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## Countering Cultural Extremism Women's Empowerment in the Arab-Islamic World Case Study: Egypt

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# COUNTERING CULTURAL EXTREMISM: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE ARAB-ISLAMIC WORLD CASE STUDY: EGYPT

Dina Tawfic\*

**Abstract:** Cultural extremism against women in the Arab-Muslim world impedes genuine effort to prevent and eradicate violent extremism in the region. The current study examines the cultural aspect of extremism against women in the Arab-Muslim world and its irreconcilability with the global spread of secular-based rights enshrined in *The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979.

Taking Egypt as an ideal-typical Muslim majority country, this article addresses the position of women in Arab-Islamic culture and identifies the challenges to accepting women's rights and gender equality as progressive values. Political Islamist groups and Islamic institutions have spearheaded the exclusion of Egyptian women to reinforce the patriarchal system, leading society to normalise aggression and violent acts against women. From that perspective, it is necessary to: 1) understand the recent Egyptian cultural transformation from a secular position to Islamising the societal views of women in the 1970s; 2) explain the complexity of Egypt's contemporary hybrid mainstream culture that combines Islam with Arab-tribal norms; and 3) examine the influence of Egyptian liberal voices.

This article will contribute to understanding cultural extremism in Egypt as a reflective model of the Arab country and the challenges of empowering women. In the end, I suggest a set of policies/recommendations to effectively counter that aspect of extremism, which critically influences all efforts initiated by local and international actors to prevent and counter extremism and violent extremism.

**Keywords:** *women's rights, extremism, culture, political Islam*

## COVERT EXTREMISM: EGYPT'S CULTURAL ASPECT TOWARDS WOMEN

When addressing extremism and violent extremism in Egypt, the first thought that comes to mind is the jihadi militant operations initiated by the Islamic State's affiliate in Sinai. However, covert extremism has become an alarming phenomenon in Egypt, where local culture is

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saturated with Salafi-Wahabi values.<sup>1</sup> The ideology of Wahabism endangers the position of women and normalises violent patterns in society.

Even though the Government of Egypt launched a national strategy to eliminate violence against women in 2015, facts on the ground indicate that Egyptian women continue to survive tough cultural conditions.<sup>2</sup> The following examples further illustrate cultural extremism against women in the country. On 20 June 2022, a young male student slit the throat of his female colleague, Nayera Ashraf, after she reportedly refused his marriage proposal.<sup>3</sup> Footage showed that Nayera was slaughtered and brutally beaten to death in broad daylight in front of the University of Mansoura in Dakahlia governorate, located north-east of Cairo. That incident elicited heavy coverage in local and international media outlets. It revives the debate on gender violence and reflects an important aspect of the societal extremist stance against women.

Strikingly, prominent Islamic scholar Mabrouk Attiya, who appears constantly on Egyptian television channels, reacted to the incident by urging Egyptian women to cover up and be modest so they can protect themselves. On his official Facebook page, Attiya posted a video saying: “You [women] have to put on modest clothes and cover up your hair to avoid being killed.”<sup>4</sup> The statement portrays women’s bodies as shameful and something to hide, otherwise they endanger their safety. It is a coated justification for men to act aggressively against uncovered women.

The incident of Nayera Ashraf is not an individual crime, but several incidents were reported last year (as shown in Figure 1). In February 2022, a widely shared video on social media platforms showed a bride beaten and dragged down streets by her groom on their wedding day in front of pedestrians in Ismailia – a city in north-eastern Egypt.<sup>5</sup> The video elicited two online narratives, with the mainstream voice consenting to the violent act against the bride under the banner that the ‘husband has the right to discipline his woman.’ A few online users/activists, however, vehemently denounced the incident. The worst was that the couple released a video days after their wedding, with the husband justifying that “it is common for men to beat their women in Upper Egypt.”<sup>6</sup> Two months later, another incident took place in a metro station where a veiled woman verbally and physically attacked two young girls because they dressed inappropriately during Ramadan (the fasting month for Muslims).<sup>7</sup> To put it differently, the

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 23–27, 62.

<sup>2</sup> Magda Shahin and Yasmien El-Ghazaly, “The Impact of Notions of Nationalism on Women’s Rights in Egypt,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 17, no. 2 (2017): 180.

<sup>3</sup> “Nayera Ashraf: Egypt Arrests Suspect in Student Killing,” Al Jazeera, June 21, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/21/egypt-arrests-suspect-in-gruesome-student-street-killing>.

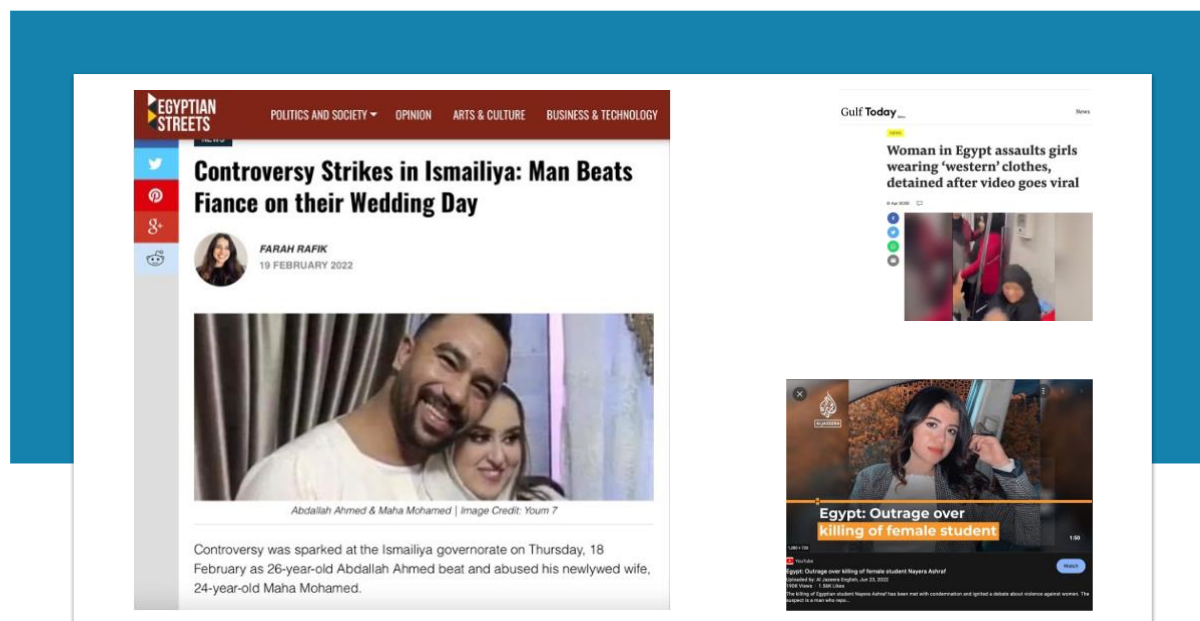
<sup>4</sup> Ashraf Gaber (@SherifGaber), “Either you wear Hijab, or you’ll be Slaughtered just like Naira,” Twitter, 4.44am, June 2, 2022, <https://twitter.com/SherifGaber/status/1539318340354576394>.

<sup>5</sup> “After the ‘Ismailia Bride’ video: Is there a Culture that justifies Violence against Women in Arab Society?” BBC Arabic, February 22, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/interactivity-60482467>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Aya Ashraf, “A Woman Attacks Two Girls in the Metro Video,” Al Watan, April 20, 2022, <https://honna.elwatannews.com/news/details/2141008/بالضرب-والشتم-سيدة-تعتدي-على-فتيات-في-المترو-لبسكم-حرام-فيديو>.

veiled woman was eager to enforce her understanding of religion on others and did not hesitate to use violence to discipline them.



**Figure 1: Media reports on violent acts against Egyptian women in 2022**

Correspondingly, several reports indicate an increase in violence against women in Egypt. For example, the *Observatory of Gender-Based Violence Against Women*, affiliated with the Edraak Foundation for Development and Equality, records 813 cases of violence against women and girls in Egypt in 2021, compared to 415 violent crimes in 2020. In its annual report, the Observatory reports that domestic and partner violence topped the rates of violent crimes, referring to the societal and religious controversy over issuing legislation to criminalise aggression against wives.<sup>8</sup> In 2017, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women released a study on masculinity, concluding that 90% of men in Egypt believe that women must endure violence to preserve the family's survival.<sup>9</sup>

In their study, "Religiosity Conservatism, and Acceptability of Anti-Female Spousal Violence in Egypt," Augustine J. Kposowa and Dina Aly Ezzat examine the cultural dimensions of violence against women. They argue that women in Egypt and Arab countries face increasing pressure in a culture that "devalues them."<sup>10</sup> In a patriarchal society, authoritarian and rigid gender roles dominate, and no matter what the women do "to prove their eligibility as citizens, they always face persecution, as the community looks down on them as

<sup>8</sup> EFDE, "Statistics on Violent Crimes against Women and Girls in Egypt," in *Observatory of Gender-Based Violence Against Women in Egypt 2021* (Edraak Foundation of Development and Equality, 2021), [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1q13Ko6mKe5bfBXbOicjF8P2Q5WWxBbpA/view?fbclid=IwAR3IQ9H5h0UdOSsBh9v0p29pKQHR2peXIPFefNmy67fOs7g2JALIL\\_5B4Q](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1q13Ko6mKe5bfBXbOicjF8P2Q5WWxBbpA/view?fbclid=IwAR3IQ9H5h0UdOSsBh9v0p29pKQHR2peXIPFefNmy67fOs7g2JALIL_5B4Q).

<sup>9</sup> Shereen El Feki, Brian Heilman and Gary Barker, eds., *Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (Images) – Middle East and North Africa* (Cairo and Washington, DC: UN Women and Promundo-US, 2017), <https://imagesmena.org/en/egypt/>.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine J. Kposowa and Dina Aly Ezzat, "Religiosity, Conservatism, and Acceptability of Anti-female Spousal Violence in Egypt," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 34, no.12 (2019): 2543.

inferior.”<sup>11</sup> From a sociological point of view, Maleeha Aslam explains that men may turn to violence when other options to fulfil their masculinity become limited. He points out that men in the Arab-Muslim world face political and economic oppression and marginalisation that questions their masculinity.<sup>12</sup> Aslam says, “In environments of political oppression and economic deprivation, customary and traditional ‘ideals’ for masculinities quite often come under stress,” thereby causing “gender-based disappointments” and “affects men’s behaviors towards women.”<sup>13</sup>

Overall, it is an alarming indicator when society normalises violent aggression against women in favour of men because violent extremism thrives in an environment where radical ideology exists and promotes a shared sense of injustice, exclusion, oppression and humiliation. The pressing questions are: What happened to the Egyptian culture that marked the first feminist movement in the region in the 1920s? Why has it become violent against women? What are the long term consequences?

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Egyptian women led Arab feminism during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1923, Huda Shaarawi, a pioneering feminist leader, took the initiative to establish the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU). It was the first formal feminist organisation where women from the middle and upper classes campaigned for gender equality in education, calling for reforms of personal status law that arranged marriage age, divorce rights and custody.<sup>14</sup> The major mission of the EFU was to raise women’s awareness to achieve political and social equality with men, perceiving women’s rights as an integral part of Egypt’s modernisation.<sup>15</sup> By 1942, the Egyptian Feminist Party had been founded, and in 1948, Doria Shafiq established the organisation Bint al-Nil (daughter of the Nile). These organisations and parties paved the way for radical changes in the Egyptian cultural dynamics towards women in the 1950s.

After the removal of the monarchy in 1952 by a *coup d’état* led by Egyptian Free Officers, the country was transformed from Kingdom to republic in line with restructuring the political and cultural environment under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser (r. 1954–1970). Nasser’s project of Arab nationalism was based on promoting secular values and emphasising national identity. In a televised speech, Nasser mocked the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood for his enquiry to enforce the *hijab* (veil) on Egyptian women. He responded: “You [referring

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Maleeha Aslam, *Gender-based Explosions: The Nexus between Muslim Masculinities, Jihadist Islamism and Terrorism* (United Nations University Press, 2012), 73, 89, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/726747?ln=en>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>14</sup> Rabab El-Mahdi, “Does Political Islam Impede Gender-Based Mobilization? The Case of Egypt,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11, no. 3 (2010): 382.

<sup>15</sup> Nadine Sika and Yasmin Khodary, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Egyptian Women within the Confines of Authoritarianism,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 13, no. 5 (2012), <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol13/iss5/9>.

to the MB leader] have a daughter who is not covering her hair,”<sup>16</sup> adding with a sarcastic smile, “Do you expect me to make ten million women wear hijab, and you could not even make a woman – your daughter – put it on.”<sup>17</sup> This short clip reflects Nasser’s secular approach of ruling the state and countering the Islamism project led by Saudi Arabia and facilitated by the Muslim Brotherhood. In this paper, Islamism denotes the political ideology used by state leaders to consolidate their power and manipulate the public. At the core of his secular project was the empowerment of women. Scholars argue that Nasser and the Free Officers were not intending to grant women political rights. In challenging this narrative, the 1956 Constitution granted Egyptian women the right to vote for the first time in history and to run for public office.<sup>18</sup>

Most importantly, cinema production, which significantly shaped peoples’ culture locally and regionally, used to frame women as influential societal actors. The mainstream narrative promoted by most of the 1950s and 1960s movies was encouraging women to take part in the country’s industrial and national projects. As an example, the Egyptian comedy movie *Lel Regal Fakat* (For Men Only), produced in 1964 and starring Nadia Lotfi and Soad Hosni, revolves around two female chemical engineers who are determined to work like their male counterparts in the desert to explore new oil wells. They defeat several challenges to prove that women are as smart as men and can endure harsh conditions. Another movie, titled *Meraty Moder Aam* (My wife is General Manager), tells a story of an intelligent working wife who is promoted to run a national company that supervises mega projects. Her husband is working under her supervision. The movie, produced in 1966 and starring Shadia and Salah Zulfakkar, highlights progressive thoughts by which men should encourage their competitive wives to advance their careers and achieve progress for the sake of the country’s prosperity. Many other movies address similar themes to modernise society’s understanding and appreciation of the role of women.

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<sup>16</sup> Sixsilentmen, “Egyptian Leader Gamal Abdel Nasser laughing at the Hijab Law in 1958,” YouTube video, 1:56, June 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brIFxRYCggE>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jihan Zakarriya, “Public Feminism, Female Shame, and Sexual Violence in Modern Egypt,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 20, no.7 (2019).



**Figure 2: Snapshots of women in Egyptian dramas during the 1950s and 1960s**

After Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war (*Nekssa setback*), Nasser's modernisation project was thwarted, leading Islamism to dominate the Middle East gradually. By contrast to the Arab nationalism project, Anwar Sadat (r. 1970–1981) approached a different political path of *infitah* (open door policy) in which he liberalised the political arena and eased restrictions on political Islamist groups as well as the Islamic establishment, Al-Azhar. Through Sadat's open policy *infitah*, Islamists and Islamic institutions gained political control over local culture. Sadat aimed to maintain a balance by empowering religious-oriented actors to counterweight Nasserist socialist opposition, which included influential young movements.

In parallel to the *infitah* policy, Saudi Arabia's growing financial power since 1973 facilitated the expansion of the ideology of Wahabism. Saudi's Wahhabism and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood turned out to be active in shaping the socio-political scene in the region, consolidating the patriarchal system, which perceives women's empowerment as a threat in two ways.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, women's rights and gender equality would expose, challenge and dismantle the conservative system that adopts particular aspects of Sharia law (interpretations and teachings of Islamic scriptures by medieval jurists and scholars) as a central source of rulership in most Arab countries, including Egypt. On the other hand, the Arab authoritarian regimes have cultivated the notion that (politicised) Islam should be protected from secular values and foreign innovations promoted by Western liberalism.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry that Unravelling the Middle East* (London: Wildfire, 2020), 193.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.; Kepel, *Jihad*.



**Figure 3: A compilation of images from the *Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *The Cairo Review & Global Affairs* and *Egypt Today* shows the development of Egyptian women through history**

Saudi Arabia poured petroleum dollars into regional and overseas countries to exert its influence. It offered opportunities for Egyptians and Arabs who moved into the Kingdom to be influenced by the country's culture and traditions. After returning home, Egyptian expats brought all of these with them, affecting a large portion of society. Like Saudi Arabia's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, *al-Jamaat al-Islamiyyia* (Islamist Groups IG) in Egypt practised *hesba* (similar to morality police) by punishing those whom they considered as violating the fundamentals of Islam. These groups conducted armed attacks against unveiled women, Coptic Christians and liberal Muslim thinkers who opposed Islamising society, leading Egypt to the second wave of terrorism during the 1990s.

Culturally, *al-Jamaat al-Islamiyyia* had become active actors within the Student Union of Egyptian universities and they successfully promoted their version of Islam.<sup>21</sup> In the 1990s, for instance, there was a systematic campaign to promote the veil as a compulsory religious obligation. The campaign was funded and supported by Saudi Arabia and implemented by senior leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, targeting the lower and middle-upper classes, and used a soft approach to achieve such a goal.<sup>22</sup> "By 1993, dozens of well-known actresses had donned their veil or the niqab and were explicitly spreading their message in weekly religious lectures."<sup>23</sup> The issue here is not about the veil, but it goes beyond that to symbolise the radical cultural shift within Egyptian society and the influence of Arab-tribal culture imported from Riyadh. Nemat Guenena and Nadia Wassef argue that Egypt's public sphere is dominated by "the conservative polemics of the Islamists and the state, in its attempt to contain the Islamists,"

<sup>21</sup> Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 193.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



which has impacted the progress of women's rights.<sup>24</sup> After emphasising women's critical role in society's development in the 1950s and 1960s, all her rights were retracted and limited to how she should dress.

## AL-AZHAR SHAPES THE EGYPTIAN CULTURE TOWARDS WOMEN

Al-Azhar is one of the ancient Islamic institutions in the Muslim world, established in 970/972 CE and promotes itself as presenting moderate Sunni Islam. State leaders throughout the history of Egypt sought religious legitimacy granted by Al-Azhar. The paradoxical relationship between the Islamic establishment<sup>25</sup> and state leaders is beyond the scope of this article, which aims to identify the role of Al-Azhar in immersing local culture with conservative values against women during the 1970s through the 1990s.

The Islamic establishment re-emerged as "one of the principle actors at the center of the religious sphere in Egypt" during Sadat's *infitah* policy by which Al-Azhar "started to gain leverage" and the *ulama* were allowed to freely express their vision and promote their ideology.<sup>26</sup> Under the leadership of Grand Imam Abdel Halim Mahmoud (1910–1978), who mastered the Islamic establishment from 1973 to 1978, Al-Azhar restored its socio-political independence. The influential position of Abdel Halim empowered him to gradually undermine the secular aspects of Egyptian culture. The following demonstrates how Al-Azhar mobilised the Islamic community to fight against women's rights fiercely. It started in 1971 when Egypt was drafting a new constitution, then several "feminist leaders" initiated a debate to reform the Personal Status law, addressing critical issues, such as polygamy, early marriage, divorce and custody of children.<sup>27</sup>

In March 1974, Aisha Ratib (1928–2013), a professor of law at Cairo University and minister of social affairs, formed and led a committee for the revision of the Personal Status law.<sup>28</sup> The committee concluded that the law should be amended and drafted a bill to empower Egyptian women. The bill included articles such as 1) raising the age at which marriage is legally possible to 18 for females and 21 for males, 2) putting restrictions on polygamy, 3) and allowing divorce to take place only in the presence of a judge to prevent verbal divorce that endangers women's rights.<sup>29</sup> The president's wife, Jehan Sadat, wholeheartedly patronised Ratib's endeavours to reform the law and "actively sought to push the proposed law through

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<sup>24</sup> Nemat Guenena and Nadia Wassef, *Unfulfilled Promises: Women's Rights in Egypt* (Cairo: Population Council, 1999), 1.

<sup>25</sup> The Islamic establishment is used interchangeably with Al-Azhar.

<sup>26</sup> Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 193.

<sup>27</sup> John L. Esposito and Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Women in Muslim Family Law* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 58.

<sup>28</sup> Malika Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of Al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952-94)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 3 (1999): 387.

<sup>29</sup> Moshe Albo and Yoram Meital, "The Independent Path of Shaykh Al-Azhar' Abd Al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd," *Die Welt des Islams* 54, no. 2 (2014).

the machinery of parliament.”<sup>30</sup> The *ulama* of Al-Azhar, however, perceived those amendments as challenging the principles of Sharia law.

Grand Imam Abdel Halim and the majority of the *ulama* as well as the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Association – representing Islamic movements – “fiercely opposed” the amendments and mobilised the community to stand against them.<sup>31</sup> Concurrently, Abdel Halim issued 68 fatwas on the Personal Status law and 29 fatwas on the obligations of Muslim women towards their families and society. One of his *fatawa* was titled “the legal age for marriage” (*fi sin al-shari lel zawag*), by which he implied that marriage is allowed at any age, claiming “Islam has not put a specific age for marriage.”<sup>32</sup> The Imam, however, set obligatory conditions for girls to be married: the ability to do household work and give birth.

Al-Azhar succeeded to thwart the Personal Status law’s amendments and parliament disapproved the bill in August 1976. Two years later, shortly after the death of Abdel Halim Mahmoud, Jehan Sadat exerted her power to push parliament to approve the amendments. In a bizarre incident that took place in 1985, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated women protested against the amendments. The protests, led Jad al-Haq, who was appointed as the Grand Imam from 1982 to 1996, sought to abrogate those amendments and revise them in accordance with Abdel Halim’s vision.

Jad al-Haq continued defeating liberal thoughts, particularly those about women’s status in society, under the banner of protecting Islam against deviation. For instance, a CNN broadcast of ‘a shocking’ televised report on circumcision in Egypt in 1993 released “a graphic scene of a ten-year-old girl screaming and kicking as her genitals were cut.”<sup>33</sup> The report triggered outrage reactions, prompting Hosni Mubarak’s (r. 1981–2011) government “to condemn the practice of clitoridectomy.”<sup>34</sup> In contrast, Al-Haq’s Al-Azhar stood strictly and “adamantly defended the practice.”<sup>35</sup> He issued a fatwa, stating: “If girls are not circumcised as the Prophet Muhammad said, they will be subjected to situations that will lead them to immorality and corruption.”<sup>36</sup> The fatwa lacked any scientific evidence to support al-Haq’s opinion, neglecting the death toll of young girls as a result of this irreligious cultural practice.

Since then, Al-Azhar has become much more active in promoting “conservative Islam.”<sup>37</sup> Al-Azhar *ulama* were allowed by Mubarak’s regime to dominate the Egyptian mainstream media, promoting their ideas and teachings of Islam among the public. In 1985, Egyptian state television channels allocated “nearly 14,000 hours” of peak airtime to broadcast Islamic TV shows presented by the senior *ulama*.<sup>38</sup> One of these *ulama* was Muhammed Metwalli Sharawi,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>31</sup> Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt,” 387.

<sup>32</sup> Abdel Halim Mahmoud, *Fatawi al Imam Abdel Halim Mahmoud: Part II* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’aref, 2002), 132.

<sup>33</sup> Tamir Moustafa, “Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 1 (2000): 13.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt,” 389.

<sup>38</sup> Kepel, *Jihad*, 281.

a prominent scholar and minister of endowments (from 1976–1978), who moved to Saudi Arabia in 1950. He is known for his hostile statements against Coptic Christians, women's rights and modern sciences. In a televised video, Sharawi limited the woman's role "to satisfying her husband's sexual needs," adding that "women should not complain if husband physically or verbally assaults her."<sup>39</sup> He played a significant role in cultivating Egyptian religious culture from the 1970s through the 1990s.

Moreover, when Al-Azhar's Ulama Front returned to the political scene in 1992 after being suspended under Nasser's era, they promoted similar beliefs adopted by the political Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Ulama Front was established for the first time in 1946 and included a group of "conservative Azharite ulama" to combat liberal thinkers, such as influential writer and intellectual Taha Hussein (1889-1973), who proposed to dissolve Al-Azhar University during the rule of Nasser.<sup>40</sup> In 1994, the Ulama Front echoed the fears of the Muslim Brotherhood against the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development. The Egyptian government hosted a conference where 180 countries met to discuss a draft resolution for avoiding population explosion. The Ulama Front and Al-Azhar chieftdom perceived the conference's draft resolution as "anti-Islamic" because it advocated birth control, women's right to abortion, homosexual rights and criminalising female genital mutilation (FGM).<sup>41</sup>

The majority of Al-Azhar senior *ulama* continued to promote radical thoughts on women, with some limiting her contribution to domestic roles, restricting her freedom of choice and perceiving her as a supplement actor to her male counterpart. Hala Shukrallah puts it succinctly,

Women's expanding roles and integration into public life was in the past closely connected with the process of modernization, as well as with secular nation-building. The weakening of the religious hierarchy and its control on society and the creation of secular institutions allowed women to have space outside the direct control of the patriarchal community. With the growth of the Islamic movement, this space created by the state was challenged.<sup>42</sup>

Al-Azhar and other Islamist actors significantly contributed to immersing Egypt into the Arab-Islamic patriarchal culture. Additionally, these Islamist actors, representing different shades of Islamism, have managed to silence/intimidate liberal voices since the 1990s, including Egyptian feminists who seek to revolutionise society's culture and root out radical thoughts against women.

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<sup>39</sup> Maspero Zaman, "Sharawi Interview on Marital Life Matters," YouTube video, 19:59, December 3, 2018, <https://youtu.be/xTWW23V2uSg>.

<sup>40</sup> Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 390.

<sup>41</sup> Moustafa, "Conflict and Cooperation," 13.

<sup>42</sup> Hala Shukrallah, "The Impact of Islamic Movement in Egypt," *Feminist Review* 47 (1994): 26.

## REVOLUTIONISING EGYPTIAN CULTURE TOWARDS WOMEN'S STATUS

Some Egyptian liberal thinkers and intellectuals sought to battle that project of Islamising society. One of the controversial advocates who fiercely stood up for women's rights was a physician and writer Nawal el-Saadawi, who believed that patriarchy and gender inequalities are alien elements in Egyptian identity. She is famous for saying: "if the power of religious groups increases, so does the oppression of women. Women are oppressed in all religions."<sup>43</sup>

Despite her biased generalisation and inaccurate correlation between religions and women's oppression, Al-Saadawi revolutionised the mainstream discourse that devalues the role of women in society. She depicts Al-Azhar as "a dangerous reactionary force," citing the Islamic establishment's stance towards gender equality, shaming women in rape incidents and FGM.<sup>44</sup> In her books, she addresses controversial issues that most Egyptians perceive as "taboos," such as Al-Mar'a *wal Jins* (The Woman and Sex), which was banned for nearly two decades. In it, Al-Saadawi was combatting the violence committed against women, including FGM, virginity tests and honour killings. She further talked about her personal experience as an FGM survivor. Ironically, after publishing her book, she was dismissed from her position in the Ministry of Health. In another book, titled *Suqut al-Imam* (the Fall of the Imam), she addresses the patriarchal system in Egypt and questions the credibility of religious authority. In response, Al-Azhar used its authority of censorship, granted by article 17 of Executive Regulations of the 1961 law of Al-Azhar, to ban the book.

Inspired by her school of thinking, a young generation of women advocates has become active in working at grassroots level, taking action to correct society's radical culture that endangers women's rights. As an example, Nadeen Ashraf launched an account on Instagram under the name of *Assault Police* in 2020 to bring justice to women who are raped or sexually harassed by exposing the perpetrators. *Assault Police* has become an influential resource, educating its growing influencers across the Middle East on concepts such as legal protection for women. The Instagram account is now widely associated with the #MeTooMovement in Egypt. Ashraf's initiative breaks up the taboo, encouraging female victims to report any act of violence committed against them. Most importantly, they become aware that sexual harassment (verbal or physical) and domestic violence clearly violate her humanity and would lead to disastrous consequences.

## CONCLUSION: RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICIES

Women are game changers in a state's preventing and countering violent extremism policies and programs. A study by the Institute for Inclusive Security shows, based on interviews in 30

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<sup>43</sup> Homa Khaleeli, "Nawal El Saadawi: Egypt's Radical Feminist," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/apr/15/nawal-el-saadawi-egyptian-feminist>.

<sup>44</sup> Margot Badran, "Nawal El-Saadawi: A Fearless Feminist without Borders," blog post, Wilson Center, March 8, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/nawal-el-saadawi-fearless-feminist-without-borders>.

countries in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, women are often “the first to stand up to terrorism” because they are among the first targets of extremism, which places them in the front-line in the struggle against violent extremism.<sup>45</sup>

The dilemma, however, lies in the fact that many policy initiatives and programs, aimed at empowering women in countering extremism and violent extremism, are often based on an unrealistic view regarding gender equality and women’s rights. To practically address the issue, policymakers should be aware that violence against women is covert extremism that facilitates and polarises the entire community. Violence against women exists everywhere, but women’s rights status in the Middle East, North Africa and Egypt, mainly, is much more deteriorated and protected under the name of politicised religion.

I suggest a set of policies to counter cultural extremism. Inspired by the whole society approach, I strongly recommend that all state and societal actors be involved in countering cultural extremism in Egypt. To begin with, state and Islamic religious institutions should review their ideology towards women’s empowerment and assess their policies. Religious cultural extremism can be radically eliminated by promoting moderate teachings of Islam, using positive narratives and stories from Islamic scriptures that praise and empower women’s rights, such as the story of the Prophet’s wife, Khadija, who was a successful businesswoman.<sup>46</sup> Inseparably, it is crucial to revive the door of *ijtihad* (reasoning approach), which provides rational and time-related laws based on understanding and analysing the Islamic scriptures. Also, women must play a role in reforming religious discourse, correcting misconceptions about women’s rights in Islam and actively engaging with the process of interpretations of Islamic scripture.

On a state level, women’s rights in Egypt must not be seen in isolation from the rights of other citizens. There should be a strategic plan to modernise and reform the educational system and enhance the culture by re-presenting role models of women in Egyptian dramas and movies. Finally, human activists, women and liberal Muslims should orchestrate their efforts to counter the mainstream cultural extremist thoughts against women.

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<sup>45</sup> Marie O’Reilly, *Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies* (Institute for Inclusive Security, 2015), <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Why-Women-Brief-2020.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Irum Saba and Khadija Bari, “The Role of Women in Business and the Life of Khadija,” in *Economic Empowerment of Women in the Islamic World: Theory and Practice*, ed. Toseef Azid and Jennifer L. Ward-batts (London: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2020), 85.

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