

Chapter One

NEW IMAGES OR CONTINUOUS ARCHETYPES?

Sumaya (a pseudonym) commutes several hours a day by train to attend Cairo University. She is twenty-three years old and one of the best students in her department. On Thursday afternoons and most evenings, she works in a shop with her mother. Sumaya wears Islamic dress, including a face veil (*niqab*) and gloves. She believes that her dream of a more pious society where all women wear Islamic dress will come to pass.

Alham (a pseudonym) has successfully entered a second career in her fifties. She is dismayed by the growing emphasis on a narrowly defined religiosity taking place in urban Egypt at this time. She strongly opposes women who wear Islamic dress, which she finds hideous and degrading. Amina (a pseudonym) is almost twenty-seven years old, and to her mother's concern has rejected several suitors. She would not dream of donning Islamic dress, but defends the historical arguments of the Islamists and criticizes the lax code of moral values found in the West.

How does one analyze these three viewpoints? What elements of their backgrounds, experiences, and motivations are responsible for the varying reactions? These Cairene women, and many others, are reacting to the emergence of new options for women in their society. A new image, or role model, for contemporary Egyptian Muslim women has arisen from the conjuncture of history and sociopolitical pressures. Women now possess multiple avenues to express their identity, including those presented by modern Islamists (usually referred to as Muslim fundamentalists). This book examines the presentation and reception of these options, and considers the processes affecting women under the rubric of gender issues.

Fadwa el-Guindi, in her work on the rise of the Islamists during the 1970s, described a new, growing Islamic ethic reflected by Muslim women.¹ Was that "ethic" really Islamic, or was it a synthesis of a popular understanding of Islam colored by political opposition to the state? In the ten years since this article appeared, numerous works have explored the appeal of the new Islamic groups, but few have described the process of female identification with Islamist ideals in detail.

Much of the recent literature on the Islamic awakening glosses over discussions of gender issues. When the question of women's status is considered, it is often occluded by a host of factors, including ethnocentrism. Social scientists have been more preoccupied with popular attitudes toward

authority, tyranny, and the potential for revolt. These issues are embedded in the oppositionist nature of some Islamist groups that sought to counter the secular authority of the state. In the wake of the Iranian revolution, that focus, reflected in governmental research and in the press, was understandable. If women were portrayed at all in materials dealing with Islamic fundamentalism, they appeared as silent appendages or auxiliary members equal neither in accessibility nor in importance to their male counterparts.

Some fossilization has occurred in the study of gender issues in the Middle East, partially due to academic dependence on the written word. Heavily reliant on past scholarship, observers of the region sometimes misrepresented the views of their subjects or failed to fully portray the spirit of studied societies. Scholarship, on the whole, has regarded sources of popular culture, especially oral sources, as interesting but not verifiable. Meanwhile, the literature has exalted the growth of feminism in the Middle East. As a consequence, the condition of Middle Eastern women has been analyzed in global terms of feminism that may be inappropriate to the Egyptian case.

A great deal of background knowledge and interpretive skill is required to explore and utilize written sources on women in Islamic history. Islamic law, another basis for debate on gender issues, is often discussed and taught as if it were observed to the letter and described present circumstances, rather than an ideal human condition. At the same time, we equate women and family law with the forces of traditionalism in the Weberian terms of the 1950s and 1960s (such as patrimonialism). The state has affected gender issues, but often observers describe its effect in antagonistic terms, as a challenge to Muslim ways, as if "Muslim ways" had ever been defined. The arguments for and against female role expansion have consistently been backed by appeals to woman's place in Islamic history. Therefore, we must review that history, and some of the arguments built upon it, in order to see how past events can affect the rights of contemporary women to participate more fully in the public arena.

Some of the methodological problems in assessing the status of Middle Eastern women may be due to an overemphasis on Islam,² or alternatively, to what Edward Said has termed an "Orientalist" approach.³ In the latter instance, the whole area of female status has been an evocative and provocative means to emphasize the difference of the Other since the Victorian era, if not earlier. From Lord Cromer to modern American feminists' expressions, we see that a culture's value may be measured by its treatment of women. The board of directors of the National Organization for Women recently adopted resolutions protesting America's troop buildup in the Gulf that describe Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as "despotic, clan-run monarchies" that "subjugate and systematically oppress women."⁴ The Arab Middle East falls short, then, on

a scale of humanism when law and history are superficially considered. Perhaps this originally European perspective came from a Victorian consciousness of the lower status of European women, who only began to fight for expanded rights in the later nineteenth century. On the other hand, degrading a civilization that represented high political and economic stakes to the European nations served several purposes—it could divert popular opposition to colonial policies at home, or justify stricter measures abroad.

Middle Eastern as well as Western sources have equated female progress with national development. Themes of the literature have concentrated on female role expansion in the public sphere or measurement of female power. It is still difficult to define the scope and nature of female participation and power because of the incomplete nature of data but also due to flawed methodology. More recent research has addressed women's activities in the private sphere as well as their informal economic activities, and that helps to round out our picture of women's lives.

Since the 1960s (and later on in French sociological and anthropological works), social scientists have encouraged their subjects to describe their own value systems. Val Moghadam emphasized the above theme in her recommendation for a “*verstehende* sociology”—one that would speak from women's experience and perceptions.⁵ This trend has been positively expressed in the growing number of oral histories gathered in Egypt, and I, too, intended to draw on that method in this work.

Those watching the development of Middle Eastern studies may have noticed a curious reversal of the study process. The researcher, the “self,” generally examined the subjects, the “others.” But now the social scientist has been found out; she now comprises the “other” examining the “self.” A division occurs between entitled others and colonialist others who propose to examine Middle Eastern women. In suggesting that only the self should examine the self, this new trend challenges many preconceived notions of the value of objective research and questions the appropriateness of outside observation.

In response to this research issue, I should emphasize that I have examined unknown subjects in a familiar environment, for the Middle East, Cairo in particular, was once my home and workplace, inside and outside of academia. The fact that I share many beliefs with my subjects should not render my study less valuable. My conception of Islam is extremely personalized, as are my views on gender issues. These beliefs had no place entering in on the business of identifying my subjects' opinions. It is true, of course, that a subject's views will be affected to some extent by her interaction with a researcher. The new image of woman proffered to the veiled woman (*muhagabat*) by the Islamists of Egypt is described within all the usual limitations and nuances that stubbornly adhere to the research process.

An Islamic, Historical, or Modern Phenomenon?

One aim of this study is to test the importance of the correlation between socioeconomic background and religiopolitical beliefs. Existing literature, particularly materials dealing with women in earlier periods of Islamic history, and other sociological studies are questioned and are seen to have certain bearing on the development of an Islamist ideology. This study proposes a certain flexibility and adaptability of gender issues in the Egyptian milieu that enables women of differing socioeconomic classes to similarly adopt a new ideology.

Clifford Geertz's categorization of change set forth in *The Interpretation of Cultures* may still be instructive in showing us that our conceptions of change may obstruct portrayals of other cultures.⁶ "Evolutionary change," as Geertz defines it, is idealized in other works on female emancipation that hark back to Daniel Lerner's description of the modernization process.⁷

The literature on Middle Eastern women continuously alludes to the pre-existence of matrilinearity, goddess worship, women warriors, and female inheritance patterns in the Arabian Peninsula. These references are made either to defend the position of women in Islam, or to attack Islamic culture as an entity affected by antifemale practices such as seclusion. But Azizah al-Hibri, Jane Smith, and Yvonne Haddad have all described female roles that were less restricted by tribal laws or scripture than were conceptions of women elsewhere in the world. They demonstrate that Islam in and of itself is not anti women, and that Arab tribalism included practices such as matrilocality and matrilinearity that contrasted with the later development of patriarchal practices.⁸

The Islamists, along with other modern writers, state that Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) may be regarded as a champion of women due to his restrictions on female infanticide and polygamy.⁹ The Prophet also regulated family interaction in various ways, and *hadith* commenting on the motives for regulation played a role in defining the subsequent rights of women.

The histories of famous women in Islam are important, for they establish a *sunnah* of the Mothers of the Believers.¹⁰ Zaynab al-Ghazali, an ideologue of the moderate Islamists, refers to the Prophet's wives as an appropriate source of emulation for Muslim women. It may be that the more restrictive gender practices of the early Muslim upper classes were drawn on to represent all virtuous women, as W. Montgomery Watt suggests in *Muhammad at Medina*.¹¹ The women in Muhammad's harem and in other aristocratic harems were likely to have been aware of the neighboring non-Arab elites' customs of veiling and seclusion.¹² The prohibition of existing forms of polyandry, and sanctioning of polygamy, veiling, and seclusion were incorporated in the notion of an Islamic lifestyle, although the original purpose of laws referring to women's clothing, for example, was ambiguous within the

developing body of *shari'ah*, Islamic law.¹³ The Islamists however, assert that Islam had only positive effects on the lives of female adherents, throughout history, as intended by the Messenger of God.

The works of al-Bukhari reveal that restrictions on women coalesced around themes of ritual purification and the idea that the believer must separate the realm of prayer and the contemplative portion of his consciousness from the sexual distractions of women.¹⁴ Injunctions for women to veil, to guard their virtue,¹⁵ restrictions on travel, or movement through public space, and growing evidence that women did not always obey these restrictions, informs us that economically or politically active women were necessarily resourceful in the face of confining forces. But are the early centuries relevant to the modern discourse of gender?

Modern Egypt is an especially interesting setting for examining gender issues. The early strength of state authority, a complex evolution of civil society, and Egypt's incorporation into the modern world economy are all essential components affecting current arguments over women.¹⁶ The importance of Egypt to the West, and the imprints of British cultural dominance, form the backdrop to the emerging debate on women and to the growth of Egyptian nationalism.¹⁷ Public consciousness of the debate on women has affected the future orientation of religious opposition to gender issues. It is also significant that a tradition of public activism and involvement was inherited by the modern respondents of this study, and that their own mothers may have responded quite differently to the call of public service and private accommodations.

Valerie Hoffman-Ladd presents the essential Islamist conceptions of modesty and segregation.¹⁸ Her analysis of important stances on female roles and functions outlines, in my opinion, an official Islamist theory, or a "leader's ideology." In this book, I have expanded the presentation of that ideology, which considers other gender issues. I have also chosen to contrast it with ordinary women's interpretations.

I will also compare unveiled women with the new Islamic woman. The notions of modesty and segregation that Hoffman-Ladd has presented do not describe the views of all Egyptian women. Sometimes, the Islamists or others writing about them suggest that women who do not espouse Muslim fundamentalist ideals are overly Westernized, "secular" women. Readers should note that Middle Eastern women conceive of and practice their religion in diverse ways but may regard themselves as equally pious Muslims.

Nonacademic treatises by modern champions of the new veiled Islamist woman are supplemented and contrasted with material derived from personal interviews. The writings of Zaynab al-Ghazali and other authors, and magazine and newspaper articles, constantly repeat certain themes of women's roles and rights related in chapter 5. Although many other, similar sources

exist, certain works have been emphasized in order to define a coherent moderate position.

Definitions

I spoke recently about the Islamists to a feminist audience, and I remember the troubled expressions and suspicious questions of those unfamiliar with the term *Islamist*, which the French have devised. I hope to make the material clearer to my readers by explaining the following terms.

Gender Issues.

Gender issues refer to a set of controversial themes involving status determinants made on the basis of gender, sex differentiations, or inequality. These include women's roles and status within the family, their position in the workplace, their control over economic resources, their integration into the educational system, their participation in social movements, their political and legal status, and their self-definitions. This term should not be confused with the phrase "the issue of gender" which refers in a general manner to the presence of sex stratification and female disadvantage within society. Gender issues cannot be termed "women's issues," because they involve cross-sex interaction as well as male attitudes and actions, and affect society as a whole.

Self-Image.

Women and men formulate internal portraits, through syzygy, a conjoining process described below. Their inner portraits correspond in some respects to ideal models that they hold unconsciously, as well as consciously, throughout their lives. These inner images may influence women in making decisions on gender issues.

The notion of self-image is found not only in European sources but has been an extremely important concept to the growth of national identity in the third world, particularly in the neocolonial period. Hence, Egyptians or other Africans may consider the term unremarkable, while American social scientists may not be so familiar with the issues involved.

During the processes of self-imaging, women reflect values and specific qualities of femininity that are similar to those of others in their milieu. Sets of moral values, life goals, and cultural orientations are transmitted to women through a variety of sources. Women choose consciously or unconsciously to adopt these values as part of the self-identificative process. Self-imaging is just a step removed from self-conception or self-idealization because it in-

volves the theoretical task of identifying the qualities and capabilities of an imaginary woman who may then be emulated.

Self-imagining involves self-labeling, a conscious action, self-awareness, or sometimes responsiveness to inner pressures, acting within the unconscious. A woman may feel more comfortable with the label of "mother" for example, than with the label of "professional colleague." The reason for her preference may be accessible only to a competent psychologist who might explore her childhood relationship with her own mother or with her children. But she may (or may not) be self-aware enough to act out her preference and continue to "mother" others in the workplace, or her friends or spouse, to the exclusion of other sorts of behavior. Within the parameters of that label she might enact her maternal functions differently in response to the overall image with which she identifies—a virtuous mother, an understanding mother, a challenging mother.

Sawsan el-Messiri states that in Egyptian society, "individuals interact by typification, interpreting their own and one another's behavior according to a process of abstraction based on experience of social reality."¹⁹ The interaction occurs continuously and on many levels.

Transmitters of self-images may be the family, the educational system, literature, religious or popular figures, and the media, including film, television, and radio. Language itself, jokes, poetry, and songs also convey self-images. Popular or intellectual perceptions of women in Islamic history are conductors of self-images as well. The much-discussed issue of authenticity (*asala*) in the Arab world involves the internalization of historical values and their lessons that transmute into portions of self-image.

Historical Models.

Islamic history is the birthplace of female archetypes that correspond to segments of modern consciousness in a manner similar to Jung's discussion of Christ as a Western archetype symbolically representing the self.²⁰ Jung described the effect of such archetypes on personal consciousness as "syzygy," a conjoining or a "projection making factor" that may influence the recipient to dramatize (or internalize) even mythological events.²¹ This explanation of the power of archetypes upon self-image can assist in understanding women's varied motivations for choosing one image over another.

The New Islamic Woman.

The image of the new Islamic woman refers to the internal model of the modern veiled women (*muhaggabat*). These women wear a specific set of garments that they call "Islamic dress" or "lawful dress" (*ziy shar'i*). It should not be confused with traditional forms of the veil worn by lower-class urban women or women earlier in Egyptian history.

I did not refer to this image as the “veiled woman,” because its significance goes beyond the issues of veiling and sex separation. But actual survey respondents who related to this image may later be referred to as veiled women, for comparative purposes.

I have also dubbed the new Islamic woman the “virtuous” woman, not because she is more endowed with virtue than her sister, but because her image centers on the piety, modesty, and chastity of its receptors. The new Islamic woman is the subject of analysis because her viewpoint and orientations to gender issues have not always been considered in their cultural and political context.

The Unveiled Woman.

The image of the unveiled woman refers to women who have not adopted the Islamist headcovering, the *higab*, and do not agree with the antiseccularist goals of the Islamists. These women come from the lower middle class, the middle class, and the elites. Some of them are lower-class women who no longer identify with the *bint al-balad*, the traditional model for urban lower-class women.

I did not title this image the “modern” woman, because the term “modernity” carries a strong normative connotation, and the unveiled woman might be no more modern than the veiled woman. She may be equally pious and therefore cannot be termed the secular woman. The unveiled woman differs from the new Islamic woman in more solidly supporting women’s role in the public sphere, although she is careful to stress women’s primary importance as wives and mothers. She may oppose the government, but she does not see the new Islamic groups as the ideal alternative to the current state, although she recognizes their political potential. In contrast to the *bint al-balad*, the unveiled woman may be more constrained in exhibiting her own defenses. For example, she might ignore male harassment in the streets rather than engage in the verbal or even physical reactions of the *bint al-balad*.²² When at work, or otherwise in public, she wears clothing of European style and does not cover her head. She does not look down on traditional fashions, for at home she may also wear a *galabiyya*, a long robe.

The Bint al-Balad.

Bint al-balad literally means “daughter of the town.” She is also known as the *bint al-hitta*, or “daughter of the neighborhood.” The *bint al-balad* is an urban lower-class woman who, despite the changes in urban life, still expresses her values and her orientations to gender issues and to other classes of society in a distinct manner.²³ She may wear a *galabiyya*, covered by a black outer dress, and a modesty wrap known as the *malayya laff*. Some women have replaced that costume with a rather long and conservative

Western-style dress and, sometimes, a shawl. She wears a kerchief (*mandil*) over her hair rather than the headcovering of the new Islamic woman. The *bint al-balad* is very religious but may not pray in the mosque regularly, although she observes prayer times at home. She may visit shrines, attend the festivals of the saints, or sometimes participate in an exorcism ceremony known as the *zar*. As demonstrated by respondents of Nayra Attia, Andrea Rugh, el-Messiri's study, and women of my own acquaintance, the *bint al-balad* may conceive of the idealized qualities of men and women in a more disparate and differentiated manner than does the new Islamic woman or the unveiled woman.²⁴

The Rural Woman.

The rural woman is known as the peasant woman (*fallaha*) or the villager (*bint al-bandar*). She is not represented in this study, although rural women and their identity codes may be referred to occasionally as a source of contrast. Up to now, the Islamists have not visibly recruited many rural women. The situation may change as rural migrants continue to pour into the cities of Egypt.

In the countryside, women exhibit varied forms of dress that illustrate adherence to the virtue of modesty. Items of their dress and the way they are worn transmit a message that the woman is chaste before marriage and, subsequently, sexually faithful. Andrea Rugh notes that garments may emphasize the female figure, as in waisted styles, or conceal female contours in unwaisted, wider-cut styles,²⁵ although these choices are dictated by village tradition and do not imply a more lenient or stricter code of morality.

Rural women have always been economically active in Egypt and interpreted their modesty code in a way that freed them for agricultural labor. Since it was impractical to utilize the traditional face veil (*burqa*) while working, they have worn the head kerchief (*mandil*) and a length of black material (*tarha*) covering the *mandil*.

These women cannot afford to share the attitude of those *banat al-balad* who feel that manual labor is "men's work" (despite the fact that some engage in it).²⁶ Rural women have also been slower to accept the idea that smaller families are beneficial. That attitude can be attributed to the lack of a social security plan to provide for the elderly, and to a need for increased labor on their lands and in their homes.²⁷ These attitudes may have affected the parents of some of the women in my sample who were from the countryside or from large villages.

Islamic Oppositionism.

The term "Islamic oppositionist" emerges from Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot's discussion of protest movements in Egyptian history that "appealed

to religious principles as a means of effecting social change.’’²⁸ A social group expressing political oppositionism counters the status quo as expressed in the state. Islamic oppositionism may also involve Saad Eddin Ibrahim’s definition of fundamentalism: “A return to the purest sources of the religion, a movement to cleanse Islam from all the impurities, heresies and revisionisms which may have influenced its body-intellect as well as its body-practice.’’²⁹

The term “fundamentalism” suggests ahistoricity and looking backward. Although the functions of repurification and revivalism partially define the objectives of the new Islamic social movements, these terms, and the word “fundamentalist,” do not explain the tension between the Islamists and the modern state until they are understood as historically sanctioned protest movements. Most, though not all, of the Islamists discussed in this work are oppositionist in a political sense. They may or may not be actively engaged in protest.

Islamic oppositionism is a segment of the Islamic awakening (*sahwat islamiyya*), a phenomenon that includes Islamic opposition but also intellectual preoccupations with religion, increased personal piety, and theoretical linkage between political circumstances and the situation of faith and modernity. Ibrahim also notes that the term “Islamic awakening,” is more common in Arabic than *usuliyya*, or derivation from the roots of religion—the Arabic equivalent of fundamentalist.³⁰

Jama‘at.

In Egypt, the Islamists under discussion are included within what is known as *al-jama‘at al-islamiyya*, literally “the Islamic groups.” The term *jama‘at* conveys overtones of populism and solidarity, as well as political oppositionism.

The Tajdid Movement.

Islamic oppositionism contains the notion of renewal (*tajdid*) of Islamic authenticity (*aṣalah*) and social justice (*‘adalah*). *Tajdid* incorporates a call to purify political principles and social mores, and a reconsideration of the body of juridical consensus and precedent (*ijma‘*). Creative and productive thought in the form of *ijtihad*, a source of jurisprudence, may enhance the purified principles of *shar‘iah* under modern circumstances. Nineteenth-century Egyptian reformers such as Rifa‘ah al-Tahtawi, Mohammed ‘Abduh, Lutfi al-Sayyid, and Qasim Amin discuss the principles of *tajdid*, as they applied to reform generally, and as it applied to women. The concept of *tajdid* is not strictly modern; it has been recognized as a theoretical principle throughout Islamic history dating back to the Abbasid revolution of the eighth century.

Moderates.

The moderates encompass Islamists who envision a gradual shift from a secular state to an Islamic state. Some, including the Muslim Brotherhood, consider such a transformation to be possible through education. I have also labeled these groups "moderates" with regard to their position on gender issues, although some moderates hold to a more rigid definition of women's role boundaries.

Ibrahim divides Islamic resurgence in Egypt into three main tendencies: "establishment Islam, Sufi Islam, and activist Islam." He further separates activist Muslims into those who are political and those who are apolitical.³¹ My use of the term "oppositionism" includes those covered under the category "activist Islam" as well as some members of the other two groups who oppose the secularist state.

The Islamic oppositionists are comprised of two subgroups: the moderates and the radical fringe. These labels lump together Ibrahim's divisions of the "apolitical Muslim Brotherhood" and the "mainstream Muslim Brotherhood" into a moderate grouping.³² The "moderate oppositionist" label includes some actors and groups outside of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Radical Fringe.

The radical fringe includes the movements who propose swifter and more disruptive means of progression toward an Islamist state. It includes groups who have seceded from Egyptian social life to create their own communities,³³ as well as others who have operated and recruited within the city, schools, and the army. So it encompasses groups like the *Takfir wa al-Higrah*, as well as the *Jihad* members who planned and carried out Sadat's assassination.

Success of a New Female Image

The alternative modes of self-image present arguments questioning the very nature of femininity to women as well as a variety of strategies for approaching gender issues. Some Egyptian women are involved with or sympathetic to the Islamist alternative because they have found the image of a new Islamic woman to be viable in important ways.

Modern Islamists claim to have rejuvenated the meanings of womanhood and femininity by creating a tangible, charismatic image. My personal interviews have revealed the variable degree of female veiling and adherence to the social values of the moderate Islamic groups. Women appear to be genuinely sensitive to their involvement in the image process and can articulate their feelings as well as their ideals.

The moderate oppositionists present a controversy over women's functions in the public and private spheres. They also incorporate arguments on the political and social role of Islam. The Islamic oppositionist message to women has been more successful than was internationally anticipated, because of a number of social, economic, political, and ideological factors. The interaction of these factors is visible in the data and essential to the formation of an alternative image for women. The oppositionist message has gained viability through its association with cultural authenticity, nationalism, and the pursuit of *ʿadala*, or social justice. It seeks a political, economic, and social leveling in response to a period of increasing and visible inequities.

The oppositionist message to women has gained support through its flexibility in key areas that affect women. Furthermore, women have demonstrated an elasticity in interpreting and applying the Islamist message. That interaction may be an example of the route by which popular ideology reworks official ideology. Social adaptability is also useful to the objectives of an oppositionist social movement.

Certain positions on gender issues have become negotiable rather than fixed, or unmalleable, components of the Islamic message to women. The shift from intrinsic element to negotiable element has taken place despite much argument among the Islamists, and despite ahistoric and immutable characterizations of gender and gender relations.

I believe that women's adaptability is an essential component in the self-image process. Because women enact many roles, the self-image model they adopt must be capable of instantaneous and complete transformation. The self-imagining process should also alleviate some of the emotional stress incurred through enactment of multiple roles.

In this study, I suggest a way in which historical archetypes may reflect a cultural norm of femininity and how that norm may vary and transmute itself through the self-image process. In their idealization of femininity, as women express it, some of the ideal feminine qualities are surprisingly close, or even identical, to those projected to men. The parallels form a cultural declaration of woman as "liberated equal" rather than as "protected dependent," to borrow from Barbara Stowasser.³⁴ But in areas of self-image, other than idealized definitions of femininity, many women pragmatically aspire to the status of protected dependent, especially younger women. This paradox is fascinating, though not peculiar to Egypt, and may be tied generally to an international economic crisis and dissatisfaction with the achievements of the nation-state.

A key respondent referred to women's attitudes as a lingering of the *haramlek/salamlek* ideology of the Ottoman period, when elite women remained physically secluded in the harem, despite economic involvements in public life.³⁵ The idealization of a family woman, a nonworking wife, is a

phenomenon to be more attributed to the development of customary law, and non-Arab influences, than to Islamic discourse on women. Marsot's work on elite women of the early twentieth century shows that even after centuries of restrictions, women's work was acceptable when unsalaried.³⁶ The idea of spiritual recompense for unpaid work (*ajr*) is widespread in the Middle East, but is balanced by a social system of favors or influence.³⁷

Explanations of social relations and politics in Egypt usually stem from analyses of the national environment or microcosmic areas within it, or from the international setting. The first group may act to self-criticize, and are designed for internal consumption (there is no sure way to insure that outcome). Foreign policy may be explained entirely on the basis of international and regional pressures rather than national interaction, but in fact a cross-stream of both currents is usually at work.

In Egypt, arguments that attribute the problematic of women and work to interior causes may be based, erroneously, on popular understandings of Islamic or Arab culture and social status, and examples abound in recent and older literature on Middle Eastern women. They may also propose that women are pawns of the state (or of an oppositional social movement). Indeed, many states encourage women to work only when a shortage of unskilled labor exists or if the male labor force is diverted by war or migration. But when unemployment soars and women are entrenched in high-visibility white-collar and service-sector jobs, then they must be discouraged from working. The enemies of female employment utilize similar interior and also exterior arguments that blame the forces of Westernism, Zionism, or neocapitalism for jeopardizing the femininity, dependence, and moral foundation of women, especially working women. Many women have argued against these contentions and recognize the machinations of their critics even when they are couched in an interior discourse.

This study has found that age and social class have an important effect on the receptivity of women to the Islamic message. Egyptians reported that younger women and women of a petit bourgeois or lower-middle-class background were more susceptible to the Islamists, and they were partially correct. Nonetheless, many respondents did not fall into that profile. The appeal of an Islamic image to elite women has to be explained.

Other studies have maintained that the strength of the oppositionists lay in Cairo and in the provincial capitals. On the basis of my present data, I concur. Still, this statement cannot be repeated with any finality until more interviews are conducted outside of Greater Cairo.

The Islamist stance on women allows their members to escape social and economic limitations in a hierarchical society through a visible leveling process and the wearing of a uniform, and by verbally emphasizing social equality. Those unveiled respondents who do not accept Islamist ideology explained the wearing of *higab* in this way. The current situation is more

complex. The above formula addresses the predicament of petit bourgeois women who awoke to the strain of social mobility. Unable to acquire the trappings of elite life, they abandoned expensive clothing, hairstyles, and makeup.

Those who argue that *higab* wearers wish to attain social anonymity cannot fully explain the logic of upper-middle-class or elite women who adopted Islamist ideals. The numbers of these women have clearly increased in the last ten years. Unveiled women said that peer or family pressure was responsible for the reverse social induction process. Both are difficult to prove. Nonetheless, some peer pressure was apparent in group interviews, informal conversations, and the respondents' living situations. When veiled women were willing to discuss the responses of their families or friends to their own ideology or appearance, they reported varying reactions. If their relatives or peers reacted negatively, their initial disapproval lessened over time. Unveiled women told me that the veiled women's fathers and brothers were happy with their new Islamic dress, whereas their mothers were up in arms. According to veiled women, familial reactions were not so neatly divided into patterns of male approval and female disapproval.

Most available sources show that the lowest urban classes have not exchanged their own modesty codes of dress and behavior for either the Islamist model or the elite model to any significant degree. The strength of the lower classes' own image system attests to the stronger process of class crystallization in a neocolonialist setting.³⁸

Some of the Islamists or their sympathizers call for a new examination of historical sources and for the use of *ijtihad* to reform the position on women. Others are opposed to a critical reexamination of the sources, for it would attack the immutable nature of information that has been granted sacred stature. The inevitably different interpretations of such a review might weaken the impact of a movement attempting to portray itself in as unified a manner as possible. Finally, that sort of endeavor could force a critique of principles that members had accepted blindly. Faith can be more comforting than the acquiring of critical faculties that easily demolish but resurrect with difficulty.

The Islamist groups view women as an integral reproductive and productive core. Their stance resembles other burgeoning social opposition movements. They say that ideally, women's productive functions should be temporary—temporary within her own life (until she has children to raise, or after they are grown) and temporary within the life of the movement (until they create a system that would eliminate the need for female labor outside of certain specified professions). In practice, however, the question of female labor has undergone an ideological juggling. The flexibility and diversity of resulting positions on the issue of women and work accords with the daily reality of government, schools, and hospitals reliant on a female labor pool.

The Islamic ideal of woman is not the antithesis of an elite, secular model of woman, but it is a reaction to it. Still, women identifying with the Islamist model had more in common with the unveiled women than they did with women of another culture, or even with women who identified with *bint al-balad*. Some unveiled women also expressed distress at the ideological, moral, and social conditions in Egypt, echoing certain Islamist criticisms of the status quo. Veiled and unveiled women alike spoke of a loss of culture; a "flattening of mental life,"³⁹ which leads to an *angst*, or anomie, a commentary on the process of social transformation in a modern society.

Another important issue that emerges in this study is that some Egyptian women believe that female nature is essentially distinct from male nature, a view that diverges from the mainstream Western feminist perspective. Other women, however, would agree with Nabawiyya Musa, a woman activist writing in 1920 who stated:

None have said that a female cat likes playing and jumping while the male cat is composed and quiet; none have said that a male dog is loyal while a female dog is sly and mean. . . . Allah created women with two eyes, two ears and one tongue like man; and she is capable as he is of performing tasks, although males are physically stronger than females in all species. The male donkey may be stronger and bigger than a female donkey, but does not understand any more than she does.⁴⁰

Most respondents saw the sexes as equally capable, but complementary rather than identical. This perspective is widely held in modern Egyptian society. Nevertheless, even the more conservative respondents felt that women should be given opportunities equal to men, and equality under the law as long as the principles of *shari'ah* were upheld.

Respondents' divisions of human nature into male and female attributes structured their conceptions of femininity. Again, even the more conservative women recognize that some women might be talented in areas that have been dominated by men. They upheld women's freedom to pursue such interests as long as they met their family obligations.

The centrality of woman to the family is their guiding principle. It applies to career women and housewives, veiled and unveiled women, those who support the Islamic *da'wah*, or call, and those who are unmoved by it. Most women neither desire nor consider a single, unmarried existence outside the family environment to be viable.

Islamist moderates aver that Islam through its living principles can liberate women. As women are a vital part of the mission to reform Muslim society, the Islamic call (*da'wah*), the moderates have composed an argument for women's religious functions in the public as well as the private spheres. Again, the adherents to other image models debate the sincerity and applicability of these claims.

The Islamists of Egypt are involved in an active, creative effort at image construction for women. We may also note an eliminative, reactive process against other models of imaging and against Western ideals for women. State policies have in some ways encouraged a model of a secular, elite, powerful woman. The Islamists can criticize that model, and it does contain certain inherent contradictions.

Readers should not interpret this study as an explanation of false consciousness permitting women to accept an ideology that limits their parameters and potential. Such an argument would gravely underestimate Egyptian (and other Muslim) women and their complex skills of reading their world and all its possibilities.⁴¹ Instead, this work explains the aspects of the Islamist image that are firmly rooted in the historical experience of the region. Then it deals with the formation of contemporary attitudes that enhance women's self-images and self-confidence within an alternative mode. To begin with, let us consider some of the problems involved in listening to women's expression of their opinions, concerns, and self-image.