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ALEKSANDR FILONIK, VERA BATURINA. EGYPT: THE FIRST STEPS OF FEMINISM

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Abstract. The article analyzes issues related to changes in the situation of Egyptian women over the course of about two decades from the beginning of the July Revolution to the end of its stage associated with the Nasser regime. Egypt, embodying the avant-garde of the Arab world, became the first Arab State to abandon the traditional belittled interpretation of the role of women in society and constitutionally confirmed their equal rights with men. Women have actively shown themselves in the struggle for the country's independence from Britain and demonstrated their willingness to be full-fledged participants in national events on an equal basis with men. The emotional explosion of their social discontent culminated in the creation of the Union of Egyptian Feminists on their own initiative and the efforts of a small group of advanced Egyptian women who conducted educational work in the women's environment and outside it, spreading the ideas of gender equality, speaking out against insulting their human dignity and humiliation in everyday life. A separate topic was the overcoming of illiteracy and women's education, which was subsequently focused on by the regime that emerged in the wake of the July Revolution, which simultaneously initiated measures in the economy, creating the public sector and limiting private capital. Amid the aggravation of social contradictions, the ideas of feminism did not receive support from the state, and the Women's Union was transferred to the government, becoming one of the conductors of the policy of the ruling party.

Egypt is the largest country in the Arab East that has been considered the center of the Arab world since ancient times. It has a rich pharaonic and medieval culture, combining the Islamic heritage and certain secular principles that are quite similar to the European way of thinking and are based on the national priorities. These ideas are fully internalized by Egyptians and are

preserved in the people's memory, inspiring patriotism in the country.

In 1919, there was a powerful upsurge of the national movement in Egypt against British rule. The struggle unfolded both in cities and in rural areas, with all segments of the population taking part in it; women also turned out en masse. In 1922, through their joint efforts, they achieved recognition of Egypt's independence from Britain.

These two years inspired women, whose contribution to the protests was commensurate with the victory, raising their hopes for further changes in their destinies. Spontaneously bursting to the surface, women's enthusiasm indicated their disagreement with the rules that were inherent in Egyptian society and regulated everyday life. Activism united the women to some extent, preparing them for the next phase, namely the struggle for equality, dignity and recognition of their civil rights; it also demonstrated the need for formalization of their activities.

Moreover, Egyptian women of the educated class shared the desire to defend the rights of their country and their own. They were familiar with the slogans of European feminism, which emerged half a century before becoming known in Egypt; though women shared the ideas of feminism, they did not promote them. The proclamation of independence and noticeable enthusiasm among the masses prompted the most ardent supporters of women's rights to create the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923. The new movement seized the initiative from the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC), an organization that was founded in 1920 and had ties to the party. Having gained more influence, the EFU was speaking on behalf of Egyptian women. It was a significant landmark that emphasized the popularity of national sentiments and the readiness of the most active highborn women to resist opponents of women's liberation. This campaign was associated with Huda Sha'arawi, a public figure who founded and led the organization. In 1924, Egypt became the first Islamic country where women

stopped wearing the hijab, which was perceived as a step towards emancipation.

The starting point for the emergence of the “women’s agenda” in Egypt, which was not yet fully formed, was the issue of the education of school-age girls, which at first was not considered a prime necessity by the overwhelming majority of society. However, the idea was latently maturing, gradually gaining supporters, which was due to objective factors. The first endeavours of providing education for girls were made during the time of Khedive Ismail in the 1870s. The educational process was very selective and available to a small number of school-age girls from a non-elite segment of society; in classes, they received a minimum of everyday knowledge, which was considered sufficient. Over the half-century since the beginning of the educational process, schools of foreign missions, as well as Egyptian fee-paying schools had joined the practice; at first, even in the cities, there were few schools for boys that were also joined by schools for girls from non-elite class.

This undertaking was a significant innovation for ordinary people and was not accepted as a feasible way to benefit Egyptian society. Schools for girls were not immediately perceived as a common and natural thing, rather than some kind of tribute to Europeanism or a whim encouraged by foreigners. Nevertheless, the issue still remained and developed at an extremely slow pace, since the need for people educated to a higher standard was not deemed as urgent. Education was not mandatory, and common people were quite satisfied with some of their sons being able to read; as for daughters, they were even less likely to be educated. Much later, only by the beginning of the last century, schooling expanded, becoming more accessible for girls; however, only at the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, primary education became mandatory due to the growing need for more or less literate personnel.

Appealing to the youth became the order of the time under the influence of ideas that penetrated Egyptian society through

the contacts of Egyptian intellectuals with foreigners and through the British administration. One way or another, the British diversified their methods to exploit the country through cultural channels. They provided access to new phenomena that emerged in Europe and became also known in the colonies. In the same manner, European feminism paved its way to Egypt, where this movement was seen as a means of opposing social injustice towards women, while British policies were regarded as related to the conservation of this injustice.

As far as Egypt is concerned, these ideas stirred Egyptian society that was already restless and stressed-out because of the unfolding events. They were associated with the consolidation of the influence of foreign capital in Arab territories after the end of the First World War, with the spread of reform ideas and revolutionary sentiments, and finally, with the impact of gradual transition to capitalism. It should be noted that capitalism introduced the notion of feasibility and new workforce requirements into Egyptian practice, making place for women as living labor. Educated Egyptian women were also invaluable sources of exciting information. In the enlightened part of their social circle, they spread information about European activists who agitated the social atmosphere in their homeland by raising various issues, including equal education for men and women. In light of such developments, Egypt was now facing new prospects for the future.

At that time, the awakening of Egyptian women could be understood as a dawning awareness of their importance for society, and as a request for respect and dignity. However, it should probably be noted that such thoughts were not particularly widespread and circulated among those women who were more prepared to embrace them. Needing an outlet, these feelings and sentiments brought Egyptian women closer to the European feminist movement. Appearing in the middle of the 19th century, the feminist movement in Europe began to draw keen attention of the Western public to its activism near to the

beginning of the 20th century. News about the actual activities of the movement and its ideas reached Egypt with a delay. However, from that time on, the women's movement in Egypt began to imitate the first feminists, though it did not have a European scope or hype. It is very likely that the basis of the social base of Egyptian feminism were those women who were the first to remove their hijabs. Although there is no reliable evidence, such actions seem quite natural for the situation at the time, marked by the enthusiasm of the most active Egyptian women who found a platform to express their hopes.

The idea of full education for school-age children was one of the major objectives of the Egyptian Feminist Union. Moreover, the founders of the Union were from the elite social class; they believed that slogans of the liberation of women and the introduction of suffrage had no future unless it was coupled with the demand for full education and health care for women and children, as well as a revision of the personal status law and the ban on prostitution.

In fact, the Union being a public organization did not utilize feminism as a weapon. Voting rights for women were hardly a political issue, but rather a social justice issue that was not some kind of a trigger for class antagonism. In other words, the Union did not set itself purely feminist tasks, but instead called for the emancipation of women, without claiming to fulfil all the demands of feminism that sought to challenge men and achieve equality with the opposite sex. It is obvious that other local women's organizations could hardly cover a wider range of issues and focused on smaller tasks, contacting only with local village chiefs (*omda*).

The Women's Union, in the modern sense of the term, could hardly become an influential political entity. It was a formal association of women who sincerely sought to improve the quality of life of Egyptian society by unlocking the political potential of females. It seems that the Union succeeded in indirectly changing suffrage and prohibiting prostitution; it

joined the course of the Egyptian revolution, whose leadership came to the conclusion that it was necessary to support changes in the "women's sphere". Some major changes occurred only two years after the revolution, in 1956. However, there was no reform of family legislation and the law on personal status remained the same, as did the provisions on polygamy and the right of men to file for divorce without the consent of the wife. [6] But even this progress showed that by the middle of the last century the organization was well known and could achieve decent results because, among other things, their objectives were the call of the time. But overall its influence remained limited and initiatives did not quite resonate with women for several reasons. On the one hand, the Union's activities were hampered by the idea of the place and role of women in Egyptian society in general; on the other hand, in Muslim society, activists personified secularism and promoted European values, which left the overwhelming majority of Egyptian women unsympathetic.

In 1948, a more radical and true feminist Doria Shafik established the Bint Al-Nil Union, which staged several spectacular protests. The intense of them was in 1951 when 1500 city women in semi-military uniforms managed to interrupt the parliament, demanding recognition of their rights yet receiving no answer. Six months before the 1952 revolution, she and her supporters also shut down a brunch of Barclays Bank, which was a symbol of English rule in Egypt. [2]

After the revolution that happened in July of the same year, the country faced a slew of economic, political and social challenges. The country also had to address antiquated matters that were clearly becoming an anachronism in a new round of history, contradicting the new outlook on society and its institutions and understanding of the role of the state. The revolution played an outstanding role in the development of the country and society and, naturally, left an imprint on the minds of a considerable number of men and women.

Doria Shafik perceived the revolution as a sign of the immediate start of a renaissance for Egyptian women. When it never happened, she accused Nasser of dictatorship, for which she was punished by house arrest. She then carried out several hunger strikes and was persecuted, and the feminist organization seized to exist. [2]

At the beginning of his reign, Nasser responded to the demands of the EFU, granting women, in addition to the right to vote, some political and economic rights, equal opportunities for education and health care, and access to the labour market on an equal basis with men. But at the same time women did not receive full rights to participate in public life. "Women in the private sphere remained subservient to men, and family laws remained untouched." [5]

At the time of political instability, Nasser probably dared not destroy all the foundations of the traditional way of life, which facilitated the functioning of the system and at the time fit the development of the productive forces in general. He chose not to cause turbulence in society, a large segment of which was loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, there was no goal to entirely abandon traditional forms of economic management that were especially characteristic for outlying areas where the level of citizenship and consciousness was stagnant, with people guided mainly by their immediate needs and interests.

In such a situation, it was impossible to rally women enough in order to engage them in reformatory activities en masse in such a way that could promote the involvement of the fairer sex in a more diverse socially useful labour than housekeeping. There clearly was no plan to destroy the concept of domestic housekeeping due to the outflow of women, but after welcoming the victory of the national liberation revolution, the society felt that women needed to be "awakened" and get involved in a more productive work.

It is obvious that by that time the EFU had fulfilled its historical function of mobilizing women during the transition

period from royal to authoritarian power; the organization no longer fit into the new era in which its activities were unnecessary. The Union was transformed into a charitable organization and placed under government control, just like other women's groups were brought into direct contact with government agencies. In addition, women's rights became part of a broader government development strategy within the framework of state authoritarianism. As a result, state feminism under the Nasser regime made women economically independent, but left them dependent on the state in terms of employment opportunities, availability of important social services, i.e. education, health care and kindergartens; the same applied to political orientation. At the same time, state feminism created a system of social patriarchy that did not challenge women's personal and family lives.

As a result of a change in social and organizational "allegiance", women found themselves in a situation where male arbitrariness was replaced by an administrative guidance from the state that was benign on the outside, but rather harsh on the inside. Behind it was not so much concern for women's life situation as control over their ability to meet the job requirements and perform their duties in the workplace. However, there is reason to believe that since job opportunities were scarce, teaching women socially useful work and discipline was not the primary goal of liberating them from a patriarchy. It was more likely done to ensure their acceptable attitude towards power, given the high political and protest potential of women prior to and during the struggle against English rule.

In other words, unlike earlier, government supervision of the women's movement was predetermined by the policy of establishing state control not only over the economy, but also over significant entities, such as trade unions, youth organizations and, naturally, women's movement; the latter had access to virtually all segments of society and could influence the minds of people, spreading an ideology that may not be in line

with the state course regarding development and mobilization of human potential. In general, such a policy was justified, since it was necessary to maintain power in the country during a difficult political period in Egypt and the whole region.

Judging by the results of the early period of the women's movement, we can say that it had a very definite impact on the lives of Egyptian women, working to give them a new beginning to the best of its abilities. However, the area of its activities was quite limited and did not reach the bottom of society. That period in Egypt was a time of many initiatives, new parties, clubs and groups of various directions that offered their own opinions of the present and prospects for the political development of the country. Alas, they never gave much thought to the place of women in these processes and the problems of gender inequality.

The fact that the situation with women was a side issue, rather limited popularity of the ideas of women's emancipation and the lack of skills in managing large processes hindered the feminists' activities, thus undermining the development of an agenda that could have been as good as those of more influential structures, i.e. political parties. Articles in the press by individual supporters of women's liberation from patriarchal household rules and speeches by a few women's activists did not solve the problem, although they made quite an impression on the reading public. However, these demarches and women's enthusiasm alone were clearly not enough to gather political forces, much less to become strong enough to actually guide the women's movement or at least bring together a group of supporters capable of actual systematic work among the women's masses.

Nevertheless, the organization's leaders set the goal of the women's movement that was parallel to the official point of view. Having found its place in the Egyptian political agenda, the problem of women did not become a core issue at that time, but gained recognition and inspired many women with various speeches by female activists. In any case, the presence of female-led initiative that was claiming its own place in the political life of

Egyptian society reminded the politicians of another potential candidate for a place in the political establishment. In the future, this contender could have gained strength and influence, announcing its claims and interests with greater determination than one might have thought. However, this did not happen by force of circumstances.

As the new leader of Egypt, Nasser proposed a quite controversial political initiative at the time, suggesting that society take into account the fate of women, granting them legal protection at least partially. Egyptian women gained some guarantees against certain situations that arose as a result of total disrespect for gender equality and women's rights, the lack of response to which had practically become a custom in Egypt.

The 1956 Constitution prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, and the 1962 Charter affirmed that women should be treated as equals to men and could throw off any remaining shackles that limited their opportunities to make a real contribution to improving the lives of people in the country. [4] The Charter also proclaimed that "the family unit is basic for society and must be fostered". [1] Some provisions of labor legislation were also adjusted in the interests of women.

The majority of the country's male population had a hard time accepting the ideas of equality. Egyptian women, on the contrary, received the news with great enthusiasm that was supported by feminist organizations in the West, who leapt at the chance to expand their influence to such a promising state as Egypt. It was due to the fact that Egypt had authority in the Arab world and was quite popular with many women in the Arab East after recognition of the rights of the weaker sex.

With these decisions, the Egyptian revolution undoubtedly taught the Arab Ummah a lesson of sorts, showing that it was not Islam that put women in disadvantage but institutions that began to dominate society and its female half after being nourished by the peculiarities of Arab Bedouin life for centuries.

Mobilization of the women's movement was not a quick process due to the pressure of traditions, time-honoured legal norms and many things that governed the life of women both in cities and in remote villages, where morals were even stricter. Under these conditions, it is not only state support that determines the level of activity of the female population. There is also a question of whether the community considers itself to be a free subject, and is able to encourage women to achieve goals within the framework of its "subjectivity" and to set the bar high enough by assessing their capabilities.

Indirectly, this may be evidenced by the example of Sudan, where a survey of men and women from the working quarters of Khartoum was conducted in the 1950s. Respondents were asked to choose up to two simple life priorities out of five given in the survey; the interviewers were especially interested in the gender-specific reactions to the question of haremlik. As a result, most men were thrilled with the option to build a wall in the house, providing a separate space for women to ensure their solitude; however, women themselves were much less enthusiastic about this, expressing their interest in a separate house altogether [3] but at the same time not outright rejecting the idea haremlik.

This fact is, in itself, rather interesting, but does not answer the question of what the respondents were thinking when delivering their "verdict". Women's opinion was intriguing: they either simply desired life's comforts, or they couldn't find it in themselves to abandon the old way of life and risk getting lost outside of it, or they were afraid of difficulties without male protection. Most likely, that was a combination of the three reasons, since the experience of "women from the lower classes" did not allow for other arguments given their consciousness, upbringing and feelings that were predetermined by the historical memory of the past generations of women.

That is not a unique case and, it seems, it can be extrapolated without any special reservations on other countries with a similar way of life, and even more so on Egypt. Sudan

obviously differs from the neighbouring state in a number of parameters. However, one should take into account their existence as part of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, emphasizing their African kinship, which is determined by similar psychological types and sociocultural features, as well as religion. Finally, the time of the survey is also important, since at that time there was not such a great discrepancy in economic development between the two countries. Also, respondents most likely were unfamiliar with feminist ideas, thus nullifying the possibility of an insincere answer.

Another attempt to gauge the attitude of women to freedom and the right to choose was made with the use of simple questionnaires that were supposed to evaluate the readiness of the respondents to change their living conditions. One of them was conducted among Arab students and touched on the subject of marriage. The result showed that young women were no more interested in marriage than young men, since at least 40 per cent of them expressed such an opinion. And another survey revealed that between 1952 and 1956 the number of women who preferred marriage to two other alternatives decreased from 57 to 41 per cent. [3]

In general, the given figures are informative, but can hardly be considered representative due to the narrowness of the social base and a small number of respondents. Nevertheless, they showed that old standards of women's behaviour were collapsing, and the trend might be associated with revolutionary events in Egypt, which gave impetus to the recognition of a woman's independence in Arab society. The reaction to the new possibilities may indicate that at least a part of women from different segments of society were internally ready or almost ready to change their living conditions, which was exactly what the survey was meant to determine.

It can also be assumed that the answers could have been inspired by feminist ideas, especially if you consider that students are usually more aware of the matters that do not

interest the general public (and even more so the public clinging to outdated concepts). Indeed, in the absence of mass means of communication, quality information about the female movement abroad could hardly reach the East in the amount necessary to win women over. In addition, it was not widely available due to widespread illiteracy, particularly among women. It is also obvious that the Arab Socialist Union in Egypt did not encourage any ideas of feminism and especially disapproved of Western feminism, considering it the destructive version, which did not correspond with the interests of the new Egyptian state.

The reasons for the awakening of female consciousness can be found within Egypt itself, in its post-war atmosphere and in the activation of national and patriotic sentiments (in connection, for example, with the Tripartite Aggression or the 1967 Arab-Israeli War), in the awakening of social thought and in society's growing interest in foreign policy processes and domestic political developments. It was a time when the country was freed from a foreign presence and began to search for its own ways and methods of development, based on the foundation that was in line with the requirements of time and realities of the New Egypt, as well as the ideas of its leadership for the country's near future.

It seemed that in the time of changes, tensions and Nasser's policy "curbing" the female issue in order to avoid turning it into a potent political trigger, feminism had little prospects in Egypt in the foreseeable future. But it did not mean that the female movement had exhausted its capabilities, which was later proved by turbulent events in Egypt's society, when women proved to be a rather spontaneous, but very powerful soft force. Such demonstrations indicate the hidden potential of the female masses that are capable of a great deal when facing direct threats caused by blatant social injustice or fraught with the return of oppressive patriarchy imposed on the female part of the population.

The Nasser regime took important but half-way measures in order to improve the situation of women, only partially

resolving their problems and setting aside other sensitive issues that still vex the female population. The suppression of feminism as a movement incompatible with the authoritarianism, even though it never could have become a weapon against the regime, left women to struggle with many difficulties generated by gender inequality.

There is neither radical feminism, nor harmony in Egypt's society. It is due to the fact that in terms of tensions in social relations, the contradictions between the male and female principles remain insurmountable.

The country faces two almost equal trends that affect the status of women, complicating things further. One of them is associated with the growth of education and cultural level of the population, including women, as a consequence of modernization processes in society altering the mind-set and reorienting it towards new values. The other is fuelled by the support of still influential conservative forces, including Islamist ones; looking back, they see bonding values that protect society from collapse and at the same time preserve the retrograde vision of a woman's place in life. It seems that both approaches are balanced out, but this outward calm is filled with profound contradictions that can result in an unpredictable and serious confrontation. It is especially possible if the balance is upset by fateful events, where women "play a hunch" and act not as feminists but as patriots, divided along party lines and forgetting about their differences with men for the sake of the victory of common sense.

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