees women the right to education. So does the Egyptian constitution when it explicitly emphasizes equality of all citizens in all spheres of life. Egyptian women have been enjoying this right going back to earlier times, but the real impetus came with the changing ideology of the fifties when new socialist measures were introduced. The education system was free of tuition fees, hence leading to its wide expansion among all citizens and at all levels, women included. The number of women in education has therefore been on the rise.

The fact remains, however, that there still exists a gender gap in education where males dominate. This gap can be seen in the higher illiteracy rate among women, as well as in the higher numbers of males enrolled at all educational levels when compared to those of females. The UNDP Human Development Report for the year 2005 shows the rate of adult

literacy for females aged 15+ as 43.6% in comparison to 67.2% for males of the same age group. In addition, the combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment rate is 72 and 80 respectively.

An attempt at understanding the above situation can best be made through the cultural dynamics in society, where gender roles are clearly delineated, creating a privileged status for males, as mentioned above. Gender role socialization tends to enhance this gap. A girl is raised first and foremost in her role as housewife and mother, at the same time that socialization of males asserts their role as breadwinners, hence male preference to the right to education. Religion in no way acts as a barrier in this respect.

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Even in the case of dropouts, the gender factor is in play. When females drop out of school, the reason here is, for the most part, domestic. They usually get married. In some cases, they take over the responsibility of performing household chores or looking after siblings. In other cases, they may be sent out to work if they belong to the poor segment, mostly in domestic labour, in order to help support the family.

There are regional variations in the gender role differentiation with respect to education. There is an urban-rural disparity, where the latter subculture is more conservative leading to stronger emphasis on traditional elements, hence a more rigid disparity in gender differentiation. In addition, upper Egyptian culture includes the most rigid traditional practices, especially those pertaining to women. The relationship between poverty and female education involves another dimension of even greater significance. Families living



in conditions of poverty practice an obvious bias in favour of male education. When and if they have the opportunity to send their children to school and are forced to make a choice between their offspring, selection goes in favour of males.

### Employment

The logical sequence of expansion in female education is their access to employment opportunities. Traditionally and historically women were restricted to stereotypically female jobs like teachers and nurses. A wider scope in education has opened up new occupational prospects. Consequently, the number of women in the labour market has increased, covering all occupational fields. One significant variable leading to the wider access of women in the labour market is the support of the legislative system guaranteeing their equality in both employment opportunities and wages. In addition, there is a very strong

work ethic in Islam that does not differentiate between men and women. The history of the early Islamic era is full of examples of women engaged in various economic activities.

The discrepancy between the Islamic support of female employment coupled with the legislative base and the actual situation of women in employment can be seen in the lower representation of women in the labour force when compared to men. Female representation in the labour force is only 23.9%. It must be mentioned in this respect that a significant proportion of women is outside the formal labour market, as seen in their high representation in the informal labour sector. This sector is highly congested with women, since they are relatively lower in qualifications when compared to men for reasons mentioned above, hence their recruitment in informal labour. Here there are no guarantees as to wages, hours, social security, environment, or any other labour rights/privileges. Women are also highly represented in unpaid labour, including agriculture. The under representation of women in employment is, undoubtedly, a cultural factor, where preference in the male mentality is to confine the woman to the household milieu.

### Political Participation

The political participation of women is yet another aspect that emerges when addressing gender issues. As it is the case with other rights, there are neither religious nor legal barriers in this respect. The actual situation, however, reflects a low political participation of women, whether as voters, candidates or in legislative bodies. The cultural image of the public life figure is male-defined. If political rights have been gained by women after a long, tedious struggle, this image still dominates. Currently, only four (4) women were able to make it to parliament in the last elections, having barely

succeeded in winning enough votes for the position.

### Marriage

The marital rights of women acknowledge not only their independence will but also more so their identity as fully-fledged partners in the relationship. For Islam, marriage is an institution of great sanctity. It signifies a permanent and sacred relationship. The religion also clearly spells out the rights and duties of all family members, emphasizing the respect of husband and wife for each other. In short, Islam advocates “holy matrimony”. The woman has to give her consent to the marriage. Otherwise, the relationship is not religiously validated. The fact that some Islamic societies force girls into marriage is a clear violation of religious requirements, and is, in most cases, dictated by cultural factors.

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As a worldly religion, Islam allows divorce. This is one aspect of family matters that has been subjected to much criticism as discriminatory against women and even abusive at times. The reason for this attitude is because divorce procedures may not take place in conformity with the Islamic doctrine. The words of Islam consider divorce “the most hateful privilege granted to man by God”. As such, it should be the last resort after the couple has exhausted all possible ways and means to make the marriage work. If all attempts fail, divorce is the solution, but guaranteeing rights of all involved parties, especially women and children, here the vulnerable groups.

Upon divorce, the woman is entitled to a lump sum of money, which is a delayed in-

stalment of what she gets upon marriage, and which is separate from the maintenance designated for the first year after divorce takes place. First priority in child custody is for the mother until the age of puberty, while child support is the father’s responsibility.

Although the Egyptian Law of Personal Status is codified on the basis of Islamic doctrine, its actual enforcement may include gaps, and accordingly the implementation of the different items may reflect a male bias. If many divorce cases are settled on the basis of the above stipulations, any others may include negotiations, bargaining and, more importantly, possibilities of male exploitation/abuse. It is such cases that are usually blown out of proportion by the media and, as such, used as a blatant attack on Islam.

Attempts have been made to modify the Law of Personal Status in order to avoid the possible gaps/loopholes in its implementation, as well as to facilitate the lengthy, complicated divorce procedures and especially custody matters.

### Excision of the Clitoris

Among the negative practices falsely blamed on Islam is that of female circumcision, also known as excision of the clitoris. The non-Muslim world considers the religion barbaric, cruel, inhumane, and involving a clear violation of human rights for requiring females to undergo this act of violence. In reality Islam is *innocent* of this accusation. This ritual is clearly and undeniably an African practice, which is part and parcel of the strong, rigid cultural values pertaining to female behaviour, focusing on their chastity. It is an African *rite of passage*. In fact, the Arabic word for it means “purification” referring to female sexual purity. The idea behind the practice is to reduce the woman’s sexual desire, thus protecting her virginity, which is highly valued culturally.

Evidence in defence of Islam is the fact that it is practised by both Muslims and Christians in Egypt. An intensive study conducted by the writer for The World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that the ritual is practiced by Muslims, Christians, Jews, and even pagans in Africa, hence its cultural character.

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Attempts at the government level are being intensified to ban the practice, at the same time channelling similarly intensive awareness-raising campaigns in this direction, especially in the media.

## A Final Word

This article has attempted to shed light on the rights of women in Egypt, as they are caught between religious and legal guarantees on the one hand and the actual practice on the other. Egyptian society has been shaped by a multi-

tude of variables, each of which has had an impact on the culture. The sequence of historical events, both external and internal, has created a society where Islam reigns supreme. However, stronger forces are in action, as represented by the traditional backbone in a male-dominated society. The dialectic between Islam and culture continues, and women are caught in the midst of this dilemma. Moreover, the legal system acts as another variable in this drama, attempting to maintain/protect the practice of the given rights, as well as to guarantee against violation.

Serious attempts are being made to emphasize the interpretation of the Islamic doctrine with modern life since it is in the essence of the religion that it is applicable to all times and places. In this way, no reactionary cultural dynamics can deny women their legitimate rights, whether religious or legal. Egyptian women are now in all fields of education; holding all positions in the labour force, even as decision-makers; and running for elections for political bodies. If there are rare situations that involve discrimination, or even abuse, the fact remains that they do not represent the norm.



Claudio Bravo, *Summer Evening* (1987).