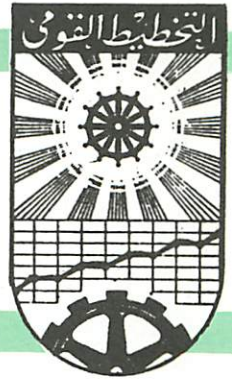


ARAB REPUBLIC OF EGYPT

THE INSTITUTE OF NATIONAL PLANNING



Memo No. 1511

The political Participation of
Egyptian Women

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December 1989

CAIRO
SALAH SALEM St-NASR CITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the political participation of women in modern Egypt. The political participation of citizens (male and female) in Egypt is discussed. The purpose of this is to acknowledge the significance of the political environment or context in which women live interact with work through as citizens. An example for the political participation of female social workers is also introduced.

Introduction

This paper examines the lack of political participation of Egyptian women in the context of general political participation in Egypt today. Also, empirical data are presented for a sample of urban female social workers in Cairo in 1987. The author wishes to contribute to the current debate on how to increase female political participation in Egypt.

II. Political Participation, Definition:

By participation we mean the voluntary work or contribution by citizens in their local community and society as a whole.

Braybrooke simplifies the meaning of participation as follows:

"....to participate is to play a recognized role in a joint human activity." (1975, p.58)

Ladd (1975) links participation with responsibility and argues that:

"Participation arises out of and leads to responsibility. To

participate itself means to become responsible for something or other. In demanding participation the individual claims that s/he needs or ought to have responsibility." (1975, p.103).

In the field of politics, political participation refers to:

"....those activities by citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take." (Verba and Nie, 1972, p.2)

Keim in his analysis for the concept of political participation concludes that:

"....it is not one concept but three, self protection, self rule and self realization". (1970, pp.80-105; 1975, pp.2-20)

In sum,

political participation is citizen participation or involvement in the political arena to share in the political decision making process, to influence the actions which are taken by government and politicians.

Political participation is a phenomenon which is not only related to the individual's personal characteristics but also to the societal context within which it takes place. The following are some examples which clarify how the societal conditions, circumstances, and culture influence political activity:

- (a) the norms of those around an individual is s/he tries to participate;
- (b) the channels of participation might not be clearly visible;

- (c) political structures might be hostile and unresponsive to such participation; and
- (d) the existence of some restrictions which collide with guarantees of free speech and freedom (see Rush and Althoff, 1971, p.106; Verba and Nie, 1972, p.229; Verba, Nie and Kim 1979, p.9).

III. The Political Participation of Women in Egypt:

The low political participation of women in Egypt especially in rural areas has been widely reported (see for example articles by Morshed, 1987; El Hakim, 1987, and studies by Nasr, 1982; Abdel Wahab, 1986; Abdel Wadood, 1987; Abo El Nasr; 1989; ch.7).

Women in Egypt represented 49.35 per cent of the total population in 1986 (CAMPAS, 1987). It means that approximately half of the Egyptian population has a very low level of political participation. In other words, politics as a public activity have been dominated by men in Egypt.

This very low level of women's political participation can be attributed to many factors. In addition to other reasons, which will be mentioned later, important factors are:

First, is the nature of the socialization process. for example; men and women are socialized into believing that men should hold the powerful positions in society. Commonly, parents in Egypt advise their children not to get involved in politics.

Second, some cultural norms dictate that politics is 'man's work' and restrict women to the roles of wives, mothers and political helpmates.

One of the Egyptian women leaders said that:

"....the political parties are structures designed by men where they have determined the rules of the game and where the voice of women is barely heard";

In other words, women are seen primarily as wives and mothers, with a strong emphasis on domestic and not employment duties. This is especially so with women in rural areas, especially in Upper Egypt, where they tend to refrain from commenting on sensitive issues such as sex and political matters.

Third factor is the high incidence of illiteracy among women (10 years and over). For example, in some areas, especially in Upper Egypt female illiteracy was very high (around 80 per cent, U.N., 1981, p.4). According to the 1976 Population Census female illiteracy was about 70 per cent (CAPMAS, 1977) and in the 1986 Population Census (the latest one) the rate was decreased to 67 per cent (CAPMAS, 1987);

Last but not least, women's organizations in Egypt are weak and less organized. Also, these organizations are altered by the change of personnel. In addition, there are no umbrella organizations for them ↵

The following three examples illustrate the low level of political participation of women in Egypt.

1. The present Cabinet of 32 ministers includes only one woman (the Minister of Social Affairs and Social Insurance).

2. Women are poorly represented in the political organizations (e.g. People's Assembly 'Parliament'; Shura, 'advisory' Council; political parties). For example, women have represented between 3 and 5 per cent in these organization

(1)

Only 18 out of 458 (3.9 per cent) are women in the present Parliament (1987-1992). It should be noted that women in modern Egypt were excluded from election to Parliament until 1956. Women are still not well represented among senior decision-

makers in development institutions both at local and national levels.

Table (1) clarifies the poor representation of women in the Parliament in the last seven elections.

Table (1)

Numbers and Percentages of Women who have entered the People's Assembly Council in the Last Seven Elections*.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Proportion %</u>
1957	2	0.6 S
1964	8	1.7
1969	3	0.8
1971	8	2.5
1976	6	1.4
1979**	34	8.7 H
1987/1992	18	3.9

* Sources: - The People's Assembly Council
- Abdel Wahab, 1986

** According to the Sadat Decision (No. 22 for 1979) women in this Election were allocated 30 reserved seats in the People's Assembly Council, accounting for the unusually high figure.

S = Smallest

H = Highest

3. There were only about 3.5 million women, 18 years and over, registered as voters in 1987 (the Ministry of Interior, 1987). They represent only 25 per cent of the 17 million registered voters in Egypt. Also, this 3.5 million women represents only 24.6 per cent of the total number of women in age 18 years and above (approximately 14.21 million in 1986, CAFMAS, 1986).

It can be concluded from these statistics and studies that the level of political participation of women in Egypt is more likely to be very low. However this low level of participation should be viewed in the

context of general political participation in Egypt. It is clearly important to take into account the political environment in which women have to live and work, and next section gives a brief overview of political participation in Egypt and the nature of the present political environment.

IV. Political Participation in Egypt:

Generally the political systems in Egypt and the majority of developing countries (e.g. Sudan, Syria, India) have had low rates of political participation compared for example with the U.S.A.; U.K.; France; West Germany and Sweden. (2) It is important, however, to take into account the particular environment in which various political organizations have to work and to consider the differences between developing and developed countries.

In developing countries, participation may be limited by such factors as the level of literacy; the general problem of communication; and the degree of democracy (including the constitutional and institutional arrangements). In the case of Egypt, the rate of illiteracy is considered high. (3) All the political organizations and all the Government Ministries are concentrated in Cairo, the Capital of Egypt. In addition, there are some political laws in Egypt which might impede full and effective political participation.

There are many articles and studies showing that in general political participation in Egypt is low (see for example articles by Springborg, 1978, pp.275-295; Yassin, 1985; Hafee, 1986; Abou Mandor, 1986; El Gazaly, 1987, and studies by Ganem, 1979; Shehata, 1980 and NCSCR, 1980, 1985, pp.260-285). This low level of political participation in

Egypt may be due to many factors including the following ones:

1. the absence of democracy: for many periods throughout its history Egypt has been subject to colonial rule. Historically, Egypt was invaded by Hyksos, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Saracens, Turks, French and, most recently, the British (The World Almanac and the Book of Facts, 1976, p.212).
2. the introduction of a one-party system (the single mass political organization) from 1953 to 1976, and the absence of any kind of effective opposition during this period (see for example, Halpern, 1963; Binder, 1972; McDermott, 1988).
3. the establishment of the current political parties was from the top down rather than the bottom up, as a grant from President Sadat (see for example, Sadat, 1978; Israeli, 1981).
4. political laws which may restrict the practice of democracy, political participation and the opposition political parties. For example, the following laws may be mentioned: the Emergency Law, the Political Parties Law (No 30, 1981), the Election Law (No 188, 1986) and the Local Administration Law (No 134, 1988).

The Emergency Law in Egypt, for example, provides the authorities with arbitrary powers to arrest and detain suspects or other persons deemed to pose a danger to public order and security and to undertake searches of persons and places. This is a contravention of the provisions of the Law of criminal procedures. Other examples, include the "exceptional" laws in Egypt, in particular Law No. 95 of 1980 known as the Law on the Protection of Moral Values, Law No. 110 of

1980 pertaining to the inclusion of additional criteria for suspicion and Law No. 105 of 1980 on the setting up of State Security Courts (see ADHR, 1987, pp.63-72).

The analysis of the available data may be regarded as a manifestation of the limited political participation in Egypt in general and for women as the half of this society in specific. A brief review of some statistics helps to demonstrate the level of political participation in Egypt. Table (2) demonstrates the level of political participation in Egypt as indicated by the numbers registered and voting.

The table shows that there has been an increase in the number and percentage of citizens registered and taking part in elections. In spite of this, it is significant that still less than a quarter (about 23 per cent) of those 18 years and over participate in the democratic system through voting.

The question now is if such a small proportion of the population 18 years and over participate in voting, which is one of the simplest forms of political participation, we would expect other forms of political participation which need more time, effort and sometimes money, to be low. Milbrath (1965) is helpful here. He pointed out that if a person does not vote, it is highly unlikely that s/he will participate in the other forms of political participation (Milbrath, 1965, pp.17-20).

We may also assume that membership of the political parties is very low. Unfortunately, there is a lack of data concerning the numbers of members in the political parties in Egypt.

Table (2)
Level of Voting in Egypt in the Last Two Elections*

People's Assembly Elections	The Egyptian Population	Number..of Citizens 18 years and over	Number and Percentage of registered Voters	Number and Percentage of Voting
The 1984 Election	46 million	28 million	12 million (43%)	5 million (18%)
The 1987 Election	48 million	30 million	14 million (47%)	7 million (23%)

- Sources: 1. CAPMAS, 1985 and 1988
2. The Ministry of Interior, 1984 and 1987
3. Britannica, 1986, p.667

* All the figures are approximate and percentages are rounded to the nearest one per cent

In sum, the political system in Egypt has had a low rate of political participation and this is very clear in respect of women in this society.

V. A Case Study - Political Participation of Female Social Workers:

This section aims to provide some information or data about the political participation of urban female social workers in comparison with their male colleagues. These data are based on a field study carried out by the author in 1987 of a random sample of 220 professional social workers in Cairo - the capital of Egypt and one of the main urban areas in Egypt (details of the Study can be found in Abo El Nasr, 1989).

Tables 3 and 4 show that male social workers score higher than do their female colleagues in all the items of the Political Commitment Index and the Political Involvement Index. For example, twice as many male social workers voted (26.9 per cent) as female social workers (13.4 per cent).

Clear evidence, also, came from the comparison between male and female social workers in respect of the political activity levels. It is found that the political activity level of male social workers is higher than their female colleagues. Eighty two per cent of female social workers are inactive, compared with only 65.6 per cent of male social workers. Five per cent of female social workers are very active; in contrast; 15.1 per cent of male social workers are very active.

According to the χ^2 results (table 3) there are significant differences between male and female social workers in 2 out of 5 items

Table (3)

Sex BY Political Commitment of Social Workers (N=220)

Political Commitment Index	Male %	Female %	X ² (d.f)	Results P
1. Consider the political arena as a field of social work practice	76.3	59.5	5.87 (1)	N.S.
2. Agree with social workers having political party membership	69.9	62.2	1.08 (1)	N.S.
3. Commitment to the importance of contacting members of political parties	81.7	69.3	15.31 (2)	S*
4. Attitude towards future contact with members of political parties	35.5	52.0	0.00 (1)	N.S.
5. Attitude towards contact again in future	41.9	16.5	3.85 (1)	S*
N =	93	127	Total = 220	

S = Significant
 N.S. = Not significant
 * P<0.05 ** P<0.01

X² = Chi-Square
 d.f. = Degree of freedom
 P = Propability

Table (4)

Sex BY Political Involvement of Social Workers (N=220)

Political Involvement Index	Male %	Female %	X ² (d.f)	Results P
1. The political activity level I - Inactive	65.6	81.9	9.41	S**
II - Active	19.4	13.4	(2)	
III - Very active	15.1	4.7		
2. Voting	26.9	13.4	5.49 (1)	S*
3. Contact politicians	41.9	19.7	11.83 (1)	S**
4. Contact members of political parties	41.9	17.3	17.96 (3)	S**
5. Provide information to members of political parties	10.8	6.3	6.00 (2)	S*
6. Contribute money	0.0	0.0	0.0	N.S.
N =	93	127	Total = 220	

* P<0.05

** P<0.01

of the Political Commitment Index, with male social workers being more committed. The two items are: commitment to the importance of contacting members of political parties, and attitude towards contact again in the future. According to the χ^2 results (Table 4) there are significant differences between male and female social workers in all the items of the Political Involvement Index, except for one, with male social workers having more involvement.

So, it can be said that sex of social workers has a greater correlation with their political involvement than with their political commitment. In other words, the political commitment of female social workers is closer to the political commitment of male social workers. While, the political involvement of female social workers is much less than the political involvement of male social workers.

In general, female social workers show less political commitment and involvement than male social workers. These results are consistent with the discussion which is presented earlier which highlighted the very low level of political participation of women in Egypt.

Similar results, of men being more politically active than women, are found in the following studies:

- (a) Egyptian research studies (see for example, Hassanein, 1982, NCSCR, 1985);
- (b) political participation's research studies in other countries for example in the U.S.A., the U.K., and West Germany (see Almond and Verba, 1963; Kuroda, 1964; Milbrath, 1965; Lazarsfeld et al., 1968; Rush and Althoff, 1971; Stacey & Price, 1981; Randall, 1982).

(c) research studies in other countries but within the social work profession, for example Clark's study in Massachusetts (1964), Epstein's study in New York City (1969) and Cypher's study (1971) in one of the Welsh branches of the British Association of Social Workers.

Clark found that male social workers were more favourable to radical social action strategies for the profession than were their female colleagues (1964, pp.37-38). Similarly, Epstein found that male social workers were more active in both institutionalized and non-institutionalized activism than female social workers (1969, pp.162-165). Cypher argues that women social workers were less radical than men social workers (1975, pp.4-25).

In contrast to the previous findings, Wolk in his sample in Michigan found that social work women on the average were more politically active than men though not significantly so (1980, pp.61-62). Similar findings to the Wolk's study are found in Reeser's study in her national sample for social workers in the U.S.A. (1986, pp.215-221). Reeser explained why her results departed from previous research, in the following way. She argued that women in the U.S.A. have participated in most fields including, the political arena; the last three decades have witnessed the strong growth of the women's movement in America, the establishment of many women's rights groups and participation in the Civil Rights and New Left movements (Reeser, 1986, pp.216-221). Women social workers have been increasingly involved in these developments.

These explanations may fit the position of women in the U.S.A. and the

other developed countries. But most of these explanations do not relate to the actual position and role of women in developing countries, including Egypt.

Nevertheless, it is found also in tables 3 and 4 that there are no significant differences between male and female social workers in four items (4 out of 11 items), three in the Political Commitment Index and one in the Political Involvement Index. This lack of difference may be due to similar professional preparation for men and women, and work in similar organizational and political contexts. This important finding implies that when women have an education like that of men, they will participate politically like men.

In general, a number of writers suggest that the difference in political participation between women and men is gradually decreasing because of industrialization and economic and social modernization (see for example, Almond and Verba, 1963, chapter 13; Milbrath, 1965, p.136).

VI. The Possibility of Increasing Women's Political Participation:

For some time, social scientists, politicians and women leaders in Egypt have been involved in a debate about the low level of women's political participation. Is it the fault of society generally? Is it due to the structure of political organizations? Or is it a lack of awareness, interest or confidence among women themselves?

Some commentators attribute the low level of participation to one or other of these aspects, while others, including the author, lean towards a more comprehensive view that embraces all three.

Those who blame society suggest the following ways of increasing women's political participation:

(a) aspects like socialization process and cultural norms and traditions around women and politics should be changed;

(b) short-sighted views and traditional beliefs about women and politics (e.g. politics is man's work ; Islam does not endorse women's political involvement) should be clarified to remove misunderstanding and distrust about the political ability of women;

(c) the society should give proper and effective effort, time and money in solving the illiteracy problem for females and males in rural and urban areas. This is mainly because there is a close and fairly strong correlation between education and political participation (see for example, Milbrath, 1965; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978); and

(d) the mass-media have a vital role in the process of presenting and clarifying the lack of women's participation, raising consciousness around it for the aim of stimulating and gaining more supporters from women and also from men.

Supporters of the view that political organizations are responsible for the poor political participation by women see this problem as a consequence of the inequality and injustice in society. This is reflected in the unfair distribution of resources, power and participation in decision-making processes between men and women. In other words, they have pointed to the structural features of political life which have excluded women from positions of power and obliterated the history of women's involvement in the political arena.

These supporters see the solution to this problem as follows: the

political organizations should remove any constitutional and institutional arrangements limit and impede a real and effective political participation by women. For example, these organizations and the Government should do their best to repeal the Emergency Law together with any related exceptional laws and introduce new political laws to give more freedom, democracy and participation for both women and men. Also, these organizations should provide equal and fair distribution of chances between men and women in the political arena or field.

Those who blame women themselves suggest the following ways to increase women's political participation:

(a) Women should do a lot in changing their circumstances and working collectively and joining women's organizations. This action will sustain and empower these organizations in their effort in advocating the women's rights, including the political ones;

(b) Women's organizations have a responsibility to raise women's awareness of their rights, including the political ones. Also, these organizations should enter into dialogue with the State, politicians and administrators on matters that affect women's welfare and participation. In other words, women's organizations should contact political organizations regularly and maintain a permanent contact to keep them informed about women's problems, needs and demands, as well as, to exert influence on the decision making processes;

(c) Women's organizations should encourage effective women who have experience in politics, to be candidates, and to support their election campaign to maximise opportunities for the voice of women in

political organizations.

(d) The United Nations Organizations, particularly UNICEF, UNESCO and UNIFEM and other global networks or commissions like those of WICCE, IFN and INSTRAW, can play an important role in developing women's organizations in Egypt especially through research, finance and exchange of experiences.

In sum, carrying out the previously mentioned changes women will themselves - more or less automatically - eliminate all those other negative features that distinguish their present political apathy. In other words, they will create a real and effective political position in the political life and structure for themselves, as men do. Also, political organizations should support and encourage strongly that more women should be represented at all political levels. Finally, women in Egypt should organize themselves and work very hard if women do not take a more active role in politics they will not be able to improve their state and conditions.

After all women do constitute half of Egyptian society.

Notes

1. Katzenstein (1978) reported that only 2% of membership of the national legislatures or equivalent bodies in Egypt were women in 1975.
2. For comparative statistics see Randall, 1982, pp.70-73; Rush and Althoff, 1971, pp.80-86; U.S.A., Minn, Feb. 1986 (the U.S.A.); Abrams, 1962, pp.228-242; R. Rose, 1965; Rush and Althoff, 1971, pp.80-86 (the U.K.); France, IFOP, March-April, 1986 (France); Almond and Verba (1963) compared political participation between the U.S.A.; the U.K.;

West Germany and other countries. Also, Sanzone (1984) compared women in positions of political leadership in the U.K., France and West Germany.

3. The rate of illiteracy on the 1976 census in Egypt and 56.5 per cent in general (70 per cent for females and 43 per cent for males). According to the 1986 census (the latest one), the rate decreased to 49.4 per cent in general (Women and Education, 1985, CAPMAS, 1987).

Abbreviations

AOHR = Arab Organization for Human Rights.

CAPMAS = Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics on the Population of Egypt.

IFN = International Feminist Network.

INSTRAW = International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women.

NCSCR = National Centre for Social and Criminal Research in Egypt.

UNESCO = U N Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNICEF = U N International Children Emergency Fund.

UNIFEM = U N Development Fund for Women.

WICCE = Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange.

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مطبعة معهد التخطيط القومي

