

Brennan W. Goodman  
Marshalltown High School  
Marshalltown, Iowa  
Egypt, Factor 16

### **Egypt: One Step Back—Four Steps Forward**

Thousands of years ago in the delta of the Nile lived one of the great ancient civilizations. History textbooks teach how the Egyptian society raised the imposing pyramids from the massive slabs of granite and limestone, but they omit the intricacies of the social pyramid. We know of slaves, but what of women? Interestingly, they were almost in equal stature with men. They could testify in a court of law. They could even lead the country as female pharaohs like Hatshepsut. Circumstances have forced women back a step. Egyptian women have fewer rights than their mothers of millenniums past. However, with recent events in Egypt, there is a chance for progress. The clean slate of government could empower women to overcome the obstacles in order to gain financial security through a variety of means. Unfortunately though, the demographics of the Egyptian people will hold Egyptian women from their true potential. A part of Egyptian resistance to modern change is the strong presence of fundamentalist religion in the country. Fundamentalist religion prevents the progress women need in order to obtain higher education, which would affect female reproductive and property rights and as well as access to credit. If women were given the proper representation in the new government, they could secure these rights. With these rights secured, the amount of poverty and food scarcity will decrease in Egypt as a whole.

According to Tour Egypt, the population of the greater Metropolitan Area of Cairo is 14.8 million people, and in Egypt, 14.2 million people live below the international poverty line, which is living on less than one U.S. dollar a day. Egypt's largest city could house the entire poor population. In this city, the typical family has four to five children. The average GDP per capita is around six thousand dollars, but to assume women also earn this would be a gross overestimation (CIA World Factbook). These families find food at their local food market places in the neighborhoods around the city, if they can afford it. Most agricultural products come from the delta of the Nile, where Egyptian farmers plant crops, such as grain, legumes, and vegetables, in moist fields, where flood waters nourish the plants (ThinkQuest). Without the Nile, there would be no Egypt, and without the Egyptian women, there would be no Egyptian future. Only 25.6% of women in Egypt are actually a part of the work force in Egypt (DataPult). This lack of employment is hurting the income of poorer families and disabling them from securing a decent amount of food, and reasons for this could be locked into Egyptian society. Now is the time to unlock these chains. It is time to open the minds of Egyptian women and through knowledge, gain the foundations of a better future.

As in America, education is a huge factor that determines the standard of living as adults. In Egypt, the average years of education hovers around 11 and only 3.8% of the GDP goes to education—placing Egypt 109<sup>th</sup> in world (CIA World Factbook). Some children in Egypt never have the opportunity to attend formal schooling. In Upper Egypt on average, less than 50% of girls can read or write (UNICEF). With these numbers, it is no surprise that the literacy rate amongst females is less than six out of ten girls. The benefits of receiving education are enormous. According to research done by UNICEF, girls who attend school in North Africa are more likely to marry at an older age. In Bangladesh, another poverty stricken country like Egypt, marrying at younger ages has major ramifications for adolescent females. Research done there has shown that these girls experience social and physical harm from these marriages. They are much more likely to face abuse from their husbands and have serious physical harm to their bodies from having children at a younger age (Field). Now, take a step back and take a look at the larger damage from these younger marriages. You will see in these areas a faster rate of population growth along with a larger percent of orphans in the population. On the other hand, females with more education have better access to health care and are aware of birth control (Kharsany).

Having access to and being aware of birth control options decreases the number of children a woman will have. This becomes increasingly more important if the women are in poverty. With fewer children, there is less pressure put upon the family unit to provide food for so many mouths. On the other hand, the decision comes down to whether they need more children to help with work. Most impoverished families choose to have more children. As said earlier, this choice hurts development in the long run. Having fewer children and pulling resources together between families is the better option. However, the social climate toward birth control isn't favorable in Egypt. One of the most common forms of birth control, condoms, is shunned by the majority of the population according to *Daily News Egypt*. Add to this situation high fertility rate amongst the Egyptian urban poor, and there will be an increase of children born into poverty (Khalifa). This situation is not optimistic for urban development. However, there is a change in this trend. Increasingly more women either want to delay the birth of another child by some number of years or forgo having another child altogether (United Nation's Population Fund). Once again, the problem is the unwillingness to use birth control and the lack of knowledge about it.

Another key benefit from education is it leads to stable government. We have seen the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak earlier this year. Now more than ever, Egypt needs to take advantage of this situation and create a stable government and ensure that it lasts peacefully. By bettering the education of their citizens, they can help ensure this. Like birth control, education fosters awareness for students' rights, which will stay with them for the rest of their lives. There's a strong correlation between years of education and government stability in the form of democracy. In the words of Edward Glaeser, a Harvard economist, "Dictators provide strong incentives for the ruling clique; democracies provide more modest benefits for everyone else" (*New York Times*). He goes on to say in his article that the reason why democracy works better through education is because education teaches people to better collaborate. This is exemplified by Egyptians' ability to coordinate with each other via social networking sites on the Internet to organize protests in Tahrir Square. These protests created chain of events that led to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak.

"Illiteracy is a correlate of poverty and hunger and is mainly a rural phenomenon which hinders rural development and food security, threatens productivity and health and limits opportunities to improve livelihoods—particularly for rural girls and women," FOA education expert Lavinia Gasperini said. And the numbers show this. Women in an educated society in a developing nation will increase productivity in the region by more than 50% (World Bank). Additionally, girls with an education are better paid in the workplace and have better decision making skills, crucial for better business. Schools in developing nations teach lessons about proper nutrition and provide opportunities for students to receive school lunches providing for what some is the only meal they'll get that day. In rural areas, educated women produce 80% more food than their uneducated sisters (FOA). These educational opportunities are the foundation to developing a securer future for the poor.

Securing property rights for women has been another big obstacle for social and financial equality in Egypt. According to USAID, only four out of one hundred land owners are women. Much of this has been due to government policy. Laws concerning property rights have been heavily skewed in the favor of men. Women appealing these laws will find it difficult to find someone favorable to their plight—all judges in the highest court system are male. But change is coming slowly. Just recently, the supreme court in Egypt has ruled in favor of women judges. Unfortunately, the decision was deferred to yet another all-male panel of judges (Economist). Many non-governmental organizations are working on securing property rights for women. One in Africa, Freedom from Hunger, is combining microfinance and education. Microfinance provides resources to the very poor to help secure property, such as land and livestock. United Nations Millennium Development Project's International Year of Microcredit in 2005 has helped make many nations aware of the benefits of microcredit and since then, less and less people are living on less than a dollar a day. It is predicted that in the next ten years, less than a billion people will live on under a dollar per day (PlaNNet Finance Group). Microcredit has also been a tool

facilitating women's access to credit. In Africa, eleven out of a hundred of the poorest homes had help from microfinancing at the end of 2006 according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Women employment in Egypt would be a boon for the economy. In research done in Asia, gender discrimination in the workplace has cost countries around 80 billion U.S. dollars. The boosted income will help women overcome poverty, and the additional capital that is gained by women in the workplace will help Egypt in the long run. What is keeping these valuable workers out of work? One barrier to employment is the social norms and cultures of the regions. Women in North Africa and Middle East are labeled as the caretakers of the household. They are bound to maternal duties. As stated before, typical families have four to five children. This household "job" is demanding, leaving little time for a job for a job outside the house (OECD). The situation can worsen if the mother happens to become the provider of all responsibilities in the family. Sadly, the divorce rate in Egypt has skyrocketed according to *The National*. Even worse, the reason for most of the divorces was related to financial difficulties in the family. Since 2000, women have been allowed to instigate divorce, but if they did so, they are required to give up financial rights from their former husbands. This discrimination puts women at an unfair disadvantage in the relationship, and only empowers men financially over women. A change in the laws would correct this. To change laws, women need a voice in the government.

Surprisingly, the women's rights movement in Egypt has a long history of involvement. Progresses has had its steps forward, but at times, have been forced back. One of their first acts involved ambushing the Egyptian parliament and demanding more of their rights in 1951. They made more and more progress throughout the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A big factor for this female influence is the United Nations Decade of Women. This organization has helped women find a voice in their obstacles and has helped found non-governmental organizations in Egypt. In fact, there are over 1,600 NGOs working in Egypt at this time (Human Rights Watch). However, a rise in religious conservatism slowed the pace of the women's rights movement. Worryingly, Pew Center polls find that in Egypt, citizens who see a struggle between modernizers and fundamentalists, 59% identify with fundamentalists. Reasons for the growing conservatism could stem from a reactionary response to modern influence from Western society or global uncertainty like the antebellum period of the 1930s where there was a drastic increase in conservatism during the financial crisis. Whatever the reason, women have felt the impact. *The Guardian* newspaper reports that at al-Azhar University in Cairo, which was known for its Islamic moderation, scholars released stronger *fatwas*, Islamic ideas concerning a variety of subjects, relating to women's clothing. Posters of what women should and should not wear are found throughout the campus. Although this seems small, it still impacts the independence of the women in Egypt.

Coincidentally, the problem isn't just the takeover by Islamic fundamentalist, but Muslim women accepting it. What reasons could a woman give up most of her rights for this? Research done by the Political Science Department at Stanford University indicates that women accept fundamentalism because it provides them with financial security. In the researchers' *The Political Economy of Women's Support for Fundamentalist Islam*, "women with limited economic opportunities—whether due to unemployment, minimal formal education, or poverty—are more likely to take on fundamentalist and traditionalist belief systems that enhance their value as potential marriage partners." Because women are disadvantaged by employment opportunities, they forgo seeking financial independence through the economic market and look towards the "marriage market" for material security. They not only give up employment, but also education. *The Political Economy of Women's Support for Fundamentalist Islam* sites six reasons for women turning to fundamentalist Islam: "fear of dislocation," "inability to earn sufficient wages independent of a male breadwinner," "lack of education and exposure to outside contacts," "concern over male reprisal for non-conformity and disobedience," "fear of divine disapproval," and "difficulty making choices about things that they were raised to believe would be inevitable."

While women find it safer to assimilate into the fundamentalist society, one woman dared to use conservative religious ideals against itself. Upper Egypt is one of the most conservative regions in Egypt. Azza Soliman, a founder of the Center for Egyptian Women, described the situation, “Some men may try to prevent the women in their families from voting, or try to control their votes (Voice of America).” Nariman el-Daramali took the initiative when she committed to run for parliament to represent Upper Egypt. She came up with a strikingly simple idea: she would go to the houses of the voters and carry with her two books—the Bible and Koran. She would talk to the women their homes and ask if they would vote for her. If the woman said yes, Nariman would make the woman swear it up their respective book (Koran for Muslims; Bible for Coptic Christians). The woman was now sworn by a holy agreement to vote for Nariman, and to not allow this covenant was against religious law. Needless to say, Nariman won her seat in parliament (Macfarquhar 145).

Throughout my research and in this paper, multiple times I stated that these issues affecting women’s rights to a better life stem from government policy. Women in Egypt want a say in the new government. According to Bikya Masr, an independent newspaper in Cairo, there has been talk of creating a larger quota of seats that will go to women in the newly formed parliament. The number of seats would increase from three or four (varies due to elections) to sixty-four. But it sounds all too much like affirmative action. Many of us here in the United States are familiar with the debate of affirmative action, but this is a solid option for developing countries, like Egypt. Affirmative action would allow women a chance to change policy. The citizens of Egypt will be able to experience a stronger presence of women leadership in the government. One of the most needed changes in order to secure property rights for women would be the introduction of women judges in the court. Government funding for education would have to increase. This would create a better balance of perspectives before the law. This affirmative action period would not be permanent; its purpose is to legitimize women representation in the government. After years of this action, the policy would revert to free elections.

And so here we are—2011. This is a year that has become the start of something new in North Africa and the Middle East. This is a year that we here in the United States have heard the thousands of protesters in Tahrir Square, demanding a new, more democratic government. In Egypt, women need a stronger voice, their own voice, and with each woman that joined the protesters in the square, the more legitimate and real they made their cause to their male revolutionary counterparts. Women there are overcoming their obstacles. With help from thousands of NGOs, they can have access to an adequate education. With new government policy, they can have secure property rights. With a more relaxed social climate, they can have reproductive freedom. And with these freedoms, Egyptian women will rise above the pyramid of poverty and, together with all of Egypt, live in peace without discrimination and hunger.

## Bibliography

- “Arab women's rights, Some say they don't want them, The battle goes on, though men often object—and sometimes women too.” *The Economist*. *The Economist Newspaper*. 25 Mar. 2010. Web. 20 Sep. 2011.
- “Are Fewer Children a Route to Prosperity.” UNFPA.com. UNFPA. Aug. 2009. Web. 20 Sep. 2011.
- Auxie, Richard. “Egypt, Democracy, and Islam.” *Pewresearch.org*. Pew Research Center, 31 Jan. 2011. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- “Better Education Improves Health of Mothers and Children.” Kharsany, Zahira. *IPSNEWS.net*, 2009. Web. 19 Sep. 2011.
- Blaydes, Lisa, and Drew A. Linzer. *The Political Economy of Women’s Support for Fundamentalist Islam*. Stanford U, July 2007. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- “Cairo, Egypt Statistics.” *TourEgypt.net*. Tour Egypt, 17 May 2011. Web. 16 Sep. 2011.
- “Combining Microfinance and Education.” *Freedomfromhunger.org*. Freedom from Hunger, n.d. Web. 16 Sep. 2011.
- “Country Profile: Egypt.” *USAID Land Tenure.org*. USAID Land Tenure and Property Rights Portal, n.d. Web. 16 Sep. 2011.
- “Educating Girls: Changing Lives for Generations.” *UNICEF.org*. UNICEF, n.d. Web. 20 Sep. 2011.
- “Egypt.” *CIA.gov*. *The World Factbook*, n.d. Web. 17 Sep. 2011.
- el Magd, Nadia Abou. “Divorce Rate Surges in Egypt.” *The National*. *The National*, 10 Sep. 2008. Web. 18 Sep. 2008.
- “Fact sheet: Egypt - Women, agriculture and rural development.” *FAO.org*. FAO, n.d. Web. 14 Sep. 2011.
- Field, Erica. *Consequences of Early Marriage of Women in Bangladesh*. Harvard U, 2004. Web. 20 Sep. 2011.
- “Girls’ Education: A World Bank Priority.” *Worldbank.org*. World Bank. 18 Aug. 2011. Web. 20 Sep. 2011.
- Glaeser, Edward L. “Want a Stronger Democracy? Invest in Education.” *Economix*. *New York Times*, 3 Nov. 2009. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- “Goal: Achieve Universal Primary Education.” *UNICEF.org*. UNICEF, n.d. Web. 20 Sep. 2011.
- Ibrahim, Baher. “Egypt’s Chilling Conservatism.” *The Guardian*. *The Guardian*, 10 Mar. 2010. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- Khalifa, Mona, Julie DaVanzo, and David M. Adamson. “Population Growth in Egypt - A Continuing Policy Challenge.” *Rand.org*. Rand, 2000. Web. 14 Sep. 2011.
- Krogh, Elsebeth, Thomas Nikolaj Hansen, Susanne Wendt and Morten Elkjaer. “Promoting Employment for Women as a Strategy for Poverty Reduction.” *OECD.org*. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009. Web. 15 Sep. 2011.

- Macfarquhar, Neil. *The Department of Media Relations of Hizbollah Wishes You a Happy Birthday*. New York: Public Affairs, 2009. Print.
- Maged, Ahmed. "Egyptians Increasingly Shun Condom Use." *Daily News Egypt*. Daily News Egypt, 26 Jan. 2007. Web. 15 Sep. 2011
- "Microfinancing, An Effective Tool for Fighting Poverty." *Planetfinancegroup.org*. PlaNet Finance Group, n.d. Web. 19 Sep. 2011.
- "Percent of Women in the Workforce." *Datapult.com*. N.p., 3 Aug. 2011. Web. 17 Sep. 2011.
- Pessin, Al. "Egyptian Women Seek Rights After Revolution." *Voice of America News*. Voice of America, 18 Aug. 2011. Web. 20 Sep. 2011.
- Sheffer, Sarah. "Concerns Over Women's Representation in Egypt Parliament." *Bikya Masr*. Bikya Masr, 19 Sep. 2011. Web. 20 Sep. 2011.
- "The Nile" *Thinkquest.com*. N.p, n.d. Web. 15 Sep. 2011.
- "Women's Unequal Access to Divorce in Egypt from Human Rights Watch." *Members.cox.net*. N.p., 20 Dec. 2006. Web. 15 Sep. 2011.