



The Egyptian Cabinet
Information and Decision Support Center

IDSC

Policy Perspective



Future of Women's Empowerment in Light of National Strategy for Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030: Cultural and Social Vision



Dr. Heba Sharobeem

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**The Egyptian Cabinet
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A non-periodic publication issued by the Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC). It covers the most prominent topics in the scene from all aspects to present a comprehensive vision regarding such topics relying on experts' perspectives.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or perspective of IDSC

IDSC's Commentary

International human rights conventions prohibit discrimination based on gender. The common Article 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) ensures equal rights for men and women. In addition, other conventions and bodies are concerned with women's rights, most notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

The international community paid great attention to enhancing women's empowerment politically, economically, and socially. The states keenly ensured that their constitutions included guarantees for gender equality regarding the various rights and duties of citizenship.

Egypt was not apart from these steps, whether societally through the efforts of the Egyptian feminist movement, or politically by giving top priority to empowering Egyptian women. The political leadership believes that empowering women is a "national duty".

In the past few years, the issue of empowering Egyptian women gained an unprecedented boom, which culminated in 2017 with the launching of the "National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030". It was based on five main elements, namely: women's self-esteem and confidence in their abilities; providing them with choices and the right to determine these choices; the right to access and receive opportunities and resources; the ability to control their lives; and the ability to positively influence the direction of social change.

Accordingly, the new edition of the IDSC Policy Perspective seeks to shed light on the future of women's empowerment in light of the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030 by addressing the Strategy's most prominent pillars.

Future of Women's Empowerment in Light of National Strategy for Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030: Cultural and Social Vision



Dr. Heba Sharobeem

Egyptian Senator

The history of the feminist movement in Egypt has passed through several stages since the 19th century until Egyptian women were able to escape from the outdated traditions that deprived them of their natural right to education, work, community and political participation, and even deprived them of being humans in the first place. We are grateful to many women who fought, even some of them - such as Dr. Doria Fahmy - who paid a very high price to change society's view of women and empower them at all levels. Thanks to the success of these efforts, the generation to which I belong and the previous and subsequent generations can enjoy many rights. Since 1956, women have had the right to participate in elections and parliament, achieved in 1957.

However, the role of women remained limited in the political field and leadership positions and they remained away from certain fields, such as the judiciary. Dr. Aisha Rateb, professor of international law and the first Egyptian female ambassador, tried to gain the position of judge in the State Council, and her application was rejected despite obtaining the highest degree among her colleagues in the applicants' examination held by the then president of the State Council, Abd al-Razzaq al-Sanhuri. She filed a lawsuit against the government, the first of its kind in Egypt, for violating her constitutional rights, but she lost it for political and cultural reasons "because her appointment was inappropriate for her femininity". Unfortunately, she couldn't see the first woman joining the State Council and the Public Prosecution in October 2021.

The Egyptian women continued to make steady strides in various areas, especially political life. They played a role that history cannot forget in restoring stability to Egypt through their active participation in the June 2013 revolution and the subsequent building of the modern Egyptian state. Women usually play the role required of them and are then marginalized, but this is not the case in Egypt. Rather, their role increased, and the year 2017 was dedicated to them. Accordingly, the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030 was released. Undoubtedly, it is an unprecedented step to give them the real opportunity to prove and activate their capabilities, or to unleash their energies and support their participation easily and safely. Certainly, this would not only give her personal success, but also enrich and advance the development of the nation as a whole.

The Strategy has four pillars: political, economic, and social empowerment and women's protection, which are all linked to each other. The Strategy's definition of women's empowerment is based on five elements: namely: women's self-esteem and confidence in their abilities; providing them with choices and the right to determine these choices; the right to access and receive opportunities and resources; the ability to control their lives; and the ability to positively influence the direction of social change. The Strategy aims for "the Egyptian women to become, by 2030, active contributors to the achievement of sustainable development in a nation that guarantees their constitutional rights, ensures their full protection, and provides- without discrimination- political, social, and economic opportunities that enable them to develop their capacities and achieve their full potential, raising the nation's standing".

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Having a quick look at what has happened since the launch of this Strategy, we will certainly find that some goals have been achieved in the three areas of empowerment. Egyptian women have assumed almost all leadership positions previously limited to men and have proven their competence. Moreover, as mentioned above, they have even been able to enter areas that they were previously not allowed to enter. As per the thinker Dr. Abdel Moneim Saeed, we see that “women’s rights are progressing in a prosperous era in which women assumed the post of a minister more than in any previous era, working in Egyptian embassies, become members in the House of Representatives (and also the Senate), governors, as well as other positions that they did not hold before”. The Strategic Forum for Public Policy and Development Studies’ report, titled Egyptian Women Between Empowerment and Marginalization, explained this in number, indicating that women’s representation amounted to about 29% of the total number of representatives, the highest percentage that women have ever had in the parliament’s history, exceeding the global average estimated at 25.6%. Egypt advanced 72 ranks globally in the percentage of women’s representation in the House of Representatives within 9 years. It ranked 66th in 2021, compared to 138th in 2012.

In addition, Egypt ranked second in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in terms of the percentage of women’s representation in parliament in 2021, leading the Inter-Parliamentary Union to describe this percentage as “historical levels”. Egyptian female parliamentarians took a rigid stance during the discussion of the Senate law to raise the percentage of women’s representation from 10% to 25%. In the end, the law endorsed this percentage to be no less than 10%, and some male representatives promised to encourage increasing

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women's representation in the Senate, which reached 13.3% in 2020. A woman has been appointed as the Senate deputy chairperson for the first time. From a legislative standpoint, as representative Jalila Othman said, "The two draft laws of the House of Representatives and the Senate included the principle of positive discrimination by increasing women's representation in parliament".

However, from my point of view, and as the research and the reality confirm, the challenge remains strong concerning social empowerment and the pillar of protection. Unfortunately, we cannot yet "prevent practices that perpetuate discrimination against women, or that harm them, whether in public or within the family". Thus, five years after releasing the Strategy, we have not achieved the required protection for them. We must acknowledge the large gap between the successes and gains women achieved, the negative mental image, and even the view of inferiority due to the societal culture, media, and religious discourse that has entrenched this image for years. Consequently, a system of negative values towards women was produced. One of its manifestations was not only the increasing violence against women, but also the emergence of another kind, which is digital violence, to which 85% of women have been exposed worldwide. Further, the United Nations declared what it called a shadow pandemic parallel to COVID-19, referring to the increasing violence against women during the COVID-19 epidemic.

With seven years left until 2030, I see that the beginning should be within the family, which is still the cornerstone in shaping the awareness of the human being. It is responsible for creating confidence inside the child, boy and girl, and entrenching the positive principles and values of belonging to the homeland and accepting diversity and difference. Accordingly, a marital relationship that is based on mutual respect is important because it is the first lesson the child receives in dealing with the other gender. It is also important to properly bring up females/future women, enhancing their self-confidence and - as the Strategy states - “the woman’s self-esteem and confidence in her abilities”. Unfortunately, the patriarchal society, which the woman herself (whether mother, grandmother, etc.) contributes to entrenching, deepens women’s inferior view of themselves and creates a kind of internalization of this view, leading a significant percentage of women to accept all kinds of domestic violence. They accept various forms of discrimination and give up many personal and professional ambitions, negatively affecting the country’s economic and societal development.

Therefore, educating intending spouses, parents, or anyone responsible for raising children is inevitable. There are signs of optimism, including the spread of family counseling and pre-marriage awareness programs. The Coptic Church has even made attending these courses a condition for



the completion of the marriage, and sometimes, the engaged couples are separated in this period, which is a good thing. Moreover, “the Sheikhdom of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif launched the family and societal awareness program, conducted by Al-Azhar Fatwa Global Center in cooperation with Al-Azhar’s various sectors. The aim is to confront family disintegration, reduce the divorce rate, and qualify those about to marry”. In addition, some civil society institutions participated in this field. However, these programs must be carefully monitored and developed in light of the emerging societal, cultural, and other problems and phenomena. It is also important to follow up on such programs and evaluate their effectiveness in the success of the Egyptian family and the proper upbringing of children.

Educational institutions, from nursery to university or any academic institute, go hand in hand with the family in their effective ability to establish a system of positive values of looking at women and dealing with them. Therefore, women’s education is very important. Still, the illiteracy rate among females is twice that of men, and sometimes it is higher based on the age group. It has been found that of the 42.5% of women exposed to domestic violence, 37% of them are illiterate. Education here does not only mean the elimination of writing and digital illiteracy, but preparing those in charge of the educational process at all stages and improving the scientific and educational content must be taken significantly into consideration. The faculties of education’s programs on preparing teachers must contain content that emphasizes gender equality and have to be part of the human rights curriculum currently taught in many Egyptian universities. The same applies to the content of various subjects of the Arabic language, foreign languages, history, sociology, and others. I appreciate the review of some curricula, which still need further development, but at least some steps have been taken. The human element that is responsible for the educational process itself remains in need of more development.

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The print, visual, audio, and digital media, along with the family and the educational institution, play a significant role. The role of digital media, in particular, increased in light of the massive technological boom witnessed in the second decade of the third millennium and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The studies confirm that media affects the individual's "perception, beliefs, behavior, emotions, attitudes, and viewpoints. The importance of the media lies in the fact that the human mind working is not limited only to receiving information from newspapers, books, TV news, or websites, but rather it transforms all the information it obtains into knowledge, conclusions, new meanings and principles about the surrounding life". The importance and influence of visual media increase with the absence of a culture of reading in the Arab world in general. The reading indicators in the Arab world, issued by several relevant institutions such as UNESCO and the Arab Thought Foundation, show that "the Arab reading rate per year is 35.24 hours. Egypt recorded the highest rate with 63.85 hours, 40 minutes per day".

Many studies have been published, including studies in which the National Council for Women participated, on the scenes of violence against women that the Egyptian films and series abound with, while glorifying the image of the man who practices violence against women who sometimes accept this. Unfortunately, some popular stars endorsed harassment in one form or another, and it became an act to be proud of rather than repel. The negative images of working women were also presented, some of whom resigned from their highest positions to please men. On the other hand, we find fewer dramas that raise various social issues, especially those related to women, and create awareness. I do not agree with or promote imposing censorship on creativity. Still, there must be a code of honor, so to speak, to take

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into account positive values, not to beautify any form of violence, to raise awareness of programs and services that help women in case they are exposed to violence, and to maximize their societal and economic contribution to advance production.



The religious discourse has the same influence, whether emotional or subconscious. In light of the difference in educational and social levels, religion continues to influence Egyptians in general. A study issued by the Democratic Arab Center in December 2017 found that “the religious factor and religious discourse overlap with all requirements and needs of the society,” especially in recent times. We have to acknowledge that for years, there has been a reactionary religious discourse based on hadiths, some of which are questionable and were interpreted in a way that entrenches the inferiority of women and permits ignoring their rights and even abusing them. This prompted the political leadership to say: “Correcting religious discourse is one of the most important demands, which we believe we need in Egypt and the Islamic world as a whole”. “The problem of our Islamic world currently is the incorrect understanding of the fundamentals of our religion”. To take an important step towards achieving this goal, it is necessary to develop religious education in Egypt. More than one study concluded that the importance of this kind of education exceeds all other types of education. Therefore, its development is inevitable, as “it is not only related to the countries’ progress, but it guarantees the state’s survival”. This development includes “encouraging innovation, humanizing religious education, keeping it away from labeling people as disbelievers, violence, and sectarianism, advancing the ways of dealing with the values of enjoining good and forbidding evil, and eliminating the religious illiteracy”.

Correcting religious discourse will not only be achieved through developing religious education but also through religious programs in various media, sermons and fatwas provided by religious institutions. This confirms that the societal, cultural, psychological, and political support for women and their protection are based on the close interconnectedness among the family, education, media, and religious institutions and the organized and continuous cooperation among them. However, this partnership must be based on modern studies and statistics that show the achievement of the four pillars of the Strategy during the past five years, while evaluating the legislative impact of some laws, such as criminalizing female genital mutilation.

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In conclusion, this cooperation would contribute to fulfilling the goals of the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women, which in turn is linked to achieving sustainable development and Egypt's Vision 2030. A family that raises a woman who is proud of herself and can develop herself at all levels will certainly be keen on educating her, cooperating with the educational institution, and providing her with a moderate religious upbringing. This would create sufficient awareness in her dealings with the media and the ability to distinguish between good and bad. This conception applies to any family member. Therefore, the challenge and urgent necessity remain for the isolated partners to come together to develop a clearly defined mechanism for empowering women to become major actors in achieving sustainable development in a nation that guarantees their constitutional rights on the ground, in daily life, and various fields of study and work. The result will be achieving full protection for them, guaranteeing them - without discrimination - the economic, social, and political opportunities they deserve, and advancing their capabilities. Thus, they can play their role in the nation's progress. The road is long and thorny, but it is worth moving forward with a steady and sustainable pace.



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The Egyptian Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC)

Government District, New Administrative Capital

Postal Code: 11582 P.O.Box: 191 Magless El Shaab

Tel.: +20227929292

Fax: +20227929222

www.idsc.gov.eg

info@idsc.gov.eg

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