

INTERVIEW: FATMA KHAFAGY

Dr. Khafagy is a women's rights activist in Egypt, where she currently works as a policy expert for the German Cooperation Agency. Prior to that she was a legal/policy expert for the European Commission Project on the Economic Role of Women in the Mediterranean Region and also headed the Office of Ombudsperson for Gender Equality at Egypt's National Council for Women. She worked for 15 years for the United Nations, including as head of the Gender and Development Program of UNICEF in Egypt. Dr. Khafagy has long been associated with various NGOs and is currently a board member of the Alliance for Arab Women. She was interviewed for Middle East Policy by Roger Gaess (AQABA9@aol.com) and Eva Soriano, freelance journalists based in New York.

MEP (Gaess and Soriano): What is the movement for women's rights called in Egypt? Do people call it the "women's movement" or "women's-rights movement"?

KHAFAGY: Nobody really feels that there is a movement [at this time], but everybody feels there are more women claiming their rights than ever before, so they call it the "women's-rights movement." Unfortunately, there hasn't been an actual women's movement since early 1980.

MEP: What was happening in 1980?

KHAFAGY: At that time we had Sadat, and his wife pushed through changes in the family law. She did not change the whole law, but there were changes such as, if a man took a second wife, the first one had the right to get a divorce, and if a woman was divorced, she could still keep her marital residence. Then Mubarak came to

power, and these two rights were revoked. There was a women's movement at that time. You could call it a movement because it really meant women from all walks of life coming together and engaging in all sorts of activities. Unfortunately, it did not continue, and since then nothing of that sort has existed.

MEP: How does the average Egyptian view the so-called women's-rights movement?

KHAFAGY: I think the majority do not like it. They say that women have already gotten more rights than they should. They think that, in light of the activities of the wife of President Mubarak and the huge [government-run] machinery known as the National Council for Women, and because the media have talked about women's rights for the past few years, that this is too much in a country where all citizens do not have full rights. They say, why not talk about

men's rights or minority rights? I think they see women's-rights issues detracting from the broader issue of citizens' rights. This has been a problem even in the methodology of how Egyptian women activists have dealt with women's rights.

MEP: Looking back over the last 10-20 years, what do you see as some of the major accomplishments in the area of women's rights in Egypt?

KHAFAGY: I think the major accomplishments have been in the field of legislation. We've had several anti-gender-discrimination laws approved and implemented. First Lady Suzanne Mubarak became interested in championing women's rights, as well as children's rights and other things. She wanted to show that there has been progress, especially to the outside world. So, for instance, we've seen new laws, including the recognition of an Egyptian woman's right to give her nationality to her children if she is married to a non-Egyptian. That was granted, although it's not been without problems. A woman became able to divorce through *khule* [a kind of no-fault divorce] for the first time, and women could also travel without being stopped by their husbands at the airport. That was an improvement. There was a change in the rape law. Previously the rapist was not punished if he married the woman he had raped. So there have actually been four or five laws enacted, but the major law, the family law, is still very discriminatory. It has very adverse effects on women inside the family and outside the family, as well as adverse effects on children. That one has not been touched yet, not in a way that addresses the major problems of Egyptian women.

MEP: In addition to further changes in the family law, what are some of the current aims of Egyptian women's-rights activists?

KHAFAGY: One is to increase women's political participation. Egypt has one of the lowest rates of political participation by women. The number of women in Parliament, the number of women in local councils, the percentage of women even in NGOs or syndicates is very small.

MEP: Are women more active in any particular political party?

KHAFAGY: No, I think there is low participation across the board.

MEP: How do women's-rights activists approach their goals? What have been the mechanisms for change, what have been their tactics and strategy over the last 10 or 15 years? Who have they allied with?

KHAFAGY: It's all been through NGOs, specifically women's NGOs. What happens is that one NGO champions a specific issue, such as nationality law, and then a few other NGOs join with this NGO and together they start to do advocacy work around the issue. There are nine NGOs working on reforming the family law. Advocacy work takes years and years before it is heard all over. Some people side with you — men in critical positions and so on — but it takes a lot of time. Then the National Council for Women would hijack the whole thing. They would say, it's the National Council for Women that's going to change this. Even though all the work has been done by NGOs, they like to claim they're responsible for the changes, because actually it is

them through the First Lady who tell Parliament to pass a particular law. So in actual terms, in carrying it out, it's a top-down decision. It's not taken by women in Parliament, because we don't have enough women in Parliament. It's not taken by men who stand beside women because we don't have too many. So it's done by a top-down decision, a political decision, from the First Lady through the Council.

MEP: Can you tell us a little more about the National Council for Women and about the role of the First Lady? She sounds a bit like a minister of women's affairs.

KHAFAGY: It all has its good side and its bad side. The First Lady is interested in lots of things in Egypt. She started by being interested in children, so she set up the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood. These [kinds of institutions] are very high governmental bodies that are either established by presidential decree or by a decree from the prime minister. She was a bit afraid about the Islamic fundamentalists so she did not talk about women's rights a lot in the late '80s or early '90s. Then, with all the international pressure — the women's conference in Beijing and all that — she set up the National Council for Women, in 2001.

It's a huge bureaucracy; hundreds of people work there, and she's the president. They have government budget lines that are quite substantial. Donors put a lot of money into all the councils she heads. These councils are supposed to address policies, legislation and so on, but they also gradually get involved in implementation. Unfortunately, they're competitive with NGOs because NGOs cannot get enough money from donors. It's very difficult to

raise local money in Egypt; you have to get permission, you have to collect money during a specific time. You also have to compete against the Islamists, who can more easily get money from people when they say, for instance, they are building a mosque or something along that line. If you say it's for women's rights, nobody gives money. NGOs have to go to donors all the time to get money, but donors would prefer giving to the National Council.

MEP: Why would donors prefer to give to the National Council? Because they hope to get something in return?

KHAFAGY: Yes, they would have a closer relationship with the government. I also think the government would like them to say that they are dealing with the First Lady of Egypt who's very powerful, who is able to influence her husband and to change things. An NGO does not have much influence in politics. But the National Council is not very popular in Egypt among poor women because it does not really reach them very much. Also the economic situation is very bad. [The Council] talks about things like "gender mainstreaming" or "gender budgeting" [specific allocations for women] and "the five-year plan," when nobody knows what those things are. We do have a five-year plan, but it's a document that is put away in a minister's desk. Ordinary women do not see very many positive results coming from the Council. Every now and then [the Council] wants to show women and Egypt and the whole world that they are really doing something. So, the First Lady issues a decree, as she did [in early 2007] to show that Egyptian women will be able to become judges. Now there are 30 women

who have been appointed judges. Although the decision was hers, all the advocacy work had been done for 10 years by NGOs. But there is no coordination or teamwork between the government and NGOs. The government does not believe much in people's participation in any form.

MEP: A recent article pointed out that there has never actually been any legal prohibition against having women judges, and that, since their appointment, there's been fear that their jurisdiction would be limited to areas such as children's courts. How does this system work? On paper there's no gender discrimination in lots of cases, but when it comes to the people who enforce policy or implement legislation, the discrimination is sometimes blatant. The police come into domestic-violence situations and are reluctant to enforce the law because they have a conservative outlook. If we understand the Egyptian Constitution correctly, women have a lot of rights on paper, but in real life they have considerably fewer.

KHAFAGY: Yes, that's true. Law enforcement in Egypt is against implementing court rulings in favor of women.

MEP: How do NGOs deal with these kinds of things? What groups do they see as preventing change? Is it men? Is it people in powerful positions who want to maintain them? Is it a conservative interpretation of religion? Is it women's complacency and a lack of criticism among the general population?

KHAFAGY: I think the most dangerous of the problems is when women themselves are convinced they're not equal, and

religion is often a factor in that. The only thing that the government and the Islamic fundamentalists do not fight about is the issue of women — but in different ways, because the Islamists are outspoken. Some of them say women should not work or women should not be educated or women should be veiled, women should be circumcised, women should not be mobile. At least they are open about it. The government gives them all the rights and all the space in the media to say this. They say it in the mosques every Friday, everywhere — in the small villages and towns, in Cairo — and they have space on television to reach a large audience. So women have sort of internalized that they're not equal. When, for instance, you say to a young woman that it's her right to get a good job because she's graduated from school with honors, she'll say, "No, a man should get the job, not me. My brother" — who has not done as well as she in school — "has more right to get a job." So they have internalized that they are not equal and that they should get what you might call the "leftovers." As a woman who works a lot with other women and with NGOs, I find this is the most difficult problem. You have to undo what the media, the schools, the sheikhs in the mosques have done for years, and help women feel that they are equal and deserve as much as anybody else.

Secondly, neither men nor women trust the government anymore, and they don't trust any service coming from the government. Women need to trust someone in order to change, be active and so on. The only thing that offers this in Egypt is the NGOs. And not all of them; we have 16,000 NGOs. Maybe 200 are really active, and among women's NGOs there are maybe 10 or 15 such organizations. A

woman can't take the risk as an individual. She can't really tell her husband, "If you marry someone else, I have to get a divorce, and you have to pay me alimony and provide for your children." She knows our laws are not going to give her this. The court is probably not going to back her, and even if she gets a favorable court ruling, she cannot necessarily implement it with the police or the administration. She needs to be part of a group to empower her, to support her. And this does not really exist.

NGOs are struggling to get money in order to function properly. In the past century, it was rich women who headed the NGOs. They were spending from their own pockets. But now it's the middle class, mostly government employees or women who have to take other jobs in development and so on, so they need to get money for their NGOs. They struggle a lot with the government; you can't have a meeting without clearing it with the Ministry of the Interior. You can't have a meeting without people from the Ministry of the Interior attending and reporting about you. They can cancel your travel plans. All this is making life especially difficult for NGOs.

MEP: So the programs to help women, to teach them how to take their lives into their own hands, are insufficient?

KHAFAGY: There are NGOs doing training, but this can only be done in a limited way when you are talking to 30 women once every month or two. You need to establish a relationship and provide services to them so that they can trust you, so it's not just talk. I don't want to paint a very gloomy picture — it is done — but it's done on a very small scale, so it takes a longer time.

MEP: Is the situation much worse for the poor and relatively uneducated women in rural areas than it is for city women?

KHAFAGY: Yes, and of course in rural areas and small villages, it's also difficult for the woman to leave her house. The size of the family is much bigger, so she has added responsibilities in caring for children. She does not have time to go out and join another group of women or an NGO. The economic situation is very bad in rural areas. In urban slums it's also bad, but there you might find a way to manage. People can beg in the street to make ends meet. But if you're poor in rural areas, you're really poor. And government services in terms of health, literacy, sewage, water are fewer, so they're in a much worse situation than those living in cities.

MEP: The government recently passed a law banning female genital mutilation. How is that law being applied?

KHAFAGY: I am not sure, but when the government finds out there is a medical doctor or a nurse who is doing it, they close down that clinic. But to my own surprise, some of the NGOs that work in villages have told me that the rate of female genital mutilation has accelerated since this law was instituted. To a certain extent, I expected this. You can't really change what people believe in and have been doing for years through law alone. They don't trust the government because they don't see anything good coming from the government. The government has all these family-planning programs that urge, for instance, women to limit themselves to having three children. But look in the rural areas. Each family there has about 10 children.

Mothers adamantly believe that their daughters will not be able to marry unless they are circumcised. And there are many cases where husbands send back and divorce daughters who are not circumcised. The most important thing for parents is to see their daughter married because they themselves cannot usually provide for her. They want her to be with a man who can support her, irrespective of what government legislation says. It seems they are saying to themselves that they have to do circumcisions quickly and even to younger daughters because the ban is going to get serious; doctors may not be able to do it much longer.

MEP: Which has had more of an impact on the situation of Egyptian women: tradition or religion?

KHAFAGY: Many Egyptians confuse religion and tradition, mixing the two together. They might, for instance, believe in a certain tradition and justify it on the basis of religion. Many Egyptians are very religious as far as rituals are concerned. They pray, fast, follow what they consider to be an Islamic dress code; they go on the pilgrimage, do zakat [contribute to charity]. But when it comes to a deeper understanding of Islam, they rely on interpretations given by the famous sheikhs. In many cases, these sheikhs have a special interest in interpreting Islam the way they do, or they are very much influenced by the patriarchal systems. Look again, for example, at female circumcision. It is a tradition that's prevailed for many centuries. It is practiced in Egypt by both Muslims and Christians. It is more widespread in Africa among non-Muslim countries than in Arab Muslim ones, but

people in Egypt would tell you that we practice it because Islam directs us to. In essence, however, Islam encourages men and women to think for themselves. There are no priests in Islam. Yet people prefer not to use their own minds; they feel more comfortable relying on others to interpret everything for them without questioning.

MEP: Is the situation of Christian women different from Muslim women?

KHAFAGY: The situation of Christian women is not any better than for Muslim women. Sometimes it is even worse. For example, Christian women in Egypt sometimes cannot get divorced because the Coptic Church allows it only in exceptional cases. In addition, there is all sorts of discrimination against non-Muslims in Egypt. Christian women suffer from discrimination in the workplace and in political participation.

MEP: Do NGOs approach the various religious communities in Egypt in different ways?

KHAFAGY: Fortunately, women's NGOs approach both Muslim and Christian women in the same way. Some hard-line Muslim NGOs, however, provide services to Muslims only.

MEP: How has the Egyptian government fared overall in its attempt to provide family planning?

KHAFAGY: Egypt for the past 20 years has had a strong family-planning program. It's been able to reach educated working women in urban areas. But in rural areas, there are more than three million children

working, many of them in the fields. There, they think having children is an investment because the children can work and get some money. It's not much, but two [Egyptian] pounds [about 40 U.S. cents] per child each day is better than nothing. Also, men in rural areas, especially in Upper Egypt, think that the more children they have, the more powerful and respectable they are. If a wife is in poor health and tired and wants to limit the number of births, she cannot, because he can divorce her, just like that. So no matter what you have in terms of a program, it reaches some people but cannot reach others. There are many different groups of women in Egypt. You need different strategies so that they listen to you and trust you; each of them has a logic of its own. What they do is not illogical or done out of ignorance or illiteracy.

MEP: Are Egyptian women's-rights NGOs able to maintain extensive ties with international organizations?

KHAFAGY: Yes, the strong urban-women's NGOs work a lot with international NGOs and with regional NGOs and have networks. They attend conferences abroad and so on.

MEP: Has the government pressured women's NGOs in an attempt to limit their involvement with foreign organizations?

KHAFAGY: The government is much more concerned about human-rights organizations than women's organizations. The human-rights organizations have focused on violations of human rights and how Egypt treats its prisoners and detainees, so this has been a headache for the government. The government has closed down human-rights

organizations and imprisoned some of their members. They're not happy with women's organizations, but they've not treated them as aggressively. They've banned one or two in the past two years, but generally they've left them space to maneuver.

MEP: What is the political-religious orientation of the various women's NGOs? Do they tend to be secular or religious?

KHAFAGY: Some are secular and do not want to base their arguments along religious lines. In many cases, however, they lose out. With all that's happening now, if you talk to any ordinary man or woman and use religion, they listen to you. But if you ignore religion they do not listen, no matter what you say, even if you misquote the Prophet or what the Quran says. People are not that well informed. The constituency of these secular NGOs tends to be intellectual women rather than grass-roots women. There are also other NGOs that are secular but acknowledge that religion plays a major role, and they'll work with broad-minded religious people to make their case. A third kind of NGO is composed of women who are veiled and are sometimes critical of the government. I don't think they use religion directly, but they see themselves getting legitimacy through this dress code.

Each of these NGOs is quite different from the others. They don't get along together easily, and disputes between them are common. That's why I say we don't have a movement now, because there isn't a common agenda among them. Sometimes they do get together on specific actions. For instance, if sexual harassment occurs in downtown public places, they might get together. They could issue a statement, hold a press conference, and work together for a

month, but then that ends. A year later, something else might happen, and they'll again get together for a while. But they don't forge a permanent alliance on a common agenda.

Unfortunately, there are women who side with the government even when there are feminist NGOs. They have the ambition to become politically powerful and all that, so they decide to further the government's hand in areas where they work. For instance, if there are elections, they might organize women in their community to raise money and vote for the ruling party. Some, although not many, have decided that the only way they can survive and be accepted and get money from the government and be in the media is to help the government, not criticize it.

MEP: What's the extent of participation of men in women's rights in Egypt? Are there many progressive men helping out?

KHAFAGY: There are a few broadminded religious people who are active, and intellectual men and journalists and others who are, but not too many, unfortunately.

MEP: In Western countries, some men see equality for women as in their interest because it challenges them to become fuller human beings. In that context, they think of women's rights as a necessary component of human rights. How would Egyptian men respond to that view?

KHAFAGY: First, the economic situation is very bad for everybody, and men have come to believe, partly because the government

encourages it, that women are competing with them for jobs, so it's better for society if women stay at home and take care of their families. They maintain that in Islam, men are the ones who should be working, not women. That's one reason why men don't want women to get their economic rights.

Another thing is that our family law is one of the worst. A man can divorce his wife for no reason whatsoever. He can even divorce her verbally. He can divorce her when he is away from her and she does not know about it; she might find out years later. I once headed an ombudsman office where I was dealing with the complaints of women. I met women who had been divorced for 10 years and did not know it. Sometimes the ex-husband would return and live with them without even telling them they were divorced. She would only know when he died and she found out that she could not claim anything. This law is as bad as it gets. If her children are over 15 years old, her husband can throw her out of the house. She can be in court for years trying to get money for child support. A man can threaten to divorce his wife if he doesn't like the way she cooks. He can beat her up whenever he wants and the police will never do anything about it. Of course, this can't be done to women who are very rich, but ordinary women and poor women are vulnerable. Men in Egypt have all these rights; why would they give them away? Especially when the government is siding with them. I think it's a kind of conspiracy between men and the government to deprive women of their rights. Not having a strong women's-rights movement hasn't helped. Rights are not given; they have to be fought for.