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CASAR Public lecture: How far have women come in the past 120 years in Egypt and the US?

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November 26, 2023 at 1 pm
AUC New Campus Waleed Alwaleed P071 hall
Event Report by Maha Muehlhaeusler

Event Title: How far have women come in the past 120 years in Egypt and the US?

Summary:

In honor of the 16 days of activism set by the UN campaigning for eliminating violence against women, CASAR hosted an event to see how far women have come in the past 120 years in the United States and in Egypt, and what changes might be possible in the foreseeable future. This was CASARs last event for the Fall 2023 semester, and was made special by the warm welcome from Director Mark W. Deets, and the tremendous efforts of Professor Yasmine Al Ghazaly, who created a video compiling important figures of women throughout the decades in the United States and in Egypt, and also acting as the moderator for the panel event. The guest speakers were AUCs very own Professor and Associate Dean Jillian Campana, who has published an award winning book with plays to raise awareness about sexual harassment, and also advocated for the use of videos and a learning and training tool for educational environments. She shares her own experience during this event as a woman growing up in the United States and moving to Egypt. CASARs special guest speaker from outside the university was Hoda El Sadda, professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cairo University, feminist, and Co-founder of the Women and Memory Forum.

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The event began with a few words from AUC Professor of Practice in the Public Policy and Administration Department and Dean of the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, Noha Al Mikawy, who discussed the importance of bridges being made between different cultures. In the light of current events in Palestine, Mikawy thought it was important to link the topic of women empowerment to the global picture, as gender issues are very controversial in building bridges and understanding across cultures today. While the world is losing one bridge after the other, Mikawy emphasized that this event is a bridge being made between Egypt and the United States in the empowerment of women.

Next, as an introduction to the topic Yasmine Al Ghazaly showcased two videos. One that she created about notable Egyptian women and policy changes for women, and another on the change in policies for women in America since 1920. The first video included figures such as the founder of the first Egyptian Feminist Union (1923) Huda Sha'arawi, first woman to become a physician in Egypt Dr. Hilana Sedarous (1930), and the first Egyptian woman to hold a judicial position, Justice Tahani AL Gebali, who was appointed in 2003 by President Mubarak. The first video also featured information such as the fact that Female Genital Mutation was incriminated for the very first time in Egypt in 2008, and that the first time the term "sexual harassment" was used as a criminal offense in the Egyptian Penal code was in 2013. Ghazaly also included honorable mentions of women figures such as Malak Hifni Nasif, an Egyptian feminist and intellectual. The second video ran through improvements in women's rights starting with the right to vote in 1920. In 1963, women gained the right for equal pay and equal work. In 1972 the Title IX was introduced. Recently, in 2016, the United States military ended its exclusion of women from combat jobs.

Hoda el Sadda began by simply answering the question of how far women have come in the past 120 years in Egypt, and that is "a very long way! But not as far as we could go." She also argued "that the feminist movement in Egypt is one of the most successful social movements in Egypt." To Sadda, there will always be "struggles, compromises and negotiations." To begin her exploration of how far women have come, she begins with Britain's colonial presence in Egypt. During this presence, Sadda discusses how the role of women was not in the foreground, until they became a symbol for modernization, national identity, and both colonial and anti-colonial symbols. In addition, Sadda argues it is easy for the discussion of women to easily shift to another topic, such as anti-colonial nationalism. It was with Huda Sha'arawy's Feminist Union where the voices of women were heard, advocating for national independence, democracy, and Arab solidarity. In 1956 women became recognized as equals before the law, and were allowed to be in political roles. Sadda emphasizes a crucial point here, that women can now be CEOs, ministers, and managers, but in the domestic sphere cannot manage the finances of her own children or exchange their schools for example. The point Sadda makes is that in the public sphere, women are equals, but in the private sphere, improvements can be made, which produces a "huge paradox" for the meaning of freedom for women. In 1956 however, Sha'arawy's Feminist Union was replaced by a charity, and is no longer allowed to have a political role. The 1970s and 80s saw new global developments for women. The year

1975 was declared the international women's year, and also held the first international conference for women in New Mexico City. The second world conference in 1985 saw the introduction of global feminism, placing women's rights and agendas at the center of global politics. Strong feminist alliances were being formed, and the internationalization of the political regime in Egypt changed the stage for women. Sadda concludes her talk with the 2011 Egyptian revolution, which opened spaces for political activism on the ground, and as a result the Anti-Harassment law was passed a few years later. Finally, Sadda stated that Egypt is in a difficult spot, trying to maintain its achievements while fighting for new ones.

Jillian Campana then discussed the American perspective, from a different point of view. Campana began by questioning why the United States is considered a "world leader" when especially around women it took a while for things to change. She shared her own personal anecdote, about her mother's generation and how women could have a few different jobs: "a teacher, a nurse, secretary, or flight attendant." Campana also shared her own experience as a striving actor in Los Angeles, California, and how as a woman, she refused to go through what many actors did to gain popularity. Campana refused to give into these patterns and moved to Egypt, where she felt more empowered than as an actor in the United States. She also shared how children's book characters are mostly male, and how she would sometimes purposely change the name reading to her daughter. In addition, Campana discussed the agency of women being taken away in Roe v Wade, and how this is related to each individual woman having control over her own body, and how crucial this is to women's liberation. Campana also brought up the topic of intersectionality between women's rights and all other wars, as all these are related to one another.

There was time for a few questions from the audience members after Campana's talk. One question was about changes, and what expectations can we have for changes in Egypt, or what should be expected from a change in the law? Hoda Al Sadda answered by stating that "laws can be the trains that push societies forward." To her, it is about politics not culture, a top down diffusion of ideas. Another question was about the role of the media and how much it impacts changes for women. It was seen by Sadda as both a tool of education and a spread of misinformation about women. The last question was directed towards Campana, about the role of the arts and how that can be helpful and empowering. She answered that "The arts are incredibly powerful and so are performances. Audiences can understand their lives through characters, and make decisions how they want to work in the world by modeling behavior and learning from behavior."

With this, the last CASAR event was concluded. Light snacks and beverages were made available to all attendees.