

INTRODUCTION

SPEAKING SEVERAL YEARS AGO at a conference about the decline of secularism in Egypt, a prominent member of Egypt's supreme constitutional court delivered a talk entitled "The Egyptian Judiciary Between Secularism and Islamization." He touched on topics ranging from court challenges aimed at making Egypt's largely secular body of law more in line with Islamic *shari'a* to the politicization of the lawyers' syndicate, and then he turned to a less predictable subject: women's fashion. Reminiscing fondly about his days as a young lawyer in the years following Egypt's 1952 revolution, he said, "Egypt was a different place. Women were very elegantly dressed, more fashionable, more Westernized. On the streets of Cairo you saw them all the time wearing short dresses, short skirts." He went on to mention the various gains Egyptian women had made over the course of the last half century—in the labor market, in education, in how social practices had changed to favor marriages between men and women on the basis of affection and compatibility rather than familial arrangements—gains that stood to be rolled back by the sweeping Islamization of Egyptian society and the increasing strength of Islamist political forces. "Now," he said, referring to the proliferation of *hijab* (the religiously prescribed head covering often translated into English as "veil") among young, educated urban women, "the streets of Cairo look very different."

The evocation of the chicly dressed, Westernized woman in the miniskirt might seem somehow out of place in a talk about the Egyptian judiciary and the legal challenges it faces in an age of globalization and Islamic resurgence. However, as Egypt's secular past has increasingly become a site of political

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contestation over the country's future, the gendered aspects of that past remain a crucial focal point of present debate. Whether among establishment intellectuals and cultural brokers longing for a more secular past in which modernity was a collective national project and women were liberated from the strictures of tradition and backwardness, or from Islamists who view the consolidation of the secular nation-state as a wrong turn on the way to the construction of a more authentically Islamic society, the figure of the Egyptian woman remains a potent symbol for engaging wider political and social changes that occurred over the last half of the twentieth century. The wider questions that animate this study are thus as much a product of the present moment as they are historical and theoretical preoccupations.

How do the gendered political and social orders put in place with the establishment of postcolonial nation-states change as nation-states themselves respond to changing political and social forces? How has the framing of "the woman question" by various social and political actors limited, or enabled, the sorts of claims women themselves could make for inclusion? What are the linkages between secular nationalist projects—like that pursued by the Gamal Abdel Nasser regime in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s—and the seemingly diametrically opposed gender politics of Islamism?

Focusing on various social, political, and cultural projects aimed at transforming women, as historical individuals, into "the Egyptian woman," as national subject, this book explores the interrelated attempts of political elites to fashion a new nation-state and a "new" yet authentically Egyptian womanhood during a particularly formative and turbulent era of modern Egyptian history. The period following 1923 witnessed Egypt's nominal (and later actual) independence from its British colonial overlords, the birth of mass politics (and mass culture), a revolution that overturned the existing political and social order, the rise of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser as a global symbol of the struggle against colonial domination and oppression, the genesis of "the Arab dream" of Pan-Arabism and socialism, and finally the devastating shattering of that dream by Israeli forces in 1967. My central aim is to chronicle how postindependence political and social projects, which were increasingly inclusive of women as political subjects, also produced new sorts of gendered and classed hierarchies exclusive to the process of forging a particularly Egyptian vision of modernity.

In order to do that, this study begins with the interwar period and then moves rapidly to its primary topic of concern: the emergence in the wake of the 1952 revolution of new discourses and practices of citizenship, which Mervat

Hatem has termed elsewhere “state feminism.”¹ State feminism entailed the recognition of women as enfranchised citizens and the explicit commitment by the Nasser regime to liberate women in order to guarantee their inclusion and participation in the postrevolutionary nation on an equal footing with men. Through laws, social programs, and the creation of new institutions that redrew the parameters of the public, state feminism aimed to make women into modern political subjects by dismantling traditional patriarchal structures in the family, creating new gender subjectivities, and mobilizing them in the service of national development.

Such measures were part and parcel of wider state attempts at reform and modernization. Over the course of the nineteen years of Nasser’s rule, the revolutionary regime embarked on an ambitious program of political and social reform that included rural land redistribution, the nationalization of foreign companies, and eventually the creation of a distinctly Arab Socialist state. These measures were orchestrated by a newly hegemonic state elite of middle-class technocrats, planners, and professionals who drew inspiration from a proliferation of other non-Western socialist models of modernization. Egyptian socialist planning aimed at eradicating the “backwardness” of the nation and creating a modern citizenry capable of carrying out a program of national advancement.

“The woman question” (debates about gender roles in the family and society), long a preoccupation of nationalist reformers, was taken up by state elites in this new, future-oriented, decolonizing world where the liberation of women, like modernization itself, appeared not only as a goal but as a historical inevitability. The promises of the revolution were embodied in glossy photos appearing in newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and state-authored pamphlets of “the Egyptian woman” working in factories and offices, going to school, waiting to obtain birth control from state family planning clinics, and presiding over her kitchen, which featured the latest in Egyptian-manufactured domestic appliances. Nor was the role that women were to play purely symbolic. For the first time, the state exhorted women to assume their role in building a modern Egyptian nation as fully enfranchised citizens and national subjects. In 1956 women were granted the right to vote and hold public office; subsequent measures abolished formal gender discrimination in hiring, established social protections for working mothers, and guaranteed women’s equal access to higher education. Later as the regime gradually adopted the ideology of Arab Socialism, focus shifted from issues of formal rights to the social and material contributions Egyptian women were expected to make

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to modernization and state-building. Women thus emerged as both symbols and beneficiaries of a new and vibrant revolutionary culture.

WHY GENDER?

The gendered aspects of Nasserist state- and nation-building, which this book takes as a central concern, have been largely overlooked by scholars. Although the literature exploring various aspects of the Nasser period is vast, more than fifty years after the revolution not a single monograph has taken the gender politics of Nasserist rule as its central focus. Most historical accounts of the Nasser period have been confined to studies of political economy or of the formal politics of the Nasser era: foreign affairs, the adoption of a one-party system, the rule of the military, and the relationship of the regime to various oppositional political movements and corporatist groupings.² When studies have dealt with women, they have mainly focused quantitatively on such issues as entry into the labor force and the participation of women in the public sector, but have largely failed to consider the regime's attempts to restructure gender relations as significant to its vision of development.

In fact, most scholars have assumed that with the consolidation of military rule and the imposition of a one-party system, politics ceased to occur at all but the highest levels of government within the framework of the state, understood as a set of legal institutions set apart from Egyptian society. What such studies leave out are the countless struggles to define the content and meaning of the Nasserist project that occurred in other arenas. It is not simply that these arenas—those of culture, of social relations, of the family, and of everyday practices—provided the terrain upon which ordinary Egyptian citizens negotiated the politics of the revolution. They were, as well, important areas of concern to the historical actors—intellectuals, policy makers, technocrats, and culture producers—who by virtue of their emerging status as state elites were most responsible for defining and implementing a vision of what post-revolutionary Egypt was meant to look like.³

By foregrounding the politics of gender, *Revolutionary Womanhood* aims to refocus attention on the relatively neglected social and cultural aspects of Nasser's revolutionary project, locating them as central to the formation of the seemingly more important arenas of state and public. The "politics of gender" as I use it here has two mutually interactive aspects: the uses to which gender is put in the process of organizing, legitimating, and attacking political (and other forms of) power; and the multifarious struggles by which gender

is continually constructed. Gender is a social construction; it refers to the social meanings constructed upon anatomical differences. Gender ideologies work to legitimate social inequalities between men and women; but gender also serves as a reference in the conceptualization and legitimation of other kinds of power. Thus the politics of gender do not exist in a vacuum: they are constitutive of (and constituted by) other political claims, narratives, and frameworks.⁴

STATE-BUILDING AND THE POLITICS OF MODERNITY

In its attempts to write gender back into accounts of Nasserist rule, this study locates itself within an expanding body of literature within Middle Eastern women's and gender studies that problematizes the multifaceted ways that gender identity formation shaped (and was shaped by) modern state- and nation-building.⁵ *Revolutionary Womanhood* shares with this scholarship the epistemological viewpoint that women of the region should be studied, not ahistorically in terms of a monolithic vision of Islam and Islamic culture, but through highlighting the construction and reproduction of gender inequalities inherent in the incorporation of national and ethnic collectivities into modern nation-states.⁶

To approach a study of gender in modern Egyptian history in this way is ultimately to call into question how the assumptions of modernization theory have informed both academic and popular discourses on Middle Eastern women. Modernization narratives take the axiomatic position that—in contrast to “traditional Islamic” societies, which suffer from religiously derived patterns of systemic and pervasive gender inequality—newly Westernized or modernized societies, whether indigenously inspired or imposed upon from the outside by colonization, produce new sources of openness, emancipation, and possibilities for women.⁷

The tenets of modernization theory have been particularly prevalent in accounts of Egyptian women in the post-1952 period, when the state granted women equal citizenship rights with men, including the right to work, the right to education, and the right to vote—in other words, the right to participate in the public space of the nation and its politics. Emancipated within this modern public sphere, where the rights of all individuals regardless of gender are recognized, Egyptian women in this period have been portrayed as continuing to be oppressed by the premodern Islamic and tribal values and structures that govern the private space of the family and that recognize men

and women, not as equal individuals but as essentially different, unequal beings. Confined to the home and traditional gender roles, women in the Nasser period have been assumed to be quite marginal to the male world of public politics.⁸

This is not the only story that scholars and others have told about women during the Nasser period, however. The other is a more triumphant story, one in which debates about the status of women in Egyptian society are seen to disappear as Egypt became more modern under the Nasser regime. In such nationalist histories (nationalist in the sense that the progress of women parallels that of the nation itself), the Egyptian state is portrayed as an agent of women's emancipation; by awarding legal rights to women, the Nasser regime is seen as having settled the vexing question of women's public participation consistently with the dictates of a modern world.⁹ Remaining gender inequalities, in both of these arguments, can then only be the product of traditional male privilege in the private sphere, which has failed to give way to the emancipatory forces of modernization and development.¹⁰ More fundamentally, however, what these diametrically opposed pictures of women during the Nasser period share is an unproblematized understanding of modernity as a universal teleology against which the progress of any given society can be objectively measured.¹¹

Alternatively, this study suggests we must look more skeptically at the varied effects that state modernization projects have had on women's empowerment, as well as interrogate more critically the claims that are made on their behalf.¹² Like Lila Abu-Lughod's volume that explores projects of "remaking women" in the Middle East over the last century, I ask "how modernity—as a condition—might not be what it purports to be or tells itself, in the language of enlightenment and progress, it is."¹³

Such an epistemological critique of modernity is central to framing this study of gender and Nasserist state-building. In arguing that the Nasser regime's attempts to "liberate" women brought novel forms of state intervention into women's lives as well as new notions of equal rights—which were contingent upon gender-specific obligations that women were expected to meet as proper national subjects and citizens—*Revolutionary Womanhood* explores what Abu-Lughod terms "the politics of modernity," namely, how new ideas and practices, identified as "modern" and progressive and implanted in European colonies or simply taken up by emerging local elites, ushered in not only new forms of emancipation but also new forms of social control and coercive

norms.¹⁴ In revolutionary Egypt one of the key sites where the politics of gender met the politics of modernity was state feminism.

WHY FEMINISM?

Expanding on the work of Mervat Hatem, I understand state feminism not just as a policy or series of policies, but as a constellation of normalizing discourses, practices, legal measures, and state-building programs aimed at making women into modern political subjects. Such a definition unites various initiatives and projects that seem quite divergent in their aims. Some, like the legal protections and social policies established to encourage female participation in the labor force, were explicitly couched as necessary for women's empowerment. Others, such as the establishment of a family planning program, subordinated discourses of female empowerment to the developmentalist discourses that characterized the regime's state-building measures. Still other issues, such as the dress and comportment of female civil servants, remained largely outside the purview of official state policy but were nevertheless a critical site for defining and negotiating the contours of a Nasserist public sphere. What they had in common was a normative vision of female "liberation" as necessary to the task of building a modern, independent nation capable of overcoming the debilitating legacies of colonial and monarchical rule.

In light of studies that have traced the history of feminism in Egypt, applying the term "feminist" to Nasserist state- and nation-building would seem to have a certain irony. According to many of the scholars who have ably charted the history of Egyptian women's movements in the first half of the twentieth century, the advent of the revolution signaled the beginning of the end of independent feminist politics in Egypt, at least until the 1970s when the greater openness of the Sadat era marked a reemergence of "competing discourses" on women, gender, and feminism.¹⁵ For many politically active women, the revolution represented a new hope that long-standing political and social grievances could be rectified. Following the Second World War, the political crises and social displacements that characterized the period brought the entrance of new actors and social movements to the political arena. Among the Islamists, trade unionists, populist reformers, student organizers, communists, and others who crowded the postwar Egyptian political scene was a new generation of women activists who built on a rich tradition of feminist activism from the first part of the century to make new claims for rights, inclusion,

and citizenship. The abolition of the monarchy, the resolutely anti-British and anti-imperialist stance of the Free Officers, as well as the revolutionary regime's promise to end the three ills—poverty, ignorance, and disease—which had plagued the Egyptian nation throughout its colonial and immediately postcolonial past, caused many to support the new order as a means to abolishing the power of a corrupt ancient regime, achieving social justice for the poor and the marginalized, and ending the continued vestiges of British colonial control and interference. In its first decade, the revolutionary regime realized many of the demands of feminist activists, including the right to vote and the right to run for and hold public office, in 1956, and the passage of extensive labor protections for female workers. The expansion of free public education gave tens of thousand of young Egyptian women access to secondary and higher education, and the expansion of the public sector brought increasing employment for female high school and university graduates.

The state's championing of gender issues, however, coincided with the suppression of dissenting voices and alternative visions. Egypt's multiparty system was abolished in 1954 in favor of a succession of mass, single-party organizations (the Liberation Rally, the National Union, and in the 1960s, the Arab Socialist Union) aimed at mobilizing support for the regime. The Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed in 1954 and much of its leadership jailed or executed over the course of the next decade, as were many Marxist activists. Prominent feminists, such as Duriyya Shafiq and Inji Aflatun, were incarcerated. Women's formerly independent social and charitable organizations, which had provided much of the basis for early activism, were placed under control of the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1964.

If we understand feminism to refer to a social movement authored by women for women, as most of these accounts have, then it is difficult to argue against the position that the Nasser era marks a profound rupture in Egyptian feminist politics. Certainly that's how some women who were politically active in the post-Second World War period experienced it.¹⁶ This study, however, argues for a more expansive definition of feminism. *Revolutionary Womanhood* views feminism not only as the speech of women but as "a system of ideas . . . a particular constellation of political practices . . . tied to a particular history—of capitalism, of personhood, political and legal arrangements" that were international in origin but local in iteration.¹⁷ It acknowledges that Egyptian feminism, like other postcolonial feminisms, rested on highly complex historical and epistemological preconditions that included disparate elements

which were not themselves “feminist” (in the sense of being self-authored prescriptions for, as Margot Badran has put it, “evol[ing] a more equitable gender system involving new roles for women and new relations between women and men”).¹⁸ Framing feminism as a historical narrative about how Egyptian women developed their own (local) national feminism has had the benefit of stressing women’s agency and has successfully challenged politicized assertions that Egyptian feminism (or particular articulations of it) are somehow culturally “inauthentic” to Muslim societies or merely derivative of Western feminist projects.

And yet, any story of the emergence of the woman question in Egypt (and the Middle East more generally) and its varied and complex legacies cannot afford to overlook the entanglements between local, national, and transnational forces, in which colonialism, nationalism, visions of modernity, the emergence of new regimes of power and regulatory institutions, and class consolidation intersected in complex ways to constitute “the Egyptian woman” as an imagined political subject. The “colonial feminism” (as Leila Ahmed has termed it) of Lord Cromer—the British consul general in Egypt in the early years of the twentieth century, whose claims that British tutelage would rescue Egyptian women from oppressive Islamic practices such as veiling—legitimized British imperial rule, the endeavors of local women activists like Huda Sha’rawi (whose pioneering activities in social service provision were predicated on the assertion that the empowerment of Egyptian women was an integral part of the Egyptian national project following independence in 1923), and the later attempts of Nasser era technocrats to create modern families by instituting a national family planning policy; all of these projects would appear, at first glance, to have little in common.¹⁹ They were shaped by political and social forces that occurred at distinct historical moments; they envisioned different outcomes and possible political futures for Egypt; and they differed in the forms of power and authority they legitimized. These differences shouldn’t be minimized. Despite their differences, however, such projects shared a normative conception of Egyptian womanhood (however defined) as the key to social and political transformations that overflowed the boundaries of the woman question narrowly posed. Egyptian feminism, as Tani Barlow has argued for the case of China, “was already other things as well.”²⁰

Using such a broad understanding of feminism and applying it to Egyptian postrevolutionary state- and nation-building projects has a number of

advantages. It allows for a more nuanced understanding of the motives, reactions, and responses of the women who were among the architects and advocates of the policies, discourses, and practices, as well as the objects, of state feminism. It helps to call into question the universalizing claims feminism makes for itself by insisting on the historical and social specificities of Egyptian projects that foreground “woman” as a foundational category. Finally it helps to situate state feminism within the context of other projects of “remaking women” in Egypt, the Middle East, and other parts of the postcolonial world.

This historically situated approach to categories, which informs the entirety of this work, also necessitates a brief disclaimer, as it marks this study’s difference from much of the work already done on the 1952 revolution and its aftermath. Two of the questions that have preoccupied Nasser period historians are the extent to which the revolution was actually “revolutionary,” and whether Arab Socialism was in fact socialist in form, content, or intention. These are not unimportant questions. The intention of this study, however, is not to assess whether or to what degree the Nasser regime was truly, objectively socialist as defined against some ideal type, nor to simply weigh in on the extent to which 1952 was actually a “revolution.” Rather, it tries to understand how concepts like “nationalism,” “revolution,” and “Arab Socialism” were defined and enacted by state elites during this period, and how visions of womanhood became central to such definitions. What sort of political and ideological work did such labels perform? What was the nature of the changes (or continuities) they legitimated?

Like many other projects of social and political transformation that had preceded it, state feminism was a project that embodied the aspirations, desires, and normative assumptions of a professional urban middle class (*effendiyya*) and often targeted urban working-class and rural women as objects of intervention. Over the course of the 1950s, members of the *effendiyya* came to provide the bulk of the middle and upper ranks within the public sector, which by the early 1960s included not only agencies dealing with social service provision but also the press, the cinema, and publishing. They were journalists, writers, culture producers, social scientists, engineers, medical personnel, and policy makers who had benefited from the prerevolutionary expansion of education and the postrevolutionary expansion of the civil service. They belonged to an emergent and increasingly powerful state elite who, as Roel Meijer has argued, derived their authority and influence from their claims to be agents of modernization.²¹