

THE MOSLEM WORLD: THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS

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FROM OLD DOGMAS TO NEW REALITIES (Part 1)

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*Abstract. The article makes an attempt to assess some aspects of
the women's issue in Egypt, which historically occupies a leading place
in the Arab East, reproduces almost the entire range of problems related
to gender issues in this region, and enjoys great authority in the Arab
environment, being the largest center of Islamic ideology and source*

dissemination of Islamic culture and ethics. The opinions of some prominent Egyptian authors on the role of religion in Arab society, the formation of Islamic consciousness and behavioral stereotypes, which today determine the views, approaches and interpretations of the Egyptians of the norms that form the basis of the attitude of the Ummah to such concepts as marriage, family, gender relations, rules of interpersonal communication in everyday life. The state policy implemented in line with the "Women's Empowerment Strategy 2030" is examined. The large-scale tasks that are set for society are assessed, from overcoming the degraded position of women to focusing them on active participation in the development of the country, including through adaptation to the modern way of life in the process of overcoming survivalist models of family structure and life and further strengthening the nuclear family, as the most coinciding with the modernization course of the state.

Islam, as an ideological and historical phenomenon, became a spiritual force that inspired its followers, endowing them with the desire to spreading of faith, to cultural consolidation, and economic integration. The basis of the Moslem community is a family, and Islam initially encourages and calls Moslems to strengthen this main support so that the environment, saturated with challenges and threats could survive more reliably. To resist these challenges and threats was possible only by the collective efforts of the whole Ummah.

The importance of this circumstances for the spread of the religion itself, the influence of which was growing as the activity of the enlarged Moslem communities, inspired by the power of the religious call and the convincing of the postulates, oriented believers to increase their ranks, as the guarantee of success and prosperity, increased is great.

This approach did not become obsolete to this day, although the material conditions for the existence of the Arab population underwent a serious evolution compared to the past historical period. But in the present, there are a number of

representatives of religious thought, who attach great importance to this topic precisely in connection with the need for the Arab world to accumulate human resources, which are perceived in historical retrospective as a guarantee of state power strengthening. The basis for the promotion of this maximum is the fact that from the early eras of human civilization the strongest were those that had a great human potential, which had a pronounced tendency to growth.¹

The entrenched idea of unlimited population growth is facilitated by the fact that in the domestic perception of the people, historical precedents are perceived as a given and root so that they become an axiom. On such an unshakable background, overcoming the consequences of the accumulated experience is given. An example is the long-term calls of the Egyptian authorities trying to convince the population of the need to reduce the high rate of birth rate. On this basis, there are serious contradictions between the awareness of the consequences of the influence of demographic complications on the ability of the state to function in the conditions of an endless deficit of food, land and water resources, on the one hand, and the need to take into account the current religious motives that do not meet the requirements of the present day, on the other.

For a long time, the problem of growing birth rate with really decreasing mortality conflicts with economic problems, threatening serious complications in ensuring the viability of the state. Against this background, the question of limiting the birth rate and its regulation has become the subject of special attention in the society.

These two concepts are initially given great importance. The first appears in the form of a restraining principle and is not rejected by Sharia, but is considered as a kind of auxiliary measure, depending only on the desires and intentions of married couples to have one or another number of children. The second concept is interpreted as a sin that contradicts the principles of Islam, for the ban on childbearing is rejected for

religious reasons². Following religious imperatives obliges to perceive them as the dominant support of Islamic consciousness and the base of behavioral stereotypes. It should be remembered that a unilateral approach to the issue can interfere with the real assessment of the prospects of the current demographic situation in those Arab countries where, in fact, spontaneous population growth can conflict with the economic situation.

This topic is actively discussed both at the state level and in religious circles, in particular, in al-Azhara, the opinion of which is important for the believing part of the population. The Islamic philosopher Muhammad Usman claims that Islam protects the people with its power, protecting them from the consequences of destructive related marriages and ensures the continuity of healthy generations, which can only be carried out in the absence of crimes against women and violation of their rights. He notes that the human potential is not so necessary for the rise of society, and for this reason there is no need to absolutize the role of manpower and direct all aspirations in the Islamic world to the growth of the population, although Sharia sets just such a task. After all, the weak link in the Arab world remains not even so much the population itself as the environment created by people, in which scientific and technological backwardness is maintained, which is why the Arab-Islamic world does not know how to benefit of their capabilities and resources and reverses the role of the human factor in real development.³

In turn, Islamic jurist Muhammad Zakzuk claims that the human potential should not be perceived either as good or evil if it has the opportunity for development and is able to ensure the progress of society. However, if there are no basic opportunities in the state to meet the social needs of new generations, then in this case the population growth is undesirable, and Islam does not approve of people who form a lot of inactive people, deprived of forces and will to correct the situation, representing them as "garbage in the stream".

This is exactly the case when the need to regulate population growth is acute, and this measure cannot be interpreted as sinful or forbidden from the point of view of Sharia, although not all figures share this position. In Islam, it is emphasized that strong faith is more appreciated than a weak spirit, and in general, preference is given to the strong, which simultaneously expresses consent between both body and soul. The mentioned author indicates that Islam does not oppose the regulation of the population, but categorically denies the restriction of families with orders to have one or two children, as required in Egypt, or resort to sterilization, as is done in other countries. Islam is a "median" religion, from the point of view of the fact that it allows a restriction, but only by increasing the intervals between childbirth so that every child completely receives his/her own measure of parental education and care.⁴

Such views are divided by the professor of the Islamic economy Hussein Shikhata, who expands approaches to the topic and also believes that a person becomes socially valuable only if he/she has general and scientific training and carries a conviction of the need to serve himself, family and society⁵.

It is obvious that the human factor does not escape the attention of fuqahas and preachers, and most of them take into account the real aspects of the life of Arab society, which cannot completely abstract from religious institutions. Moslem jurists pay tribute to the trend towards population growth, but warn that it must be in accordance with the interests of society and the state, perhaps even to the detriment of the latter's strategic preferences. Within the framework of this discourse, the moral superiority seems to remain on the side of those who advocate a moderate approach to the topic and against a kind of demographic "extremism."

However, in the absence of a consensus on the issue, the discussion can hardly be considered exhausted, especially since we are talking about an extremely sensitive and delicate matter that concerns the intimate side of a person's life, but at the same

time attracts wide attention from both religious figures and secular experts due to its special significance for the survival of the state. Thus, the topic of fertility and, accordingly, population growth in the Arab world, recognized in the middle of the last century, will remain acutely relevant for the future, since different judgments and approaches to the issue are not reduced to a single direction, leaving it open. Naturally, it is closely related to the position of women in Arab society, where her role has undergone quite noticeable changes, but in many other essential aspects remains disadvantaged.

This approach has not outlived its usefulness to this day, although the material living conditions of the current Arab population have undergone a serious evolution compared to the bygone historical past. But today a number of representatives of religious thought consider it necessary for the Arab world to accumulate human resources, which in historical retrospect are perceived as a guarantee of strengthening state power. The basis for promoting this maxim is that from the early eras of human civilization, the strongest were those who had great human potential, which had a pronounced tendency to grow⁶.

The entrenched idea of unlimited population growth is projected onto the situation of women, who find themselves dependent on a variety of circumstances. In fact, "the subordination of women is not the result of the original creed of Islam, but rather the result of centuries of stagnation. After all, the "post-Quranic" theological interpretation of religion was more focused on pre-Islamic patriarchal structures. The basic ideas of Islam were quite progressive at the time of its inception, improving the situation of women in many areas"⁷.

But under changed circumstances, the change of historical eras that create new realities and require informed decisions is little taken into account by the mass consciousness, which habitually focuses on inherited patterns.

Against such a background, overcoming the consequences of accumulated experience is not easy. An example is the

decades-long appeals of the Egyptian authorities, trying to convince the population of the need to reduce high birth rates. On this basis, serious contradictions arise between the awareness of the consequences of the influence of demographic complications on the state's ability to feed the population in conditions of endless shortages of food, land and water resources, on the one hand, and the need to take into account existing religious motives, which come into dramatic conflict with the requirements of the present day, on the other.

For more than a decade now, the problem of the growing birth rate with the actually decreasing mortality rate has come into conflict with economic processes, most clearly manifested in Egypt and threatening serious complications to the economy and the viability of the state. Following the religious imperatives that still hold Arab society together to this day naturally obliges us to perceive them as the dominant pillar of Islamic consciousness and the basis of behavioral stereotypes. But in this regard, we must not lose sight of the fact that a one-sided approach to the issue may, one way or another, interfere with a real assessment of the prospects for the current demographic situation in those Arab countries where, in fact, spontaneous population growth may conflict with economic reality.

Even under the Nasser regime, Egypt realized the need to renew the country and move away from the past, including on the women's issue, constitutionally enshrining women's rights and recognizing the possibility of women's broad participation in society. The modern understanding of the role of women was reflected in 2017 with the adoption of the "National Strategy Programme Women's Empowerment 2030", or "Women's Strategy 2030", which is a separate document, but is consistent with the "National Strategy for Sustainable Development. Egypt 2030". In order to implement such an ambitious plan, the state declares

that it will seek social justice and integration into society for women, instill in them a sense of citizenship and an understanding of the importance of participation in solving problems related not only to modernizing the economy, but also to bringing women themselves out of social stagnation.

In particular, this can be seen at least in the example of a social concept that aims to create a prosperous society in which the highest level of social inclusion is achieved and civil rights are ensured in the economic, social and political spheres, based on dignity, efficiency, law and social mobility, supporting marginalized groups, protecting women's rights and preventing all forms of discrimination against women⁸.

And this is a key point, since it is already becoming obvious that the historically degraded status of Egyptian women is beginning to enter into noticeable dissonance with modern processes and casts a shadow on Egyptian reality, which is disavowed by gender injustice. The complex phenomena involved should be the subject of a general rethink, and by 2030 "growth indicators" should reach the level of "sustainable development". But at the time of preparation of the Strategy, the initiators themselves expressed doubts about the extent to which their decision corresponded to the task of improving Egypt's image on women's issues, in comparison with other countries. However, it was decided to "redouble efforts" to "enable central and local leadership to translate high-level political will into real women's empowerment"⁹.

Support for women is carried out under the leadership of the National Council for Women's Affairs and under the control of the so-called Egyptian Women's Observatory, which is responsible for assessing changes in the status of women, identifying quantitative indicators of progress and regularly monitoring the effectiveness of programmes and projects implemented to achieve gender equality¹⁰.

Civil society organizations, which are widespread on the ground and work to advance sustainable development goals, are

key government partners in addressing this issue. Some non-governmental organizations registered in the country are also involved in programmes to improve the quality of life of Egyptians¹¹.

The strategy emphasizes the achievability of goals precisely by the specified date, i.e. by 2030, and records those that have already been partially implemented in the right of women to participate in the political activities of the country. Women are free to choose a profession in economics and business, have equal rights to leadership positions in state-owned companies and private businesses, are not limited in public activities, in the information environment, education, healthcare, and are protected in the public sphere and in the family. The government's policy applies to all women, including the backward rural areas of Upper Egypt. Empowering women through work outside the home and a broad advocacy campaign for women's equality form the core of the Egypt 2030 platform. However, in the conditions of concrete reality, not all of the listed possibilities are realizable.

According to some estimates, an increase in women's employment outside households may lead to a decrease in the birth rate and, accordingly, a reduction in the number of children among couples, especially those with extremely low incomes (32 per cent of the total number of families). The list of current tasks in Egypt includes measures to reduce maternal and child mortality, characteristic of this segment¹².

The proclamation of new approaches touches on topics that are sensitive to public opinion, since they are associated with the need to invade the stereotypes of perception of women that have developed within the nation and introduce a different culture of communication with the weaker sex. The documents speak of educating the nation in the understanding that women's rights should be protected, and collective responsibility for this is entrusted to men, becoming their civic duty.

An important aspect of the "pro-women" policy lies in not only adjusting existing laws on personal status in accordance with the circumstances, but resuming religious discourse about the place of women in public life in order to use this authoritative channel of influence on the mass consciousness of citizens. The state is interested in popularizing the opinions of authoritative Moslem jurists and spiritual mentors in an effort to soften approaches to women's issues, which have led to the fact that society has been deprived of the benefits of using women in the workforce and their ability to make creative decisions¹³.

The Women 2030 project raises a wide range of serious and conventional issues that require urgent solutions. A short time is allotted for transformation, and during this period it is necessary to make political decisions, develop mechanisms for their implementation and find investments to support the process in the economic vector and in the socio-cultural and humanitarian directions. In previous periods, Egypt managed to stop bottlenecks, but the concentration of tasks does not become less as the final date approaches. Meanwhile, the inertia of public consciousness on the women's issue is great and can hardly be overcome in a short time, as can be seen from the history of the development of the feminist movement in Egypt. Obviously, the program will have to be implemented at a later time, since it is difficult to assume that all gender issues can be resolved in the remaining time until 2030.

A certain paradox is that the modern Egyptian woman is fully aware of her rights, which are constitutionally enshrined and at the professional level equate her with men. However, in family life, "external" rights do not guarantee her the opportunity to speak out against domestic exploitation, since a woman is dependent on the men in the family and, according to tradition, must serve them.

In the vast majority of cases, a woman is free to work outside the home only if there is a lack of money in the family. But even then she is not freed from routine housework, which,

according to feminist apologists, develops into exploitation. On the other hand, a non-working woman is not free in her expenses and is completely dependent on a man, realizing that working in the house is her duty. In such circumstances, apparently, it is not so much Islam that prevents women from becoming more independent, but rather the economic situation in which it is difficult for them to survive outside the family union, within which they must run the household under any circumstances. Given the powerless position of women, any conflicts can be overcome only if systemic patriarchal relations in the family are seriously changed. However, most men are impressed by the traditional image of a woman as a housewife, so the latter evaluate themselves through the eyes of a man and strive to correspond to the male vision of an ideal woman, without even trying to evaluate their merits on a higher scale. For this reason, it is difficult to expect from them an impulse towards liberation if they are constantly preoccupied with pleasing their spouses, on which fact the stereotypical image of an obedient Egyptian woman is based, whose only interest is seen in being attractive to her man" (including in the role of a housekeeper), and she can only submit to the situation and suppress her own desires¹⁴.

This behavior only confirms the correctness of the thesis about being and consciousness, especially for the case when 60 per cent of Egyptians live in rural areas as part of extended families, where women's freedoms are not welcomed, and get along quite well within the framework of the traditional model of gender relations.

Probably, one should not suspect all women of such apathy, but one cannot deny this phenomenon in Arab society. In any case, here equality in relationships, as it is understood in Western countries, is blurred, for it was not formed by upbringing from childhood. And this alone forces a woman to yield to the pressure of the male part of society, which dictates rules and regulations that tighten gender relations so much that

in the common people even ordinary friendly relations between a man and a woman cannot arise due to the absence of such a concept¹⁵.

Nevertheless, nuclear families in Egypt now account for more than half of households, which fact, one way or another, indicates the scale of the transition to a new gender quality (this indicator is also typical in the Arab world for Iraq, Jordan and Palestine)¹⁶.

But this clearly does not mean that these countries, and especially Egypt, have transformed into a completely new quality. Egypt, by definition, remains a largely collectivist society, in which kinship relationships play a large part in Egyptians' ideas about how connections are structured in their society. This knowledge often encourages a nuclear family to become closer to other relatives within similar nuclear families, which often turns the resulting community into, in essence, an extended family united by shared life¹⁷. Such a network group can organizationally, under a combination of different circumstances, acquire signs of a tribal structure and connections, even if partial ones. But such a mutation may be fraught with the revival of allegedly already outdated morals, and it is not a fact that a woman in such a system will be free, like her counterpart in a Western nuclear family.

Egyptian society, like its family units, is still changing under the influence of social, economic and civilizational factors that are universal in nature and transform the material and spiritual world of the Egyptian and views on marriage. Today, extended families, according to some evidence, tend to shrink and are gradually giving way to nuclear families, which make up to 84 per cent of households¹⁸. But certain doubts remain as to whether they are all located within the city limits, and then we can assume that some of them may belong to the transitional type and are mixed.

Moreover, in nuclear families, despite the emergence of modern features in the role behavior of spouses, traditional

behavioral models remain stable. That is, women show less independence and are more inclined to yield to men in matters of family life. It is considered good manners for urban women to be homely and thrifty, going so far as, according to surveys, that they even often "pay for the household expenses of their families, since they often go to work not for the sake of their own prestige," but because of the desire to give gifts to loved ones¹⁹. But, rather, still, to feel their independence and self-sufficiency, without undermining the foundations of family life. It is no secret either that housewives in any home have the opportunity to legally achieve their goals. And this moment partly destroys the impression of the absolutely hopeless humiliation of women even in home "reservations", where power is held by supporters of tough behavior towards women.

Against the backdrop of tenacious segments of the old family structure, one can no longer deny the influence of new forms of family relationships that are more adapted to the modern way of life. It is not only generated by technologically highly efficient means of production, but also itself forms a new psychology that penetrates the sphere of interpersonal communication. This environment, in turn, initiates new standards of perception of the surrounding space, creates new contexts of relationships, resorting to modern information and communication technologies that open access to the outside world. With their instigation, in Egypt, as well as, it must be said, in other countries with emerging markets, news exchange is strongly stimulated and public opinion is powerfully ideologized. In this way, old morals and orders are compromised, conservative thinking is gradually pushed to the periphery of social consciousness, "pupating" in traditional family structures, but can also linger in the world of nuclear families, already living with new meanings, but subject to reflexive "retardation."

At the moment, Egypt is becoming an arena for a clash of polar interests, which can undermine the process of harmonization of society and sow additional contradictions in it. Nevertheless, the

movement in a productive direction is progressive, but in many cases does not have clear boundaries, given the different levels of start in different strata of society and the speed of degeneration of family structures that lingered at the intermediate stages of reformatting, which does not make the purity of mutations particularly convincing. As the target date of 2030 approaches, the ranks of opponents of gender equality may thicken and resistance may grow, even on the initiative of women, since not all of them want to break out from the tutelage of men.

In the conditions of Egypt, it is hardly possible to sharply accelerate the process without violating the integrity of the family space as it has developed to date, and without causing unwanted unrest in society in this area as well. In attempts to increase the well-being of the nation by diversifying the economy and transferring it to a market economy, the state is trying to control the situation not only with economic levers, but also with its "soft power" in the form of ideological indoctrination of the population. As noted, it additionally mobilizes the capabilities of civil organizations, although the degree of their influence is not so great, but creates an appropriate background, and also attracts non-governmental organizations with a foreign component, which are better equipped to carry out their work among women.

Even if attempts to rebuild the family structure according to the modern pattern demonstrate success, the result will not be final. After all, a nuclear family, usually with a small number of children, is not particularly attractive to the 60 per cent of Egyptians who were brought up in old traditions and view high birth rates as a guarantee of support in old age. The inertia of the people's consciousness in this case is great, especially in matters of maintaining the viability of households, regardless of their location. And this is a very good reason for people to adhere to a tradition that will be difficult to eradicate.

To be continued.

Notes

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