

Recovering Women's Voices

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Recovering Women's Voices: Islam, Citizenship, and Patriarchy in Egypt

BY

REHAM ELMORALLY

American University in Cairo, Egypt



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2024

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83608-249-1 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83608-248-4 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83608-250-7 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

Preface	<i>ix</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	1
1. Veils of Power: Gender, Citizenship, and the Shadows of Patriarchy in Egypt	4
Chapter 1 History of the Arab Republic of Egypt	9
1. From Province to Kingdom to Republic – A Chronology	9
2. Post-independence Egypt	13
3. Personal Authoritarian Rule – The Machiavellian State	14
4. Authoritarianism in Egypt	15
4.1. Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism, and Feminism – Gamal Abdel Nasser	16
4.2. Secularisation and Resacralisation – Anwar Sadat	19
4.3. Suppressing and Oppressing the Opposition – Hosni Mubarak	24
5. Civil Societies in Egypt – What are They?	27
6. The Radicalisation of Political Islam in Egypt – The Case of the MB	30
Chapter 2 Feminism, Identity, and the Status of Women in Egypt (19th–20th Century)	37
1. A Brief Overview of Feminist Activism in Egypt	43
2. The First Feminists in Egypt	44
2.1. The First Feminist Wave: Public Education and Political Representation	47
2.2. The Second Feminist Wave: Constitutional and Legal Rights	53
2.3. The Third Feminist Wave: State Feminism and Civil Society	56

3. The Female Identity: Dehumanisation as an Explanation for Women's Inferiority	60
3.1. Rationalising the Dehumanisation of Women Using Religion	65
Chapter 3 Codifying the Dehumanisation of Egyptian Women	73
1. State-sponsored Feminism and the Status of Egyptian Women	73
2. The State and the Crackdown on Women's Movements	80
3. Codifying the Dehumanisation of Egyptian Women	82
4. Conceptual Framework	95
4.1. Conceptual Diagram and Analytical Elements	97
Chapter 4 Methodology, Methods, and Tools	105
1. Research Methodology: Qualitative Interpretivism/The Interpretivist Paradigm	105
2. Rationalising the Qualitative Methodology	106
3. Research Method: Auto-ethnography	106
4. Textual Analysis and Selection of Legal and Policy Documents	112
5. Research Tool: Semi-structured Interviews	115
6. Conducting Culturally Appropriate and Sensitive Research	117
Chapter 5 The Role of Religion and Class in Setting Patriarchal Bargains	123
1. Growing Up in Classes	125
2. Islam: A Culture and a Religion	130
3. Education and Son Preference	142
4. Patriarchal Attitudes and Women's Subordination	146
Chapter 6 The Role of the Hijab in Navigating the Patriarchal Bargain in Urban and Rural Egypt	151
1. Contextualising the Hijab in Contemporary Egypt: What Does it Represent?	154
2. Rationalising the Dehumanisation of Women Using Religion in Contemporary Egypt	161
3. Women's Active Collusion in the Reproduction of Their Own Subordination	164
4. Navigating Patriarchal Bargains: The Strategic Use of the Hijab in Urban/Rural Areas	168
4.1. 'Yes, the Hijab Protects ME'	175
4.2. 'Yes, the Hijab Protects HER'	179

Chapter 7 Sufi Islam Versus Sunni Islam: The Role of Religious Interpretation on Women's Roles and Status in Society	183
1. Brief History of Siwa	186
2. Navigating Patriarchal Bargains: The Strategic Use of the Hijab in Siwa	191
3. Codifying the Status of Siwian Women	196
Chapter 8 Conclusion	207
1. Summary of Findings	207
2. Discussion	211
3. Conclusion	217
 Bibliography	 219

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Preface

Gender inequality can be attributed to a myriad of causes. This book seeks to unpack the gender disparity in Egypt, which ranks 129th on the Gender Equality Index (El Feki et al., 2017). This book examines a specific aspect of inequality observed in Egypt: women as second-class citizens. Accordingly, this book sets out to understand how the patriarchal system in Egypt prevented women from realising their strategic gender interests, and by extension perpetuating their second-class citizenship. This book also unpacks how the patriarchal system in Egypt exploited and manipulated women, which served to maintain male domination and preserve the status quo. Conceptually, this book makes use of Sylvia Walby's *Six Structures of Patriarchy* in the Egyptian context to gain a better understanding of how the patriarchal system created a 'system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (Walby, 1990, p. 20). To do this, secondary data were critically approached to re-examine feminist activism from the perspective of movements to attain and realise women's strategic gender interests. The book recognised the essential role of Islam in cultural understandings, thus the book systematically investigated the role of religion and religious interpretation in solidifying women's subordination. This recognition was significant as personal status laws in Egypt, which are meant to protect women's rights, must adhere to the rules of Sharia Islam, making it most relevant to the investigation of how women's subordination was institutionalised. The book also collected primary data, using the Hijab as a pre-identified measure to sensitively interview 100 ordinary citizens (women $N=51$, men $N=49$), who were randomly selected and volunteered their time, from five different locations in Egypt, and examined how women navigate the patriarchal bargain which is universal throughout Egypt.

The data triangulation served to confirm a positive relationship between women's strategic gender interests and citizenship status by highlighting that the findings of the secondary sources, such as legal texts and written documents, are consistent with the collected primary testimonies from ordinary citizens. Findings suggest that if women are prevented from realising their strategic gender interests, they lack the agency to challenge their citizenship exclusion. Further, if women attained strategic gender interests, then they would have the agency and right to full citizenship status and benefits. The reason women are denied strategic gender interests in Egypt is the institutionalisation of the dehumanisation of women, which reproduces women's social inferiority. Simultaneously, the Sunni interpretation of Islam served to legitimise women's *less than human* status and rationalise

their secondary status, evidence of which can be seen in both cultural understandings and the legal framework. Secondary data revealed that these processes were established by the patriarchal system to maintain the patriarchal bargain where women must exchange their agency and autonomy for safety from male violence and financial security. In other words, the patriarchal system sets up the bargain in a way where noncompliance with the concrete rules is socially and institutionally sanctioned, forcing women into a position where they internalise their inferiority and reproduce their subordination. The data suggest that the Hijab is strategically used by women in urban and rural areas of Egypt to navigate the patriarchal bargain; however, the results did not apply to indigenous women. The patriarchal manifestations in urban/rural communities and the indigenous community are attributed to the numerous differences, including the Sufi interpretation of Islam espoused in the Siwian indigenous culture.

The significance and purpose of this book are to update and advance the study of Egyptian women's citizenship status and demonstrate the strategies Egyptian women used to navigate the patriarchal bargains constraining the actualisation and realisation of their strategic gender interests. The findings of this study contribute to existing knowledge and produce new empirical data about the patriarchal structures and bargains present in Egypt today, and how Egyptian women navigate these structures to challenge their social inferiority and second-class citizenship status.

Acknowledgements

To my esteemed mentors, Dr Sarah Cardey and Dr Joanne Davies, my journey under your guidance has been transformative. Your unwavering support and insightful critiques have pushed me to explore realms beyond my imagination, fostering my growth academically and personally. You've been my pillar, providing a safe space for intellectual curiosity and emotional resilience through every high and low.

I want to express my profound gratitude to my editor Daniel Ridge for his foundational expertise and steadfast support. His keen insights and encouragement greatly enhanced this work, making the journey both collaborative and enriching.

To the roots of my being, my parents Mohamed ElMorally and Azza Abou El Ezz, your love and sacrifices have sculpted the essence of my being. Mami, your encouragement opened the world of words to me, laying the foundation of my academic pursuit. Papi, you've been the guiding light, instilling in me the values of logic, critical thinking, and the endless pursuit of knowledge. Together, you've been my sanctuary, my unwavering support system.

My sisters, Ingy and Nouran, your boundless love and support have made the distance between us inconsequential. Your presence has been a constant reminder of strength and unity. To my best friends, Ola Emad and Nour Badrawi, your faith in me has been the wind beneath my wings, reminding me of the power of perseverance and the strength of our bond.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express my indebtedness to Dr Samuel Poskitt, Dr Patrick Hassan, Annalyse Mosekland, and Tamisan Lath-erow, for your generosity of spirit and time. Your friendship, collegiality, and support are what allowed this book to be completed on time. You all have my everlasting respect, admiration, and appreciation.

This acknowledgement is a testament to the collective support and love I've received. Thank you for being my compass, my inspiration, and my strength.

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Introduction

In Egypt, women are perceived as second-class citizens and are considered socio-culturally inferior to men (Abbott & Teti, 2017; Chang, 2018; Farouk, 2021; Moghadam, 2004; Rama, 2013). This male domination and women's socio-cultural inferiority are attributed to different primary causes depending on the theoretical perspective adopted. When Islam came to Egypt in 640, it was perceived as a progressive religion which asserts the equal status of both women and men, particularly in terms of obligations and spiritual values (Shaikh, 2009, p. 787). However, due to male-dominant interpretations of the Qur'an and Sharia 'a discourse of competing equalities [arose]: men and women are granted rights by traditional approaches to the Sharia, but men have generally been granted their rights and women have not been allowed theirs' (Shaikh, 2009, p. 787). Yet, there are also verses in the Qur'an which do overtly state that men have a higher value than women, for instance, men inherit twice as much as women, and the legal testimony of men is worth twice as much as a woman's (Adang, 2002; Al-Hakim, 2002; Ibn 'Arabi, 1911, p. 89). The religious scholars of Al-Azhar – the institution responsible for Islamic jurisprudence, scripture interpretation, and the source of religious authority in Egypt – referred to in Arabic as *Ulama* [religious jurist/scholar recognised by the State and accredited by Al-Azhar] and/or *Imams*, 'interpreted Islam to emphasise women's second-class status, while downplaying the message of gender equality. Practices such as female veiling and seclusion became sacrosanct, even though the Qur'an does not require them' (Chang, 2018).

Before the British colonisation of Egypt in 1882, Youssef Rapoport in his book *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*, highlighted that the social norm of 13th- and 14th-century Muslim women in Egypt was to work as peddlers, hairdressers, midwives, and in the textile industry. Rapoport (2005) said, 'Contrary to the ideas commonly prevailing in Europe, a large portion of the votaries consisted of ladies, who were walking to and from without the slightest restraints, conversing with each other, and mingling freely among the men' (p. 246). What changed in the Egyptian society to transform women's social roles and freedoms? Chang (2018) argued that French and British colonisation 'decimated the cottage industries that had employed women in large numbers', and continued to state, that

only men were allowed to work in factories that used steam power and to receive training on advanced machinery (...) [which] pushed society in a conservative direction. The customs of veiling and

seclusion were practised more widely, and the codification of family laws stamped out rights that women had enjoyed earlier.

She concluded that due to the simultaneous industrialisation of Egypt and Western colonisation processes 'the vibrant and diverse tradition of women's participation in public life was erased. People assumed that women had always lived under severe constraints (...) [because] Egyptian society is often reflexively conservative' (Chang, 2018).

This book focusses on women's inferiority and second-class citizenship in Egypt from the perspective of *strategic gender interests*. Maxine Molyneux (1985) coined the term *strategic gender interests* to refer to women's emancipation efforts in terms of 'the abolition of the sexual division of labour, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labour and childcare, the removal of institutionalised forms of discrimination, the attainment of political equality, the establishment of freedom of choice over childbearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women' (p. 233), which are the cornerstones to achieving women's equal status. Respectively, Molyneux (1985) also coined the term *practical gender interests*, to refer to

interests [which] are given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division ... practical interests are usually a response to an immediate perceived need, and they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality. (p. 233)

Similarly, Anne-Marie Goetz (1995) expanded on Molyneux's definition, adding that practical gender interests 'respond to immediate, situationally specific needs and which may not challenge prevailing forms of gender subordination' (p. 7), that is, responses to women's practical needs aimed at improving their quality of life, yet do not challenge the existing power imbalances or women's subordination. Goetz (1995) also elaborated on the definition of strategic gender interests, arguing that they 'entail transformative goals such as women's emancipation and gender equality', adding that because strategic interests cannot be assumed, it 'makes it difficult for feminist policy analysis to establish a set of values for evaluating policy measures' (p. 7). Additionally, Goetz stressed the significant role the State plays in promoting/suppressing women's strategic gender interests, explaining that 'the state is still a critical arena for the promotion of women's interests' as the state underwrites the 'asymmetrical distribution of resources and values between women and men and ... improving the quality of the accountability of public institutions to their female constituencies' (Goetz, 1995, p. 1).

Goetz (1995) observed that in patriarchal systems of Bangladesh, Morocco, and Mali, *inter alia*, the 'states have both assumed and construed women's identity for public policy as being conditioned by their social relationships as dependants of men and have made them the objects of family welfare policy' (p. 4). She criticised the patriarchal system for setting 'policies for women [that do] not to

provide women with institutional survival bases – such as employment or asset ownership rights – which might be alternatives to dependence on men’, that is, criticising the development of policies that meet the practical interests of women, but ‘at best, such policies improve women’s survival at the margins; at worst, they can reinforce the traditional gender ideologies which contribute to women’s disadvantaged position in their efforts to mobilise physical and human capital for their self-development’ (Goetz, 1995, p. 4).

In essence, Goetz unpacked how the pursuit of practical interests by a state benefits women’s overall welfare. However, as practical interests do not challenge the existing gender structures, women’s subordination will continue to be reproduced and perpetuated and the patriarchal system will prevail, preventing women from realising their strategic interests. Similarly, Caroline Moser (1993) argued that ‘the state in different political contexts effectively controls women’s strategic gender needs through family policy relating to domestic violence, reproductive rights, legal status and welfare policy’ (p. 2), an issue which is unpacked in the context of Egypt in Chapter 2.

Throughout this book, the term strategic gender interests thereby refers to efforts and needs required to emancipate women and challenge women’s subordination to men, as well as practical gender interests – the needs required to overcome the immediate and situationally specific shortcomings, without challenging the existing gender roles or cultural norms. Moreover, practical gender interests are exploited by the patriarchal system to subjugate women via patriarchal bargains and maintain male domination and control. Therefore, throughout this book, practical gender interests are used to refer to the women’s responses to immediate needs, while strategic gender interests are reforms at the structural level which challenge women’s subordination. Depending on the theoretical school of thought, patriarchal systems can be defined in a myriad of ways. For instance, from a Marxist Feminist perspective, patriarchal system insinuates ‘men’s domination over women is a by-product of capital’s domination over labour’ (Walby, 1990, p. 4). From a radical feminist perspective, men’s domination over women is ‘not a by-product of capitalism’ but consider male violence and domination over women’s bodies and sexuality to be the root cause of women’s inferiority (Walby, 1990, p. 3). This book uses the term patriarchal system more holistically to refer to ‘Different aspects of women’s subordination ... to take account of the different gender inequality over time’ (Walby, 1990, p. 5). More specifically, Sylvia Walby’s (1990) definition of the patriarchal system as a ‘system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women’ (p. 20) is adopted for this project and is used to refer to the systemic suppression of women’s equal access, status, opportunities, and rights (strategic gender interests) by the patriarchal socio-political and cultural systems. Furthermore, the term ‘patriarchal bargain’, a term coined by Deniz Kandiyoti (1998) is used in this book to entail the strategies women living in patriarchal systems employ to gain a greater degree of autonomy and security within the ‘concrete constraints ... [that] influence both the potential for and specific forms of women’s active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression’ (p. 275), that is, efforts to gain Egyptian women strategic gender interests.

1. Veils of Power: Gender, Citizenship, and the Shadows of Patriarchy in Egypt

This book sets out to understand how the patriarchal system in Egypt prevented women from realising their strategic gender interests and, by extension, perpetuating their second-class citizenship. This book also unpacks how the patriarchal system in Egypt focussed on the development of women's practical gender interests, which improved women's welfare but did not challenge women's subordination or advance their strategic needs. Consequentially, the sex-based power structure in Egypt was reproduced and the patriarchal system was maintained. The book considers how the perception of women as inferior is a social construct perpetuated and reproduced by the patriarchal system to consolidate and normalise women's second-class citizenship. This is evidenced by the systematic patriarchal suppression of women's strategic gender interests throughout Egypt's history, starting from the 1919 revolution (discussed in Chapter 1).

The book delineated three pivotal objectives, each accompanied by a series of research questions designed to guide the investigation. The *first objective* was to identify the historical and political instances that have established women's second-class citizenship in Egypt. This inquiry was structured around several critical questions: What role has the State played in either promoting or suppressing the political and social status of Egyptian women? To what extent have political Islam, including Islamist opposition and religious institutions like Al-Azhar, influenced the promotion or suppression of women's strategic gender interests? Furthermore, the book is aimed to understand the rationalisations behind Egyptian women's inferiority and their exclusion from full citizenship rights, offering a comprehensive overview of the systemic challenges faced by women in Egypt.

This was achieved by reframing and re-examining the scholarship around women's movements in Egypt and approaching them as efforts to actualise strategic gender interests for Egyptian women. First Chapter 1 sets the scene by providing a historical account of feminist waves and activism and reviewing how the State operationalised the patriarchal system to suppress feminist demands for strategic gender interests. Second, the chapter introduces the process of dehumanisation as a possible explanation of how women's second-class citizenship and women's inferiority were established.

The *second objective* of the book was to identify and analyse the intersectionality of the patriarchal system and Islam in reproducing women's inferior identities and identifying patriarchal bargains. This analysis was driven by questions aimed at unpacking the complex dynamics at play: What role has political Islam played in the resurgence of traditional conservative practices in Egypt, such as the Hijab, and what consequences has this had on women's status and roles in Egyptian society? Additionally, the book explored the construction of the status of Egyptian women by political Islam and examined to what extent religion informs societal perceptions of women and the rights and liberties protected by the legal framework.

To achieve this, Articles from Egypt's Constitution, Penal Code, and personal status code about women's strategic gender interests were selected and analysed to better outline the extent to which they contributed to the institutionalisation of women's inferiority and second class. This necessitated an unpacking of how religion intersects with politics, as personal status laws are based on the principles of Sharia Islam and therefore required a distinction to be drawn over what is a religious mandate and what is cultural understanding/interpretation.

The first two objectives were designed to provide an analytical account of the different instances where women's strategic gender interests were suppressed and the patriarchal system was prevailed. The purpose of the first two objectives was to use secondary data to re-examine literature and policy documents using strategic gender interests as the analytical lens. The third objective was to use the findings and conclusions of the first two objectives to approach the qualitative data.

The *third objective* was to identify and analyse, through the role of the Hijab, how women negotiate social power in Egypt. This objective was pursued through questions that sought to uncover the strategies employed by women to navigate the patriarchal structures of society: What did the data reveal about the patriarchal bargains women employ in Egypt to gain greater security and autonomy? What is the role of the Hijab in signalling adherence to the rules of the patriarchal system? And, considering that personal status laws are based on the Sharia of Islam, what role does religious interpretation play in challenging or perpetuating patriarchal structures? Through these focussed inquiries, the book endeavours to shed light on the nuanced ways in which women in Egypt navigate and negotiate their identities and social power within a deeply entrenched patriarchal system.

The third objective was sought to collect data about the patriarchal bargains in Egypt and gain insights into what strategies women employed to challenge their citizenship exclusion and realise their strategic gender interests. The data collection was designed to gain insights into what strategies women employ to navigate the patriarchal system of Egypt, which forced them to 'often adhere as far and as long as they possibly can to rules (...) that result in their active collusion in the reproduction of their own subordination' (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 289). This was analysed in relation to women's 'ability to exercise agency [afforded through the actualisation of strategic gender interests] on their own behalf, including the agency needed to challenge their [citizenship] exclusion' (Kabeer, 2006, p. 100). Similar to Sylvia Walby (1990), this book does not distinguish between 'necessary and contingent structures of social system ... since patriarchy is an open social system which can take a variety of forms' (p. 19). Using the *Hijab* as a proxy measure, that is, an indirect measure to collect information about patriarchal bargains and perceptions of women's status and role in society sensitively, 100 ordinary citizens (women $N=51$, men $N=49$), who were randomly selected and volunteered their time, from 5 different locations were interviewed (see Chapter 3 for full methodological approach). It was significant to see how women perceive themselves and how men perceive women to gain a better understanding of why

and how women's strategic gender interests have been curtailed by the patriarchal system. As Ruxton (2020) expressed, 'if men are still the prime beneficiaries of gender inequality, then dismantling male privilege is, at least in part, men's work'. Therefore, as most men, willingly or unwillingly, have benefitted from the patriarchal system, it became essential to include men's voices to better understand how women and men can work together to challenge the patriarchal system in Egypt. In other words, if the power resides with 50% of the society, and that 50% do not see an issue with the system they are in, then they are deemed to perpetuate and reproduce it. Effectively, it was rational to interview men and women to gain insights into how the patriarchal system in Egypt succeeded in suppressing women's efforts to realise their strategic gender interests. Furthermore, this book highlights how men's understandings of women's status and rights have historically, and in contemporary Egypt, been curtailed using political Islam as an ideology to justify the subjugation of women. According to Are Knudsen (2003), the problem of trying to define political Islam is ever-changing 'many authors dispense with a definition altogether, leaving it to the reader to infer the many meanings of political Islam', however, in this book, the term is used to denote 'Islam used to a political end' (p. 2).

The significance and purpose of this book are to update and advance the study of Egyptian women's citizenship status and demonstrate the strategies Egyptian women used to navigate the patriarchal system constraining the realisation of their strategic gender interests. To address the objectives, the project was sought to make sense of how and why Egyptian women hold a secondary citizenship status and how the patriarchal system in Egypt prevented women from achieving their strategic gender interests. This involved a re-examination of existing literature about women's and feminist movements in Egypt through the perspective of strategic gender interests (objective 1). It also involved the critical analysis of primary interview data and secondary policy papers and legal texts to unpack the extent to which religion intersects with patriarchal structures to socially perpetuate women's second-class citizenship and the discourse of women's inferiority (objective 2). Finally, 100 ordinary citizens (women $N=51$, men $N=49$), who were randomly selected and volunteered their time, from 5 different geographical and environmental communities in Egypt to investigate the types of patriarchal bargains identified by Egyptian women and what they have done to challenge/perpetuate their inferiority and second-class citizenship (objective 3). The data triangulation, therefore, was served to provide a reliable account using three data sources to understand the relationship between women's strategic gender interests and second-class citizenship.

This book contributes to existing knowledge by producing new empirical data about the patriarchal structures and bargains present in Egypt today, and how Egyptian women navigated these structures to challenge their social inferiority and second-class citizenship status. The book also demonstrates how reframing historical and political events through a strategic gender interests' perspective could provide an alternative reading to these events and reveal dimensions of analysis previously unnoticed. Additionally, the new primary data are valuable

given the difficult political context of present-day Egypt and the difficulties of accessing certain communities. Cumulatively, this book fills a gap in the literature and contributes to a new updated study of gender, citizenship, and politics in Egypt. The wider benefit of this book is that it includes local accounts from historically marginalised populations, such as the minority-ethnic Amazigh indigenous population of the Siwa oasis, providing valuable insights into this under-researched community.