

July 2011

Shifts in Treatment of Women's Rights in Egyptian Media

Aliaa Dawoud

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dawoud, Aliaa (2011). Shifts in Treatment of Women's Rights in Egyptian Media. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 12(4), 148-161.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol12/iss4/10>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Shifts in Treatment of Women's Rights in Egyptian Mediaⁱ

By Aliaa Dawoudⁱⁱ

Abstract

Egyptian media's treatment of introducing the *khula* law which gave Egyptian women unprecedented divorce rights was overwhelmingly negative. However, the treatment of other more recent legal changes that granted women more rights has on the contrary been overwhelmingly positive. This paper analyzes this change and considers whether it can be explained using the theory that media's criticism of government policy is in reality a consequence of and reflects divisions within the political elite regarding the issue at stake. It also analyzes the discourse utilized by feminists to call for women's rights and argues that Egyptian feminists are drastically shifting the discourse that they utilize to call for women's rights.

Keywords: women's rights in the Arab world; media treatment of women's rights; women's rights in an authoritarian context

Introduction

In 2000, a new law was introduced in Egypt that granted women unprecedented divorce rights. By virtue of this law called *khula*, a woman can obtain swift, unilateral and irrevocable divorce, provided that she returns her dowry and relinquishes all of her financial rights. *Khula* is an Arabic term that means remove or get rid of. Its usage in this context connotes that a woman can easily get rid of her husband, a connotation which was rather offensive to Egyptian men. Egyptian media coverage of this new law was overwhelmingly negative. A cartoon printed in the government owned newspaper *Al Ahrām* depicted a man standing next to a door while a carpenter was busy removing the door. The man's wife points at him and says to the carpenter "No, that's [i.e. the door] not the one I want to remove [*akhla* present tense for *khula*] but that one [i.e. her husband]." A pro-government weekly newspaper carried the headline "*Men's Era is Over*," while a newspaper affiliated to a liberal opposition political party stated "no one has a good word to say about it" i.e. the *khula* law, while a serial entitled "*O Men Unite!*" was screened on a government owned terrestrial television station owned by the government (Sakr 2002: 873). In addition, a movie called *Mohami Khula* i.e. a lawyer specializing in obtaining divorce for women using the newly introduced *khula* law was released soon after the introduction of the law. The movie depicts a spoilt, wealthy woman who decides to divorce her husband only three months after their wedding because he snores and because she find married life extremely boring. In other words, it trivializes the issue, implying that women are fickle enough to divorce their husbands on a whim.

However, things were rather different when another law was being amended to grant women additional rights. Three years later, the nationality law was amended to allow Egyptian women married to non-Egyptian men to pass on the Egyptian nationality to their children. Egyptian nationality varies with it entitlements to may state services that are either unavailable to foreigners, or far more costly. This time, in contrast, the Egyptian media's coverage of this newly accorded right to women was largely positive. For example, an opinion column in *Al Ahrām* newspaper described the discussions that were ongoing at the time to change the nationality law as a step that will solve immense problems a large number of Egyptian women from various social and occupational backgrounds face (Mehana 5/10/2003). In another opinion

column in the same newspaper, the columnist highlighted some of the problems that the children of Egyptian mothers and non-Egyptian fathers face, expressed his support for the amendment of the nationality law and even proposed solutions to some of the obstacles to achieve this.

Similarly, media coverage of efforts that took place in 2009 to introduce a law penalizing sexual assault was overwhelmingly positive. The media extensively reported on the first woman to sue a man who sexually assaulted her and portrayed her as a role model. For example, a columnist in the privately owned newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* wrote:

the brave young woman, Noha Roshdy, who was sexually assaulted and stated that she had the right to seek to punish the sick young man who violently and barbarically fiddled with her body. She succeeded in bringing him to justice so that he was sentenced to three years in prison. This will bring an end to this disgusting anarchy (Gaber 2008).

Also, a religious scholar featured in an episode of the talk show *90 Dekika* or *90 Minutes* said "I applaud Noha who pressed charges and defied Egyptian society. She was brave enough to talk about it and should be a role model for other girls who are [sexually] assaulted. If more girls do the same, things will change."

The present study investigates this shift in Egyptian media's treatment of women's rights and tries to identify the reasons behind it. It explores the shift in light of the theory that media criticism of the status quo and media calls for particular changes are the result of differences and divergences within the ruling elite and not a consequence of freedom of expression in the media or pressure from below; i.e. societal criticism of the status quo or calls for change. Kevin Williams (1987: 242), writing about change in media coverage of the Vietnam war, argued that media criticism of the status quo is often a consequence of divisions and differences of opinion within the ruling elite. If members of government disagree with the policy being pursued and would like to see a particular change in policy about, they will provide the media with information to that effect. They are, for example, interviewed by media outlets due to their status as government officials and during the interview they express those views. When a large number of members of the ruling elite do so for a sustained period of time, it is only then that opinion columns, editorials and other commentary by media personnel pick-up on this and begin to voice similar arguments. The present article draws on this model of change in media coverage which calls for an analysis not only of public opinion but of divisions within the ruling elite. It analyzes the discourse used to call for and justify women's rights in the areas of nationality and sexual assault using critical discourse analysis (CDA) because the text being analyzed pertains to a disadvantaged group in society (Jager 2002:36): women. Language about women's rights is a site of struggle, being often used to justify the status quo by arguing that existing power relations are normal and common sense, when in reality the powerful dominant group in society is actually imposing its ideology onto society as a whole to its own benefit. Meanwhile, disadvantaged groups, in this case those speaking out for women's rights, may be trying to struggle against such ideological domination and trying to express and further their own ideology (Fairclough 1898: 14, 15, 84, 86, 88). Thus, the article examines whether media discussions of Egyptian legal changes affecting women are grounded in women's rights discourse or in other kinds of discourse. The arguments under study are voiced through Egyptian media outlets. Since context is an integral element in

CDA, (Meyer 2002: 15; van Dijk 2002: 97) the analysis must take into consideration several important issues about the media outlets themselves, such as who owns them and whether or not – and if so how – the government has any form of control over the privately owned media outlets.

Another theoretical element underlying the analysis is the notion of corporatized entity, which was developed by Bianchi (1989: 20-21) in his study of what he called 'unruly corporatism' in Egypt. Corporatized entities are governmental entities established by the regime that perform work that is usually accorded to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Civil society activists are then co-opted into these entities so that their activism becomes directed towards areas that are in line with, rather than hostile to, government policies. Finally, this article uses the term governmental non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) to refer to NGOs that are run by people affiliated to the regime. The activities of GONGOs are always in line with government policies, further them and never involve anything remotely hostile to the regime.

Overview of the Different Players

The main players in women's rights in Egypt are the government and women's NGOs. Both heavily interact with an international framework that consists of the United Nations (UN) that sponsors several conventions and conferences on women as well as Western organizations and governments that provide funding for projects pertaining to women. Given the aims of this article, a very brief overview of these different players and of specific elements in the Egyptian media is necessary at the outset.

Most researchers describe the Egyptian regime as authoritarian. Mai Kassem (2004:1) goes as far as describing it as personal authoritarian in which all branches of government are loyal to the President himself. In such a system the functioning of so-called NGOs has to be analyzed with care. As regards women's NGOs, it can be said that the Egyptian regime seeks to control them using a combination of co-optation and coercion. Some manifestations of such control are that NGOs have to register with the state, which means that the state can and often does deny authorization to NGOs who activities it disapproves of. Furthermore, the state is also entitled to directly interfere in an NGO's work, because it reserves the right to reject its board of trustees, dismiss it and appoint another one to replace it (Kassem 2004: 120). In addition, when it comes to women's rights, the Egyptian government is enmeshed in an international framework that upholds and promotes a particular version of women's rights. For example, Egypt is partly to the UN sponsored Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Thus, in accordance with CEDAW, Egypt established the National Council for Women (NCW) by Presidential decree in 2000. The first lady, the president's wife, Suzanne Mubarak, is the President of NCW and, according to its mandate, its aims include suggesting general policies to society and its institutions pertaining to women, expressing its opinion regarding proposed laws and decisions about women, proposing laws and decision that enhance women's status, expressing its opinion about all of the conventions about women and representing women in all international organizations and events to do with women (NCW 2006: 1-2). Also, NCW writes the governmental report for the CEDAW Committee. It is noteworthy that the first lady is an active President for NCW, to the

extent that she follows the Council's work almost on a daily basis¹. In addition, NCW is further integrated in the international framework because most of its projects are in collaboration with organizations such as the Government of the Netherlands, (NCW nd: 3) USAID, (NCW 2003: 10) UNDP, OUDA, EU, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNFPA, UNESCO, (NCW nd: 76) UNFPA and Ford Foundation (NCW nd). Indeed, NCW can be described as a corporatized entity (Bianchi 1989: 20-1), because it was established by the regime in order to perform work that is usually accorded to NGOs.

The other main players in women's rights in Egypt are women's NOs/ several such NGOs exist in Egypt today. However, two specific women's NGOs are particularly relevant to this study because one of them, the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW), strongly advocated amending the nationality law, while the other, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), strongly advocated introducing a law to penalize sexual assault.

ADEW describes itself as an NGO that primarily works with female headed household living in shanty towns (ADEW 2006: 3-4). Its objectives include empowering women who head their households economically, legally, socially and culturally as well as establishing communication channels between this category of women and decision makers (ADEW nd: 6). ADEW is fully co-opted by the government. Several factors indicate that it is on good terms with the state. Firstly, it does not face any problems in dealing with state security². Secondly, many of its events are sponsored by high-ranking government officials such as the first lady (ADEW 2001: 6, 9) and various ministers (ADEW 2001: 19). Also many high-ranking government officials attend their events, such as members of the People's Assembly and Shoura Council (ADEW 2006: 19, 46, 50). Also, ADEW maintains good relations with the corporatized entity NCW. For example, some of its projects are in collaboration with NCW³, the Secretary General of NCW attends many of their events and praises ADEW's activities which its personnel perceive as giving their work greater value⁴ (ADEW 2006: 19, 46, 50). In fact, ADEW can be described as a GONGO (Binachi 1989: 20-1). In addition, it is part of an international framework that advocates a particular version of women's rights. For it relies heavily on Western donors and it receives funding from a very large number of western organizations and governments such as the Union Back of Switzerzland, Optimumus Foundation, German Technical corporation, UNDP, Ford Foundation, the Embassy of Finland, the Italian Fund Debt Swap Program, International Children's Fund, the World Bank, Virginia Foundation, the European Union, the German Embassy, the Japanese Embassy, the Australian Embassy, Vodafone, Flora Foundation, the Body Shop, Dorsis Foundation, the Swiss Fund, UNIFEM, AECI/CONEMUND, (ADEW 2006) the British Council and the Egyptian Swiss fund and the Global Fund for Women (ADEW 2002: 28).

¹ Interview with Ambassador Samiha Abo Steit, Advisor to NCW Secretary General on 18 September, 2008

² Interview with Iman Baibers, Jan. 2009, ADEW headquarters

³ Interview with Rasha Raslan, 11 September, 2008

⁴ Interview with Rasha Raslan, 11 September, 2008

The second NGO, ECWR, describes itself as an independent organization whose main concern is supporting Egyptian women in their struggle to obtain all of their rights and in order to achieve equality. ECWR encourages the legislative authority to reconsider all of the laws that are not in line with the constitution and international conventions about women, especially CEDAW. It is further integrated into the international framework by its reliance on Western funding. Some of the organizations it receives funding from are the British council, the Embassy of the Netherland, the National Democratic Institute based in Washington, the EU, (ECWR nd: 1-3, 6, 38, 47, 97) UNDP, Global Fund for Women, the European Initiative to Support Democracy and Human Rights, Embassy of Finland, the Swiss Fund for Development, Konrad Adenaur Foundation, Swiss Catholic Lenten Fund, women Kind World With, AIDOS, COPSE, Open Society Institute, MEPI, Netherlands Development Cooperation Section and the African Women's Development Fund (ECWR's website).

ECWR can be categorized as a partially co-opted NGO because its relationship with the state apparatus is good in some respects and bad in others. It experiences problems in dealing with state security, especially when their activities are political in nature. For example, sometimes the events that they organize are cancelled by state security only 24 hours before the event is due to take place⁵ and it usually takes them a very long time to obtain approval from the government to receive foreign funding for any project⁶. However, other elements indicate that it is not entirely at odds with the state. For example, a report released by ECWR about the 2005 parliamentary elections states that they, along with other NGOs, call upon the President to fulfill one of the elements of his electoral program, which entailed adopting the quota system to set aside a number of parliamentary seats for women (Abu El Komsan and Hafez 2005: 48). Similarly, ECWR cooperates with NCW on various fronts and its publications include both praise and criticism of NCW. One publication is actually dedicated to NCW. The dedication states "to the National Council for Women which placed women's political participation at the very top of priorities" (ECWR nd: 1). In addition, ECWR believes that NCW should bring the feminist movement together and cooperate with it. However, the same report includes criticism of NCW. For example, the report accuses NCW of crippling NGOs and imitating their activities (ECWR 2006: 9-10).

Also, in order to understand how the various players interact over media treatment of women's rights, it is important to understand how the Egyptian media operates. The media outlets examined in this study are talk shows that are aired on privately owned channels as well as programs aired on government owned channels. The government has succeeded in controlling the privately owned satellite channels using corporatist tactics in addition to coercion. All of the privately owned satellite channels operate in studios based in Media Production City and they broadcast using the satellite Nilesat. The Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) owns 50% of Media Production City and 40% of Nilesat. ERTU is a consortium of television and radio stations that are accountable to the Minister of Information. Officially, it is a public enterprise. But in practice, the Minister of Information heads its board of

⁵ Interview with Marwa Mokhtar, 10 September, 2008

⁶ Interview with Marwa Mokhtar, 10 September, 2008

trustees and it is a mouthpiece for the government. The other shareholders in Media Production City and Nilesat are largely banks and investment companies that are owned or controlled by the state. In addition, a state owned enterprise – more often than not ERTU – owns a minority share in the channels themselves. Also, the channels must obtain a license from the state and those licenses may very well be withdrawn if these channels speak too freely on domestic politics (Sakr 2008: 267, 270-3, 275). Another corporatist tactic is that such licenses are only granted to people who are closely affiliated with the regime, including through business partnerships with the President's son. At the same time the state resorts to coercion by having its security services harass these channels. For example, producers of a talk show aired on one of these channels once told me in an informal conversation that state security often calls them a few hours before the program is aired and orders them to drop one of the issues that they had intended to tackle in the program on that day. According to the producer, his channel abides by such orders, which indicates that such programs only tackle issues that have obtained prior approval from state security. He also added that a member of state security often telephones them while the program is on air and order them to instruct the anchor to tone down. The message is passed to the anchor using the ear piece. Meanwhile, the government owned channels are controlled by ERTU.

It follows from the above, that none of these players – the government, the NGOs or the media should be regarded as monolithic and homogenous entities. In my analysis I perceive each entity as consisting of various structures with multiple agents within it, which allows for numerous struggles to occur (Randall 2002: 123). Furthermore, the structures these agents are now members of, as well as other societal structures, both enable and constrain agents. Furthermore, these structures are limiting in some regards, but at the same time, they also enable agents to act in a particular manner (McAnnulla 2002).

Finally, since Egypt is a country with a colonial history it is important to take post-colonialism and its ramification into consideration. The colonizers used women's rights to undermine Egyptian culture. They argued that Egypt was backward because its culture and the predominant religion – Islam – oppressed women (Ahmed 1992: 151-2, 154). They also actively sought to change women's status in the manner that they saw fit. Different groups in society responded to this in different manners. Some felt that their indigenous culture was under threat and therefore sought to maintain the status quo. Others sought to modernize Egyptian culture and re-interpret Islamic texts to suit modern times and grant women more rights, while others supported the particular version of women's rights the colonizers were calling for using discourse that was very similar to the of the colonizers. This led to a negative perception of feminists and women's rights in Egyptian society; feminists came to be perceived as agents of the colonizing West and colonizers in order to undermine Egyptian culture (Ahmed 1992: 154). Things remain unchanged today. Most – if not all – women's NGOs are funded by Western organizations and/or governments and this has in many instances been used against them to smear their reputation and taint them as traitors and agents of cultural imperialism (Townsend et al 2003: 96-7). The situation is further exacerbated by interference of powerful Western countries – especially the US – into internal Egyptian affairs, which is perceived by many as a form of neocolonialism. It is not uncommon to hear laymen and women in Egypt arguing that the government decided to grant women this particular right because they were pressured by or in order to please powerful Western countries, especially the US.

Institutions Involved in Shift Towards Positive Media Treatment of Women's Rights

As previously stated, the Egyptian nationality law was amended in 2003 to allow Egyptian women married to non-Egyptian men to pass on the Egyptian nationality to their children. Media coverage of this change was overwhelmingly positive. Evidence suggests that this was largely because senior government officials were in favor of amending this law in that particular manner.

ADEW, a fully co-opted NGO, was the one leading the campaign calling for the law to be amended organized a very large conference as part of its campaign, which was sponsored by the incumbent first lady. This drew a lot of media attention to it; the conference was covered by five newspapers, two magazines, two radio stations and three televised programs (ADEW 2001: 6, 9, 19). Needless to say that the first lady would not have sponsored the conference if she did not approve of its theme. In addition, several other government officials such as members of parliament attended the conference. In the words of Iman Baibers, the President of ADEW's Board of Trustees,

when important people attend your conference the media takes it more seriously because it conveys that these important people believe in your cause. We invite these people like Ministers and Governors [to our events] because it has a positive impact on media coverage because they give us credibility, it shows that the government approves of us, the media perceive us as in-line with the government⁷.

In fact, much evidence implies that the law was changed not due to the efforts of ADEW but because the most senior government officials decided to do so. Baibers herself argued that

Hosni Mubarak [the President] is the one who had the means to change the nationality law, he was the only one who could change it. That is why I beseeched him to change it. Hosni [the President], Suzane [Mubarak the first lady] and Gamal Mubarak [the President's son] are the ones who can change things, I have to get my message through to them and be persistent, that is they only way to get anywhere. That why on ... [television] I asked Hosni Mubarak to change the law, he is the one who stood up on the 18th of September 2003 and said I am going to change the law⁸.

This insight validates Kassem's (2002) characterization of Egypt as being ruled by a form of personal authoritarianism, where the head of state is the only one who can make such a decision.

However, Nehad Abu El Komsan, President of ECWR, added another perspective to the argument. She stated that NGOs spent ten years trying to change the nationality law but it was NCW that managed to change it. Indeed it was NCW that established a committee to develop a law that grants women this right (ADEW 2001: 19-20). As previously stated, the first lady is an active President of NCW. Therefore, she must have approved of amending the law. At the same time, since NCW is integrated into the international framework that promotes a particular version of women's rights, this is an important element that must also be taken into

⁷ Interview with Iman Baibers, Jan. 2009, ADEW headquarters

⁸ Interview with Iman Baibers, Jan. 2009, ADEW headquarters

consideration. NCW has set up a program to follow Egypt's implementation of CEDAW and it compiles the achievements of different ministries and governmental institutions about women in preparation for the report Egypt shall submit to the CEDAW committee (NCW 2004: 9). Article 9 in CEDAW explicitly states that: "states Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children" (CEDAW). In fact, Lamia Lotfy, member of the non-co-opted NGO National Woman foundation, argued that international pressure on the Egyptian government is the only measure that leads to changes in laws regarding women's rights. She believes that changing the nationality law is a decision the government has made in order to improve its image in front of the upcoming CEDAW committee⁹. Furthermore, as early as 2000 – three years before the law was changed and ADEW organized their conference – the then Secretary General of NCW had stated that amending the nationality law in order to allow Egyptian women married to non-Egyptian men to pass on the Egyptian nationality to their children was essential (Sakr 2002: 838-9).

Therefore, the positive media coverage of amending the nationality law was a reflection of the most senior government officials' intention and decision to amend the law. The NGO that ferociously advocated this change was not far removed from the state apparatus. The government officials' decision was largely fueled by its obligations within the international framework that advocates and promotes that particular version of women's rights.

Examining in detail how another law granting women rights will come about and the media treatment of this process provides further evidence to support the paper's argument. The other more recent example of the shift in Egyptian media's treatment of women's rights is its treatment of the efforts to introduce a law that penalizes sexual assault. ECWR is the NGO that leading this campaign. Media treatment of this issue was almost entirely positive. For example, *90 Dekika* (90 Minutes), a talk show aired during weekdays on the privately owned satellite channel *Al Mehwar* addressed the issue in seven different episodes in just over a month. This is particularly significant because women's rights are hardly ever addressed in Egyptian talk shows. Furthermore, the coverage was not just extensive but overwhelmingly in favor of introducing the law. For example, in one episode of *90 Dekika* the presenter told one of his guests, the father of a girl who had been sexually assaulted, "Everyone feels for you. ... I salute you for the stance that you have taken and for your courage," referring to the father's decision to press charges and speak up about it in the media. In another episode of the same program aired on the 21st of April 2009, the presenter interviewed a male journalist by telephone on sexual assault. The journalist said "I don't know what's wrong with Egyptian youth ... this is a very strange phenomenon that" has become rather widespread. A final example is an episode of the talk show *Al Ahsera Masa'n* (10 PM) that featured the first Egyptian woman to file a court case against a man who sexually assaulted her. The presenter stated that the media "is supporting ... [the woman] and her family because they believe that this court case sets a good precedent that can be followed."

Evidence suggests that the main reason behind this is an informal type of institution, the *shillas*, or social network, which in this case consists of media personnel and leaders of women's NGOs.

⁹ Interview with Lamia Lotfy, 17 September, 2008, NWF headquarters

Shilla is an Arabic slang term for the work group. It is an element of bureaucracy that can be used to denote a complicated set of organizational bonds through which informal communication takes place aiming at exchanging mutual favors in order to maximize rewards. Nazih Ayubi (1980: 467-8) goes so far as describing *shillas* as "the most significant informal bond in contemporary Egyptian society."

Nehad Abu El Komsan, President of ECWR described her organization's relationship with media personnel as follows:

We are on good terms with some journalists, some of them are our close friends. Our relationship revolves around common interests, we – the NGO – need media coverage of our activities and the journalists have space that they need to fill in newspapers. This relationship developed over a long time. When I am featured in a program on television, I chat with those behind the program, I tell them to turn to me if they need information about particular issues, I simply provide them with accurate information but they do not have to feature me in the program ... in return. I sometimes put them through to people. For example, if they are discussing political participation I can provide them with the contact information of women who ran for parliament. Sometimes they call me and ask me to participate in a program addressing a particular issue which is not my area of expertise so I refer them to other people who are very active in that area and who are more qualified to talk about them on television. ... Dealing with media personnel in that manner leads them to respect me and the NGO as a whole¹⁰.

Ayubi (1980: 469-470) also argues that these *shillas* are a response to over bureaucratization and complication of matters which result in hindering work from being done smoothly and properly. In such cases, *shillas* are resorted to in order to overcome these obstacles as well as to further national goals. This aspect of his theory can be used to explain how ECWR's campaign against sexual assault obtained media coverage in the government owned media. For example, Abu El Komsan stated:

Sometimes one of those behind a program in a government owned channel says to me: I will state that the upcoming episode is about misbehavior in public such as throwing garbage in the street and mistreating female passersby so that I obtain approval [from state security] for the episode, and then during the episode itself, you can say whatever you like and address sexual assault¹¹.

She spoke very highly of these people, describing them as putting their jobs on the line because they believed in the cause that she was advocating, i.e. combating sexual assault¹².

But it is important to bear in mind that ECWR is part of the international framework. It regards CEDAW as an important term of reference and its activities to combat sexual assault are funded by Western donors. In 2009 there were efforts to draft a law penalizing sexual assault. Again, NCW was the one drafting it. In the words of Abu El Komsan: "we developed a draft law addressing sexual assault and we are trying to discuss the issue so that only one draft law is around. But we are not decision makers, they [NCW] are the ones who chose whether or not to invite us, we

¹⁰ Interview with Nehad Abu El Komsan, January 2009, ECWR headquarters

¹¹ Interview with Nehad Abu El Komsan, January 2009, ECWR headquarters

¹² Interview with Nehad Abu El Komsan, January 2009, ECWR headquarters

just send things to them [NCW] and wait and see. They are going to organize meetings with key figures and female parliamentarians to discuss the draft law, we should be part of this process but we are not."

Therefore, Egyptian media's positive coverage of sexual assault is largely due to *shillias*. However, ECWR is part of the international framework. Therefore, when it addressed this particular issue and received extensive media coverage for it, it is likely that such media coverage was permissible because the government will have to address that same issue anyway in the very near future due to its international obligations and not because ECWR is imposing an agenda on to the government. The fact that NCW was the one officially working on a law to that effect implies that a scenario very similar to the one that brought about amending the nationality law was taking place¹³. In other words, positive media coverage cannot be attributed to an unprecedented level of freedom of expression in the Egyptian media. As to whether it can be explained by pressure from specific elements of the ruling elite, this will be returned to later.

The analysis of how the nationality law was changed and how the law penalizing sexual assault was being introduced reveals that women's NGOs cannot be regarded as members of the ruling elite, nor do they have any significant impact on decision making. In both cases, women did not obtain these specific rights due to the efforts of women's NGOs, but Egyptian women were granted those rights due to decisions made by the need to fulfill obligations of the international framework. Women's NGOs happened to be calling for more or less the same rights because they are themselves embedded in that same international framework and are co-opted by the government to various extents.

Discourse Used in Media Treatment of Women's Rights:

Another important shift in Egyptian media's treatment of women's rights is in the discourse used to call for and justify these rights. This section of the article analyzes the discourse of the leaders of the NGOs which ferociously campaigned for amending the nationality law and combating sexual assault. They were both featured in various media outlets to call for granting women these rights.

Evidence suggests that there is a shift away from grounding the arguments in a discourse of women's rights and towards grounding them according to other kinds of logic.

ADEW's campaign to amend the nationality law employed the terms '*alhimaya wa albakaa*' or 'protection and survival' which focused on conveying the suffering of Egyptian mothers and their children who are denied the Egyptian nationality. For example, during the previously mentioned conference ADEW organized under the auspices of Egypt's incumbent first lady, it conveyed how many of these children end up dropping out of school because they are required to pay far larger sums of money as tuition in dollars, which their mothers cannot afford. Even those who finish their education face difficulties in getting a job as non-Egyptians. ADEW also conveyed how many of these children are the offspring of marriages that did not last for very long so that their parents got divorced, their fathers left the country and abandoned the children. Many of them have not even visited their fathers' home country and do not speak its language. ADEW conveyed all of this by allowing

¹³ The law had not yet been passed when this paper was submitted for publication.

some of these women and children to tell their own stories to the public in person during the conference. These 'live testimonies' as ADEW calls them, were then reported by the media very extensively (ADEW 2001: 8). An example is the following quote from a story published in *Al Ahrām*:

My mother is Egyptian and my father is Syrian, but I have never seen him. ... I am over thirty and still single because I am not an Egyptian citizen. In order to get married, I have to obtain permission from the Syrian Embassy but they refuse to give me permission ... the most important problem that I face is being unable to realize my dream of serving in the army of my country – Egypt – while being required to serve in the Syrian arm.

Meanwhile, in ECWR's campaign to combat sexual assault and call for a law penalizing it, according to Abu El Komsan:

When we address sexual assault we adopt a war discourse. We are not saying that men are bad for they are sexually harassing women, we are saying let's sit down and talk, we have a problem and we want you to solve it. We are calling upon society. We transformed the issue into lack of safety in public so that men would fear for their sisters, daughters and wives/ how would you as a man go to work every day while fearing for your wife while she is in public? [This tactic was effective to the extent that] some of our volunteers are young men. We transformed it into an issue that concerns the public as a whole¹⁴.

In fact, both women argued against framing the issue in terms of women's rights discourse, adding that it is not effective. Baibers stated that:

we did not use [women's] rights discourse but 'protection and survival' because when you talk about rights you get nowhere because nobody has any rights [in Egypt]; men are oppressed. But when you talk about protection and survival, we are an emotional people. When I talk about women's rights it has less of an impact than when an impoverished woman describes her suffering. It addresses people's hearts ... If you object to changing the law, then you are cruel and heartless¹⁵.

While Abu El Komsan argued that

Radical feminist discourse is a threat to Arab society. In my opinion there is a lot of pressure from backward movements in the region and so radical feminist discourse unintentionally encourages arguments such as [blaming] cultural imperialism [for] destroying our identity. That is why we need strategic thinking and warm discourse. When I embark on a campaign my goal is not to argue that men are oppressing women, no¹⁶.

Therefore, there seems to be a shift away from grounding campaigns for women's rights in the terminology of rights or gender equality and towards other discourses which seem to be more appealing in the Egyptian context. For in the case of the nationality law, the problem was not framed as a gender equality issue but was personified as a problem that is causing suffering to a social group. The 'people'

¹⁴ Interview with Nehad Abu El Komsan, January 2009, ECWR headquarters

¹⁵ Interview with Iman Baibers, Jan. 2009, ADEW headquarters

¹⁶ Interview with Nehad Abu El Komsan, January 2009, ECWR headquarters

focused on in the discourse used in the campaign against sexual assault, the issue was framed as a societal problem which has a negative impact on society as a whole and the argument revolves largely around safety. There was also a clear attempt to appeal to men and incorporate them in solving the problem rather than blaming them for it.

By framing the arguments in this manner and not women's rights, these feminists also spared themselves being described as agents of the West and being called traitors. This is because they succeeded in framing the problem as a purely Egyptian one which was being solved for the benefit of Egyptian society as a whole or some members of Egyptian society. Thus, it was difficult for anyone to argue that the changes being pursued were women's rights that were being called for and/or granted due to pressure from or in order to please powerful Western countries.

Conclusion:

The theory that media criticism of the status quo and media calls for change are more the results of divergences of opinion within the ruling elite than a reflection of societal dissent has partial resonance in relation to the shift in Egyptian media treatment of women's rights. However, Williams theory was developed in a democratic context. Although its essential argument still holds in a personal authoritarian one, some slight changes are clearly necessary. In a country ruled by personal authoritarianism, criticism and calls for change in the media re largely a reflection of the most senior government officials' intention to change or amend a law, including – as in the cases discussed here – laws pertaining to women. In parallel, Egyptian activists for women's rights seem to be making a drastic shift in the campaigning discourse they adopt. Some contemporary feminists seem to believe that using a discourse based on women's rights in inappropriate and ineffective in Egyptian society. Thus, they are opting for other kinds of discourse that have no specific definition just yet. But it is safe to conclude that shifts in media treatment of women's rights cannot be explained by public endorsement of a women's rights campaign that is engineered by women's rights groups and brought to the fore through media outlets. Instead, the explanation lies in government control of decisions to grant women rights and in women's rights activists' accommodation with this top-down approach.

References

- Abdel Azim, Darwish, (2003). *A Seminar about the New nationality Law*. 1 November 2003. Al Ahram.
- Abdel Salam, Samia, (2003). *They Can Defend their Country: Egyptian Women and their Children have Won*. 3 October 2003. Al Ahram.
- Abu El Komsan, Nehad and Saeed Abdel Hafez, (c. 2005). *Towards Developing A Culture of Young Female Leaders: the Papers and Conference Proceedings of the cultural Dimension of the Third Stage of the Women's Cadre School Program*.
- Abu El Komsan, Nehad. Interview with the author. January 2009. ECWR headquarters.
- Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women, (2006). *Annual Report 2006: The year of Co-operation*.
- Ayubi, Nazih, N. M., (1980). *Bureaucracy & Politics in Contemporary Egypt*. London: Ithaca Press.
- Association for the Development and Enhancement of women, (nd). *For Them*.

- Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women, (2001). *At Last Egyptian Women have Emerged Victorious: After Many Years of Struggling Egyptian Mother's Children Obtain the Nationality*.
- Baibers, Iman. Interview with author. January 2009. ADEW headquarters.
- Bianchi, Robert, (1989). *Unruly Corporatism: Associational Life in Twentieth Century Egypt*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
- Dawoud, Maher, (2000). *The Khula* (A Cartoon). 27 January 2000. Al Ahram.
- Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, (c. 2006), *Rising at the Expense of Women: A Report about Women in the 2005 Parliamentary Elections*.
- Fairclough, Norman (2002). Critical Discourse Analysis as a Method in Social Scientific Research. In Meyer, Michael and Wodak, Ruth (ed). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. 2nd edition. pp. 121-138. Sage Publications: London.
- GABER, Lamis, (2008). "El bana masr kan fi el asl motaharsh" (He Who Built Egypt was Originally A Sexual Harasser), *Al Masry Al Youm*, November 8, Available at <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/>
- Jager, Siegfried, (2002). Discourse and Knowledge: Theoretical and Methodological Aspects of A Critical Discourse and Dispositive Analysis. In Meyer, Michael and Wodak, Ruth (ed). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. 2nd edition. pp. 32-62. Sage Publications: London.
- Kassem, Maye, (2004). *Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule*. United States of America: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- Lofty, Lamia. Interview with author. September 2008. NWF headquarters.
- McAnnulla, Stuart, (2002). Structure and Agency. In Marsh, David and Stoker, Gerry (ed) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. 2nd edition. England: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 271-291.
- Mehana, Magda, (2003). *Thoughts of An Egyptian mother: Reviving Hope in the Hearts of Mothers*. 5 October 2003. Al Ahram.
- Meyer, John W., Boli, John, Thomas, George M. and Ramirez, Francisco O., (1997). World Society and the Nation-State. *The American Journal of Sociology*. July **103** (1) pp. 144-181.
- National Council for Women, (2006). *The National Council for Women: Mandate and Formation*.
- National Council for Women, (c. 2003). *A report about the Period March 2000 – February 2003*.
- National Council for Women, (nd). *Women's Political Empowerment*.
- Sakr, Naomi, (2002). Seen and Starting to be heard: Women and the Arab Media in A Decade of Change. *Social Research*. Fall 69 (3). pp. 821-850.
- Sakr, Naomi, (2008). Egyptian TV in the Grip of Government: Politics Before Profit in A Fluid Arab Market. In Ward, David, (ed). *Television and Public and Policy: Change and Continuity in An Era of Global Liberalization*. New York: Taylor and Francis. pp. 265-282.
- Randall, Vicky, (2002). Feminism. In Marsh, David, and Stoker, Gerry. (ed). *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. 2nd edition. England: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 109-130.
- Townsend, Janet, Mawdsley, Emma and Porter Gina, (2003). *Development Hegemonies and Local Outcomes: Women and NGOs in Low-Income Countries*. In Kofman, Eleonore and Youngs, Gillian (Ed) *Globalization: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Continuum, pp. 47-64.

- Van Dijk, Teun A., (1993). Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis. *Discourse and Society*. 4 (2) pp. 249-283.
- Williams, Kevin, (1987). Vietnam: The First Living Room. War Mercer, Berrik, Mungham, Geoff and Williams, Kevin (ed). *The Fog of War*. pp. 213-260.

ⁱ **Acknowledgements:** This paper is based on a small part of my PhD thesis. I am deeply indebted to my supervisor Professor Naomi Sakr

ⁱⁱ Aliaa is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Westminster. Her PhD thesis is entitled *Utilizing Mass Media in the Political Empowerment of Egyptian Women*. She is a holder of a BA and MA in media from the American University in Cairo