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REPORT BY THE EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT ON THE  
EVOLUTION OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN EGYPT

Egyptian women throughout our modern times have endeavoured to reach the same level occupied by their sisters in western European countries. They are enjoying a high degree of freedom that has its roots in every basic religion. As to Islam, in specific, its rules have provided women's rights in every field of social, economic and political life. Through history women in the East have shared with men great responsibilities of statehood and were principal advisers on matters pertaining to safety of their countries. Islam has given women more rights than is commonly known. Women in Islam have the right to dispose of their personal property without any restriction, the right to manage their property without their husbands' interference and the right to keep and dispose of their earnings. The Moslem women have thus enjoyed greater privileges than many of their sex in a number of Western countries today. On the other hand, if it is said that certain customs existing in the countries of the Near East have not helped to give women the standard and status they are deemed fit to enjoy, many of these customs are foreign to the rules and teachings of Islam (e.g. veiling of women is mainly a Turkish innovation and has no origin in Islam). Polygamy was also subject to misconception which was the result of bias, unprofound or ignorant writing of many Western writers. Polygamy, in fact, was mainly instituted to defend womanhood. It also has its limitations. A woman might get seriously ill, incapacitated or turn out to be sterile. Rather than divorcing her, her husband would keep and care for her. In spite of Moslems' right to polygamy, it is not practised as many people would think. Statistics show that it is almost non-existent in cities and big towns and is of an extremely low percentage in rural areas.

After the First World War, Egyptian women began to claim equal rights with the opposite sex. The advancement of social life in Egypt, which was greatly

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expanded, gave more incentive to the women's movement.

The feminist movement since the First World War owes a great deal of its success to its prominent leader, Mrs. Hoda Charawi, who represented Egypt for the first time at the famous International Congress of Women which was held in Rome in 1923. Mrs. Charawi claimed equal opportunities for women and insisted on their full legal and social rights. Her trip to Rome and her remarks at the Congress brought her and the women's movement a great deal of publicity and justifiable attention. When she returned to Cairo, she founded the Woman's Association which was to lead to a much greater feminist movement. Ever since 1923, the Egyptian Woman's Association has sent its own delegates to international feminist meetings wherever they were in the world - Stockholm, United States, Italy, Turkey, Lebanon and France.

At a meeting in the United States fifteen years ago, Mrs. Charawi again represented Egypt and made a long speech that attracted much attention. Since then, many Egyptian feminine leaders have attended these international meetings and have been praised for their grasp of social, medical, business and political problems. They were also given a great deal of credit for helping women in other less enlightened countries, women who are not yet liberated from the unbearable yoke of prejudices.

The Egyptian women have played a prominent role in the field of education and their achievements have been remarkable. For a century - before their movement became active - Egyptian women had contributed widely to literature and art. Many of them became noted poetesses. Many wrote books that have today a world-wide circulation. Most of them possessed a keen sense of sensitivity and observation. With their advantages of acquiring Western culture and education and blending it with their own oriental culture, they were able to deal with new problems with a facility that was not then common, nor is today in many areas in the eastern world.

Among the leading Egyptian women writers, there was Madame Malak Nassef, who fifty years ago attained considerable renown as a "desert searcher". She was an accomplished poetess, able to give the most colourful descriptions in verse of the long Arabian nights, with all their mystery and enchantment. She painted in vivid terms the fascination of the desert and of the picturesque Bedouins who inhabit it. She wrote of the cool night winds, the glittering lights and of the vast endless stretches of sand dunes. She also recounted the

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fascinating legends of her country and brought to light much of the folklore of the natives. Besides her writing, she conducted elaborate studies of the status held by women under Egyptian law and made fruitful suggestions as to the ways they could obtain their emancipation.

With regards to education there has been a great growth in the number of schools for women in Egypt since 1923. Schools for girls exist in every section of the country. Women who were university graduates became lawyers, doctors, scientists, teachers and musicians, and today they are being joined in these fields by thousands of other young Egyptian women who have carefully prepared themselves for business and professional careers. Egyptian women have distinguished themselves as surgeons, frequently serving on the staffs of Egypt's modern hospitals.

Egyptian women have shown an intense interest in the work of the press. Not long after the First World War, three magazines were published and edited by Egyptian women writers. They had the Arabic names of Al Masria which means "the Egyptian woman" and Fatat El Chark, which means "the girl of the Orient".

Three magazines are in existence today and deal mostly with social problems and the necessary reforms which must be adopted to raise the standard of the Egyptian woman. Women's magazines have increased greatly in the last few years. Some of them are specialized in archeology, painting and fine arts.

The feminist movement of yesterday concerned itself with forcing open a place for women in a society which already existed in a ripe and aging form. It was at Yale University that some students paraded a few years ago with banners bearing the inscription: "Marry them early, tell them nothing, treat them rough".

Many changes have been taking place since. The feminist movement of today must concern itself with the rebuilding of a society in a form in which both men and women can live more creatively and therefore more happily than they did formerly.

Egypt went through the same evolution. There is now a new Woman's Party in Egypt called the Bent El Nil which means "the daughter of the Nile". This party was founded not long ago by a distinguished feminist writer, Mrs. D. Chafie, who is a graduate of the University of Paris. The programme of the new party calls for the right of Egyptian women to become members of Parliament. This programme was the occasion for a controversial issue in the Egyptian press. Many editorials were devoted to that topic.

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Perhaps the most successful achievement of the Egyptian women is their contribution to the social and public welfare of the country. Such a crisis as the cholera epidemic gave ample proof of their quality and value. This humanitarian task is being carried out by several associations where Egyptian women are the heads of the movements such as the famous Red Crescent Association, which is the equivalent of the Red Cross, and the Mohamed Ali Association, whose name is internationally famous for its humanitarian work. Serving on the committees of these associations are the Princesses of the Royal family, who gave great impulse to these associations, and also women who belong to leading Egyptian families and who have distinguished themselves through their personal battles against poverty and disease among the poorer people of Egypt. One of these associations has created many workshops where girls of poor families, who are unable to support themselves, are given the opportunity to learn handicraft work. Each year there is an exhibition where their products are shown and sold to the public. At present, many girls are studying handicraft work and learning to become specialists so that they may soon be self-supporting. Another woman's association called the Women's Health Improvement Association, has done wonders in recent years to protect the health of impoverished children. Through its efforts, a special health city, as it is called, has been built on the fringe of the desert. This little city now is the home of nearly 200 children of all ages who have been saved from the grim clutches of tuberculosis. They live in homes which have every modern convenience, electricity, running water, a laundry, spotless kitchens, and they eat in a spacious dining room where there is real community spirit.

To sum up, Egyptian women are confronted like all women throughout the world with the same problems of life, have the same faith in human kindness, are willing to participate in the growing of a new world from which misery, bitterness and fear should be wiped out and they have the same belief in integrity and pureness of the human soul.