

# CARNEGIE PAPERS

## **In the Shadow of the Brothers**

The Women of the  
Egyptian Muslim  
Brotherhood

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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## Introduction

In September 2007, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt released its first political party platform draft. Among the heavily criticized clauses was one that denied women (and Copts) the right to be head of state. “Duties and responsibilities assumed by the head of state, such as army commanding, are in contradiction with the socially acceptable roles for women,” the draft stated. In previous Brotherhood documents there was no specific mention of the position of head of state; rather, they declared that women were allowed to occupy all posts except for *al-imama al-kubra*, the position of caliph, which is the equivalent of a head of state in modern times. Many were surprised that despite several progressive moves the Brotherhood had made in previous years to empower women, it ruled out women’s right to the country’s top position.

Although the platform was only a first draft, the Muslim Brotherhood’s ban on women in Egypt’s top office revived old, but serious, questions regarding the Islamist movement’s stand on the place and role of the “Sisters” inside the movement. The Brotherhood earlier had taken an advanced position concerning women, as reflected in its naming of women candidates for parliamentary and municipal elections in 2000, 2005, and 2007, as well as the growing numbers of women involved in Brotherhood political activities, such as street protests and elections. Although the platform recognizes women as key political actors, it was considered a retreat from the movement’s advanced position in some earlier electoral platforms.

The draft party platform confirmed a long-held view that the status of the Brotherhood’s women still does not correspond to their contributions, which have proven crucial in advancing the movement’s political and social aims. Women activists have been at the forefront of the Brotherhood’s political struggle and have become highly visible in key political events, but their role still goes unrecognized.

There is, however, growing evidence to suggest that more and more Islamist women are becoming restless with their subordinate status and are seeking ways to assert their demands for more representation inside the movement and broader participation in politics. An important factor in this is the emergence of a young generation of Islamist women activists who are critical of their marginal status and believe that the Muslim Sisters’ role has outgrown their subordinate positions in the movement. This young generation’s call for change has added significance, because some leading figures are the daughters and wives of senior Brotherhood leaders. This lets them make their voices heard despite the absence in the Brotherhood of an institutionalized mechanism to

consult women. Furthermore, a growing number of Brothers, particularly those who were part of the student movement of the 1970s, have become convinced that the status of women inside the Muslim Brotherhood is a “weak point” that needs to be addressed seriously. Most members of this group who favor representation of women occupy middle-rank positions in the movement. This pro-women representation group includes names such as Ibrahim Al-Zaafarani, Abdel-Monem Abul-Futuh, and Essam al-Erayan. They have constantly pushed for women to be included in the Brotherhood’s power structures, supported the idea of women running in elections, and voiced criticism against the movement’s ban on women candidates for presidency.

Far from being resolved, the issue of the position of women in the Muslim Brotherhood is at the center of a lively debate. However, there is no evidence that this debate is threatening the unity of the movement. The questioning by women activists of their role, and their call for broader participation in decision-making bodies, are parts of the normal dynamics of change, not signs of a “rebellion of the Sisters,” as some observers described it. The Muslim Brotherhood, like any other sociopolitical movement, is not a static body. It is influenced by the social and political milieu in which it operates.

The writings of young female activists and their calls for an end to the marginalization of women show that they have genuine grievances and demand change. But they also show that they are not willing to go so far as to sacrifice the movement’s cohesion and unity to obtain those rights. Many young activists are convinced that it is only a question of time before they gain those rights. Those women activists have a strong institutional loyalty and are convinced that change can happen from within, albeit gradually. They believe that they must continue to struggle to find a balance between their subordinate positions inside the movement and their growing roles outside of it. They continue to be significant players in major political developments and believe that their growing visibility will ultimately lead them to accumulate both social and political capital that will boost their case for broader participation and power sharing.

## Old Vision, New Reality

Many of the characteristics that define Islamist female activism today are rooted in the early days of the Muslim Brotherhood’s struggle. Hassan al-Banna, the movement’s founder, realized early the important support that women could offer. Setting up a women’s division in the Muslim Brotherhood was also al-Banna’s response to calls for women’s liberation, Western style, made by many Egyptian intellectuals at the time. The Brotherhood’s first women’s division, called *ferqat al-akhawaat al-muslimaat* (the Muslim Sisters Group), was set up in 1932. It consisted mainly of the daughters, wives, and other relatives of the Brothers, a practice that remained central in the Sisters’ recruitment. Familial ties still play an important role in increasing membership.

An internal statute defining the goals and hierarchy of the women's organization was released in April 1932. It stipulated that the aim in forming the Muslim Sisters group was to uphold the Islamic ethos and spread virtue through lectures and women-only gatherings. The women's organization did not have its own head; instead, it was under the authority of the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, who communicated with the Sisters through a female deputy. However, al-Banna soon appointed a man, Sheikh Mahmoud al-Gohary, to supervise all women's activities and act as a link between the women activists and the Supreme Guide. Their work (activities) would be regulated during a weekly meeting of the Sisters presided over by Sheikh al-Gohary, who would report later to al-Banna. Funding would come from a small, monthly fee paid by members and private donations.

Despite a promising beginning, the activities of the women's division soon came to a standstill due to lack of female cadres. Al-Banna approached Zaynab al-Ghazli, an icon of Islamist women activism at the time, to help revive the division. She declined, preferring instead to focus on her independent work. It was not until 1943 that a group of 120 young women who attended al-Banna's weekly sermon formed the nucleus that revived the Muslim Sisters Group. They were mostly family relatives of the Brothers, university graduates, and mosque-goers. An executive committee of twelve members was elected to supervise the Muslim Sisters' activities. Sheikh al-Gohary remained to be the go-between for the group and al-Banna.

One of the revealing statements regarding the organizational relationship between the Brothers and the Sisters at the time was mentioned in the autobiography of Sheikh al-Gohary. Ever since his appointment to oversee the Sisters' division, he had been completely cut off from Brothers' activities and affairs. "These were two different entities altogether, and they never congregated," he wrote. His words are still relevant today.

Al-Banna took a conservative stand regarding the limits of women activism. There were instances, however, when he took a favorable position on women's participation in politics. Shortly after the government dissolved the Muslim Brotherhood in 1948, al-Banna formed a delegation of Muslim Sisters to submit to the palace, the cabinet, and a number of ministers a memo to protest the move. The movement had to keep a low profile of its activities as a defense mechanism. Much earlier, in the 1932 internal statute regarding the women's division, he had also stipulated that "the Sisters should contribute as much as their conditions allow them to the Brotherhood's "reform program." The Sisters' efforts, nonetheless, remained largely focused on charity work, social activities such as setting up schools, and medical services and religious matters, although the number of female divisions had reached approximately 150 nationwide. Despite the assassination of Hassan al-Banna in 1949, the Brotherhood moved to organize the women's division's work further, issuing an internal organizational statute in 1951 that is still in force today.

Hassan al-Banna's assassination, followed in 1952, by the Free Officers' coup that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power, marked the beginning of a difficult period for the Brotherhood. Meantime, the women's organization, which had a lower political profile, started playing a more important role. Al-Banna's assassination was accompanied by a campaign that rounded up many Muslim Brotherhood senior members, which threatened the very existence of the Brotherhood. "What kept the movement from collapse at the time was the fact that women moved quickly to take on the job when men were imprisoned or were sent into long exiles," said Jihan al-Halafawi, a senior activist. This role was to influence and shape the evolution of women's activism within the movement.

In 1954, the Brotherhood suffered another setback. Many of its leading members—including some iconic figures in the Sisters' division—were arrested. Despite the arrests, the other Sisters still had freedom of movement. They provided moral and financial support to the families of the detainees, a task that would remain one of the key undertakings of the women's division as the movement continued to be the target of the state wrath.

Nasser's time in office proved the most difficult period in the history of the movement. Nasser pursued a policy of confrontation with the Islamist movement, which led to the arrest of thousands of its members as well as senior leaders. In June 1957, 21 Muslim Brotherhood leaders were accused of plotting an attempt on Nasser's life. Some died of torture. Besieged, the Brotherhood turned to underground activism. The women's division struggled to come to terms with the crisis. Their most important task was to hold meetings to organize their work, although overt political activities were a risky business, since the movement was banned. Through a simple organization and a division of labor, the women's division managed to hold meetings. Zaynab al-Ghazli, acting on her own, worked to secure financial support for the families of the detained Brothers and also helped publish the writings of Sayyid Qutb, the Brotherhood's intellectual guru, which were smuggled out of prison. She later joined the Brotherhood women's division. In 1965, the government accused the Brothers of plotting a coup, and the organization estimates that arrests of its members reached 18,000. The crisis reached its peak in August 1966, when Qutb and two other Brothers were executed. The crisis in the 1960s and draconian political conditions forced a severe reduction in women's activism during the decade. Movement activities in general, and those of the women's division in particular, were mainly conducted on an individual basis and mostly underground.

After Nasser's death in 1970, President Anwar Sadat opened up political space for the Brotherhood in an attempt to reduce the lingering Nasserite influence over politics and society. Sadat sought to use the Islamists as a pawn against his other, more staunch Nasserist and leftist opponents. It paid off for the Islamists. A woman activist who attended university at the time called it

“the era of open Islamist activism.” The Brotherhood made political and social gains during “the return to religion” wave that followed defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel. It marked the Brotherhood’s rebirth, and the women’s division also benefited. University campuses emerged as the main recruiting grounds for women activists. Still, their activities remained few and far between and continued to be based on individual initiatives.

Even though the Brotherhood remained illegal, Sadat released all of its remaining prisoners and turned a blind eye to their expanding political activism on university campuses. In 1979, Sadat allowed publication of the Brotherhood magazine *al-Daawa* (the Call) and responded to the Brotherhood’s long-standing demand that the Egyptian penal code be made compatible with Sharia rulings. In 1980, constitutional amendments were adopted that declared Sharia to be one of the main sources of Egyptian law. But Sadat’s signing of a peace agreement with Israel, combined with harsh economic conditions, unleashed a wave of popular resentment. More radical elements among the student movement organized under the umbrella of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group). The Brotherhood distanced itself from these radical Islamist forces, which embraced violence as a way of change. But they also protested police misconduct and the arrests of young Islamists.

There was hardly any debate at the time about the roles and status of women activists. The Brotherhood was still struggling to recover from the fallout of the 1960s crisis. It sought to seize the moment of political openness offered by Sadat by reorganizing its rank and file and articulating a political and social vision that suited the times. Women’s activism, on the other hand, was hurt by the period of hibernation following the 1960s. Continuing to lack a defined structure through which work could be managed, women’s activism kept a very low profile and consisted mainly of individual efforts.

In 1982, following Sadat’s assassination, Hosni Mubarak took office. The relationship between the state and the Brotherhood did not undergo any radical shifts during the early years of Mubarak’s rule. The Brotherhood continued to expand in universities and professional syndicates, recruiting both men and women, and built relationships with segments of the population across the social spectrum, mainly through charitable work. The women’s division slowly began to resume its activities during the mid 1980s and helped greatly to reinforce the image of the Brothers as an active social force.

A new development took place when the Brotherhood decided to enter electoral politics in the second multiparty elections in 1984, after declining to participate in the first, held in 1979. Since the Brotherhood was not a political party, it had to enter an alliance with one of the four existing political parties (the ruling National Democratic Party, Al-Ahrar party, the Socialist Labor party, and al-Wafd). The Brotherhood leadership formed an electoral alliance with al-Wafd, a secular party with liberal leanings. According to the electoral law at the time, a political party needed to obtain 10 percent of

the votes of all registered voters to enter Parliament. Al-Wafd leaders thought that their alliance with the Brotherhood would secure this percentage. This plan succeeded, and Al-Wafd managed to get thirty seats, seven of which were for the Brotherhood. The same scenario took place in 1987 through another Brotherhood electoral alliance, this one with the liberal al-Ahrar party. That alliance resulted in thirty-seven seats in Parliament.

The decision to enter electoral politics was significant as it put to the test—for the first time in decades—the popularity of the Brotherhood as a sociopolitical movement. It also gave the Brotherhood a rare opportunity to enhance their image as a movement deeply embedded in society.

The 1990s witnessed the beginning of the end of the state policy of toleration regarding the Brotherhood. Hit by a wave of violent attacks against government targets conducted by fringe Islamist groups, such as al-Jamaa al-Islamiya and another radical militant group, Tanzeem al-Jihad (the Jihad Organization), the regime's patience ran thin. Between 1995 and 1996, hundreds of Brothers were arrested, and many went before military tribunals. The charge for years would be “belonging to an illegal organization” and “plotting to overthrow the regime.”

The Brotherhood boycotted the elections in 1990 in protest against the state's repressive policy toward them. In the 1995 elections, they secured only one seat. But in the 2000 elections, despite security strikes against their candidates and supporters, they managed to secure seventeen seats in Parliament. In 2005, despite government efforts, the Brotherhood secured an unprecedented 88 seats. Women played an important role as organizers, activists, and vote-mobilizers in the majority of Brotherhood electoral campaigns.

The 2000 elections had special significance, marking the first time that the Brotherhood put forward a woman candidate, Jihan al-Halafawi. Halafawi made a very strong showing, but government machinations eventually ensured her defeat. However, her candidacy set an important precedent. The Brotherhood put forward a small number of women candidates in subsequent parliamentary and local elections, although so far none has made it into office.

After the strong 2005 showing, the Islamist movement was declared “a security threat.” In 2007, the government rounded up hundreds of the movement's senior and rank-and-file members. It also targeted the movement's economic assets by confiscating properties and closing down factories owned by some leading businessmen who are Brotherhood members.

The women's division organized a campaign, led by the daughters and wives of the detained Brothers, that helped create public awareness of the plight of the detained Brothers in the face of the state-run smear campaign. They organized street protests against the military trials, ran media campaigns, secured funds to pay lawyers and support the families of detainees, and organized visits to those detained.

## The Absence of Structure

As the previous analysis suggests, it was the Brotherhood's women's division that often came to its rescue in times of confrontation with the state. The heart of the Sisters' mission was to help the movement survive the harsh security strikes against its leadership. They did not, however, acquire any added influence or improve their status inside the movement in return for their contribution to the Brotherhood's political and social aims. Most important, despite the growing role of women in the Brotherhood, no women was yet represented in any of the movement's two main power structures, the *majlis al-shura* (Shura Council) and *maktab al-Irshad* (Guidance Bureau). This is so even though Article 56 of the internal statute issued in 1951 stipulates that the Sisters' division, along with other nine units, falls under the supervision of the Guidance Bureau. This remains the case today.

One Sister activist described the state of the women's movement today as "an organized entity" but not "an organizational structure." In other words, women members divide work and responsibilities, but there is no particular mechanism for doing this. The Sisters' activities are channeled through a number of committees, each focused on a specific domain. There are, for example, the educational committee, the social committee, the media committee, and the political committee. For the most part, women continue to focus on religious education and charitable work. They coordinate their work and activities with the person in charge (almost always a male cadre) of women's activism (*an-Nashaat al-Nisaae*) in the administrative office for their respective areas. Women's activities also include seminars discussing current issues in politics, society, and religion.

Because the movement is outlawed, there are no official and reliable membership figures. Dīaa Rashwan, an observer of Islamist politics, concluded after studying the turnouts in recent elections and movement-led demonstrations that the Brotherhood has 50,000 to 60,000 registered members with a further 400,000 to 500,000 sympathizers and supporters. Of the total, 25–30 percent are women.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned, the beginning of women's activism in the Muslim Brotherhood promised the birth of a strong women's movement. However, the early efforts to institutionalize and organize the work failed to sustain its momentum in the turbulent years that followed. And while women played a significant role during the times of crisis in the 1950s and 1960s, such efforts did not help consolidate their role as partners in power inside the movement. On the contrary, the women's movement paid a heavy price as a result of the crises. This was reflected in the collapse of its structure and hierarchy. Even after the state's siege was lifted on the Brotherhood's activities during the Sadat years, women's activities and work still took a back seat in the movement's priorities.

Reinstating the Brothers' section and reviving its activities always took precedence over everything else. Apart from the release of a few documents during these long and lean years, which contained only thin and repetitive sections on the movement's vision of women's roles in politics, there was hardly any debate at the time about the roles and rights of women. Yet, despite the absence of an institutionalized body that could regulate their work, women's roles as visible political actors grew.

Still, it was not until the year 2000 that the women's movement started to take an upward turn with the nomination of the first woman candidate on Brotherhood electoral lists and the growing visibility of women in demonstrations and public protests. Today, more women, supported by a section of the Brothers who embrace a reform-minded and moderate view of women's activism, are calling for the end to their marginalization.

## Documenting the Evolution

Since its comeback on the political scene in Egypt, the Brotherhood has issued a number of documents explaining its stand on various thorny issues, including the role of women. An important Brotherhood document issued in 1994 addressed women's roles and rights from an Islamic perspective. It aimed to refute what it saw as misconceptions about women in Islam. But the documents contain hardly any reference to women's status or role inside the movement. It did address various issues, such as women's right to ownership, financial independence, and the incompatibility with Islam of forced marriage. One important chapter addressed women's rights in politics, stating that women have the right to participate in elections both as voters and candidates, since there is no rule in Sharia that prohibits this. It also stressed that women should be made aware of their rights as voters and candidates and that they should be encouraged to run in elections. Women, according to the document, can occupy all state posts except for al-Imaama al-kubra, the equivalent of the caliphate. A chapter addressing the Western model of women's liberation described it as "based on a decadent philosophy that goes in contradiction with Sharia principles," a statement that reflects the dominant thinking among a large segment of women activists.

These views were reiterated in the Muslim Brotherhood Initiative for Political Reform in Egypt, issued in March 2004. While the initiative repeated the Brotherhood's line on the traditional roles for women, it pointed out that women are entitled to participate in parliamentary elections, hold public posts (except that of head of state), and have educational opportunities.

The Brotherhood's electoral platform for the 2005 parliamentary elections stressed certain points. It stressed, in particular, that women have the right to participate as voters and candidates in all parliamentary elections and that they should have the right to strike a balance between their social duties and their work in the public sphere.

In the 2007 party platform, there was an emphasis on women's rights. The Brotherhood presented a vision based on what the document described as "complete equality" between men and women, while preserving their different social roles. It also stressed the need to empower women to acquire their rights in a way that does not conflict with the basic value system of the society. The document referred to the "dominating social negative view regarding women" and the need to change it by campaigning to make the society fully aware of women's rights in all fields, not just in education.

While the movement's literature—in the few documents they have produced as well as their electoral platforms—has recognized women as political actors, be they voters or candidates, this has yet to be translated into either actual policies adopted by the movement or a consistent vision embraced by its rank and file, perhaps because the movement is split on the issue. A group of reform-minded Brothers are in favor of giving women equal organizational status and a full power-sharing rights. Most of them are mid-level cadres, almost all of whom are urbanites. On the other hand, the leadership takes a more conservative stand on the issue. They are in sync with the majority of people in their popular base, many of whom uphold the Salafist view that women's activism should be kept to a minimum.

For example, the debate on the ban against women running for the presidency revealed a divided Brotherhood. Members of the Guidance Bureau, the movement's highest-ranking body, did not speak in one voice. While some members (Mahmoud Ezzat, Mohammed Mursi, and Muhammed Habib) based their exclusion of women from the post on a "religious choice" (*Khayyar Feqhee*) and a "social reality," other senior members (Abdel-Monem abul-Futuh, Gamal Heshmat, and Essam al-Erayan) objected. They argued that the decision did not take into consideration the reality and context of contemporary Egypt and that it violated the principle of a civilian state, to which the Brotherhood has said it was committed. "It also goes against the principle of citizenship, which makes everyone equal before the law and confers the right to be nominated and elected as a head of state," said Gamal Heshmat, a former member of Parliament (MP) for the Brotherhood. Having come under pressure, the movement's elders suggested that the draft was not final and that criticism will be taken into consideration. The split, however, was revealing; it captured the divide that is shaping the Brotherhood's vision concerning women's status and roles inside the movement.

## The Absence of Women in the Brotherhood Structure

The Muslim Brotherhood is a hierarchical movement. To understand where the Sisters' division is positioned in its hierarchy, a brief review of its structure is necessary. The Brotherhood is governed by an internal statute dating back to 1951 and last modified in the mid-1980s. It identifies the main administrative

units, establishes the mechanisms for the election and selection of members of both the Guidance Bureau and Shura Council, and explains the tasks assigned to each unit. The Brotherhood's hierarchy consists of:

- 1) The Supreme Guide, the Brotherhood's highest authority with many powers
- 2) Maktab al-Irshaad (the Guidance Bureau), a sixteen-member executive body elected by the movement's Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council)
- 3) The Majlis al-Shura, the legislative body, which outlines general policies. It consists of 75 to 90 members representing Brotherhood members in the 22 governorates of Egypt
- 4) The administrative bureaus (*al-makaatib al-Idariyyah*), the executive bodies at the governorate level. Each bureau outlines the plan of action in its respective area and communicates with the Guidance Bureau. In each bureau, one male member is in charge of women's activities (*al-Nashaat al-Nisaaee*) and acts as liaison between the Sisters' division in each governorate and district and movement headquarters in Cairo.

Not surprisingly, all activists interviewed by the author agreed that two structural changes are needed to allow the movement to evolve: First, the Sisters' division must be integrated into the main structure of the movement. It is now a separate entity that is completely cut off from the Brothers' activities. Second, women must be represented in all decision-making bodies. In other words, the women's division should be represented in the various power structures of the movement. Structurally, there is a complete separation between the main movement and the women's division. There is no direct exchange between the two bodies, and communication is conducted through "middlemen." They are two parallel bodies' with one head.

The majority of women activists interviewed view integration as crucial in ending the marginal status of the women's movement inside the Muslim Brotherhood. These women view separation as "a form of segregation" that no longer fits the conditions of the Muslim Sisters today. One activist argued: "We work now in different places, and it is very awkward that I meet my male comrade [in the Brotherhood] in the hospital or at the university, and we sit and discuss issues, but we are not allowed to mingle during Brotherhood meetings because of the heritage of the past. One advantage to integration is that it will put an end to the duplication of work and will allow us a shortcut to the leadership. It is no more than providing us with a mechanism." To those activists, integrating into the main body would mean that while they maintain an independent hierarchal body, this body should be represented in the different decision-making units of the movement.

The more conservative element among the Sisters disagrees. The separation between the two structures, they argue, should remain; otherwise, the situation would be considered unchaste and un-Islamic. This view is a result of what one pro-integration activist described as “the Salafist influence dominating the Brotherhood’s rank and file.” In the conservative view, the absence of a specific structure and a hierarchy for the women’s division is “a deliberate policy” to protect Sisters from repressive policies and harassment by security agencies.

Even the moderates in the Muslim Brotherhood believe that integrating the Sisters into the main body is still “a premature move.” Islamist movements in Tunisia and Morocco that tried integration are rethinking the decision, they argue. Esam al-Irayan, a member of the Brotherhood’s Politbureau and one of the moderates, argues that the jurisprudential, cultural, and intellectual basis for the Islamist movement says that the role of women is complementary to that of the men in those movements, that men and women are complementing one another and not identical to one another. For this reason, separation between the two divisions is important. “The separation here is because of function, not of discrimination. Each has his role and function.” Nonetheless, many activists are convinced that despite the resistance to integration, change is happening on this front, albeit very slowly.

The debate about the conspicuous absence of Sisters from all Brotherhood structures has also been influenced by the divide between reformers and conservatives. One group of activists supports women’s representation in powerful positions on the grounds that women play crucial roles in maintaining the movement’s mobilization ability and continuity. A second group believes that having women in top positions would not give the Sisters a greater role or more influence. The popular base, they argue, sometimes exercises more pressure and has a bigger impact on movement decisions than some of those at the helm. A third group still does not seem to have made up its mind on the issue. While these last activists downplay the absence of the Sisters from power structures, they still believe in the importance of having women occupy positions of power, particularly those related to women’s activism. Their reason: “They will be more gender-sensitive.” Amany Abul Fadl, professor of English literature at Ain Shams University and a senior Sisters activist, maintains, “Being in the hierarchy will not give us more authority or expand our roles. We work full-time for our cause and our society. [But] being there may give us some freedom of action. I would like to see some of us in powerful positions within the movement; I will feel more comfortable because she [a woman in such a position] will be gender-sensitive. She will understand our needs and our enthusiasm toward certain issues more than the Brothers. She will be more responsive to us. Maybe we need to be represented, but [even] if we stay as we are, we are in good condition.”

Several activists have gone public with their criticism of the status quo. A case in point is 35-year-old Rasha Ahmed. Ahmed, who holds a teaching position at the faculty of medicine at an Egyptian university, wrote an online open letter to the Brothers' Supreme Guide in 2007, in which she took issue with the status of women inside the movement. She questioned the way in which the movement dealt with the women's section. Ahmed wrote: "If the Sisters were undertaking difficult roles just like the Brothers, my question is why are women not treated like men inside the movement? Why are they deprived of the right to select and elect movement elders? Why have internal elections been confined to the Brothers? Women have played a crucial role in the elections and in serving the cause. This is why we have to empower women inside our movement and enable them to have their rights fully to select and elect so we can present a model to the rest of the Islamist movements. I do not demand that women should occupy top positions, but I'm only asking for their simple right to select the person who leads the Dawaa (proselytism)."

In conclusion, Ahmed pointed out that she had sent previous messages to the Brotherhood leadership but received no response. She then decided to post her message online as part of the self-criticism process undergone by a number of Brotherhood activists. She was not alone. Her open letter created a stir among the Brotherhood rank and file. Some have written in support, while others have criticized the medium through which she chose to address "sensitive and internal issues."

A sympathetic response came from one Brother, Dr. Ibrahim al-Zaafarani of the Alexandria chapter, who submitted a proposal to the Supreme Guide calling for the appointment of three female activists to the *Shura* Council as a first step toward acknowledging the role of women in the movement. Zaafarani suggested three names: Wafaa Mashhour to represent Upper Egypt, Makarem Al-Deeri to represent Cairo, and Jihan al-Halafawi to represent the north. He chose these specific names so as to close the door to any objection from more conservative elements on the basis of security risks. Zaafarani has received no response as of yet.

The debate should be seen within the overall political context. A more democratic political environment would, no doubt, boost the fortunes of Brothers who favor women's activism. But so long as repressive policies continue against the movement, the balance will tilt in favor of the more conservative elements, who want to restrict women's activism and roles because of the risk of a security crackdown.

The nomination of the first woman candidate in the 2000 parliamentary elections, Jihan al-Halafawi, generated a forceful debate about the future of the Sisters. Halafawi described her nomination as "a big leap for women's activism." Her nomination encouraged activists to question their roles and seek a place in the Brotherhood structures. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more and more

women were growing restless about their marginal status. The activists' initial demand was to allow women to occupy the positions related to the Sisters' division and activities. More ambitious demands included membership in the *Shura* Council as well as in the Guidance Bureau. Halafawi conveyed the Sisters' views directly to the Supreme Guide. The latter then requested a list of suggested names for positions in the *Shura* Council. Halafawi's demands were later supported by a proposal put forward by al-Zaafarani to include women in the *Shura* council.

## Arguments Against Change

As seen earlier, both men and women in the Brotherhood who oppose changing the position of women in the movement often use religious arguments as justification. But there are other obstacles to change, both in the outside political environment and inside the organization.

### Confrontation With the State

Brotherhood leaders insist that the state's "ruthless war" against the Brotherhood is the primary cause for the exclusion of women members from positions of power. They say the issue should be viewed within the larger context of the state-Brotherhood relationship. Put simply, the Brotherhood does not want to subject its women to arrests and mistreatment by the police. Those concerns are legitimate. There have been instances when the regime made clear its discontentedness with the increasing visibility of women activists, particularly in street politics. One revealing case took place when several Brotherhood MPs from the Menoufyia governorate were rounded up in the summer of 2007. One of the key charges filed against them was "giving instructions to women and using them in political activities." The notion that the movement is "using" women, as opposed to women acting politically of their own free will, colored the way the security apparatus understood women's activism in the Muslim Brotherhood. In another incident, which confirms this view, a senior security officer sent a stern warning to the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide about what he said was "the movement's deliberate policy of placing women in street protests." The officer demanded that women "be taken out of the street," or the movement would have to face the consequences. One activist spoke about receiving a series of warnings that women would no longer be beyond the reach of the police if they continued to be conspicuous in the streets. Several women activists were summoned to police stations in a move that clearly sent a message to the Brotherhood.

Both the Brotherhood and the state have maintained an implicit agreement to put women activists outside of the repressive policy of detention and police harassment. There are, nonetheless, serious concerns within the Brotherhood

that this policy might end soon. One activist explained: “The leadership explains [that] the reason women are not in leadership positions is because people who are there are being chased day and night by police forces, while women are dignified. We tell them that the value system of the enemy (the state and the security apparatuses) does not have any moral ceiling when it comes to political activists, be they men or women.”

Women activists also cite the movement’s cautious, and at times overprotective, policy as far as involving them in politics to refute the view held by the authorities that Islamist movements “use” their women activists to score political points. The Brotherhood leadership insists that arresting women is a line the movement will not allow to be crossed under any circumstances. A revealing incident took place during the *Shura* Council election in June 2007. The Brotherhood fielded nineteen candidates, some of them women. When three women activists were arrested by state security in one of the Delta governorates, demonstrations went on around the clock for three days demanding their immediate release.

What most activists fail to mention, however, is that having women excluded from positions of power is also a Brotherhood survival tactic. The existence of a women’s division operating away from the gaze of the security apparatus is a guarantee of the continuity of the movement in spite of the threat of security strikes aimed at eliminating it. Sisters then become “the Shadow Brothers,” a second line of defense that ensures the movement will survive times of crisis.

### **The Conservative and Salafist View**

The prevailing culture within the Muslim Brotherhood is also an obstacle to changing the position of women. The culture among the Brotherhood rank and file is generally conservative with a large base under Salafist influence. The conservative view is that women can best serve the cause through their traditional roles as mothers and wives but not as political actors or peers in the movement. Consequently, efforts to expand the role of Sister activists in movement structures and political activities meet determined resistance, particularly from members living outside the capital. This conservative culture is being challenged to some extent by the younger generation of Brothers in the cities, but this group is a minority. Although they receive some encouragement from the reform-minded wing of the Brotherhood, they are frustrated. It appears that the majority of the rank and file of both sexes hold a very conservative view of women’s roles in the public sphere.

In a telling incident, in May 2008 a Brotherhood male blogger posted a commentary questioning the absence of Sisters from positions of power and asking why they were always represented by a Brother in meetings. When he directly posed the question: “Should Muslim Sisters occupy positions within the movement hierarchy?” the majority of respondents, women as well as men, said no.

### **Lack of Experienced Women Cadres**

The women's division faces other key challenges that adversely influence its evolution. Because women are not allowed to occupy positions of power, they are not trained and, of course, do not have experience. As a result, the division faces a serious shortage of competent, experienced cadres. Women activists, as well as senior movement leaders, acknowledge this fact. Women are not being trained to become strong political actors or efficient administrators. Many activists complained in interviews that the readings the movement routinely provides for its female members are out of date and fail to address the challenges and problems they face today. Instead, the readings place special emphasis on their role as wives and mothers. Much of the administrative training has been taken out of the curriculum assigned to the Sisters, since they are not represented in the movement hierarchy. Despite these obstacles, some women activists—including Jihan al-Halafawi, Makarem al-Deeri, Amany abul Fadl, and some others—have proven capable of playing leading roles. Their success, however, has been the result of their individual efforts and abilities, not of an institutionalized process to prepare women for leadership.

The rise of a new generation of young women activists is forcing a debate on the type of training and socialization that women activists get. While the movement is not immune from the influence of debates on women's rights and empowerment taking place in the broader society or even internationally, it is internal pressure that will be crucial if the attitudes and perceptions about women's activism are to change. Although some women maintain that women's roles and weight cannot be measured by the size of their representation in the movement's hierarchy, other strong voices contend that representation is an important reflection of the roles that women activists play in advancing the Brotherhood's political and social causes

### **New Trends**

Some new developments are introducing a new element in the debate about and the experience of women activists in the Muslim Brotherhood. While none of the developments is conclusive or even points in a clear direction, they are important and worth discussing.

### **Women in the Electoral Process**

In 2000, the Brotherhood placed the first woman on its candidates' list for the parliamentary elections. The move had been preceded by long, and at times stormy, debates among Brotherhood rank and file. It revived old questions regarding the extent to which women's roles as political players should expand and challenged the movement's original vision of women: that they can serve the cause best when they fulfill their traditional roles as mothers and wives.

The experience of this lone candidate (and of the one woman who ran in the 2005 parliamentary elections) shows that women who managed to overcome the internal resistance in the movement faced formidable opposition from other political organizations and, above all, from the state.

Opponents of the Brotherhood suspected that the move was no more than an election stunt and that it did not reflect a genuine will to allow women activists a broader space in politics and power sharing inside the movement. The Brotherhood dismissed the claims, once again citing security risks as the reason why it was reluctant to push its women to the front line of political struggle. In the 2000 elections, the sole woman candidate was Jihan al-Halafawi. In 2005, the movement sought to increase the number of women candidates, placing between 14 and 21 on the initial candidates list. The move was quickly aborted. An intensified pre-election security campaign that targeted Brotherhood cadres, together with opposition from some of the candidates' families, persuaded the Brotherhood to reduce the number of women candidates to just one—Makarem al-Deeri in Cairo.

The idea that the Brotherhood should include women on its candidates' list originated with two Brotherhood members from the Alexandria division—Ibrahim al-Zaafarani and Ali Abdel-Fattah. In their words, theirs was an attempt to address “a weak point” of the Brotherhood and also to project a positive, progressive image of the movement during elections.

A second, more important motive behind the inclusion of Sisters on the Brotherhood electoral list was the hope that this would relieve the security forces' pressure on Brotherhood cadres. The confrontation between the state and the movement was at a peak in the run-up to the 2000 elections, and some potential candidates had been imprisoned. The Brotherhood hoped that women candidates would escape the pressure from the security forces. Women candidates also represented an opportunity to change the way society perceived the Muslim Brotherhood, according to one young activist. Having a woman speak in the name of the Muslim Brotherhood in public meetings, she said, could affect popular perceptions of the movement.

The Zaafarani and Abdel-Fattah initiative drew strength from a document issued by the movement in 1994, which recognized the right of women to stand for parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, when the proposal was presented for discussion in Alexandria's administrative bureau, initially it faced resistance from Salafist and other more conservative elements in the Brotherhood, who argued that it was still “premature” to run women candidates. After weighing the consequences, the Brotherhood's Guidance Bureau gave its seal of approval, deciding to select a number of women candidates from the Delta governorate, the Alexandria chapter nominated Halafawi. The Brotherhood's leadership knew that it would be extremely difficult to sell the idea in the more conservative environment of Upper Egypt, and, more importantly, its decision to have women candidates was not without risk.

Fielding women candidates might divert security attention from Brothers' cadres, but it would call attention to the activities of the Sisters, putting them at risk of being arrested or harassed by security forces. The leadership also worried that more conservative Islamist movements, particularly the Salafists, would try to discredit the Brotherhood in the eyes of the public by portraying them as less Islamic. They worried the decision might even antagonize their conservative followers as well as sympathizers within the Salafist circles.

Some of their fear proved correct. The two women who stood for elections in 2000 and 2005, respectively, both had a difficult experience. In the 2000 elections, al-Halafawi ran against the ruling party's candidate in al-Ramal district, a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Alexandria. Halafawi's husband, who was also a Brotherhood member, and her campaign manager were arrested during the early days of the campaign. Security officials approached her, offering to free her husband if she would withdraw her candidacy. But she was bent on fighting the battle until the end. Many of her supporters were rounded up, and she faced a smear campaign by her rival for office. Surprisingly, those who came to Halafawi's aid were the more conservative people, even Salafists, in her constituency. They organized rallies in support of her candidacy and helped mobilize voters to show up on election day. Election day, however, proved a complete travesty. When the initial vote count indicated that Halafawi was close to winning, her victory was simply overturned by an official decree that cancelled the elections in the al-Ramal constituency, which remained without representation in the assembly for two years.

In 2002, the government decided to re-run the election, and Halafawi ran again. But the voting stations were turned into military zones. Halafawi supporters were rounded up, and voters were not allowed to cast their votes. To no one's surprise, the ruling-party candidate won the seat.

Makarem al-Deeri, the Brotherhood candidate in 2005, managed her electoral campaign in a different atmosphere. Women played an increasingly visible role in her campaign. The Sisters were entrusted with key tasks, including the distribution of voting cards among Brotherhood members and potential voters, and the supervision of electoral lists. This meant they had to go to police stations to collect lists of registered voters in each constituency and screen them by crossing out the names of voters who had died or moved out of the constituency. They also organized street activities, such as rallies and public speeches. Most importantly, they sought to win over potential voters. Young women activists went door-to-door soliciting votes in constituencies that Brotherhood candidates normally contested, such as Madinet Nasr, Sayyida Zayanab, and al-Ramal. In as conservative a society as Egypt, this was an unthinkable way to gain campaign publicity.

Al-Deeri's campaign manager was a woman who worked with a team of young activists, mostly new university graduates. Al-Deeri ran in Madinet Nasr, a middle- to upper-middle-class constituency commonly known as the

“president’s constituency,” because the president of Egypt casts his vote there. Al-Deeri’s campaign platform focused on social services and issues related to women, such as children’s rights, family, and education. It was based on general ideas rather than on specific plans of action. But al-Deeri managed to gain the support of women voters. She had several gatherings in the streets, under the full gaze of the security forces, during which she gave electoral speeches and led public prayers.

The campaign paid off despite the strict security measures. When the votes were counted, al-Deeri was 1,500 votes ahead of her ruling-party opponent. But officials announced that her rival, Mustafa al-Salaab, had won the seat. Hundreds of al-Deeri supporters, most of them women, protested in front of the vote-counting station, accusing the government of vote-rigging. They only dispersed when al-Deeri went out to thank them for their support and assured them that “the flag of Islam will never fall.”

In sum, the candidacy of women proved a big challenge to the Brotherhood, both internally and externally. Still, the movement decided to take this step. It was, in part, a response to the pressures exerted by a large segment of the Sisters, who thought the move was long overdue. Many activists viewed it as a big shift in women’s activism inside the movement. Having performed well in the electoral battle, they developed more ambitious goals, such as a place in all the Brotherhood’s power structures. In addition, despite the small number of candidates placed on Brotherhood lists, the electoral experience has put the cadres of the women’s division in touch with the “masses,” enabling them to establish grassroots networks.

Nevertheless, the Brotherhood is still reluctant to place a large number of women candidates on its electoral lists. In 2005, of its 150 candidates, only one was a woman. The experiences of both Halafawi and al-Deeri revealed the acute shortage of women cadres who are well trained to deal with political and social issues. The Brotherhood still fails to make the development of its able women cadres a priority.

## Street Politics

Street politics is another front in which Sister activists have played a central role. In 2005, Egypt experienced an opening up of the political space. This opening led to the rise of protest movements such as The Egyptian Movement for Change (*Kifaya*), an umbrella group under which a number of political forces, including the Brotherhood, were grouped. *Kifaya* organized a series of sit-ins and demonstrations protesting Mubarak’s sixth term in office. Its most significant political act has been to breach the state ban on street protests.

It was in this setting that the Brotherhood Sisters began to be increasingly visible in the streets. Encouraged by *Kifaya*’s bold move, the Muslim Brotherhood

organized a series of street protests in 2005 and 2006 in different towns across Egypt. Women activists constituted almost half of the demonstrators. It was the first time the movement pushed its women to the forefront of the political struggle. Sisters were equally visible in campus protests and sit-ins marking different causes, be they in solidarity with the Palestinians or opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq. In 2006, when security forces intervened and banned Brotherhood candidates from participating in the student election at Cairo University, male and female students belonging to the Brotherhood organized a series of demonstrations. They then formed a parallel structure, The Free Students Union, to run candidates and defy the security ban on their candidates. The first head of the Free Student Union to be elected was a young Sister.

When 22 senior Brotherhood figures were arrested in December 2006, their wives and daughters launched a campaign against the military tribunals and their rulings. This included a series of sit-ins in front of the Interior Ministry to protest the trials. Young women activists raised anti-regime banners in support of those detained. This growing street visibility of the Sisters raises questions about the argument that women must be kept from positions of power for fear of security strikes. In other words, if women activists are allowed to participate and then become active in street politics, the activity that is most likely to put women face-to-face with the state's brutal security machine, the argument put forward by most male leaders loses its point. In all of these overt political activities, women activists proved themselves very capable at organization, mobilization, and public outreach.

### **Cyber Dissent**

The combination of oppressive political and social conditions, repressive state policies that cripple political dissent, and lack of a mechanism with which to communicate with their peers has unleashed Brotherhood online activism. This move was part of a wave of cyber dissent. Numerous bloggers from across the political spectrum sought to expose state misconduct against the opposition. The strongest voices have been Brotherhood members. So far, 150 Brotherhood blogs have been started, becoming what one observer described as "an information clearinghouse" for the thoughts and activities of young Brothers and Sisters. They criticize the status quo and discuss the most sensitive issues. These blogs do not reflect a rebellion within the Brotherhood, because these activists possess institutional loyalty, shown in the way they choose to identify themselves. Almost all take pride in belonging to the Brotherhood. The blogs give them a platform to voice criticism of what they consider to be failing policies of their movement. They have tackled issues from the party platform to the subordinate status of their Muslim Sisters, repressive regime policies, and solidarity with the detained Brotherhood members. They also express their personal thoughts.

The blogs are proving to be a successful method of networking among what one observer described as the Brotherhood's "urban fourth generation." In real life, there are no mechanisms for young men and women to discuss issues and exchange ideas. They cannot do so within their Islamist organizations or in wider society. Virtual space remains open, providing an alternative to the strict discipline of the movement, which forbids members to assemble or hold meetings, due to the security siege against the organization. Blogs give rank-and-file members, at least the younger ones who feel more at home in cyberspace, the means to make their voice heard about current, vital issues in the absence of an institutional means to communicate with their senior leaders.

Muslim Sisters are also blogging. The first blog created by a Sister appeared in March 2006; the blogger identified herself as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Another woman who joined the discussion identified herself as "a girl from the *Ikhwan*." In discussions on the blog, participants focus mostly on their personal experiences, including their experiences as Muslim Sisters. Some discuss what it means to be a member of the Brotherhood today. Some write about their imprisoned fathers, posting videos of the trials and pictures of family members. One example is the campaign launched by Zahara al-Shater, daughter of Khayrat al-Shater, a deputy Supreme Guide who is serving a seven-year sentence, in support of both her father and her detained husband.

One activist who has been involved in cyber activism said that it was the venue that shed light on the work and activities of the Muslim Sisters. It provided the activists with a space to escape the tightly controlled political and social environment. It also permits them to express their thoughts and ideas without having to screen them. While blogger activists still represent a minority within the Brotherhood, their influence on the ongoing internal debates cannot be ignored. The trend toward blogger activists also represents a challenge to the Brotherhood leaders who, after decades of working underground, still cannot understand members going public with discussions of internal issues and criticism. In an attempt to co-opt these *Ikhwan* bloggers, a series of meetings were organized between them and mid-level Brotherhood leaders. This is not to say that the movement does not encourage its members to use cyberspace as a medium for expression. In fact, courses are offered on what is described as "the resistant popular media," which train members in spreading the word about the Brotherhood's vision and activities on the Internet. It is still premature to assess the overall impact that blogging will have on the Brotherhood's handling of the thorny issues raised by these bloggers. However, it can already be said that blogging is bringing into the open many of the internal debates that used to take place behind closed doors, exposing the movement increasingly to outside influences.

## Conclusion

The status of women activists in the Muslim Brotherhood movement is not static. The struggle of women activists to carve a niche inside the movement's power structures reflects a close interaction between structure and agency, inasmuch as structural changes are closely associated with gender consciousness. As an increasing number of women activists have become aware of their contribution to the movement and the centrality of their role as political actors, they have put forward more demands for recognition of this role in terms of hierarchy and structure.

Islamist women activists uphold the view that Islam is a religion that has done women justice. Any injustices inflicted upon them, they insist, have to do more with the cultural, political, and social realities in which they are functioning as a sociopolitical movement. A review of the general set of cultural values that govern the movement's outlook regarding the role of women as political actors proves them right. A conservative culture, coupled with an oppressive sociopolitical environment, is responsible for women being denied the representation that reflects their actual contribution to the political struggle. Women activists therefore chose to engage in the mass politics of presence to make up for their absence from the elitist politics of representation inside the movement.

An important conclusion emerges from long hours of talking with and interviewing many women activists. Despite their awareness of the significance of their contribution to the movement's survival and political influence, and despite their demands for a wider role and positions of power, they remain unwilling to go so far as to sacrifice the movement's unity and cohesion or to go any further in challenging the leadership. Many of the activists interviewed stressed this point, as they have in their writings.

The question, going forward, is whether the emergence of a young generation of activists will ultimately generate a new political force that could prove crucial to the women's movement in the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike their older colleagues, those activists are extremely dynamic, enjoy high visibility, are assertive about their rights as political actors and as partners in power structures inside the movement, in many cases have family ties to senior leaders, and, above all, are frustrated with their subordinate status.

Major barriers stand in the way of women's advancement in the movement. First, there is no overarching vision regarding women's activism. Second, the existing leadership seems unwilling to give up its long-held vision of limiting women's role to their traditionally accepted ones. Third, a conservative base presents obstacles to developing women's structures and to allowing activists a broader role in politics. Fourth, and most important, is the regime itself, which continues to suppress dissent and opposition forces.

The development of a well-defined and integrated structure for women in the movement will primarily depend on two key factors: one, the outcome of the conflict between the movement's reformers and conservatives, and two, the emergence of strong women leaders who take on the challenge of making gains inside the movement. They are already emerging, and the individuals mentioned in this paper warrant further attention.

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## Note

- 1 Dīaa Rashwan, "The Truth about Muslim Brotherhood Membership," *Al-Masry al-yom*, April 28, 2008, Issue 1415, p. 13.







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