



WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN FOCUS: EGYPT

**FINDINGS FROM MAY—JUNE 2004 FOCUS GROUPS WITH
EGYPTIAN CITIZENS ON WOMEN'S FREEDOM**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A series of focus groups conducted with Egyptian citizens finds that progress for women is hindered by gaps in public knowledge about basic rights as well as by institutional weaknesses in Egypt's government.

Conducted with a broad cross section of Egyptians from Cairo, Alexandria, and several villages in the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt in May and June 2004, the focus group research offers fresh perspectives from Egyptian citizens whose views are often not included in analyses on women's rights.

Designed to complement other efforts aimed at identifying the challenges and opportunities for empowering women, this public opinion research project is one component of Freedom House's Survey of Women's Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa.

Key Findings

- **A media revolution is creating greater public awareness and presenting new opportunities to impact public attitudes on women.** Like many other countries in the Arab world, Egypt is undergoing a media revolution, in large part sparked by competition from new satellite television channels. Viewers find interactive and participatory programs such as call-in shows and debates appealing, and there is a strong appetite for programs that address social problems. Egyptians, particularly women, generally give high marks to televised education programs and recent televised public awareness campaigns that have addressed health and social issues. No participant in the research mentions the U.S.-sponsored media outlets, including *Al-Hurra* television, Radio Sawa, and *Hi* magazine.
- **Women's political rights: a hollow equality.** Women have equal rights to vote and participate in political debates, most Egyptians say. Exercising these rights does not matter, because they see political rights as meaningless in Egypt's current political system. Many Egyptians see formal politics as an elite game and view debates among political leaders as irrelevant to their lives and concerns. Few Egyptians say that they have ever voted in elections. Reasons cited for not participating in formal politics include not seeing a direct impact on their lives, perceptions of electoral fraud and cheating, and bureaucratic inefficiencies making it difficult to obtain voter identification cards.
- **Special challenges to women's political participation.** Several women note that they face special challenges obtaining voter identification cards. In addition, although there is broad societal acceptance of women serving as ministers of government and members of parliament, most men and several women say that women are not suited for serving in top positions such as prime minister or sensitive positions such as defense minister.

- **Disconnection from formal legal system.** Egyptians demonstrate a strong inclination to mediate disputes outside of Egypt's formal legal system, particularly on matters related to disputes within families. The imperative to maintain family honor and respect in the community's eyes is a strong force.
- **Concerns about shortcomings in Egypt's schools.** The general public in Egypt sees education as the most important right for women, but they worry that Egypt's public schools are not up to the task. Several Egyptians issue harsh critiques of the current education system, saying that teachers are poorly trained and schools are ill equipped. Many complain about having to pay teachers for private lessons so their children can pass exams, a payment that several view as bribery for a basic entitlement.
- **Complex views on female circumcision.** A recent public awareness campaign aimed at discouraging female circumcision, or female genital mutilation, is stirring up debate but does not appear to have shifted public opinion substantially. Most Egyptians, including women, make strong arguments for the need to continue this practice, basing their arguments on religion, long-standing societal practice, and societal expectations.
- **Strong suspicions about international donor assistance.** Overall, Egyptians are skeptical of donor assistance, with many worrying about possible conditions attached that could make Egypt economically dependent and constrain its independence on foreign policy matters. Negative perceptions about the United States resulting from its policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine add a special challenge for American organizations.

Recommendations

Recommendations to help Egyptian civic groups, the Egyptian government, and donors in efforts to expand women's rights based on the views obtained in this research include:

1. Invest in efforts to increase knowledge and awareness among the Egyptian general public.

Specific recommendations include:

- Continue to target women in literacy programs;
- Increase adult civic and legal education programs;
- Examine ways to use new media programming to increase public knowledge; and
- Test public awareness campaigns in advance before airing them.

2. Reform government institutions and procedures to make them more responsive to the Egyptian people's demands.

Specific recommendations include:

- Implement comprehensive political reforms that will allow a broader spectrum of political voices to freely debate public issues;
- Streamline voter registration procedures;
- Improve teacher training programs to enhance the quality of education; and
- Introduce reforms to stop corruption in schools and prevent teachers from demanding payments for private lessons.

ANXIOUS EGYPTIAN PUBLIC FOCUSED ON BASIC NEEDS

Egyptians are preoccupied with their country's economic troubles; recent price increases, unexpected currency exchange fluctuations, unemployment, and perceptions of a growing division between rich and poor dominate the discussions.¹ Egyptians evince a tone of desperation about their personal financial situation, with several people expressing worries about meeting their family's basic needs. They feel like they paying more and getting less, working harder and seeing less reward for their efforts.

There is a major [economic] depression these days. (Urban man, 20-29, college graduate, Cairo)

There is nothing that can create happiness in our lives, especially nowadays. (Rural man, 45-65, illiterate, Tanta region)

Every time you go to buy something, you find that it is more expensive than the day before. (Urban woman, 30-44, illiterate, Cairo)

Price increases—this is the main problem. There's nothing I can see from the money I earned. I go to work from half-past six in the morning until two in the morning. I don't get enough sleep. (Urban Christian man, 30-44, college graduate, Cairo)

These days... people don't even care about Palestine—they just care about providing their families with their daily food. (Newly urban² man, 30-44, literate, Alexandria)

The public's anxieties over the economic situation shape how people talk about women's rights; in the context of economic stagnation, inflation, and high unemployment, women's issues are men's concerns too. One illiterate woman in Cairo, when asked about the forms of violence that women face in Egypt, exclaims, "The price increases!"

To cope with this situation, people say they are increasingly relying on buying items on credit and using installment payments, in addition to *gam'iyyas*—an informal system of collected savings, often run by women, that does not involve interest payments.

¹ On July 9, 2004, shortly after this research was completed, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in a bid to signal a new direction on policy, replaced the government and appointed a new prime minister and several technocrats and economic experts in a new government.

² In an attempt to capture perspectives from segments of the Egyptian population who have been part of urbanization, participants in four of the sixteen focus groups were recruited with the additional screening criteria of having arrived in either Cairo or Alexandria within the last five years.

Egyptians of all walks of life find it difficult to say anything positive about the current situation because of overriding economic concerns. Extreme negativity shapes how people define human rights and discuss women's rights, with people placing more emphasis on economic rights and basic needs. The dire situation leads many to conclude that men and women are theoretically equal in most rights, but that many of those rights are not guaranteed in Egypt—for women or for men.

Concerns about Overall Decline and Social Disintegration

The economic dissatisfaction is connected with apprehensions of a more general decline. There is a strong sense among the public that Egypt's long-standing social contract is disintegrating, with people becoming more selfish and not looking out for each other, and the government no longer guaranteeing some of the essentials previously provided. Some worry that weakened social bonds and economic troubles are contributing to other problems like crime, drugs, and a general loss of values.

People don't look out for each other anymore. You either get something or you don't—and if you don't, then that's it. Even buying bread has become a problem—having to line up for hours just to be able to buy five loaves of bread. People often end up fighting and arguing with each other in the bread lines. (Newly urban woman, 20-29, literate, Alexandria)

Our major problem here in Egypt is that people only think of themselves—everyone is thinking “me me me,” and they don't care about others. If we stop this selfishness, things would be better. (Urban Christian man, college, 30-44, Cairo)

In the days of Gamal Abdel Naser and Sadat, your life was secure regardless of anything. You were assured that you would get all sources of food in the supermarket, and the prices were known and set. (Urban man, 20-29, high school graduate, Alexandria)

People don't care anymore about each other; everyone looks out for himself. We've heard from our mothers about the old days when neighbors looked after each other and tried hard to take care of them. (Urban Christian woman, 20-29, high school graduate, Cairo)

Some Egyptians, particularly those living in cities, complain about Egypt becoming a country of *wasta*—favoritism based on personal and family connections. They see *wasta* as playing too strong of a role in relations and affecting all types of decisions, from selecting players on Alexandria's football team to hiring for everyday jobs. As one young man in Alexandria says, “I got a job in government only because I had *wasta*. Without this *wasta*, I would not have been able to get the job.”

For some, the spring 2004 rejection of Egypt's bid to host the 2010 World Cup symbolizes yet another failure by the country to live up to its great potential—as one young man in Alexandria says, “Do you know what made me feel less patriotic? The zero we received in the World Cup competition. It was disgraceful and not an easy thing to accept.”

Small Hints of Progress in Alexandria and Asyut

Two countervailing exceptions to Egyptians' overriding sense of decline emerge in this research. First, a handful of people in the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria give high marks to the governor for making the city cleaner and better organized. As one young man says, "I consider Alexandria a developed city... it is like Europe." Tangible and visible signs of progress, no matter how small or symbolic, can have a slight yet important impact on the general mood. Second, in the Upper Egyptian region of Asyut, several comment on the relative period of calm and security that has recently emerged, after years of clashes between government security forces and extremist forces and violence between local groups. As one Christian man from a village near Asyut says, "The good thing about these days is that we are living in peace here, and the people have better relations with each other."

VIEWS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS: LINKED TO RIGHTS FOR ALL

Egyptians stress basic needs when they talk about human rights, and this conception of human rights informs popular attitudes on women's rights. Most Egyptians interviewed say men and women have equal rights in an ideal world, but on the whole these rights are not ensured in today's Egypt—for women or for men. The general sense that men and women should have equal rights does not translate into an attitude that they have the same roles and responsibilities in life. Both men and women see women as having the primary responsibility for taking care of the home and raising children, while men serve as the primary breadwinners.

When asked how they define human rights, Egyptians of all walks of life—younger or older, Christian or Muslim, illiterate or college-educated—almost exclusively focus on the most basic essentials of life: food, housing, jobs, education, and health care. Several Egyptians, particularly those who are unmarried or recently married, express anxiety about housing and talk about their troubles finding an affordable place to live.

[Human rights means] the essentials—food at a suitable price, housing, and security. (Urban man, 20-29, college graduate, Cairo)

[Human rights means] to eat, drink and have clothing... (Rural woman, ages 20-29, illiterate, Tanta region)

My right as a human being is to work. (Rural man, 20-29, high school graduate, Al-Fayoum region)

[Human rights mean] financial rights, because the country is deteriorating. Things are becoming more and more expensive, and in general there is an economic slump. I'm getting married, and I can't get everything I need. I have to pay for it by using installment payments. If the country's economic situation were better than this, we could get what we want. This is the case for both young men and young women. (Newly urban woman, 20-29, literate, Alexandria)

In addition to education, covered in greater detail below, several Egyptians mention health care when asked to define human rights, especially among older Egyptians. As with jobs and housing, people generally do not think that their country provides adequate access to health care. An older rural man from a village near Tanta in the Nile Delta says that doctors are butchers, and a younger man in Alexandria says that health care workers treat patients like products and not human beings. A number of people offer stories such as doctors in public hospitals having to deal with fifty patients at one time and patients offering bribes to hospital officials to get proper medical treatment.

Although Egyptians almost exclusively talk about economic and social rights when asked about human rights, a few glimmers of anger and disappointment about the relative absence of meaningful

political rights and civil liberties appear. One example is a college-educated Christian man in Cairo, who says, “In Egypt, the problem is that we are guilty until proven innocent, which is a disaster because anywhere else people are innocent until proven otherwise.” Several others talk about voting rights, but a common view is that this political right is essentially meaningless because no real change results from exercising this right.

General Sense of Progress and Equality for Women

On the whole, Egyptians say that women have achieved progress in the last ten years, with more women than men saying the situation has improved for women. The main reason cited for this sense of women’s progress is increased access to formal education and literacy programs, as well as general public awareness and education about family planning and women’s health issues. Several rural women from the Asyut region say that they are attending literacy programs or have recently attended them in the past, and this has enhanced their lives and made them more capable of defending their rights.

Some men say that women have achieved too much progress, with hints of a backlash as a result of this perceived progress. One newly urban man in Alexandria blames the West, saying “Women now have more rights than men, because the West keeps talking about women’s rights continuously.”

Some say that things have gotten worse for women in the last ten years, with several young men expressing worries about increased immorality and concerns that women are imitating the way women dress in other countries because of what they see on television. Among a handful of men, there are concerns that women are not dressing as modestly as they did in the past. One young man in Cairo, a college graduate, says, “Things have gotten better for women because she is no longer forced to marry someone she doesn’t want to marry, but things have gotten worse because women are dressing less decently.” A middle-aged man in Alexandria says, “Now, fathers are allowing their daughters to get indecent clothes—tight clothes and stretch tank tops.” Interestingly, several women note the exact opposite, saying that more and more women are actually choosing to wear a veil or more modest clothing.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL RIGHTS: DISENGAGEMENT FROM FORMAL POLITICS

Egyptians are extremely disengaged from formal politics, with few saying that they have ever voted in Egypt's elections. Women have equal rights to vote and participate in political debates, most Egyptians say. But exercising these rights does not matter much, because Egyptians view political rights as hollow in Egypt's tightly controlled political system. Men and women agree that women are capable of serving as members of the People's Assembly and in certain ministries of government. But most also express reservations about women in top leadership positions such as prime minister or mayor.

The Egyptian public sees politics as an elite game. There is a strong desire among the public to have leaders that listen to them, but because this does not happen, many Egyptian citizens have disengaged from formal political life. The debates they see unfolding in much of the press have little to do with their lives and concerns. One woman in Cairo says, "A lot of people in the newspapers talk about things that have nothing to do with what we want."

An Unresponsive People's Assembly

When discussing the role of government, Egyptians focus exclusively on the national government and the People's Assembly in particular, with no one mentioning local government. The People's Assembly does not fulfill its responsibilities in the eyes of most Egyptians interviewed. Almost everyone says that Egypt's legislative body does not deliver on matters big or small. Promises made in election campaigns are later ignored, and people see members of the People's Assembly as inaccessible:

They keep discussing the bread crisis in the People's Assembly and they keep condemning the bread price increases, but then nothing is done. (Newly urban woman, 30-44, literate, Cairo)

I watch it [People's Assembly sessions on television] to laugh. I see those people—someone is yawning, someone is sleeping, and at the end they agree on everything. (Urban man, 20-29, high school graduate, Alexandria)

The People's Assembly agreed with a certain company to keep Cairo governorate clean but nothing happened. I have to take away my own garbage. (Urban Christian man, 30-44, college graduate, Cairo)

There's one main reason [why we don't vote]: we know that the person we'd vote for won't do anything for us. (Newly urban men, 20-29, literate, Cairo)

After a candidate wins, nothing happens. You cannot even reach him again—they don't have time for us. (Rural Christian man, 30-44, illiterate, Asyut region)

Low Interest in Voting

Most people interviewed say that voting is meaningless and a waste of time—few people say that they have even taken the time to vote. Although this research takes place during the same period as the 2004 national elections for Egypt's Shura Council, few people know that these elections are taking place. Overall, both men and women provide four main reasons for not voting and taking part in formal politics:

1. Not seeing voting as having a direct impact on their lives. At the most basic level, the main reason for such seemingly low rates of participation in the elections³ is that most Egyptians do not think it matters in their lives. "It is useless" and "it won't make a difference," are two common responses to the question of why people say they have never voted. One younger woman from a Nile Delta village outside of Tanta says, "If I felt that things would change or would be affected by my voting, then I would definitely do it."

2. Cheating and electoral fraud. Despite recent efforts by the Egyptian government to improve negative public perceptions about the fairness of elections, fraud is a second leading reason why so few people vote. One younger man in Alexandria says, "It is nonsense what is happening in the elections." Because of fraud, many Egyptians do not think that their vote will matter. Egyptians criticize the National Democratic Party (NDP), Egypt's ruling party, for "cooking" the results, making sure that its candidates win, and making it difficult for voters who do not support the NDP to vote. Numerous allegations of vote buying by candidates emerge:

I once went to check on the elections last year, and the streets were closed and there were police forces stopping voters from participating because they wanted this lady [a female candidate] to lose!
(Urban man, 20-29, high school graduate, Alexandria)

The National Democratic Party had to win the Shura elections. It was a must. There was a candidate everyone loved, but he was not from the NDP, and we were really shocked with the results. The person we loved got 1,000 votes and the NDP candidate got 9,000 votes. We don't understand how this works. (Rural man, 20-29, high school graduate, Al-Fayoum region)

The results of the elections are known beforehand. It is well known who will be elected and who won't be. (Newly urban woman, 20-29, literate, Alexandria)

...we know that businessmen distribute money so people would vote for them, whether they deserve to be elected or not! And the candidate with less financial backing will not win because he does not pay the voters. (Urban Christian woman, 20-29, high school graduate, Cairo)

³ In the elections for the national Shura Council, initial estimates placed voter turnout at less than 10 percent of registered voters. Voter turnout in People's Assembly elections has historically been lower than 30 percent of the voting age population.

There are people who came to our houses and offered fifty pounds to vote, but we refused. (Newly urban woman, 20-29, literate, Alexandria)

I went to the elections and I was forced to vote for the National Democratic Party. There were a lot of examples of people who were forced to vote [a certain way]. The way I'm talking to you now—I'm afraid of talking to you about this. It's not because I'm weak, but because of the circumstances. (Rural man, ages 20-29, high school graduate, Al-Fayoum region)

3. Bureaucratic inefficiency and difficulties obtaining voter identification cards. A number of people say they have encountered significant problems getting registered to vote. One college-educated Christian man in Cairo says that he once lost his voter identification card, and he “suffered hell” trying to obtain a replacement, and then just gave up. A middle-aged woman in Cairo says, “There are obstacles and a lot of red tape to get through to obtain a voter identification card. It took me years to get one issued for me.”

4. Lack of knowledge and basic information about voting procedures and timing of elections. For many, particularly among those with less education, knowledge and information gaps keep them from participating in elections. Women in particular indicate that they do not have enough information about voter registration and election procedures.

I need to understand more about the process and the procedures. This can be done through an advertisement on television, just like the other awareness campaigns. (Newly urban woman, 30-44, literate, Cairo)

I thought about voting but I don't know where they issue the voter identification cards or what the procedures are. (Urban woman, 30-44, illiterate, Cairo)

I am unaware of the voting system, and I am not up to date with the timing of the elections. (Urban Christian woman, 20-29, high school graduate, Cairo)

I don't know if we should go vote or they send me a voter card. I don't know the system. (Rural woman, 20-29, high school graduate, Asyut region)

I don't have enough information about elections and the procedures. (Rural man, 45-65, illiterate, Tanta region)

In addition to the four reasons Egyptians commonly cite for not voting, some women, particularly those living rural areas, say that their illiteracy holds them back from feeling confident enough to vote. One illiterate woman from Cairo says, “I cannot read or write, and [at the polls] they give me a paper and tell me to stamp it. I will stamp it, but I won't know what the paper is or what I chose exactly.” For a handful of other women, duties at home and the family take precedent over political participation, with some women saying that a woman's place is in the home:

Yes, sure it [voting] would be beneficial, but the woman staying in the house is better. She has no place in the elections. It is none of her business. The man should do that on her behalf; the man does everything on her behalf already. Now of course everybody is saying that women make up half the society and all that talk, but I believe the woman's place is her house. (Newly urban woman, 30-44, literate, Cairo)

We just didn't bother to go [vote]. My son went and got a voting card, and he asked me to go with him but I refused. It would just interrupt my housework and leave my kids and house. Why would I do this? (Urban woman, 30-44, illiterate, Cairo)

General but Limited Acceptance of Women as Government and Political Leaders

Most Egyptians agree that women have the right to serve as leaders in certain government and political positions, except for some very top positions.

On the whole, virtually all women and most men say that women are capable of serving in the People's Assembly. Some point to examples of women who have served in the People's Assembly as evidence that they have this right. The pervasive cynicism about Egypt's government and People's Assembly leads some men to question whether women could do a better job. As one college educated Christian man in Cairo says, "The men [in the People's Assembly] cannot represent our opinions—how can a woman do this?" But on the whole, a consensus exists that women are competent to serve in the People's Assembly.

Similarly, there is a general consensus that women have the right to become ministers, though some, particularly men, say that women should be given portfolios such as Minister of Social Affairs, and that they could not capably serve in "tougher" positions like Minister of Interior or Minister of Defense. A female prime minister seems out of the question in the minds of most, including many women. The most commonly cited reason given for why a woman could not serve as prime minister is that she is too emotionally sensitive—that women do not have the fortitude to stand up to the strains and pressures of the job.

Similar reasons are given for justifying the opinion that women could not capably serve as mayors in rural settings. A young man living in a rural area in Al-Fayoum region south of Cairo calls the notion of a woman serving as mayor "the weirdest thing ever," saying that if the mayor were pregnant, no one would wake her up when there is a problem in the middle of the night.

A few others reject the notion that women are not capable of serving in these positions, and blame a certain societal mentality in rural areas and villages that impedes women from becoming mayors—one woman from a village outside of Asyut in Upper Egypt says that women could not be mayors in villages because "there is retardation and stupidity" among the people there.

Signs of a Public Appetite for Political Reform

Despite the widespread disengagement from formal politics, some Egyptians still hold out some hope that changes could make their political participation more meaningful.

When asked about their views of democracy, Egyptians' associations are largely positive, with freedom of speech and opinion and equality coming in as top responses to the question of how they define democracy. Some say that democracy is an essential part of Islam—as one younger man in Cairo says, “We have this concept of shura (consultation) in Islam, and shura means democracy. I should listen, respect what I am listening to, and discuss it.”

A handful of people express reservations about democracy, with some saying that it could lead to chaos and disorder, particularly when people exaggerate their opinions. One college-educated young man in Cairo is particularly forceful in his objection to democracy, saying “This concept of democracy is being exported to us as part of the intellectual war they [the people of the West] are waging against us.” Overall, most are receptive to the idea of political reform. One reason they would like to see more democracy is so that they can hold their leaders accountable for their decisions. One young woman in Alexandria suggests that there should be a law “giving people the chance to get rid of their representative and replace him if he does not fulfill his campaign promise.”

Even though most Egyptians are not currently engaged in formal politics and voting, several point out that if they receive more information about the government and elections and if the ability to obtain voter identification cards were easier, they would participate. Among some of those who have so far not actively participated in politics and elections, there is a sense that their value as individuals would increase in society if they did participate. Among the handful who have voted, they note how taking part made them feel like a valued member of society. One woman says that voting made her feel more valued.

I feel that if I had a voter's card, I would have some value and worth in society. I want to be like the rest of the people. (Rural Christian woman, 35-65, literate, Asyut region)

A lot of people are suffering from forms of severe frustration which is due to many things. For example everybody feels that they are worthless in the sense that they are not significant members or active participants in society. If I tell someone to go and vote in the elections, he will tell you, “Why bother? My vote will not make a difference.” This springs from his lack of sense of being a valuable member of society... (Newly urban man, 30-44, literate, Alexandria)

[When I voted] I felt as if I was going to an exam. I was worried about what I would do and what would happen. I felt my own value and worth. I was happy with myself. Honestly, my sisters-in-law, they are all educated, and they were going to vote too that day. So when I was going with them, the four of us, I felt that I was their peer. (Newly urban woman, ages 30-44, literate, Cairo)

I vote because I feel it is my obligation, in a way to ease my conscience so that I feel that at least I tried to make a difference. It gives me the impression that I thought and acted positively. If there is a candidate whom I approve of and I vote for him, and if he gets elected, that will make me feel content about voting. If he fails then at least I can tell myself that I tried and wasn't responsible for his failure. Either way I wouldn't be able to blame myself. (Newly urban man, 30-44, literate Alexandria)

WOMEN'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION: CONCERNS ABOUT SHORTCOMINGS IN EGYPT'S SCHOOLS

The Egyptian general public sees education as the most important right to guarantee for women. When asked to select the two most important rights for women from a list of eight rights⁴, the leading response is women's education.

Why Education is Important for Women

Egyptians offer four main reasons why education is important for women:

- **Path to economic advancement for all.** Egyptians place a high premium on educational rights for all, seeing it as a key to economic advancement for women and men alike.
- **Educated mothers raise educated children.** This view, held largely by most men but also quite a few women, is based on a view of mothers as the main figure responsible for raising and educating children. If a mother is literate, she can help her children with their homework.
- **Key to obtaining all other rights for women.** Some women see education as the key to obtaining all other rights—economic, legal, political, and social. As one illiterate woman in Cairo says, “If we get educated, we can get all of those other rights.”
- **Educated women have better marriage prospects.** A number of women say that educated women are more marriageable.

Perceptions of Decay in Egypt's Education System

Even though a majority agrees that it is as important to educate women, most worry that Egypt's educational system does not have the capacity to provide anyone, men or women, with an adequate education. While many Egyptians give positive marks to recent efforts to expand literacy in programs targeted at adults, the overwhelming view about Egypt's public school system is strongly negative.

The Egyptian public's complaints about their country's education system can be divided into two main concerns—low quality and too much corruption.

⁴ The eight rights included in the list were property, education, employment, legal rights in court, political participation and voting, protection against violence, and the right to serve as leaders in government.

First, people worry about the quality of education that children receive, with several issuing strong criticisms about teachers' poor abilities and a style of teaching that stresses rote memorization, which leads to students quickly forgetting most of what they had learned:

Our education system is outdated. A foreigner established it twenty-five years ago and we are still using it to this day. Nobody else is following this system anywhere else in the world. (Urban man, 20-29, college graduate, Cairo)

The teaching methodology is rote learning for the purpose of sitting for exams. This is why we end up forgetting what we studied. Abroad, they have the open-book system of exams. Education is not about rote learning but about understanding what you have studied. (Newly urban man, 30-44, literate, Alexandria)

In the village they are not paying a lot of attention to education. The teacher leaves the classroom and goes out to smoke cigarettes, and he would choose one of the kids who can read or write [to teach the class]. Yes, I know children in grade 12 who do not know how to read and write. (Rural Christian man, ages 30-44, illiterate, Asyut region)

Even at the college and university level, no one is creative with education—they just have the students memorize. The students focus on passing and not getting an education. (Newly urban woman, 20-29, literate, Alexandria)

Second, Egyptians complain about public school teachers who demand that parents pay for extra private lessons so their children can obtain better marks on standard exams. Egyptians view paying for private lessons as a form of corruption and bribery, and the cost of private lessons is an economic burden. One illiterate woman in Cairo defines human rights as “the right to not be used by our children’s teachers, who ask for money for private lessons.”

Teachers don't put in much effort in the classroom because they want you to rely on paying them for private lessons. (Newly urban man, 30-44, literate, Alexandria)

[Teachers] scare children if they don't take private lessons, and so the child grows up to feel that he only succeeds at his studies because he attended private lessons. (Rural woman, 20-29, illiterate, Tanta region)

Private lessons have been around for such a long time, and teachers are not sensitive and do not care. The lessons make me suffer because at that time they ask for payment, I usually don't have money. Are they expecting me to steal? Is this a way to educate? It is becoming a profitable business to educate students. (Rural man, ages 45-65, illiterate, Tanta region)

Several people express strong expectations that Egypt will update its educational system; Egyptians see modernization in education as a prerequisite for developing the country. One young man in Cairo says, “I expect we will be able to eliminate illiteracy in ten years.”

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC RIGHTS: NOT EQUAL IN HARD TIMES

On balance, most Egyptians say that women have equal economic rights, but like political and educational rights, many wonder what these economic rights actually mean in a period of privatization, high unemployment, a stagnant economy, and inflation.

Lack of secure work is an overwhelming concern for most people. Those who work in government jobs complain about the relatively low pay, but note that job security is much better in the public sector than in the private sector.

Workers' rights are a big concern for some, and there are complaints about how private companies, particularly multinational corporations, treat their employees. A young man in Alexandria, a former employee of a multinational company with locations in Egypt, says he has to work twelve-hour days standing on his feet and that "they treat you like a slave. If you make any mistakes you are fired."

Egyptians generally support a woman's right to work, though many men and a handful of women say that a woman's primary role and responsibilities are at home, raising her children and taking care of the family. Most men and women say that men suffer discrimination in hiring because employers prefer women. Reasons cited for this tilt toward hiring women include perceptions that women are more diligent and obedient workers and that they are more willing to accept lower salaries with fewer benefits.

Men should receive preferential treatment in hiring, say several men, because society continues to expect men to be the main breadwinners. This attitude is particularly strong among younger men who say they have personally seen difficulty finding steady employment.

Women's Right to Work: Perceptions of Women Having More Job Opportunities

On the whole, most Egyptians say that women have more job opportunities than men. There are many reasons why several people claim this is so—women accept lower salaries and fewer benefits, and employers view women as more reliable and pliant workers. Egypt's current economic difficulties and societal expectations that men should serve as the primary breadwinners for families lead some men to say that men should receive preferential treatment in hiring. Men's troubles finding a job and a steady income also delay marriage for some couples:

I want to ask you all a question: if a woman stayed home, wouldn't the unemployment rate totally disappear? If I felt that unemployment would drop and there would be more jobs for men if the women stayed home, then they should stay home. (Urban man, 20-29, college graduate, Cairo)

All the young men are staying at home doing nothing. There are no jobs. If there were jobs, those men wouldn't have been staying home. This unemployment is caused by the increase of women in the workplace. You just go anywhere, any government office or company or anything, you'll find it's the women who are working there everywhere and not the men. This is a problem of course. Men are more than women in the society. Who should work: the man or the woman? The man. And women sit in these offices doing nothing all day. (Newly urban man, 20-29, literate, Cairo)

These days, the majority of women work, and men are incapable of finding a job. Go to any governmental institute and count the number of males and females and you will find that females outnumber males. And this is a huge reason why men cannot find jobs, and therefore she has to stay home and give men a better chance. (Rural man, 45-65, illiterate, Tanta region)

There are priorities in life. A man is the one that spends his salary on his house; the government should realize that when there are no more unemployed men they can start hiring females. All young men want to get married and work, instead of sitting in cafes or even going on drugs. (Urban man, ages 20-29, high school graduates, Alexandria)

But for some men, the idea of giving preferential treatment in hiring to men only seems to make sense in the abstract. When men can point to a concrete example from their own lives of well-educated and trained women who are qualified to work, they find it harder to accept the notion that women should just stay home. As one young man, a college graduate in Cairo, points out, “I have sisters who graduated from practical colleges, so they must work. If we say that women shouldn't work, then those who won't work are our own sisters! Some of them are in practical colleges and they have no other option but to work in their field—medicine, pharmacy, and engineering. Such girls cannot stay home. It is only normal for them to work.”

Women's Property Rights

General consensus exists that women have rights to own and operate their property independently—most say that Islam guarantees women's property and Islamic law is the source of legislation. Muslims and Christians alike accept women's property rights. However, some rural Egyptians, as well as some newly urban Egyptians who had moved to the city in the last five years, say that long-standing practices in villages sometimes place restrictions on women's rights to inherit and own property independently.

WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS: THE ENDURING IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

Egyptians overall say that women have equal legal rights, arguing that in most cases the laws as written treat men and women equally. Only a handful of people raise questions about certain laws and procedures that treat women differently, such as heavier penalties for women who commit adultery.

Echoing their disengagement from Egypt's formal politics, many Egyptians demonstrate a strong inclination to say away from Egypt's formal legal system, preferring to mediate disputes outside of the courts.

This inclination is particularly strong on matters related to disputes within the family. In cases of domestic violence, both women and men express a predilection for keeping the matter within the family, worry about dishonoring their families by bringing such disputes in the open. The imperative to maintain family honor and respect in the community's eyes is a strong force.

Over the last few years, Egyptian women have gained more legal rights in family matters, including the right to initiate divorces in 2000 in return for giving up some of the wife's financial rights. Overall, Egyptians express mild support for the measures that enhance women's rights in family law, with a few having reservations about changing family law, something seen as clearly defined by Islamic law. A few men see the changes as part of a campaign by the West to destroy the fabric of society.

Public Attitudes on Women's Testimony in Court

Most Egyptians do not dispute the legal requirement for having the testimony of two women equal one man's testimony. According to Egyptians' understanding, Islamic law is the source of this provision, and God's law cannot be questioned. As one rural woman living in a village near Tanta says, "It follows verses in the Quran, this cannot be changed or modified."

Christians, however, raise more questions about this stipulation. One younger Christian woman from Cairo says, "A man created this law to discriminate against women." But most Christians matter-of-factly accept the fact that Islamic law is the primary source of legislation and is applied to both Christians and Muslims in Egypt, and they offer no more comments or opinions on this issue.

Questions about Female Judges

Several people question whether women can serve as judges, with most men strongly opposing women serving as judges, and only a handful of women expressing support for the idea. The justification is similar to the one provided for opposition to women serving as prime minister.

One Cairo man's comments summarize much of the opposition to women serving as judges: "There is a week every month when the woman is unstable; this is because she is physically different from the man. During this week, she cannot make the right decisions, and so she is not qualified to be a judge." Others say that it does not make sense that a woman would serve as a judge since a woman is not allowed to testify in court by herself and needs a second woman to corroborate her testimony in order for it to equal one man's testimony.

The exception to this general finding comes from Christians—on the whole, Christians interviewed are more open to the notion of women serving as judges than Muslims.

Not Inclined to Access Egypt's Formal Legal System

Egyptians express hesitations about taking their personal disputes and concerns to the courts. In addition, a number of people say that the courts are inefficient and slow to issue judgments. One illiterate woman in Cairo says, "My husband is my cousin, so if we fight, and I take him to court, it will be ages before I can get my rights from him. So what can I do? Make my brother or father beat him? And then what? They would go to prison for such a thing. It is better just to be patient and let things go."

A second leading reason given for avoiding the court system is a sense that disputes are better resolved by other means. This is particularly true in instances involving differences and problems within families, including domestic violence.

Some women seem unaware of legal protections offered to them by Egypt's laws. When asked if there is a law that protects women from violent acts by her husband, younger Christian women in Cairo all agree that no such law exists. One woman explains, "You can go and file a complaint with the police, but a woman cannot do so because it is culturally unsuitable."

Attitudes on Domestic Violence

Though this research does not focus on the issue of violence against women, the issue emerges nevertheless as a leading concern in the broader discussion on women's rights. Several Egyptians choose protection from violence against women as one leading concern for women, operating with a broad definition of violence that ranges from verbal harassment in the streets to sexual harassment in the workplace to beating in the home. Some Egyptians—even women—rationalize violence against women, citing the frustrations of daily life and economic pressures:

Yes, in some circumstances the man is forced to beat his wife. Sometimes she's done something wrong and in spite of that she leaves her house to her parents' house. (Rural woman, 20-29, high school graduate, Asyut region)

Some women deserve to be beaten up. Some cases that might lead to beating her up are that I might come back from work and find that my wife is at my neighbors and she left the house without food. (Rural man, 45-65, illiterate, Tanta region)

Sometimes you are upset or you disagree with your wife and during the discussion, you slap her on the face or something like that. Then I go out for an hour or so and calm down. I come back home and try to fix the situation. If there's love and commitment between the couple, she will tolerate these things and she'll understand your reaction. (Urban man, 20-29, college graduate, Cairo)

I want to say something, and please don't be upset at me for saying this: there's a crooked rib in every woman that needs fixing. Therefore, sometimes if the husband lets her do whatever she wants, she will exceed her limits. So the true husband should let the woman realize her limits and stop her if she crosses them. (Rural woman, 20-29, high school graduate, Asyut region)

In instances when domestic violence occurs, the first recommendation many women have is for the woman to wait for her husband to calm down. To avoid violence, one woman in Cairo says that if the husband comes back from work upset and stressed, the wife “should not provoke him or upset him. She should try to calm him down and make him feel better.” If domestic violence becomes intolerable and beatings frequent, most agree that the next best step for the woman is to take the matter to her father or an elderly person in the family. Egyptians see legal recourse, including taking such matters to the police and courts, as a last resort, if it is mentioned at all.

Keeping Matters in the Family Circle

The home remains a central part of Egyptian women's lives, and much of the scope for women's rights takes place and is defined within the confines of the home. For many women, particularly those with lower educational attainment and from lower economic classes, visiting families, particularly at weddings, funerals, or during holidays, represent the few times when they actually go outside of the house. When asked whom they trust and where they go to get information, women usually point to family members.

Pivotal choices in individuals' lives, including marriage decisions and decisions on how many children to have and how to raise the children, are part of a negotiation within the family in which women seem to have a strong voice. Though the different roles of men and women in the family have shifted as changes in education and the economy have brought more women into the workforce, the model that women are primarily responsible for the household's day-to-day management while men should be the primary breadwinners endures for many Egyptian families.

Family values and identity remain a strong force in Egypt, and much of what occurs in the family zone remains untouched by Egypt's laws and formal legal mechanisms. According to some Egyptians, the laws on the books and the government institutions charged with enforcing these laws are impotent in the face of the family's power:

If the husband is religious and God-fearing, then he would want to give his wife her rights without her having to go to court, and if he isn't [God-fearing], then no number of lawyers or courts can make him do that. (Newly urban woman, 20-29, literate, Alexandria)

If it is a small problem they should solve it themselves, and if it is a big problem then they should do what the Quran says, and that is that they should turn to the wise members of both the couple's families. After that, if things get really bad, then it should take an official turn like court or divorce.
(Newly urban man, 30-44, literate, Alexandria)

A number of women offer hints of an in-law abuse problem. Because of housing shortages and economic difficulties, many married couples are forced to live with the husband's parents. Some women say that they or women they know suffer from maltreatment, ranging from verbal abuse to physical beating, by their in-laws.

Several Egyptians say more has to be done within the family to enhance respect for women. As one college-educated man in Cairo says, "The way I see it, women are already granted all of their rights. However, I see that sometimes inside her family, she does not feel important or worthy. Her family members have to give her this respect."

An illiterate woman in Cairo agrees with the idea that women need more respect within the family, saying, "Even if the woman is working, when she's in her house and her husband just yells at her, she's reduced to nothing. She does not mean a thing then. She's needed in her work. She can be a minister or an ambassador or anything, and she can manage the male employees at work, but when she's home, sometimes a moment's anger from her husband blows all of this away."

Views on Polygamy

Polygamy is permitted by Islamic and Egyptian law, but most Egyptians see it as impractical given the economic troubles many Egyptians face today. Several women laughed at the thought of their husbands taking a second wife. Christians in Egypt do not practice polygamy—as one woman in the Asyut region says, "This is considered adultery in the Bible." Nearly all Muslims are in agreement—a man marrying more than one woman is impractical in this day and age, and the only instance when it might make sense is if the first wife is sick or unable to bear children.

Attitudes on Divorce Laws and Khul'

On nearly all issues covered by the research, no substantial difference of opinion seems to exist between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Yet divorce is one issue that divides Christians and Muslims—this is a function of differences in religious beliefs. Christians say that divorce is either completely prohibited by their religion or is extremely rare because it is strongly discouraged by their families. Muslims, on the other hand, say that their religion provides for divorces.

In the past few years, Egypt has taken steps to revise its laws in order to give women more power to initiate legal proceedings against their husbands. One of the most important changes came in January 2000, when the People's Assembly passed a law granting women the right to divorce without having to receive her husband's consent. In this type of divorce, called khul', the woman returns her dower and relinquishes her rights to alimony.

Egyptians' views are sharply mixed about the khul' law, and they express uncertainty about the consequences of new provisions. On balance, women are somewhat more supportive than men, though a number of poorer women worry about having to give up their financial rights and pay back

the dower. Some women, particularly rural women, do not understand the difference between a khul' divorce and a regular divorce.

Men are generally upset about the changes to the divorce law, which many see as yet another step to give women power at their expense. A few men see possible financial advantage where women see disadvantage when it comes to khul' divorce; as one young man from Cairo says, "If I am really fed up with my wife, I can turn her life into a living hell, and then she asks for a khul' divorce. So this way, I divorce her without paying her any money."

But on the whole, men in Egypt tend to have a negative opinion of the khul' divorce, with some expressing vociferous opposition. One young man in Alexandria calls the law that introduces the khul' divorce "a false law which God does not accept," and a man from Al-Fayoum region south of Cairo says that the khul' divorce "destroys the family." Even though Christians are not directly impacted by the law, several see it as yet another symbolic step against men.

Previously, men had more and better rights than women in everything. But now things are different—for example, this khul' law. Before there was love between the couple, and love made him obey her. But now he's forced to obey her whether he loves her or not. (Newly urban man, 20-29, literate, Cairo)

The woman now is a man and the man is a woman. This is true. It is not by our choice—it is the government's doing. If it were in our hands, women would not have gone anywhere. We were asked to give equality to women, and the worst thing of all is this new law, the khul'—did you hear about the khul'? (Urban Christian man, 30-44, college graduate, Cairo)

This law has given women more control over men. He cannot tell her to do this or that now. (Newly urban man, ages 20-29, literate, Cairo)

Signs of Discontent among Women with "Obedience House" Procedures

One concern that emerges among a handful of Egyptian women is the ability of men who are in disputes with their wives to sue their wives for obedience (ta'a) and confine them in basic housing with only the bare minimum of support. One younger woman in Alexandria says, "It is really humiliating when the man asks to send his wife to an obedience house." A man in Al-Fayoum sees khul' divorce as running against the grain of men's power and working in the opposite direction of placing women in obedience houses.

General Acceptance of New Nationality Law

In the summer of 2004, shortly after this research was conducted, the People's Assembly passed legislation to amend the nationality law to give nationality rights to the children of Egyptian women who are married to non-Egyptians. The research indicates broad public support for this measure in urban areas, though most rural Egyptians, as well as a number of illiterate Egyptians, had not heard about the proposed changes.

EGYPT'S DEBATE ON FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

Despite the sensitive nature of al-khitan⁵, Egyptians speak openly about the issue, offering many opinions in a complex debate on this long-standing practice. In addition, Egyptians offer opinions on a current public awareness television advertisement campaign sponsored by the government and women's rights groups to discourage the practice of al-khitan.

Views on Al-Khitan: Arguments in Favor and Against

There is general disagreement and confusion among Muslims about whether or not Islam mandates the practice. Some Muslims offer general citations of various Sunna (the way the Prophet Muhammad lived his life, an important source of Islamic jurisprudence) or hadith (a narration about what the Prophet Muhammad verbally approved in his life, another important source in Islamic theology) as justification for the practice, but other Muslims disagree that Islam stipulates al-khitan. The practice is not confined to Muslims—several Christian women indicate that they had been circumcised and plan to do the same to their daughters.

In addition to religious justifications, those who argue in favor of al-khitan base their arguments in long standing social practices (“we have done this from the Pharonic times”) and the need to control the sexuality of women. One strong argument in favor of practicing al-khitan is simply that society expects it. One illiterate middle aged woman in Cairo recounted a story from her neighborhood about a man who would not sleep with his wife on their wedding night when he discovered that she was not circumcised. The man sent the woman back to her parents the morning after the wedding and told his mother-in-law that he would not touch her unless she was circumcised.

“Social proof,” or the principle that people determine whether certain behavior or practices are acceptable by finding out what other people think is correct, is a strong force in any society. One Christian woman from a rural village in Upper Egypt near Asyut says that she decided not to circumcise her daughter and she heard a lot of criticism about this decision in the streets. Some other arguments in favor of continuing to practice al-khitan include:

They say that the woman becomes a loose woman if she is not circumcised. (Rural Christian woman, 35-65, literate, Asyut region)

It is wrong to leave the girl without circumcision because this makes her lustful. (Newly urban man, 20-29, literate, Cairo)

⁵ Al-khitan is usually translated as female circumcision, clitoridectomy, or female genital mutilation.

Girls must be circumcised because if she isn't, she will become a lesbian. She will always want this [sex] all the time. So we say trim but don't cut it all because if you cut it all, this will cause her problems with her husband after marriage and she will become sexually frigid. So if you only trim, whenever her husband wants her, he can take her. (Newly urban woman, 30-44, literate, Cairo)

Al-khitan is a good thing for women. We grew up knowing that this is what our parents did to us, and so we did the same thing to our daughters. (Rural woman, 20-29, illiterate, Tanta region)

Al-khitan should be done to the girl—it is a custom we have had passed down to us from our great-grandfathers. (Rural Christian man, 30-44, illiterate, Asyut region)

We are not sure whether it is right or wrong, but we perform it because it exists in our culture. (Rural woman, 20-29, illiterate, Tanta region)

I'll tell you something. When you hear stories like the one we told you about that girl who wasn't circumcised and her husband didn't want her, when we hear such stories, we fear for our girls. They also say that when the woman is not circumcised, she is always sexually aroused. Men retain these beliefs and cling to them. The doctors can say whatever they want to say; we have been circumcising our girls for ages now—what happened to them? Nothing! They are perfect. (Urban woman, 30-44, illiterate, Cairo)

These arguments in favor of al-khitan are only part of the story. Some others express strong objections to the practice, saying that it harms women's health and eventually leads to marital problems.

It humiliates and insults the woman. It weakens the sexual drive of the woman and leaves her suffering from psychological problems. In our times, when they circumcised us, there were no doctors, no anesthesia, or anything. They just took us to a midwife and they cut us while we were conscious—we felt everything. (Urban woman, 30-44, illiterate, Cairo)

[Having al-khitan done] gave me a feeling that there is something wrong and missing from me as a woman. And yes, it did affect my relationship with my husband—it made me feel uncomfortable in dealing with my husband. (Urban Christian woman, 20-29, high school graduate, Cairo)

The men suffer from it later on in life. (Urban Christian man, 30-44, college-educated, Cairo)

Reactions to the Anti-Al-Khitan Public Awareness Campaign on Television

At the time of this research, a public awareness campaign aimed at discouraging al-khitan through television commercials was underway. A majority of Egyptians in the focus groups says they have seen the public awareness advertisements, which appear to have an effect by stirring up debate. One woman living in a rural village near Asyut says that she and her husband have been arguing about the issue because of the advertisements. "I say we should follow the television and what they say

about al-khitan and what the mufti says regarding this—we shouldn't do this to our daughter. But my husband says we must circumcise the girl.” Another woman from the rural areas surrounding Asyut says that she circumcised her older daughter and wants to do the same to her younger daughter, but the younger daughter saw the advertisement and tells her mother, “Do you want to slaughter me, mom, like they say in the advertisement?”

Like opinions on al-khitan itself, reactions to the televised campaign are wide-ranging. On the positive side, it is creating greater awareness, “trying to convey a message that would save girls from this hell,” says one Christian woman living in a rural village in Upper Egypt. An illiterate woman in Cairo says that she circumcised her first two daughters when they were young, but when she saw the advertisements against al-khitan, she decided not to circumcise her other two daughters.

Nevertheless, there are signs that perhaps the current public awareness campaign is either not achieving its intended effect or that it is too early to determine whether the approach will work. Some argue that the genesis for the campaign lies in the West, and others just say that the approach is not convincing enough to override centuries of long-standing practice and their understanding of religious doctrine. Still others say that the public awareness campaign's approach is vacuous, just telling people to say no to al-khitan without telling them why:

I think this issue has been forced on us by the West, because women here are more conservative than women in other countries, and this is not pleasing them. (Urban man, ages 20-29, high school graduate, Alexandria)

*It is coming from the West. Last week, I was attending the *khutba* [Friday sermon] in the mosque, and the man who was giving the *khutba*. First, he said that the Americans started to implement the anti-al-khitan campaign now because they discovered that al-khitan stops the formation of the cells that cause AIDS and other cancerous diseases in the reproductive system... (Urban man, 20-29, college, Cairo)*

The advertisements just say it is prohibited and they didn't explain why. They should explain more. (Urban woman, ages 30-44, illiterate, Cairo)

...but excuse me, it tells you that [we should not circumcise girls] but that doesn't mean that the commercial is correct! The right thing is to circumcise girls. (Newly urban woman, 30-44, literate, Cairo)

These advertisements [against al-khitan] are not convincing at all and they will not affect anyone at all. (Rural man, 20-29, high school, Al-Fayoum region)

MEDIA REVOLUTION CREATES NEW POTENTIAL FOR CHANGING VIEWS

Like the rest of the Arab world, Egypt is undergoing a complex revolution in media and information technology. This transformation is making people better informed by providing them with a greater diversity of information sources. Television, particularly new satellite television channels, is at the center of this media revolution.

The increase in television programming options has created new openings for advancing women's rights by expanding knowledge and information available to women in particular on general news, politics, and local affairs.

Egyptians, particularly women who spend more time at home, generally give high marks to education programs and recent televised public awareness campaigns that have addressed health and social issues, such as pre-marital medical check-ups, contraception, family planning, children's vaccinations, and the negative impacts of al-khitan on women. One woman from a rural village near Asyut praises the Arabic language *Sesame Street* children's program now on Egyptian television for helping educate her children.

Television's effect appears especially strong on a number of the housewives, both in the cities and rural areas. One woman in Cairo says, "We all have television in our homes. We are watching it all day and get to know about everything from it." Another illiterate woman in urban Cairo says that television has created more awareness and that even though she is illiterate, she "can still watch television, see good things, and try to imitate them."

Radio remains an important source of information and news for some, especially in rural areas. People in Upper Egyptian villages near Asyut mention *Sout al-Qahira* ("The Voice of Cairo") radio station, as an important source. But new television programs, in part driven by the emergence of pan-Arab satellite television channels, seem to be a leading force in shaking up Egypt's media, introducing more competition and obliging Egyptian programs to innovate.

The pan-Arab satellite news channel Al-Jazeera is tremendously popular, especially among younger men. But the reason for the popularity seems to have as much to do with how the channel covers issues inside of Egypt as how it covers regional issues such as the conflict in Palestine and events in post-Saddam Iraq.

One college-educated man in Cairo says, "If you have satellite channels, you can know more about your own country than what you learn from local channels." A young man in Alexandria agrees with this notion, saying "Al-Jazeera had coverage on the horrible things that take place in police stations in Egypt."

For some, Al-Jazeera represents the openness and debate that typifies democracy. When people respond to an open-ended question on how they define democracy, one college-educated man in Cairo says “Ar-Rai wal Ar-Rai Al-Akhar” (“The Opinion and the Counter Opinion”), a slogan used on Al-Jazeera to promote its programming.

No one mentions the U.S.-sponsored media outlets, including Al-Hurra television, Radio Sawa, and *Hi* magazine.

Al-Jazeera’s programming is only a small part of the story in the media revolution that Egyptians are experiencing. Increased media competition, in part spurred by satellite television channels like Al-Jazeera, is leading to a greater variety of programming on other satellite television channels and domestic channels in Egypt.

When asked about main sources of information and entertainment, Egyptians mention a variety of programs that they find appealing, which can be grouped into three main types.

First, several women and men mention programs that address problems in Egyptian society, including *Dunya al-Marra* (“Women’s Universe”), a program addressing women’s concerns; *Bayn el-Nas* (“Between the People”), a weekly program which includes reenactments of real-life social dilemmas sent in by viewers and solutions offered by specialists as well as people on the street; and *Khalf El-Aswar*, a weekly program that presents infamous crime stories and seeks to impart the lesson that crime never pays.

A second group of television programming that Egyptians, men in particular, mention is Islamic religious programming, including *Iqra’* (“Recite”), a channel on the ART network that covers the application of Islamic principles to contemporary issues and addresses a variety of age groups. Other religious television programs that Egyptians cite include *Fatawa wa Ahkam*, a telephone call-in television show that gives viewers the chance to ask a religious sheikh or scholar questions about religion.

Finally, numerous people cite new entertainment shows, especially talent audition shows involving young people competing to become the next Arab pop singer, shows like *Star Maker* and *Star Academy*. These programs seem especially popular among younger women—one younger woman from a village outside of Asyut explains the appeal of these shows by saying, “It makes me feel psychologically comfortable, because I cannot do those things. I like to watch other people doing things or saying things I want to say. Sometimes I wish I was one of those girls singing in those programs, and I imagine myself in their place.”

Access to more types of programs through satellite television is not without controversy. Egyptians from nearly every demographic group covered in this research raise concerns that certain forms of entertainment now appearing on their television screens reflect and contribute to the moral decline and loss of values that Egypt is experiencing. One young woman in Alexandria says that “there are some satellite channels that show things that contradict our principles,” and an older man from a rural village near Tanta calls them “rude channels which are embarrassing when our wives are watching.”

Egyptians, like people in several other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, are experiencing a complex media revolution, a transformation that is tugging the people in different

directions. A larger share of the general public is gaining access to a wider variety of programs, and the ultimate impact of this development is unknown.

Some common threads run through this increasingly competitive media environment. First, the general public welcomes and is partial to social and educational programs on matters directly relevant to their lives. The appeal of these programs demonstrates a potential for additional programming that address women's rights and concerns.

Second, Egyptians indicate that two attractive features of the new media options are that they are interactive and participatory, a quality lacking in Egypt's politics. Participation is crucial: television and radio shows that give room for the audience to call-in, ask questions, voice their concerns, and vote for their favorite singer are popular, whether the program is about entertainment, politics, or religion.

Third, women in today's media are depicted in a wider variety of contexts than in the recent past—not only as journalists and entertainers, but also politicians and professionals. This provides role models to younger female viewers and is creating new—sometimes positive, sometimes negative—impressions about what contributions women can make to society.

SKEPTICISM ABOUT DONOR ASSISTANCE AND THE UNITED STATES

On balance, Egyptians are suspicious of donor countries' motives, and only a handful of people say that Egypt can benefit in the long run from this assistance. Others fear that Egypt has become dependent on donations from the outside, which weakens the country's global position and makes it more difficult to assert independent views on international policies.

Overall, Egyptians with higher educational attainment appear to be more skeptical and mistrustful of accepting external assistance.

Why would they come to our country? They have their own motives. All that they want from coming to our country is to make profits. They are not interested in developing us. (Urban man, 20-29, college graduate, Cairo)

We should be able to solve our problems by ourselves, solving problems comes from within. (Rural man, 45-65, illiterate, Tanta region)

Nobody can really help us except ourselves because nobody cares as much as we do. (Newly urban woman, 20-29, literate, Alexandria)

Of course it's not a pleasant thing at all. Imagine if one day these countries just stopped giving us such donations, what will we do then? Why can't we be self-sufficient? (Rural woman, ages 20-29, high school graduate, Asyut region)

They try to buy us with every possible way, and they force you to do things that make you under their mercy. (Urban man, 20-29, high school graduate, Alexandria)

Negative perceptions about the United States resulting from its policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine add a special challenge for American donors and organizations.

These people [The United States] make up any excuse in order to invade and occupy any country. God protect Egypt. (Newly urban woman, 30-44, literate, Cairo)

This is not good because if today the United States got upset with Egypt, it will simply stop these donations. Or it will pressure Egypt and force it to make certain political decisions that Egypt didn't want to make in the first place, and then Egypt won't be able to refuse because of these donations. (Rural woman, 20-29, high school graduate, Asyut region)

If I am a country, I would not just give away money for another country unless there was something in it for me. They need our soldiers to fight for them. It is in their favor of course. When the United States was invading Iraq, we could not say anything because we took their donor funds.
(Urban woman, 20-29, college graduate, Alexandria)

Not all of the reactions and comments about donor assistance generally and the United States in particular are negative. One young Christian woman in Cairo says that Egyptians had some negative feelings towards the United States after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but “this doesn’t cancel the fact that the United States helps us and without those grants it would be difficult for us to live.” However, comments such as these are few and far between, indicating an additional challenge for external organizations that aim to help Egyptian women enhance their rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to help Egyptian civic groups, the Egyptian government, and donors in efforts to expand women's rights based on the views obtained in this research include:

1. Invest in efforts to increase knowledge and awareness among the Egyptian general public. Lack of public knowledge and awareness about basic rights, institutions, and practices is a major impediment to advancing rights for Egyptian women, as well as men. Specific recommendations include:

- **Continue to target women in literacy programs.** The Egyptian public has a strong appetite for education and literacy programs, and expanding literacy classes is a vital first step in efforts to empower women.
- **Increase adult civic and legal awareness programs.** The research uncovers significant gaps in the Egyptian public's knowledge of their country's laws, particularly on issues directly affecting women, such as family law. In addition, there are broad sectors of the Egyptian public that lack knowledge of basic procedures such as voter registration or understanding of the role of government institutions. Legal advances will not lead to broad societal change unless citizens know and understand how laws and procedures affect their lives.
- **Examine ways to use new media programming to increase public knowledge.** The research finds that television and radio programs that address social issues are appealing to Egyptians. Interactive and participatory programs, like call-in programs and debates, are particularly popular and may be used to stimulate discussion of important issues.
- **Test public awareness campaigns in advance before airing them.** When implementing public awareness campaigns, organizations should test these approaches in opinion research in advance, in order to understand the target audience's hesitations and arguments for and against the core messages.
- **Frame campaigns and training on women's rights to fit more closely with Egypt's social context.** When developing programs aimed at providing women with support such as legal services, groups should keep in mind the strong inclination among Egyptians to address and resolve issues within the confines of the family rather than in Egypt's formal political and legal structures. Programs that seek to bridge the gap between Egypt's formal legal and political systems and Egypt's informal societal structures will likely have more impact. In addition, since men's attitudes have an impact on how society treats women, programs aimed at expanding women's rights should seek to involve men and raise awareness about the changing role of women.

2. Reform government institutions and procedures to make them more responsive to the Egyptian people's demands. Specific recommendations include:

- **Implement comprehensive political reforms that will allow a broader spectrum of political voices to freely debate public issues.** The Egyptian public sees their political rights as hollow. They view their current leadership and representatives as largely unresponsive to their needs, and they believe that their choices in elections are narrow and severely restricted. As a result, Egyptians have largely disengaged from formal politics. Bold and comprehensive political reforms that allow new political forces to emerge and enter into freer public debates have the potential for igniting citizen engagement in formal politics. The Egyptian public still holds out some hope that changes could make their political participation more meaningful. But without substantial changes that offer citizens more political choices and reduce the ruling party's dominance of political choices, it is unlikely that the Egyptian public will become more engaged in formal politics.
- **Encourage members of the People's Assembly and local government leaders to develop more active constituency outreach efforts.** The gap between the people and their representatives is wide. Assistance programs should seek to assist local and national representatives in looking beyond elections and developing regular forums for feedback with citizens.
- **Introduce reforms that enhance the quality of education and eliminate the problem of private lessons in Egypt's schools.** The research finds widespread discontent with methods of teaching that emphasize rote memorization and public anger at teachers who demand that parents pay for private lessons.
- **Streamline voter registration procedures.** The research finds a dire need to address bureaucratic inefficiencies in Egypt's voter registration system. These problems seem to impact women more than men because of women's difficulties in obtaining identification cards.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report is based on sixteen focus groups conducted May 26-June 7, 2004 with a broad cross section of Egyptians.

Methodology

Defining the demographic specifications which are found at the end of this section on methodology began with examining available demographic data on Egypt. Freedom House attempted to mirror the country's overall demographics, which is possible only a very limited way given the small numbers of individuals involved in a modest qualitative research project such as this.

In order to enhance the comfort level of participants, each of the sixteen groups was recruited to be relatively homogeneous. In this manner, each participant is more likely to feel that everyone's opinion matters equally, that there is no need to defer to another person, which encourages frankness and participation. Homogeneity of each of the groups also helps us understand the diversity of opinion that may exist within certain demographic groups. The focus groups were separated by gender, age, class, and in some cases marital status. The rationale for the constitution of the groups includes:

- **Geographic location.** Operating with a finite number of focus groups, Freedom House set out to obtain a mix of views from urban and rural participants in four main areas of the country: the capital city of Cairo, the Nile Delta region, the Mediterranean coastal region, and Upper Egypt. In an attempt to understand a key segment of a population that is becoming increasingly urbanized, four of the sixteen focus groups were held with “newly urban” participants—individuals who came to live in Cairo or Alexandria in the last five years.
- **Gender.** Half of the groups consisted of women, and half were with men, reflecting the basic overall demographics of the adult population.
- **Age.** Like most countries in North Africa and the Middle East, Egypt has a relatively young population. Therefore, nine of the sixteen groups were conducted with participants aged 20 to 29, five were conducted with participants aged 30 to 44, and the remainder of the groups were with participants aged 45 to 65 (age specifications for one group with women in Upper Egypt had to be expanded to the 35 to 65 age frame to obtain a sufficient number of participants). This scheme is intentionally and slightly biased towards the younger generation when compared to available statistics, in order to get a sense of the emerging attitudes that may impact longer term trends in the country.
- **Educational attainment.** Participants were recruited in four main educational categories: illiterate, literate but did not receive a high school degree, high school graduates, and college

graduates. The tilt in this scheme was towards lower educational attainment; a majority of the groups were with participants who did not have a formal high school degree, and only three of the sixteen groups were with college graduates.

- **Marital status.** In the lowest age brackets used in this research, we also screened on marital status, on the assumption that the life experiences of men and women who are married in their late teens and twenties versus those who are unmarried in that same age bracket are different.
- **Christian and Muslim focus groups.** Four of the sixteen focus groups were organized with Christians, which disproportionately represents the size of the Christian community in Egypt. Though no reliable figures exist on the exact size of Egypt's Christian community, conventional estimates place the Christian population at ten percent of Egypt's overall population. The rationale for conducting four groups was simple: in order to investigate whether there were differences between rural versus urban Christians and men versus women, a minimum of four groups had to be organized. As noted in the report, on most issues, few substantial differences of opinion between Muslims and Christians on the full range of women's rights issue emerged, and those that did mostly centered on family law issues.

Freedom House's research partner organization in Egypt took the specifications and used its network of individuals to recruit individuals to participate in the focus groups on a probability basis, using a mix of random sampling and snowball sampling in cases when specifications were difficult to meet and local conditions prevented the research partner from easily identifying potential participants. Snowball sampling is a form of convenience sampling in which a key person in a community helps identify potential participants who meet the desired selection criteria. Once a set of potential participants were contacted, they were asked for additional recommendations for others who might fit the demographic specifications for a particular group.

Freedom House's research partner provided two trained and experienced focus group moderators for the sessions—a woman to lead sessions with women, and a man to lead focus groups with men. Freedom House's research consultant observed all of the sessions either behind a mirror or via closed circuit television and monitored with a simultaneous interpreter.

During the introduction to each session, the focus group moderators received permission from the focus group participants to record the sessions. Freedom House's research partner produced full transcripts of each session, which were used in combination with notes from observing the sessions to produce this analysis.

Limitations on the Research

Egypt continues to face many restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression, and this presented challenges in fully covering all of the topics intended for the research. First, Freedom House's Egyptian research partner was hesitant to delve deeply into issues it deemed sensitive and refused to ask certain questions such as attitudes on top political leaders or religious matters. When focus group participants complained about Egypt's ruling party, the focus group moderators generally did

not probe more deeply to gain a better understanding of how participants felt about this, as Freedom House would have preferred.

Second, in one instance, focus group participants' suspicion and the relative newness of discussing such issues in a group setting with strangers of similar demographic backgrounds caused the cancellation of one group with younger men in Upper Egypt. This group was cancelled twenty minutes into the session, and the research team recruited a second group of similar demographic characteristics from another part of Upper Egypt. On the whole, however, focus group participants seemed comfortable expressing frank opinions about their views on women's rights and the general situation in Egypt. That this research was conducted without many troubles or interference is a positive sign.

On Focus Groups

Focus groups are semi-structured group interviews that proceed according to a careful research design. Focus groups are useful in helping understand the language that people use when they discuss particular ideas or concepts. They are also useful in gaining a deeper appreciation for the motivations, feelings, and values behind participants' reactions. It is a flexible format that allows researchers to probe into issues important to the sponsors, while also permitting participants to raise other issues or concerns that might not have occurred to the researchers.

Because of the small numbers involved, however, focus group participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly and statistically representative of the larger population from which they are drawn, and findings ought not to be generalized beyond the small number of participants. They offer insight into emerging ideas and popular attitudes on key issues, but it would be unsound to extrapolate to firm conclusions about what "all" or "most" Egyptians believe based on such a small sample of individuals.

Focus Group Specifications

Group	Date	City/Area	Area Type	Gender	Ages	Education	Additional Specifications	Number of Participants
1	May 26, 2004	Cairo	Urban	Women	30-44	Illiterate		8
2	May 26, 2004	Cairo	Urban	Men	20-29	College graduate		8
3	May 27, 2004	Cairo	Urban	Women	30-44	Literate	Newly urban	8
4	May 27, 2004	Cairo	Urban	Men	20-29	Literate	Newly urban	8
5	May 30, 2004	Tanta	Rural	Women	20-29	Illiterate	Married	8
6	May 30, 2004	Tanta	Rural	Men	45-65	Illiterate		8
7	May 31, 2004	Alexandria	Urban	Women	20-29	Literate	Newly urban, Married	8
8	May 31, 2004	Alexandria	Urban	Men	30-44	Literate	Newly urban	8
9	June 1, 2004	Alexandria	Urban	Men	20-29	High school graduate	Married	8
10	June 1, 2004	Alexandria	Urban	Women	20-29	College graduate	Unmarried	8
11	June 2, 2004	Asyut region	Rural	Women	35-65	Literate	Coptic Christian	8
12	June 2, 2004	Asyut region	Rural	Men	30-44	Illiterate	Coptic Christian	8
13	June 3, 2004	Asyut region	Rural	Women	20-29	High school graduate	Married	8
14	June 6, 2004	Al-Fayoum region	Rural	Men	20-29	High school graduate	Unmarried	8
15	June 7, 2004	Cairo	Urban	Women	20-29	High School graduate	Coptic Christian	8
16	June 7, 2004	Cairo	Urban	Men	30-44	College graduate	Coptic Christian	8

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This round of focus groups in Egypt was the second in a series sponsored by Freedom House's Survey of Women's Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa, which aims to facilitate and support national and international efforts to empower women in the Middle East and North Africa region through a comparative evaluation of women's freedoms in 17 selected countries and territories. The *Survey of Women's Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa*, with a projected publication date of early 2005, will provide an overview of women's freedom throughout the Middle East and North Africa and identify critical issues relevant for policymakers, experts and activists.

Freedom House's Executive Director Jennifer Windsor; Sameena Ford, Senior Research Coordinator for the *Survey of Women's Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa*; and several other members of the Freedom House team including Arch Puddington, Mikaela McDermott, Christopher Walker, Jonathan Haddad, and Amy Phillips contributed to organizing the research and editing of the report.

Thomas O. Melia, Director of Research at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University; Diane Singerman, Associate Professor of Government at American University; Heba El-Shazli, Middle East Regional Program Director for the Solidarity Center; and Mona Yacoubian offered many thoughtful comments on the draft report.

Synovate Egypt, a market research company in Cairo, conducted the fieldwork for these focus groups. Synovate offered advice on the demographic composition and geographic location of the groups, recruited participants in a methodologically sound fashion, and moderated the focus group sessions. Special thanks go to Rehab Bassam, who served as the simultaneous interpreter behind the mirror at all of the focus groups.

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ABOUT FREEDOM HOUSE

Freedom House is a clear voice for democracy and freedom around the world. Founded in 1941 by Eleanor Roosevelt, Wendell Willkie, and other Americans concerned with the mounting threats to peace and democracy, Freedom House has been a vigorous proponent of democratic values and a steadfast opponent of dictatorships of the far left and the far right.

Non-partisan and broad-based, Freedom House is led by a Board of Trustees composed of leading Democrats, Republicans, and independents; business and labor leaders; former senior government officials; scholars; writers; and journalists. All are united in the view that American leadership in international affairs is essential to the cause of human rights and freedom.

Over the years, Freedom House has been at the center of the struggle for freedom. It was an outspoken advocate of the Marshall Plan and NATO in the 1940s, of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, of the Vietnam boat people in the 1970s, of Poland's Solidarity movement and the Filipino democratic opposition in the 1980s, and of the many democracies that have emerged around the world in the 1990s.

Freedom House has vigorously opposed dictatorships in Central America and Chile, apartheid in South Africa, the suppression of the Prague Spring, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, and the brutal violation of human rights in Cuba, Burma, China, and Iraq. It has championed the rights of democratic activists, religious believers, trade unionists, journalists, and proponents of free markets. In 1997, a consolidation took place whereby the international democratization training programs of the National Forum Foundation were incorporated into Freedom House.

Today, Freedom House is a leading advocate of the world's young democracies, which are coping with the debilitating legacy of statism, dictatorship, and political repression. It conducts an array of U.S. and overseas research, advocacy, education, and training initiatives that promote human rights, democracy, free market economics, the rule of law, independent media, and U.S. engagement in international affairs.

Freedom House's publications include: *Freedom in the World*, an annual global survey of political rights and civil liberties; *Freedom of the Press*, an annual survey of world press freedom; *Nations in Transit*, an annual survey of political conditions in Central Europe and Eurasia; and *Countries at a Crossroads*, a comparative evaluation of government performance on governance and respect for human rights and the rule of law in a set of 30 countries that are at a critical crossroads in determining their political future.