

Women's Movements in the Middle East: Case Studies of Egypt and Turkey

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Abstract

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 within overarching broad general themes, as becomes obvious in the context of two case studies - Egypt and Turkey – which are explored in this report.

The analyses of the women's movements in Egypt and Turkey respectively entail a brief exploration of the historical context, i.e. 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 our understanding of present-day women's movements in the region. The fact that Turkey, unlike Egypt, has never been colonized is coupled with 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 differs 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 within the general strive for 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 towards women's organizations, the growth of civil society and its severe restrictions (Law 32), the role of the international arena, particularly donor organizations, as well the increasing influence of Islamist constituencies. In the Turkish case, the women's movement has been able to work much more closely through the existing state structures and institutions, particularly the municipalities. The polarization between Islamist and secular constituencies, struggles for democratization and institutionalization of feminist activities, as well as debates about the Kemalist legacy, appear to particularly impact the Turkish women's movement.

The comparison between 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 of democratization processes, yet they are extremely constrained by prevailing social and political structures, lack of clear institutional targets and ambiguous state policies.

I. Introduction

This paper seeks to reflect on women's movements in the Middle East. Within the general context of the region, the case studies of Egypt and Turkey will illustrate two specific yet illustrative examples of some of the underlying issues, problems, debates and policies, which constitute the backdrop to contemporary women's activism. The two case studies also reveal that specific historical as well as current conditions shape women's movements and partly account for differences within the Middle East.

A critical discussion of the Middle East as a unit of analysis will be followed by a more specific analysis of similarities and diversities between women's movements in the region (section I). In section II, the Egyptian women's movement will be analysed in terms of its historical development and current political context, its constituent parts, goals and strategies. Specific attention will be given to both, the role of the Egyptian state as well as international constituencies in shaping and affecting the women's movement. A similar analysis will be carried out in section III in the context of the Turkish women's movement. This paper will conclude by comparing the two cases, which have been explored in greater detail and relating the emerging issues to the more general debates about women's movements in the region.

I. 1. Between Diversity and Similarity

II. 1. a) 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. Middle Eastern women and men live in cities, provincial towns and rural villages. Contrary to popular opinion, the Middle East is *not* a uniform and homogeneous region. There is no archetypal Middle Eastern woman either, but rather "women in the plural, inserted in quite diverse socio-economic and cultural arrangements" (Moghadam, 1993: 10).

Given this social and cultural fluidity and tremendous diversity, we have to be very careful before generalising 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 generalisation: "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" (1993: vii).

Many scholars have argued, however, that the diversity within 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 organisation, and much of the literature on women in the area still assumes an "Islamic culture" that has everything to do with gender. The Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatema Mernissi, for example, argues, in *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (1984) 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 her later work, Mernissi diverged from her earlier stipulations and now argues that Islam was largely distorted by male jurists who wished to attribute to Islam misogynist tendencies that the prophet Muhammad did not possess.

Whatever role one might want to ascribe to Islam in 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 among Sunni and Shi'a Muslims as well as other Muslim groupings, such as the Alawite minority in Turkey. Moreover, women belonging to religious minority groups, such as the Maronites in Lebanon, or the Copts in Egypt, for example, are generally exposed to very similar, if not the same, cultural and social codes and traditions as their Muslim counterparts of the same social class standing (Eickelmann, 1998).

Often traditions and customs are 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 among various countries in Africa, such as Sudan and Somalia, but is not practised in most Muslim countries (*ibid.*). Another often neglected point is the fact that religious stipulations are not only mediated by cultural codes but, in most cases, they are also interpreted by a male clergy.

Linked to the assumption of normative Islamic traditions and customs which are thought to exist all over the Middle East, maybe allowing a degree of local specificities, is the notion of strict sexual segregation 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 Lindisfarne (1994) critically argues, the notion of sexual segregation, which up to a certain 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 actually challenged the notion of 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: on the macro-level of the economy and the state as well as on the micro-level of the family. While his concept certainly glosses over the specificities of post-colonial 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" vs "modern" has been criticized and challenged on many grounds. The emergence of Islamist movements, for example, cannot be described as "being backward" and looking 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 much of 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 towards marriage, for example, which are based on "modern" notions of conjugal love and the nuclear family as ideal.

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

II. 2. Women's Movements

The oscillation between diversity and similarity also holds true for the study of 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 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 the one hand and the denunciation of feminist discourses and practices as being mimetic of the West on the other hand. Yet, as Kandiyoti points out, often ignored in these analyses is the politically contingent nature of the relationship between Islam and women's rights from the post-colonial state building era to the present (ibid: 21). This also holds true for the relationship between feminism and nationalism which 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 and relationships they had on women's movements. The analyses of the Egyptian and Turkish cases respectively will shed light on the distinct trajectories of nationalism and feminism and their subsequent and evolving relationships.

According to Mervat Hatem (1993), 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 of regime policies toward women led to the discrediting of these official women's organizations: "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, labor needs and/or the war economy in Iraq” (p. 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 political space, which has allowed the emergence of independent women’s organizations.

One factor which 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 (ibid.). This factor will become especially apparent in the context of the Egyptian women’s movement discussed below.

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 this 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, economic and political factors combined led to the establishment of women’s self-help groups which exist side by side with more politically or academically focussed women’s organizations. The Israeli occupation and its policies led to an alarming deterioration of the economy as well as the supply of key services (ibid.: 34). 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 women’s issues being secondary to national liberation.

What should have become clear at 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 of women’s movements in Egypt and Turkey will illustrate both, some of the underlying debates, issues and dilemmas of women’s movements in the region, as well as reveal significant variations among them.

III. The Women's Movement in Egypt¹

III. 1. The History of the Egyptian Women's Movement

Many studies dealing with the Egyptian women's movement begin their analysis with women's participation on 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 numerous women's journals published, as well as the mainstream press, encouraged debates on social issues such as education, the role of the family, women's work, women's rights, etc. The programs 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, 1994:13).

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: 31). Initially, male nationalists accepted women's nationalist activism (demonstrations, economic boycotts, etc.). However, "after 1919, when nationalist pressures emerged in the wake of promulgation of a constitution for Egypt women's political rights were not mentioned. Their equality with men was not discussed" (Philip, 1978: 278)

While feminist discourse and activism during the period of post-colonial 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

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: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

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 of women. It also promoted literacy programs, campaigned to improve cultural, health, and social services among the poor and enhance mother and childcare (Shafik, 1955:191). The campaign for women's political rights was linked to the campaign for social reforms (Khater and Nelson, 1988:470).

Within the atmosphere of general political radicalization², linked to harsh economic conditions after World War II and the obvious inadequacy of the monarchy in dealing with the political and economic instability, some women considered the Bint El-Nil Union as too bourgeois and conservative in its ideology and tactics. Women like Inji Aflatoun, Soraya Adham and Latifa Zayyad, who had adopted socialist or communist ideologies, saw the liberation of women as a narrower battle within 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, 1988).

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).

² The Palestinian national struggle mobilized pan-Arab concerns which shifted focus from the national level to an international arena. Between 1944-49, Egypt experienced 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 the establishment conservative-religious groups. A series of strikes took place within the broader movement of demands for social reform (Vatikiotis, 1969: 342-44). In addition, the re-emergence of the Communist party during the early years of World War II - although weakened by approximately two decades of underground dormancy - had a significant ideological impact on Egyptian society in the 1940's (Botman, 1987:17).

Zeinab al-Ghazali, who at first looked to Sha'rawi for leadership, left the EFU in 1936 to form the Muslim Women's Society. The fast-growing organization focussed mainly on welfare work and promoted the study of Islam among women. Its political objective was the implementation of the *shari'a*. 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, 1992:197).

It is during this period of the 1940's that the women's movement took in different directions: the aristocratic charity-oriented "ladies of the salon" affiliated with Princess Chevikar ; Doria Shafik's Bint El-Nil, a mixture between 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 to establish an organization of their own" (Nelson, 1996:165); as well as the welfare and Islamist-oriented "Muslim Women's Society" created by Zeinab Al-Gahzali.

The phase of militant and heterogenous feminist activism of the 1940's and first half of the 1950's was followed by a period of quiescence. Egyptian feminist activism receded under the rule of Gamal Abd Al-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 revised 1963 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: 232). 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: 210). 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 programs which introduce 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 accounted for the progressive nature 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 day care, 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, did not only provide 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: 238). While a number of women might have gained autonomy as a result of the migration of male household-heads, 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 which promoted women's return to the domesticity (Hatem, 1992).

Under the influence of the president's wife, Jehan Sadat, reforms to the Personal Status Law (governing marriage, divorce, custody, etc.) were proposed. The reformed law, labelled as "Jehan's Law", granted women legal rights in marriage, polygamy, divorce and child custody; it was implemented 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. Internally, the state anticipated that the reforms would encourage the growth of a secular coalition of men and women; internationally, it hoped to use the law as a form of public relations to improve its image as a step towards gaining increased political and economic support, especially from the United States (Hatem, 1992:242).

³ *Infitah* did not only constitute the declared economic policy of privatization, open market, but its *laissez faire* undertone also extended into the realm of the government, administration, migration, foreign policy etc (Ayubi, 1991:17). In other words, *infitah* did not exclusively refer to economic liberalization, but also entailed a neo-liberal reform of the state sector and a realignment of international alliances, i.e. an *rapprochement* with the United States.

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

However, during Sadat, much like under Nasser, women basically lacked independent representative organizations of their own and were dependent on the regime's particular needs. The beginning of the UN 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. 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 should be stressed is that throughout history, Egyptian women activists have been discredited by different constituencies by being labelled western agents of colonialism or imperialism. The debate over the intellectual origins of the Egyptian women's movement constitutes an ongoing controversy among contemporary Egyptian feminists. The debate entails several questions, which are significant for self-definitions and struggles for legitimacy among 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 stake today is the issue of 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 its very beginnings until the present day various constituencies opposed to the struggle for women's rights (Islamists as well as nationalist-leftists) have engaged in an evaluation of women activists with regard to their level of "authenticity" or "westernness". As elaborated in greater detail elsewhere (Al-Ali, 2000), it is these forces which continuously and successfully use the argument of "our indigenous culture" vs "western culture" every time gender relations and women's rights are addressed. The "culturalization" of political issues has become so naturalized in contemporary Egypt as in many other parts of the Arab world, that it seems very difficult to doubt the legitimacy of this practice and question its grounds.

III. 2. The Contemporary Context of the Egyptian Women's Movement

III. 2. a) The re-emergence 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 of the state's legitimacy, was amended due to strong opposition from the Islamists who perceived it to be anti-Islamic. The revised law abandons 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 which restored some of the benefits that the 1979 version had provided.⁵

⁵ By creating legal systems that more easily accommodated the conservative strands within the Islamic movement, the regime eliminated the sources of legal ambiguity through which women were able to manoeuvre in the area of personal status. At the

The increased confrontation with the Islamists over the implementation of the *shari'a* (Islamic law) pressured the Mubarak regime to legislate and implement more conservative laws and policies towards women and to diminish its support for women's political representation. While Islamist forces continue to constitute a powerful constituency of the contemporary Egyptian state⁶, there has been increasing demand on the Egyptian government to adhere to UN conventions concerning women's rights. Economic dependence on aid from the United States and international donor organizations (IMF 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".

The re-emergence of women's activism has mainly been linked to the continuing battle over the Personal Status Law and the taking up of formerly taboo issues such as contraception and clitoridectomy (Ahmed, 1992: 214). 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, argued that it 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 their submergence into 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 the one hand and Fathia Al-Assal, the head of the Progressive Women's Union, on the other (Khater, 1987:17). However, the narratives of several women activists involved in the coalition formed then, gives evidence of a much more broader spectrum and diversified movement than presented by Khater. The coalition called "The Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Woman and the Family" consisted of leftists, Nasserists, Wafdists, enlightened

same time, the High Court voided the law establishing reserved parliamentary seating for women on the grounds of "preferential treatment". This move implied the re-interpretation of the principle of gender equality as "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 establishments of 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 particularly effected women (Zaki, 1995).

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

Islamists, women from the Arab Lawyers' Union, AWSA and other interested individuals (Hijab, 1988:32). 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 (Summayya D., spring 1996; Al-Ali,2000).

The very act of forming an emergency coalition, when the constitutionality of the Personal Status Law was challenged in 1985, represents a break from prevalent nationalist- and liberal-modernist discourses within Egypt which "only focused on women's rights in the public sphere as part of creating new societies (Hatem, 1993: 42). In other words, the hitherto existing frameworks within which "women's issues" were discussed linked the struggle for women's rights with 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 within the "private" family sphere are not only ignored, but also considered as standing outside the legitimate struggle for women's rights. During the post-*infatih* period, these previously unchallenged premises on women's rights started to be challenged from various directions, even if they continue to constitute the most widespread interpretation of women's rights.

The quote by Summayya D. also sheds light on the debate about the frame of women's activism. The political experiences which gave birth to the attempt 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 did not only bring 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 within the Egyptian women's movement view the preparations for the 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 co-operation, which were limited to personal exchanges between women from different organizations or the exchange of publications. The *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 follow their own activities (Seif El-Dawla & Ibrahim, 1995: 115).

The preparations for the ICPD and the conference itself created space for many women activists 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. As Seif El-Dawla and Ibrahim describe the time of preparation for the conference:

Women started to become interested in subjects, which usually had not 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 re-emergence of a 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, Ibrahim, 1995: 115).

The feelings of hope and success before and during the ICPD in Cairo were soon shattered by a severe backlash triggered by the government, the Islamists and certain actors within the NGO movement. Whereas 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, the government and the nominated organizing committee for the International Women's Forum in Beijing, headed by Hoda Badran, put lots of emphasis on the legal definition of NGOs and on their registration at the Ministry of Social Affairs. This approach had the consequence of excluding groups like

⁸ Once a group finished its research during the preparations for the ICPD, the coordinator 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.

the New Woman's Research Centre, which had circumvented the law of association by registering as civic companies. The very location of the ICPD had 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 its 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 to no surprise then that the government's enthusiasm dwindled substantially in the aftermath of the conference. At the same time, women activists also suffered severe attacks by Islamists, who pressured the government to compromise on several issues, such as female genital mutilation, and thereby diverged from the expectations raised and promises made during the ICPD. During the ICPD, state officials proclaimed their commitment to ban FGM by law in the presence of the international community. 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 syndicate, Al-Azhar pressured the Ministry of Health to withdraw 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).

III. 2. b) The Law of Association

Despite Mubarak's official pro-democracy policy, repressive measures have not only been directed towards Islamic militant groups and communists, but also towards 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 subjected to the control of 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". Licenses 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. It was 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 - that the government banned AWSA. Nawal El-Sa'dawi had been very outspoken against the war and the Egyptian government's position on it. The influence of state power on civil society organizations through the Ministry of Social Affairs and the apparent randomness with which organizations are allowed to operate, is has been restrained by the international arena which has largely contributed to the professionalization of the traditional voluntary sector (Al-Ali, 2000).

Several women's groups have preferred to circumvent Law 32 and the danger of being dissolved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and registered with the Office of Property

and Accreditation as research centers or civic non-profit companies as opposed to private voluntary organizations (PVOs) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), thereby avoiding the control and restrictions set 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 “the Committee to Change the Law of Associations”. Its members include the Cairo branch of Amnesty International, the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights and the Legal Research and Resource Center for Human Rights (Sullivan, 1994: 35). One year prior to the ICPD, Egyptian NGOs experienced a breakthrough in their tension-ridden relation with the government as the latter recognized and supported an elected NGO 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 Beijing (ibid.).

Increasing opposition to the Law of Association, especially on the part of Egyptian civil 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 drafted bill by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The proposed bill did not meet hopes and expectations of Egyptian NGOs. However, the ministry engaged in a series of consultations with the NGO Forum which resulted in a agreed upon compromise on both sides. However, in spring of 1999 the Ministry of Social affairs sent a bill to the Egyptian People’s Assembly which starkly differed from the one agreed upon by both sides.

The bill, which passed within days, prohibits associations from carrying out any political activities, it increases the ministry’s power to control and intervene in Egypt’s civil society, and it restricts regional and international activities. According to a statement by a group of Egyptian NGOs, the law, when placed in the current political context, is “merely a reflection of the government’s general intention to further restrict any form of independent association, be it in political parties, unions, professional syndicates, or NGOs.” The newly passes law constitutes a severe blow to Egypt’s NGO movement in general and to the women’s movement in particular.

III. 3. Terrain of Egyptian Women’s Movement

The contemporary women’s movement in Egypt is extremely varied in terms 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; several women’s committees exist which are attached to political parties, professional organizations and human rights centres; and a number of individual women intellectuals work independently through their specific profession or are loosely affiliated with specific groups and might 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, exists on 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 I have discussed earlier. Others, like the New Woman, Together or the Daughter of the Land Group have circumvented the strict regulatory codes linked to 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 were initially mobilized around the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), while the founding members of the 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, to different degrees, involved 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, called ADEW and Appropriate Communications Techniques, called 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 variable as much as their specific understandings and interpretation of secularism (Al-Ali, forthcoming). A great range of positions and attitudes towards 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 towards secularism and religion, where younger women tend to be much more open to the idea of reinterpretation 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 voice within the mainstream Islamist discourse as well as criticize and challenge their male counterparts for misinterpreting Islam. The most celebrated women have remained ambiguous about what constitutes an adequate role of women within an envisioned Islamic state and society: 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. While Al-Ghazali and Qazim find no contradiction between women's public involvement (education and work)

and private lives within the family (wives and mothers), they have remained antagonistic to feminism (Badran, 1994: 209).

A new generation of Islamist women have been more outspoken and confrontational about 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 and author of the book, *Islam and Women's Issues*, stressed that she would spread her convictions through newspaper articles, in public lectures, TV programs and in lectures at Cairo University. 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's activist, is certainly the most outspoken in the call for 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 objective to change society from within in order to realize her vision of an Islamic state. *Ijtihad*, the re-interpretation 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 women's roles within the Islamic state (Karam, 1998). While Al-Ghazali and Qazim propagate 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 attributes a liberating potential for women within the realm of the family as well as promoting women's leadership within an envisioned Islamic *ummah*.

Different positions vis-à-vis the state and political parties cut across women working within secular and religious frameworks. Many secular-oriented women, similar to Rauf - yet for different reasons -, see the Egyptian state as essentially corrupt and as an impediment to their struggles. Others try to work within existing state structures, a strategy that has become particularly obvious in the various reactions towards 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.

III. 4. Goals and Activities of the Egyptian Women's Movement

Most of the goals and priorities of Egyptian women's movement are related to modernization and development discourses. 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 put previously taboo issues, such as women’s reproductive rights and violence against women, on the agenda.

The problem of violence against women has been one of the most controversial issues as it touches precisely the core of what has been side-tracked for so long: forms of oppression within the home, within the family. It comes to no surprise then that 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 relativize its significance by acknowledging the problem as such, 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, 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 within the women’s movement are translated into various projects: income generating projects and credit 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 certain issues and raise awareness about them; design and convey gender training packages among NGOs; the publication of books, magazines and journals; and the establishment of Women’s Media Watch.

In the context of the Egyptian women’s movement, the very term “activism” glosses over a variety of involvements and activities, which, if considered in isolation, are not all forms of “political activism”: charity and welfare, research, advocacy, consciousness-raising, lobbying and development. Certain forms of activity, such as research, might develop into more political engagements, such as advocacy or lobbying. Moreover, groups and individuals, at any given point of time, might be involved in different kind 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. The translation from raising certain issues, suggesting ramifications to actual implementations is impeded by both, the state’s ambiguity and lack of commitment and the women activists’ own failure to adequately retain momentum and display solidarity amongst each other. 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 blocks collective action. In some instances, it seems a legitimate question 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, feed into each other (ibid.).

Among Egyptian women activists the issue of universality vs 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

within the context of debates about “authenticity”, “indigenization of knowledge and activism” on the one hand, and the adherence to international conventions and transnational affiliations on the other. Like the controversy about foreign funding, the debate is partly triggered 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 processes of decolonization in which Egyptian political actors try to define their own agendas and aims (ibid.).

The way debates around the new marriage contract, female genital mutilation and violence against women developed in recent years make 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 which is inevitably caught between the demands of Islamist groups and pressures by the international community (ibid.).

III. 5. 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 where the government 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 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 on a project concerning “Women and Violence” did not only persist, but also seem to have maintained their momentum. These various issue-oriented networks actually typify a new organizational form in the history of the women’s movement in that they consist of associational linkages in which the various groups maintain their autonomy and, to some extent, acknowledge the differences amongst each other. 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 multi-fold, 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 are short-lived because they were more a response to “available 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 the one hand, it has created a situation where careerism could override political goals, which in turn augments 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 which has been reflected positively in the quality of various projects and publications of contemporary activists (ibid.).

Despite the fact that the struggle over resources presents an impediment to collective action and solidarity, and might also give leverage to foreign donor organizations to impose their agendas, it has been put to use productively and effectively by some groups and individuals to pursue their own goals and priorities. There exist lots of nuances in the debate about funding, including a complex ranking system between “good” and “bad” donors. Those organizations based in countries perceived to be politically less threatening, less imperialist and more progressive in their politics towards the Third World are labelled as “good”. Another feature of “good” funding agency as opposed to a “bad” one is the level of freedom or control they impose on the receiving organization. In other words, those funding agencies which 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.⁹

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give examples of the range of positions and debates around the issue of funding within the women’s movement. But what needs to be emphasised 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.

III. 7. The State and the Egyptian Women’s Movement

The state is not only 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 was paralleled by the continuous pressure women exerted on the Egyptian state to respond to their demands and needs (Hatem, 1992: 348). The Egyptian state poses a threat as well as offering resources to the women’s organizations.

A useful conceptualization has been put forward by Connell, who defines the state as embodying “gender regimes” and 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

⁹ On the scale of “good” and “bad” USAID ranges on the far side of “bad”. The Ford Foundation has improved its reputation in recent years and moved to the centre of the scale, together with UN-related organizations like UNICEF. The German GTZ is doing a bit better in its position towards “good”, while the Norwegian, Dutch and Danish funding agencies are certainly doing best.

dynamics are a major force constructing the state, both in the historical creation of state structures and in contemporary politics” (1990: 519). The state’s power to regulate and shape gender relations can work towards the consolidation of existing gender relations, but it also has the potential to unsettling the existing gender order through reforms (Connell, 1990: 529-531).

The ambiguities inherent in state policies have significant implications for feminist politics which has 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 within 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 which simultaneously reflect portrayals of women as “victims of social backwardness, icons of modernity or privileged bearers of cultural authenticity” (1994: 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) characterise 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, 1994: 388).

The fractured nature of the Egyptian post-colonial state, its changing policies under different regimes, its internal divisions as well as its links to international constituencies account for women activists’ shifting relation to the state. Women are affected in different ways: they are recipients of state policies (which could be either supportive or oppressive) and 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” (1990) provides a useful analytical tool to understand the changing and ambiguous relationship between the Egyptian women’s movement and the state. 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 the reformed 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 fall 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 Tellawi initially expressed her support, she later objected to a meeting by organizations working in "the field of women". Among the various reasons cited was that there was "no field of work or activity called the field of women". It remains to be seen how the Egyptian women's movement will strategize and 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.

IV. The Turkish Women's Movement

IV. 1. 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. (Aynur Demirdirek, 1998)

Analyses and interpretations of the history of the Turkish women's movement have to be viewed in 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 Ataturk after the establishment of the Turkish state in 1923. It is a widely shared view that the reforms associated with Ataturk presented a radical change 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" which brought about women's liberation, but also attempted to re-appropriate their own history by pointing to pre-Republican women's movements and activists. These studies give evidence to the fact that Turkish women began to struggle for their legal and human rights after the initiation of the modernization process of 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). In other words, Ottoman women were not merely oppressed, but educated women did organize and embraced every opportunity out speak out and challenge existing gender relations.

IV. 1. a) 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 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: 74). A wide range of demands relating to education, employment, marriage, and dress code paralleled demands of women’s movements around the world. However, while being supportive and impressed by the women’s suffrage movement in Europe, Ottoman women expressed the opinion that it was an untimely and inappropriate demand for themselves in light of more immediate and pressing issues (Demirdirek, 1998: 73).

Ottoman women’s demands were initially discussed in the framework of Islam, but later on women started to raise secular arguments as well. Many of these demands can be understood in the framework of the drive for “modernization” which can be traced to the Tanzimat period (1829-76). During this time, a dual legal system based on the combination of *shari’a* and European civil law juridicial systems did not affect the Islamic personal status code (regulating 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: 130).

The various writings of articles, editorials and commentaries, the establishment of women’s magazines, and the publication of the first novel written by a feminist was followed by the establishment of a number of women’s organisations between 1908 and 1920. These organisations differed in their approaches, goals and activities, ranging from charitable, 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: 75). After the collapse of the Ottoman army at the end of World War I and the occupation of Istanbul in 1918, women’s organisations constituted a considerable element of the “national liberation front”. There were 16 women’s organisations among the approximately 50 groups that were struggling for “the national cause”. Patriotic women’s organisations 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 World War I was accompanied by a crisis of Ottoman culture and political system which 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 modernisation vs. 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 experienced very little change for centuries needs to be questioned.

IV. 1. b) The Women's Position in the Kemalist Republic

Factors that favor 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. (Coşar, 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 for reform in women's status culminated into "state feminism" (**Durakbasa, 1998: 139) while others strongly doubt the terms appropriateness in the context of Kemalist reforms (Arat, 1994: 57). 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 permitted child custody rights to both parents (Kandiyoti, 1987: 321). Moreover, women were granted the right to vote and to be elected for Parliament. In 1934, they were constitutionally granted full citizenship rights.

Yet, only a relatively small number of women were able to use the rights granted to them by Ataturk while the vast majority of women were still tied to the land and under social control of men (**Cosar, 1978: 138). What needs to be stressed here is that Turkey, being a largely agrarian society, lacked both a sizable bourgeoisie and an industrial working class (Arat, 1994: 54).

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 to adhere to supposedly western values of discipline, orderliness and rationality within 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 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: 72). 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 Ataturk’s onslaught on the on the theological Ottoman state (Tekeli, 1981; in Kandiyoti, 1989: 127). Tekeli interprets the timing off the legislation on women’s suffrage in the 1930s as an important attempt by Ataturk 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” (quoted in Arat, 1998: 14).

In the frame 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 worlds and the Ottoman Empire (***Durakbasa, 1998: 141). It comes to 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 analyzing and comparing the Turkish women’s movement to other women’s movements in the region.

IV. 2. a) The Contemporary Context

Ironically, the coup d'état in 1960 is often described 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: 17). The emergence of new and ideologically distinct groups seriously challenged the state's ability to maintain 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 organisations operated as extensions to political parties and movements. (Kandiyoti, 1989: 145) Women were used to expand a political party's electoral base as well as for fundraising activities. Young women, particularly university students were particularly attracted to left-wing organizations, even though these also marginalized women's issues (Arat, 1998: 18). 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: 145). "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 take-over in 1980 and its repressive politics had a contradictory impact on feminist activism in Turkey. Political antagonisms and ideological polarization which marked the 1970s were suppressed through a ban on political parties, imposing restrictions on labor unions and the repression of organizations concerned with class politics (Arat, 1998: 18). Consequently, the political spectrum was compressed and political activism affiliated 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 straightjackets of male-dominated political structures. Being disappointed by their experiences within the previously existing political parties and organizations increased women's inclination to seek new venues and frameworks for their activism.

IV. 2. b) The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement

In 1987 Turkey was a country offering 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 officially denied) and a small group of feminists marching through the streets to demonstrate against violence against women, virtually in the same week. 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 through 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 started to get mobilized in small groups revolving around certain themes, projects, or events. Unlike other political movements, such as the leftist or Islamist movement, Turkish feminists, similar to their Egyptian counterparts do not primarily aim at mobilizing "the masses" but focus on strengthening solidarity, and friendly relations between women activists. This can be both 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 greater numerical constituency and more systematically approach mainstream institutions 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 was conducive to the emergence of feminist journals and magazines, as it is characterized by an emergence of new forms of print media that challenged the domination of dailies in building the every day public agenda. This new forms of media consisted of widely distributed weekly news magazines and popular monthlies which targeted particular audiences, and identified "men" and "women" as distinct consumer groups (Öztürkmen, 1999: 277). However, as has been pointed out by Turkish feminist scholars, there were tensions between Turkey's academic and activist feminists on the one side, and the 'popular feminism' promoted by women's magazines (ibid.: 289). The emergence and development of the monthly magazine *Kadınca* (Womanly) is a case in point. The magazine and its editor, Duygu Asena, were recognised for developing a new discourse, using innovative and creative techniques as well as popularising certain key concepts and slogans associated with the growing women's movement. Yet, academic and activist feminists criticised the consumerist content and approach, most visible in the advertisements that objectified women and were highly sexualised (ibid: 275).

In addition to the more popular media, feminist scholars and activists established a number of journals such as *Somut* (Concrete), *Feminist*, and *Kaktiüs* (Cactus), which initiated debates about and campaigns against ‘battering and sexual harassment’ amongst other issues. Many of the women who were involved in these various journals did later initiate and participate in various campaigns, projects and activities that cumulated into a vibrant women’s movement. For example, in 1983, a group of professional women started to come together regularly to prepare a feminist page for the weekly literary journal *Somut*. This project only lasted a year, but 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 a 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 labor, market women’s products, improve women’s education, and provide consulting services concerning women’s health and legal problems (Arat, 1998: 297).

Within 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 and raise and address issues, which had been previously been taboo, i.e. domestic violence, sexual harassment and general patriarchal oppression. Personal relationships, and ‘love’ featured side by side with more overtly feminist themes such as abortion, violence against women and war. However, as Nilüfer Göle cautions that in the 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 focussed 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, quoted in Öztürkem, 1999: 281)

Despite these reservations, there is no doubt that the 1980’s marked the beginning of 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 mobilisation and action. Women’s groups in Ankara and Istanbul organized the first public feminist event in 1986: 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: 78).

In the late 80s, 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: 296). 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: 277). Yet, in the beginning of the 90s it became obvious that attempts at institution-building proved to be extremely difficult.

IV. 2. c) Attempts at Institution-Building

Only few of the many projects which were started with enthusiasm in the 1980s or 1990s lasted longer than three to four years. The main part of 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 hierarchic organization. A shift in this approach can be first detected among the founders of the "Association of Women Against Discrimination" who articulated the necessity for institutionalization in order to transform patriarchal institutions and implement CEDAW (Arat, 1994: 104).

Attempts at institutionalization culminated, for example, in the establishment of a women's shelter (The Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation), a women's library in Istanbul, and a consultancy center in Ankara. Independent feminist centers 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 Labor and Social Security. At the local level, a number of municipalities established departments focusing on women's problems (Arat, 1998: 298). Furthermore, several public universities established women's studies programmes or research centers.

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 the significance of domestic violence amongst each other, protested to the judge and sent petitions to court. This initiative then grew into a full-fledged "Campaign Against Beating" which was later called "Solidarity Against Beating". More than 3000 women participated in a protest march which 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" (Arat, 1998: 300-301).

***Yesim Arat's account of the history and development of the shelter (1998) reveals Turkish feminists' struggle to work within a patriarchal system by employing alternative organizational structures and collective leadership (Arat, 1998: 22). It also shows the discrepancy between feminist goals and "male-state approaches" to women's problems. The difficulties in institutionalization become very obvious by

looking at the conditions and events that led women to build shelters and the peculiar rules suggested by municipal governments (e. g. requiring the husband's permission to enter the shelter).

The founders of the women's shelter constantly had to be on guard against co-option and annexation of their project by the local authorities. They had been made aware of the dangers of affiliating oneself with the state: In another municipality, a women's shelter, which was 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: 300-303). By trying to keep 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 participant democracy within an organization that operates within a largely male-dominated and undemocratic political system resulted in internal conflicts and tensions (Arat, 1998: 22). 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 (1998: 306).

Feminists involved in the shelter - as well as many other feminists in the Turkish women's movement - are trying to combine both political activism revolving around women's issues and the attempt to forge more democratic notions of citizenship. By the 1990s, the different strands within the women's movement - Islamist, Kemalist, Socialist, Liberal or Radical feminist - stress the need to gain and sustain autonomy and an independent identity from existing political structures. Unlike women during the Kemalist regime, contemporary feminists do not expect the state to liberate women, but protest the state's restrictive civil rights.

In addition to promoting values and practices of democracy, the liberal and Kemalist feminists within the women's movement also constitute a force which 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, as ***Yesim Arat's (1999) recent study of women's organizations affiliated with the Islamist Welfare Party shows, accept a hierarchical system based on a gender-based division of labor. They also 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 motivations for women to join the Islamist women's organizations; among them: the influence of friends at school, religious and conservative family backgrounds, and gratitude towards the Welfare Party which delivered useful services related to health and education (Arat, 1999: 30-36). 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 or the challenge of 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. The opposition to the rise of Islamism, does not necessarily entail a feminist consciousness as the fast growing groups such as "the Association for the Protection of Contemporary Life" and "the Club for Atatürkist Thought" reveal. The 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.

V. Conclusion

Participants in women's movements in both countries, Egypt and Turkey, reflect similar demographic characteristics, i.e. mainly urban educated middle-class and upper-middle class women. In recent years, these movements have broadened their bases to some extent while the middle-classes have impoverished under the pressure of economic crises and structural adjustment policies. Activities of the women's movements are generally limited to big cities, taking place respectively in Cairo, Istanbul and Ankara. Even if the resonance of the women's movements may travel to 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. In comparison to Egypt, the network of feminist activities has been more expansive and dispersed, partly because of the existence of institutions such as women's refuges, but also since women's studies departments have been even established in some of the provincial universities.

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

In the Egyptian context, the 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 much less daring in addressing inequalities and issues, which primarily affect women, i.e. domestic violence. These differences can be understood by looking at the historical and political context, which shaped the development of the women’s movements in each country. Egyptian women activists always had to align themselves with nationalist movements - first the anti-colonial, later anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist struggles, and could not prioritize women’s issues without facing accusations 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 which equated Turkish civilization with the equality between men and women.

It becomes obvious that Turkey emerges as a unique case within the Middle East, since the country that has never been colonized. 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 defense of “Muslim women” led to a situation whereby women’s dress codes, behaviour and roles have become symbols to measure authenticity and independence on the one hand and concessions and imitations of the West on the other. This, consequently, very much limits the discursive and political space of the Egyptian women’s movement up to today.

There exist obvious similarities between Nasser’s and Ataturk’s policies towards women, namely imposing reforms in the framework of attempts at modernization. Both regimes promoted women’s rights and equality within the public realm of education, work as well as political participation, while women’s rights within the so-called private sphere of the family remained a taboo. Yet, an important difference between the two regimes was their respective attitude and relation towards 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 mentioned earlier separated Turkish nationalism from Islam. Though secularizing to some extent, the Arab nationalism, promoted by Gamal Abdel Nasser, never promoted such a separation from the majority religion and cultural framework.

The need to look beyond commonly acknowledged notions of feminism and nationalism being entangled in the Middle East should have become obvious while comparing the case studies of Turkey and Egypt. What also has to be underlined is the fact that a close analysis of any given women’s movement reveals a great deal of heterogeneity within the boundaries of one country, although they are similar in terms of class backgrounds. Aside from relative levels of independence and freedom of action, women’s groups and organizations within the Middle East vary with respect to their political orientation, their national and international affiliations, their terrain of political engagement, and their membership size. Within the groups, individual members differ in terms of their personal and political motivations for activism, their

ideological backgrounds and orientations, their proclaimed aims, and their actual engagement in activities.

The heterogeneity of women's organisations and groups within a specific country might give rise to the question 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: 223), I would argue that the number of women's groups and networks, as well as individual activists in many Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt and Turkey, for example, 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 could 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, and (Kandiyoti, 1991), 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.

Informed by examples from the Egyptian and Turkish cases, one can deduce that women's movements in the Middle East are challenged to work with or through state structures which at times could be conducive and at other times impeding women's activism. Women's movements fluctuate between adherence and opposition to existing structures, occasionally trying 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 within the fluctuation of 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 of democratization in the contemporary Middle East.

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The Middle East is a transcontinental region which generally includes Western Asia (except for Transcaucasia) and all of Egypt (mostly in North Africa), Turkey (partly in Europe), and Iran (a part of South Asia per the UN geoscheme). The term has come into wider usage as a replacement of the term Near East (as opposed to the Far East) beginning in the early 20th century. The broader concept of the "Greater Middle East" (or Middle East and North Africa) also adds the Maghreb, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia