

August 09, 2011

## Many Egyptian Women Prepare for Greater Role Behind Veil

Al Pessin | Cairo, Egypt



Photo: Reuters

A veiled Egyptian woman displays her ink-stained fingertip after casting her vote for a referendum on constitutional amendments at a polling station in Cairo, Egypt, March 19, 2011 (file photo)

As Egypt moves to write a new constitution, many are looking to secure more rights for women. That effort comes after decades of growing traditionalism in the country, including more use of Islamic veils. Many Egyptians do not see any contradiction, however, between the increasing use of veils and the push for more women's rights.

All across Cairo, women of all social and economic strata are wearing various types of Islamic veils - and the practice has increased markedly in recent decades.

Nearly 100 years ago, Egyptian women fought to get out of the veil.

But Egyptian Sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim said the practice has made a comeback.

"Well, first of all, the observation is accurate, that there are more women in veil, or behind the veil, than ever there were in modern Egyptian history," said Ibrahim.

Professor Ibrahim wrote a book about the early days of the return of the veil among students and professionals 30 years ago.

"The veiling was, in a sense, a compromise to be able to participate as fully as possible in public life without being perceived as lacking in ethics or morality or being loose. If veiling is the price, many women, many young girls, have accepted to pay that price," said Ibrahim.

That is evident on the streets of Cairo, where lawyer Noha Samir said she has been wearing a veil for many years.

"A hijab looks nice and makes me feel comfortable. I am committed to Islam, but I can also follow fashion - within limits," she said.

Other women have adopted the veil later in life, like social worker Magda Abdo el Zayad. But she said her unmarried daughter already is wearing one.

"As we got older we started to learn about things, about our religion that we did not know growing up. But my daughter is already veiled. Even when I urge her to go out sometimes without it, she refuses. She says she would feel naked."

Experts say some of Egypt's increased social and religious conservatism came from Saudi Arabia, conveyed by millions of Egyptian men, who went there to work and came home with different views of how women should behave.

But Azza Soliman of the Center for Egyptian Women said the change also came from women themselves, and is related to the country's recent history.

"There was a gap between what the people needed and what the government provided, so many people turned to religion to fill the gap," said Soliman. "And many women chose to express their new religious feeling by putting on the veil."

But most Egyptian women do not wear the full 'niqab,' which covers all but the eyes. Most wear some version of the 'hijab,' covering the hair and neck.

And many are quick to point out that they can be fashionable, even with a veil.

"Why not be elegant and at the same time be veiled? Why not? The hijab does not have to limit you," said homemaker Samia Hegazy.

"Just because a person is veiled doesn't mean she wears bad clothes. There is also very good clothing for the veil," said Dina, a homemaker.

Newspaper editor Rania Al Malky said for her, there is no conflict between being covered and being a successful professional, or a political activist.

"To me, I don't think this in itself represents anything really in this society. On the contrary, sometimes women feel empowered by their veil because it protects them somehow from being targeted. Some of the leading youth figures, who are women in the youth movement that led to this revolution, were young, veiled women," said Al Malky.

Veteran Egyptian Journalist Hisham Kassem agrees that what's important is not a woman's clothing, but rather whether she has full rights in society.

"In some cases you had women who were not veiled, but basically played no role in society. But when I see veiled a woman who's out there demonstrating, this is somebody on the move to play a role," said Kassem. "The attire is not going to be the issue here. It's the role they are going to play. And that eventually will lead to full equality, as opposed to women simply taking off the veil, but playing no active role."

That does not conform to Western ideas about women's liberation. This woman was detained by police in France in April for wearing a veil, in violation of a law designed to promote women's rights.

As Egyptians work their way through the early stages of democracy, though, many believe the veil can, and even should, be part of it.