

Women in Egypt: Islamic rights versus cultural practice

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Understanding the circumstances of a Muslim woman in Egypt requires an earnest consideration of both the social and cultural structure of her milieu. In other words, women's issues, Islamic or otherwise, and gender concerns are endemic of society's broader dynamics. For this reason, a woman's circumstances cannot be understood apart from her context. Egypt has undergone a series of successive invasions or conquests, each of which has impacted Egypt's social fabric. Egypt's contemporary culture is thus a mixture of a multitude of elements, shaped by the progression of historical events, which has contributed to the development of Egypt's current atmosphere. Accordingly, it is the cultural context, which shapes the environment for the Egyptian woman.

The cumulative effect of the historical transformation of Egypt has consequently created an environment in which, at present, a woman's rights are caught in a contradictory cultural foundation. On the one hand, a long history of a highly active feminist movement, dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, has expanded over the years. This movement stems from a liberal Islamic faction that has been greatly influenced by Western thinkers and has succeeded in granting women many long-struggled-for rights. The decades of the fifties and sixties particularly marked the climax of an upsurge of the liberal movement for women's rights in accordance with the socialist transformation in society introduced by the new political regime. With this new regime came legal equality for all citizens. Women began to enjoy their rights to a similar extent as men, in all spheres of life (e.g., education, employment, politics). Thus, the gender gap during this period was undeniably reduced, though not eliminated.

One must mention that the newly introduced socialist ideology was able to reconcile its doctrines with Islam, going so far as to claim Islam as the religion of socialism. This strong support developed out of the prevailing influence of liberal Islamic thought. Scholars in support of this movement, highly educated in religion, aimed to eradicate the rigid perception of Islam as propagated by conservative scholars. Liberal scholars portrayed Islam as broad-minded and flexible in nature, a religion applicable to all times and situations. In particular, they attempted to trace modernity to the Islamic doctrine. Their interpretation of religion

indicated a consistency with modern life, as opposed to the austere, archaic ideas advocated by a more conservative group. Central to this liberal trend was the emphasis on the rights of women provided by Islam.

The global liberal trend has cast Egyptian women into the midst of international currents emphasizing the role of women in development. This trend calls for the guarantee of women's rights in society. Through Egypt's participation in international conferences and forums dealing with women's issues, Egypt has come to declare its acceptance of the growing concern for the eradication of discrimination against women. At the same time, Egyptian women are nevertheless confronted with a reactionary tide, which started in the mid-seventies, and has come to infiltrate and exert a major influence on various aspects of society. Moreover, the liberal trend has been reversed on the basis of misinterpreted religious grounds. The facade of this backward movement appears to be religious, though in reality, its roots are political, social, and economic. Consequently, as the vulnerable group in society, women have fallen prey to setbacks in their rights. Unfortunately, religion is often used as a pretext for these setbacks. Many rights for which women have long struggled and have successfully attained are currently subject to debate. Various opportunities, which had become available to females, are now being questioned. The reactionary tide, gaining impetus over time with the increasing political, economic, and social problems, has aggravated the preexisting inequality between males and females. In a traditionally male-dominated culture, the previously reduced gender gap has once again widened in response to the strong reactionary movement (El-Safty, 2001a).

The purpose of this article is not to defend Islam, but rather to clarify common and widespread misconceptions regarding the religion, which have been significantly enhanced by current societal conditions. The ongoing violence associated with Muslims has served to aggravate the negative image attributed to Islam. As a result of this drama, the underprivileged, marginalized, deprived, and even abused female segment of society has suffered, as evidenced in the current practices limiting their rights. To the non-Muslim world, Islam underlies these practices. Non-Muslims fail to realize that, in reality, these practices are strongly rooted in tradition rather than religion. The cultural factors in a male-dominated society prevail and unfortunately are supported by newly introduced misinterpretations of the religion, which are readily adopted by the frustrated, disillusioned masses.

Understanding Islam requires that one perceives it as a way of life, not only a religion. It is a comprehensive, all-inclusive, worldly religion, which encompasses all aspects of the individual's life. It covers all rights and duties of its followers, specifying them clearly. In this context, the rights of women are explicitly spelled out, as are the rights of every member of society (i.e., men, children, elderly). In this article, I will address those rights, which may be subject to violation in Muslim societies, and as such, are falsely blamed on Islam. In reality, the violation is based on cultural norms and values. From the non-Muslim perspective, the image is not only negative, but also bleak, and may go so far as being considered barbaric in certain instances.

RIGHTS VERSUS PRACTICE: THE DISCREPANCY

Right of Ownership and Inheritance

Islam provides a woman with the right to own property or handle it, depending on her preference, independent of any member in her family. As a single, married, or divorced woman, the property is exclusively hers, without any claim from any family member, male or female. In addition, Islam does not preclude the joint, communal ownership of property in the marriage relationship, as is sometimes the case in other societies. Thus, it is common for women in Egypt, like Muslim women in other countries, to keep their maiden names after marriage. This practice indicates their public, legal identity--their status before the law. Furthermore, the woman has the right of inheritance. Rules of inheritance in Islam are highly detailed and meticulous, clearly specifying the right or share of each member in the family. Each family member is entitled to a certain share, depending on the religious interpretation or justification, which extends beyond the focus of this article, more so, beyond the author's position to explain. The author is no authority on Islamic jurisprudence, but only as a practicing Muslim who grew up in an Islamic environment in its liberal form. This approach to Islam is based on a solid understanding and clear perception of the doctrine, further supported by intensive research on gender issues in the predominantly Islamic Egyptian society.

However, since a cultural image of the female as the weaker sex exists, women are considered unable to deal with financial matters. Thus, men may not allow women in their family to handle their own property. They may take it over, with or without legal claim.

Underlying this behavior is the belief that the female is unqualified for the task, untrained and inexperienced in male affairs. Central to this belief is the notion that the world of money belongs to men and not women.

In turn, a woman's right of inheritance may be violated. She may be totally denied the right to inherit property, or more commonly, she is given a much smaller share than she is legally entitled. The rationale behind this violation deals with the cultural belief that a husband may take over his wife's property after marriage, through legal transaction, with her consent, or through force. Such a situation is commonly observed in rich families, and more so in rural areas, where wealth is concentrated in land ownership. Wealthy families fear the loss of their heritage and believe that maintaining the property along the male line is economically and culturally justified. In these cases, it is very important that the family name be perpetuated through the male recipients of property.

Right to Education

As a worldly region, taking into consideration the practical aspects of life, Islam gives women the right to an education. Furthermore, Egyptian legislation supports the right of education for women. However, this right was slowly adopted, because it contradicted with the cultural value of female seclusion in the earlier, more traditional days of the Ottoman Turkish restrictions on women. With the growing feminist movement, the number of women in education gradually increased, beginning in the nineteenth century. The true impetus for female education emerged in the fifties, when education was granted free to all citizens. Females took advantage of the expansion in education, and started to enroll in large numbers. These members increased annually at all academic levels. Despite this, the rate of female literacy has dropped. A gender gap still persists, both with respect to the gender ratio in education as well as the literacy rate. The UNDP Human Development Report for the year 2001 shows the rate of adult literacy for the age group 15 and over, as follows: 42.8 for females as opposed to 66.1 for males. In addition, the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrollment ratio is 72 and 80 respectively. (El-Safty, 2001b).

An attempt at understanding this situation can best be made through the socialization process in the culture, where gender roles are clearly delineated, and males are favored when it comes to the right to education, and many other rights. Islam is in no way

responsible for such circumstances--religion does not act as a barrier to female education. A female is socialized first and foremost in her role as housewife and mother, while the male is raised as the breadwinner, hence the need to send him to school. Even in the case of dropouts, the gender factor is a driving force. Females drop out of school to get married, look after the family by performing house-hold chores, or to take care of younger siblings. They may be sent out of the home to work, as is sometimes the case among the poorer segments of society, in order to help support the family. Nevertheless, there is still a gender division of labor in these cases, since the women are mostly engaged in domestic labor (EI-Safty, 1996a).

The relationship between poverty and female education involves another dimension of even greater significance. Families living under conditions of poverty reveal an obvious bias in favor of male education. When and if they have the opportunity to send their children to school, they often make decisions in line with traditional norms. Consistently, the male child is automatically favored (EI-Safety, 2001a).

Right to Employment

A logical sequence of expansion in female education deals with the development of employment opportunities for women. Whereas historically and traditionally, women were restricted to stereotypically female jobs (e.g., teacher, nurse), new occupational prospects have emerged. The number of women in the labor market has thus increased, covering all occupational fields. One significant variable leading to the wider access of females in the labor market is the support of a legislative system guaranteeing their equality in both hiring procedures and wages (EI-Safty, 2001a).

Moreover, Islam gives women the right of employment, if they so choose. In fact, the religion has a very strong work ethic for both men and women. The history of the early Islamic era provides examples of women engaged in various economic activities.

The discrepancy between the Islamic support of female employment, coupled with the legislative base, and the actual situation of women in employment can be seen in the relatively low representation of women in the labor force as opposed to men. The Human Development Report (2001b) estimates the economic activity rate of women as 34.5, while that of men is 44. It must be mentioned, however, that there is a significant proportion of

women outside of the formal labor market, as shown by their high representation in the informal labor sector. In addition, they are highly represented in agricultural labor, as well as other forms of unpaid labor.

The current setback in the culture is responsible, for the most part, for the lower percentage of female economic activity. Besides the cultural constraints against female labor, which have been reduced, but not done away with, many women either voluntarily refrain from work or are forced to do so, on the basis of the societal requirement to confine her to the home, or the more recent condemnation of society as a society of atheists, hence the strict prohibition on women accepting its wages, which are considered "polluted."

The most controversial issue that emerges with respect to female employment appears in the long debate that lasted for years and escalated in the last decade on the position of the female judge. No woman has been appointed to this professional domain. Yet, there is no legislative or religious barrier to this situation. The Egyptian constitution grants all citizens equality in employment, as has already been mentioned. The history of Islam includes female judges. Many Islamic countries have women sitting in the judicial chair (e.g., Syria, Sudan, Yemen). The Muslim religion imposes no constraint against females holding this position. Rather, the constraint is purely cultural, based on grounds that are irrational, centered primarily around the inability of women to cope with the strenuous, stressful tasks of the judge, as not suited to her delicate nature, in addition to her highly sentimental, emotional make-up, which is likely to interfere with her ability to make sound decisions. Lawsuits were filed in courts, filed by women who were refused the job, but who base their case on the legislative and Islamic rights, as well as the absence of barriers in both areas. Only in the year 2003 was the first woman judge appointed, much to the exaltation of the Egyptian woman and all supporters of woman's rights.

It is relevant to mention here that the reactionary tide in society has extended to include most aspects related to women's issues, including their participation in political life, and as such, their representation is significantly low in this area. The traditional point of view does not consider public life in general as a female domain.

Rights in Marriage

The marital rights of women acknowledge not only their independent will but also more so,

their identity as full-fledged partners in the relationship. In order for marriage to be religiously valid, Islam requires that the couple give their consent. In some cases, a girl may be forced into a marriage against her will. However, this is a rare situation and tends to occur more so in rural areas. In such cases, marriage represents a clear violation of the Islamic requirement. The marriage is not considered religiously valid. In a traditionally patriarchal society, this behavior may take place when parental authority dictates a woman's affairs.

For Islam, marriage is an institution, which has its sanctity. It signifies a permanent and sacred relationship. The religion also clearly spells out the details of the rights and duties for all parties in the family. The policies or practices or both pertaining to family matters are meticulous and fall beyond the scope of this article. It suffices to say that religion explicitly advocates "holy matrimony," as well as the respect of husband and wife for each other.

The fact that Islam allows divorce is one strike against the religion. In addition, divorce procedures in the Islamic world have been highly criticized as discriminatory against women, and even abusive at times. Nevertheless, the practice of these procedures has not been, in most cases, in conformity with the Islamic doctrine. The words of Islam consider divorce "the most hateful privilege granted to man by God." As such, Islam requires that it should be the last resort, and initiated only after the couple has exhausted all possibilities for reconciliation. If issues are resolved, the marriage can continue. The problem arises when differences cannot be resolved. In such cases, couples are advised to attempt to solve their problems through all possible means. If all attempts fail, divorce is the ultimate solution, guaranteeing the rights of all parties involved, especially women and children, the vulnerable groups.

Upon divorce, Islam requires that the man pay a lump sum of money to his former wife. This amount is agreed upon in the marriage contract and is separate from the alimony that she gets for one year following divorce. It is important to mention that in the event of a husband's death, the widow is entitled to this sum of money, which is independent of her legal inheritance. These arrangements are intended to guarantee the woman's financial security in the case of the loss of a husband through death or divorce (El-Safty, 1997).

After divorce, a mother has the right to her children's custody until they reach puberty. While she takes care of them, the father is responsible for their financial support. The mother can remarry if she so chooses, but there is a requirement of waiting at least 3 months

subsequent to divorce. The rationale behind this requirement is to give the couple the chance to reconsider their decision and hopefully reestablish their relationship. The more important reason for this required interval before a woman's second marriage is to guarantee that there is no pregnancy. If a woman becomes pregnant during this period, the baby is considered the ex-husband's, and therefore, the baby receives his name and financial support.

Additionally, there are further details of divorce procedures. For instance, there are specifications for more meticulous and complicated cases that have repercussions on matters of custody, alimony and/or child support. However, the broad outline, as provided here, clearly depicts how the rights of women are guaranteed in the case of divorce.

The Egyptian Law of Personal Status is codified on the basis of Islamic doctrine. However, its enforcement includes gaps that may require more specific clarification. At times, the details in the law may appear ambiguous to the common person, but they are understood in Islamic and judicial circles (El-Safty, 1995).

Many divorce cases are settled through the agreement of the couple. However, in many situations, family members are involved, especially the older ones, since the family remains the backbone for the individual. In many other cases, however, divorces are settled in court. In court, a wide variety of legal complications may arise. In a male-dominated culture, the law does not always support women. Alternatively, the actual implementation of the law may at times reflect a male bias. If women have complaints about their rights in divorce procedures, the culture is responsible, not Islam (El-Safty, 1995).

Moreover, men tend to abuse the right given to them to divorce their wives. They may do so for minor or trivial reasons, not realizing that Islam allowed divorce. The decision for divorce does not make life simple or easy--rather, it requires that the couple endure numerous steps and procedures in order to settle their differences, before taking the final step of divorce.

The realization of the problems a woman will likely face when she goes to court with her divorce case has led the judicial authorities to update an already existing right in Islam, which has long been ignored. Divorce procedures in court are known to be lengthy and complicated. The updated right allows the wife seeking divorce to pursue a rapid step, if she is willing to give up her rights in divorce, and further, return the sum of money that her

husband had paid her as a gift upon marriage. The latter is a traditional ritual, which is rooted in Islam. It has, however, undergone various modifications over the years, many of which have been drastic. The initial idea in Islam was to offer the bride a gift upon marriage, depending on the groom's financial ability. This gift has been transformed into a status symbol, and is now given in cash, indicating not only the groom's financial status, but more so, the bride's value. The sum, therefore, is highly relevant to socioeconomic status.

The initiation of the updated right as a law is meant to facilitate divorce procedures for women. This step has created much controversy and debate in society, especially among men, indicating that they now feel threatened in the face of simpler divorce procedures for women. Since the law was introduced in the year 2000, a significant number of women have taken advantage of the opportunity. A few were granted the right, but not all. Again, more practical complications arise in its implementation. The apparent simplicity of the law does not necessarily reflect its actual enforcement. This law is one example among other modified items of the Law of Personal Status in response to the increasing demands made in society, not only by women, but also by some liberal-minded men. Their argument is based on the rights given to women by Islam and the need to guarantee that these rights are properly observed as given, without any intervention from cultural factors or law enforcement influence that may deviate from the accurate interpretation of the right. Therefore, over the years, the law has undergone a number of modifications that are more in favor of women compared to the traditional law. Each modification aims to reduce any possible discriminatory practices against women and at the same time provide them with greater security in marriage (El-Safty, 2001a, 2001b).

One significant gain for women in the modified law has been the emphasis on an additional alimony, literally translated to mean the "alimony for pleasure," again in line with the need to guarantee the woman's financial security in case of divorce. This type of alimony indicates a sum of money to compensate for her years of service to her ex-husband and is calculated in proportion to the number of years in marriage. The rationale behind this calculation is that the more years spent in marriage, the older the woman is. In turn, she is less likely to find a job, if she is not currently working and/or less likely to get married again. (Marriage is difficult for an older woman in the Egyptian culture.)

Other items in the law have likewise been modified, indicating a greater concern for the

Islamic base. Furthermore these changes are in line with the emerging needs and demands of the changing times. The fact remains, however, that a gender gap still persists.

It is important to mention a right granted to women in marriage by Islam, which is seldom practiced--Islam gives the woman the right to initiate divorce. In this case, both husband and wife share this right. In order for a wife to be granted this right, it is required that it be clearly specified upon marriage.

Surveys have shown that the incidence of marriages in which wives enjoy this right is sparse, simply because it contradicts traditional norms and values. The husband's male image is protected, as he is culturally considered the dominant figure in the marriage relationship. This kind of marriage usually occurs when the wife is capable of dictating her own terms. This may happen when she is a celebrity, such as a movie star or heiress. Nevertheless, when this occurs, it is usually kept a secret.

The most commonly criticized right given to men in Islam, one that is especially blown out of proportion outside of the Islamic world, is polygamy (i.e., the man's right to keep as many as four wives at a time). It is difficult, if not impossible, for a non-Islamic authority to explain the justification behind this right. Islamic authorities provide a rationalization. Consideration for the conditions in marriage is an important underlying variable. Certain cases, such as a wife falling ill, may indicate the probability of another marriage. Islam states that the husband should not divorce her in such situations. Rather, he should continue to look after her, providing her with the necessary care and support. However, in such cases, he is allowed to take another wife, as his existing wife cannot have a normal sex life, and because Islam, like other religions, does not permit sex outside of marriage. Another situation whereby a man can take another wife is when a wife cannot bear children. The barren wife is not to be divorced, but instead remains married to her husband, who is responsible for providing her with support and maintaining the same level of respect for her. This behavior is in line with the strong cultural value of producing children. It is important to mention that the wife whose husband is sterile has the full right to be divorced, if she so chooses. All these possible situations do not involve mandatory polygamy or divorce--rather, individuals have a choice.

Moreover, concern for the first wife can be seen in the strong emphasis on her care, as indicated by the requirement that the husband guarantees equal treatment, both morally and

financially, for both wives. An additional clause in the Qoran states that unless the man can guarantee equal treatment, he must not take another wife. If a man proceeds to take more than one wife, without sincere grounds for doing so, he is clearly violating the Islamic doctrine, which does not grant additional marriages in the absolute sense. If special cases exist, as mentioned earlier, a second marriage is justified, but not a third or a fourth.

Since marriage in Islam is a sacred relationship, it does not allow for any deception between man and wife. If a man decides to take another wife when he is already married, he must notify his first wife. The second marriage is not a secret event. The Old Law of Personal Status in Egypt did not specify this matter explicitly. Consequently, many acts of deception occurred. Men could have more than one wife without the first wife ever knowing about it. Unfortunately, it was quite common for a wife to discover her husband's dishonesty upon his death. In most cases, this sudden discovery occurred either during the funeral or through reading the obituary in the press.

The modified Law of Personal Status, launched into action in 1986, when codified, had the objective of ending this deception. The modified law stipulates that the husband must notify his first wife when he decides to remarry. The first wife then has the option of accepting the situation and remaining married to him or refusing, in which case she is entitled to a divorce, maintaining all of her legal rights. If the husband has a secret official marriage that is somehow discovered and reported as unofficially documented in his identity card, he is tried for forgery. The government assures that marriages are documented in a man's identity card.

Addressing the issue of marriage in Islam cannot be complete without making reference to one form of marriage, which has been controversial and thus subject to much debate. When translated from Arabic, it means "informal marriage," which may take place without the legal requirement of the contract. In informal marriage, the couple makes a statement that they accept each other as marriage partners, either orally or in writing, usually on a slip of paper. Informal marriage has been known in Egypt throughout history and occurs in special conditions. Normally, a couple who wants to keep their marriage a secret would resort to informal marriage, since it does not require any official documentation. This situation may occur when a member of the couple, usually the man, is in a certain position (e.g., political or social) that can be jeopardized by his marriage. In the last decade, however, there has been a significant increase in such marriages among youth, particularly university students. The

reason for this trend lies in economic problems in society, such as unemployment and inflation, coupled with the high cost of marriage. The inability of the couple, particularly the young man, to establish a family, leads them to establish marriage secretly. They try, in this manner, to provide a legitimate cover for their relationship, in response to the strong religious urge, albeit fearing exposure in society.

The controversy over informal marriage is based on legal barriers and religious ambiguity. According to Islam, the contract is not required for marriage to take place. However, a basic pillar for the religious validity of the relationship is lacking--namely, its public declaration, because in reality, the *raison d'etre* of the relationship is its secrecy. Accordingly, the religious position condemns it. Furthermore, it has no legal recognition.

The victim in this controversy over informal marriage is undoubtedly the woman. In the first place, the social stigma associated with informal marriage is great. In a society, which places strict restrictions on female behavior, the woman is blamed for the relationship and her image is tarnished, while the man gets away with it. In the second place, she the woman has no legal rights in the case of separation or her husband's death. Thus, she faces the problem of confronting a very bleak future, especially if she has children.

One factor in favor of women who are caught in informal marriages and end up with broken marriages is the legal recognition of the child's paternity. Children are viewed as victims in this relationship and hence have to be protected by the law against the stigma of illegitimacy in a society where such a status is still highly ostracized. However, in order to prove the child's paternity, a woman must file a lawsuit, at which point the secrecy of the relationship is no longer maintained. Nonetheless, she is already scandalized if the matter of the child becomes public.

Female Circumcision

Among the negative practices blamed on Islam is that of female circumcision, otherwise known as the excision of the clitoris. The non-Muslim world considers the religion barbaric, cruel, inhumane, and involving a clear violation of human rights for requiring females to undergo this act of violence. In reality, Islam is innocent of this accusation. The ritual is a cultural practice, which originated in Africa. It is part and parcel of the strong cultural values pertaining to the behavior of women, which center around female chastity--in fact, the Arabic

word for it means "purification," referring to the female's sexual purity. The idea behind the practice is to reduce the woman's sexual appetite by excising the clitoris. Because the girl's virginity is highly valued by tradition, circumcision is meant to protect her against any possible violation of the code of behavior associated with her chastity. A girl is therefore circumcised before she reaches puberty or to be more precise, before she menstruates--in other words, before reaching the "dangerous age" when her sexual urge can get her in trouble. It is thus guaranteed that her virginity remains intact until marriage.

Evidence in defense of Islam not being responsible for this violent ritual is the fact that both Muslims and Christians in Egypt performed the rite. Female circumcision is absent in most Islamic countries. Clearly, this ritual is an indication of a cultural rather than a religious practice. Female circumcision is seen in parts of Africa, other than Egypt. In the Sudan, its practice is so extreme that the excision extends beyond the clitoris, and the woman may actually be disfigured. It is common knowledge that many cases of childbirth become complicated, because the circumcision operation for the woman has gone too far.

The rate of female circumcision dropped significantly in Egypt as the feminist movement advanced. In the fifties and sixties, the practice was obviously diminished. However, it continued in the rural areas. Female circumcision was more widespread in the southern parts of Egypt, the more conservative, traditional segment of society, where cultural norms and values are very strongly upheld. The more recent years, especially the past two decades, have witnessed a surprisingly growing upsurge of this violent ritual. Moreover, the ritual is now rationalized according to Islamic foundations. Consequently, its incidence has been on the increase. Efforts by the health authorities to explain the many complications associated with the practice have proved unsuccessful, in the face of a strong so-called Islamic tide advocating the practice. One minister of health tried to pass a law banning female circumcision but failed in his attempts. A later effort was made to restrict the practice and avoid the many problems arising from its malpractice. As a result of this effort, a verdict was made requiring the ritual to be limited to hospitals and medical centers, only by doctors. The underlying reason here is that the actual practitioners of female circumcision are the traditional health providers (e.g., traditional midwives, health barbers, and herbalists). In most cases, the operation would proceed under conditions of a multitude of health hazards that eventually lead to a wide variety of complications, least of which hemorrhage, let alone the

long-term negative physical effects that afflict the victim. The fact that a restriction was placed on the providers of the service was intended to guarantee a woman's safety against complications. The practical side of this decision lay in the fact that the operation is performed regardless of the law. The requirement that its practice be limited to trained, qualified practitioners is aimed at reducing the ensuing health hazards under qualified performance.

The attempted intervention by the Egyptian government to control the increasing incidence of female circumcision was confronted by a wave of opposition by whoever claimed to have a say in Islam. Lawsuits against the government were filed in court, trying to find a religious base for the practice. The cases have not yet been resolved. The final attempt made by the Ministry of Health is a ministerial decree banning the practice. It however does not have the power of law.

On the more practical, societal level, the propagated belief that female circumcision is an Islamic ritual is seen in the strong conviction of a large segment of the population. Studies support this prevalence. Surprisingly, women who are circumcised are keen to have their daughters circumcised, believing that it is against Islam to remain uncircumcised. Some women may go so far as to believe that their future son-in-laws would require their brides to undergo this operation if they discovered that they were not already circumcised on the night of their wedding (El-Safty, 1996b).

Such a strongly embedded belief in the minds of individuals raises the question of the overlap, even confusion, between religion and culture. To an average Egyptian, the line between the two is unclear, especially when current conditions begin to reinterpret already accepted matters of life and provide them with new meaning. It suffices to say that the clash between the conflicting trends in society seems to have ended in favor of the conservative trend in the fight over female circumcision. It remains to be seen whether future conditions can lead to a different direction or will remain the status quo.

A Final Word

This article has attempted to approach the current situation of Egyptian women as Muslims caught between the rights granted to them by Islam and the actual rights bestowed to them. The Egyptian society has been shaped by a multitude of variables, each of which has

impacted its culture. The sequence of historical events, both external and internal, has created a society where Islam reigns supreme. However, stronger forces are in action, as represented by the traditional backbone of society. The male-dominated structure continues to prioritize gender differentiation. Whereas Islam grants women explicit rights as equal partners, cultural factors often intervene, causing inequality, thus denying women many rights. A close observation of Egyptian life reveals the discrepancy apparent in gender matters. In education, employment, and marriage, this discrepancy can be easily detected. It is important to mention, however, that giant steps have been taken over the years to reinforce the rights granted to women by Islam, in spite of the massive and strong reactionary tide they have confronted. This reactionary group has attempted to reinterpret, or misinterpret, long-accepted modes of practice in the Islamic dogma, thus widening the gap between given rights and their actual practice.

This paper has, therefore, addressed those practices that may be subjected to violation of Islamic rights, and as such, are the focus of much criticism by the non-Muslim world. In fact, criticism is also found in the Muslim world where there is a true understanding of the religion. The media, in particular, may blow such practices out of proportion, in many cases to gain attention. It's a misconception to blame these gender-biased practices on Islam, since Islam is a humane religion, which is greatly misunderstood.

The fact remains that some aspects of the religion may be deemed unacceptable to outsiders, as in the case of polygamy. The details of the actual justification behind the practice may be lacking to the outsiders who are unable to understand this kind of practice. The question arises as to how many aspects of any religion still remain ambiguous and incomprehensible.

The dialectic between Islam and culture is ongoing. Egyptian women are caught in the midst of this dilemma. Egyptian women should promote a more egalitarian society, where gender is no barrier to any human right.

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