

The Women's Movement in Egypt, with Selected References to Turkey

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United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) work for Geneva 2000 was carried out with the support of the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Nations Division for Social Policy/Department of Economic and Social Affairs. UNRISD also thanks the governments of Denmark, Finland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom for their core funding.

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

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 in overarching general themes, as becomes obvious in the context of two case studies – Egypt and Turkey – explored in this paper.

The analyses of the women's movements in Egypt and Turkey entail a brief exploration of the historical context, that is, 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 understanding present-day women's movements in the region. Turkey, unlike Egypt, has not been colonized in modern times. Regarding 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, differ 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 in the general effort to achieve 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 toward women's organizations; the growth of civil society and the severe restrictions on it (Law 32); international pressures and expectations, particularly on the part of donor organizations; and the increasing influence of Islamist constituencies. In the Turkish case, the women's movement has been able to work much more closely through existing state structures and institutions, particularly the municipalities. The Turkish women's movement seems to have been particularly influenced by the polarization between Islamist and secular constituencies, the struggles for democratization and for the institutionalization of feminist activities, as well as debates concerning the Kemalist legacy.

Comparison of 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 for democratization, yet they are highly constrained by prevailing social and political structures, lack of clear institutional targets and ambiguous state policies.

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Résumé

Les mouvements féminins du Moyen-Orient se distinguent les uns des autres par leur évolution historique, aussi bien que par leurs idées et pratiques actuelles. Pourtant, ils se ressemblent en ce sens qu'ils ont en commun plusieurs facteurs historiques et politiques, comme par exemple leurs liens avec les mouvements nationalistes, avec les processus de modernisation et de développement, ainsi que les tensions entre les tendances laïque et religieuse. Les spécificités et différences peuvent être regroupées sous des thèmes généraux, comme le montrent à l'évidence deux études de cas, l'Égypte et la Turquie, dont il est question dans ce document.

L'analyse des mouvements féminins en Égypte et en Turquie passe par une brève exploration du contexte historique, c'est-à-dire de la naissance et du développement d'organisations féminines et d'une pensée féministe. La description du contexte historique montre quelle importance il peut avoir pour comprendre les mouvements féminins actuels dans la région. La Turquie, contrairement à l'Égypte, n'a pas été colonisée à l'époque moderne. S'agissant des autres facteurs historiques qui influent sur les paramètres actuels des discours et activités féministes, le kémalisme et l'idéologie propre au nationalisme turc employée par le régime kémaliste se distinguent résolument du nassérisme et des idéologies nationalistes arabes associées à l'État égyptien. Pourtant, dans les deux pays, comme dans beaucoup d'autres régions du monde, les organisations féminines ont été récupérées par l'effort général de modernisation et de développement.

Le contexte contemporain amène à débattre de la topographie propre à la vie politique nationale, qui constitue la toile de fond sur laquelle s'inscrit le militantisme des féministes actuelles. L'auteur prend en considération, non seulement les questions relatives à l'économie politique, aux rapports entre l'État et la société, à la politique des partis, mais aussi le rôle des affiliations et relations internationales. Le mouvement féminin égyptien est marqué par le rôle ambigu de l'État envers les organisations féminines, le développement de la société civile et les sévères restrictions qui lui sont imposées (loi 32), les pressions et attentes internationales, en particulier celles des organisations donatrices, et subit l'influence croissante des islamistes. Dans le cas de la Turquie, le mouvement féminin a pu travailler beaucoup plus au travers des structures et institutions de l'État, notamment des municipalités. Le mouvement féminin turc semble avoir été particulièrement marqué par la polarisation entre les tendances islamiste et laïque, les luttes pour la démocratisation et l'institutionnalisation des activités féministes, ainsi que les débats sur l'héritage kémaliste.

La comparaison des deux études de cas laisse à penser que, malgré des contextes historiques et politiques différents, les mouvements féminins des deux pays ont, ces dernières années, remis en question des notions couramment acceptées de la culture et des institutions politiques. En élargissant le champ d'étude et en se penchant aussi sur le militantisme féministe dans d'autres pays de la région, il apparaît que les mouvements féminins du Moyen-Orient peuvent être un facteur de démocratisation mais sont très limités dans leur action par les structures sociales et politiques en place, le manque d'objectifs institutionnels clairs et de politiques publiques ambitieuses.

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Resumen

Los movimientos de la mujeres en Oriente Medio varían con respecto a trayectorias históricas específicas, así como a ideas y prácticas actuales. Sin embargo, su semejanza radica en que comparten algunos factores históricos y políticos, tales como sus vínculos con movimientos nacionalistas y procesos de modernización y desarrollo, y las tensiones entre las tendencias seculares y religiosas. Al abordarse temas generales, se observan rasgos específicos y diferencias, como resulta evidente en estas páginas, donde se examinan dos estudios de casos – Egipto y Turquía.

El análisis de los movimientos de las mujeres en Egipto y Turquía supone un breve estudio del contexto histórico, es decir, la aparición y el desarrollo de las organizaciones de las mujeres y del pensamiento feminista. Al discutirse el marco histórico, se pone de relieve su importancia continua para comprender los movimientos actuales de las mujeres en la región. A diferencia de Egipto, Turquía no ha sido colonizada en la era moderna. Con respecto a otros factores históricos que influyen en los parámetros actuales de los discursos y actividades feministas, el kemalismo y la ideología específica del nacionalismo turco utilizada por el régimen kemalista difieren rotundamente de las ideologías naseristas y árabes asociadas con el Estado egipcio. Sin embargo, en ambos países, al igual que en muchas otras zonas de la región, las organizaciones de las mujeres participaron conjuntamente en la iniciativa general encaminada a lograr la modernización y el desarrollo.

Con respecto al contexto actual, se discute la topografía política nacional específica, que proporciona el telón de fondo del activismo feminista contemporáneo. Además de las cuestiones relativas a la economía política, las relaciones entre el Estado y la sociedad, la política de los partidos y la legislación, también se considera la cuestión de las afiliaciones y relaciones internacionales. En Egipto, el movimiento de las mujeres está particularmente influido por la actitud ambigua del Estado con respecto a las organizaciones de las mujeres; el crecimiento de la sociedad civil y las severas restricciones impuestas a la misma (ley núm. 32); las presiones y expectativas internacionales, particularmente por parte de las organizaciones donantes; y la influencia cada vez mayor de los distritos electorales islamistas. En el caso de Turquía, el movimiento de las mujeres ha podido colaborar de forma mucho más estrecha a través de las estructuras e instituciones estatales establecidas, particularmente los municipios. El movimiento de las mujeres en Turquía parece haber estado particularmente influido por la polarización entre los distritos electorales islamistas y seculares, las luchas por la democratización y la institucionalización de las actividades feministas, y los debates sobre el legado kemalista.

Al comparar estos dos estudios de casos se observa que, a pesar de los diferentes contextos históricos y políticos, los movimientos en ambos países han desafiado en los últimos años los conceptos imperantes de la cultura política y las instituciones. Al tener una visión más general y considerar asimismo el activismo feminista en otras zonas de la región, resulta evidente que los movimientos de las mujeres en Oriente Medio son agentes potenciales de la democratización, aunque están muy limitados por las estructuras sociales y políticas establecidas, la falta de objetivos institucionales claros y la ambigüedad de las políticas estatales.

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Introduction

This paper reflects on women's movements in the Middle East. In the general context of the region, the case studies of Egypt and Turkey are specific yet illustrative examples of some of the underlying issues, problems, debates and policies that constitute the backdrop of contemporary women's activism. These case studies also reveal that specific historical as well as current conditions shape women's movements and partly account for differences in the Middle East.

The first section of this paper provides a critical discussion of the Middle East as a unit of analysis, followed by a more specific analysis of similarities and differences between women's movements in the region. In the second section, the Egyptian women's movement is analysed in terms of its historical development and current political context, its constituent parts, goals and strategies. Attention is given to the role of both the Egyptian state and international constituencies in shaping and affecting the women's movement. The third section offers a similar analysis in relation to the Turkish women's movement. The paper concludes with a comparison of the two cases in greater detail, and relates emerging issues to more general debates about women's movements in the region.

Between Diversity and Similarity

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

Given this social and cultural fluidity and tremendous diversity, caution has to be exercised before generalizing 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 generalization: “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” (Tucker, 1993a:vii).

Many scholars have argued, however, that the diversity in 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 organization, and much of the literature on women in the area still assumes an “Islamic culture” that has everything to do with gender. In **Women in the Muslim Unconscious** (1984), for example, the Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatema Mernissi argues 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 more recent work Mernissi diverges from these stipulations and argues that Islam was largely distorted by male jurists who wished to attribute misogynist tendencies to Islam that the prophet Muhammad did not possess.

Whatever role is ascribed to Islam with 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 between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims as well as other Muslim groupings, such as the Alawite minority in Turkey. Moreover, women belonging to minority religious groups, such as the Maronites in Lebanon or the Copts in Egypt, are generally exposed to similar or the same cultural and social codes and traditions as their Muslim counterparts of the same social class (Eickelmann, 1998).

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

Linked to the assumption that normative Islamic traditions and customs prevail throughout the Middle East, allowing, perhaps, a degree of local specificity, is the notion of strict sexual segregation. This is 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 Tapper (1979) critically argues, the notion of sexual segregation, which up to a 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 challenged the view that there is 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 dif-

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