

Egypt

Sexuality Politics in Egypt



Karina Shalaby*

Hossam Bahgat
Wesal Afifi

Introduction

When Hind el-Hinnawy decided in 2004 to file a paternity lawsuit against Ahmed el-Fishawy, a famous 25-year-old actor who descends from a family of Egyptian movie stars, she knew she was striking a blow at one of Egypt's most solid pillars of patriarchy. The 28-year-old television stylist and costume designer sent shockwaves across Egyptian society when she publicly acknowledged that her newborn, Lina, was the fruit of an *'urfi* marriage between el-Fishawy and herself.

An *'urfi* (Arabic for “customary”) marriage is a contemporary practice with roots in Sunni Islam. Such marriages are usually clandestine and involve a man and a woman drafting their own marriage contract and opting not to register it with public authorities. While far from illegal *'urfi* marriages grant no rights to the wife except to file for divorce — if she is able to prove that there was a marriage in the first place.

*Photo from the free concert of Shakira in Cairo, on March 2007, which gathered thousands of young people at the Pyramids.

Egypt's mesmerized audiences were well aware of the existence and prevalence of *'urfi* marriages, especially among younger generations, but were accustomed to the negative portrayal of this type of relationship in soap operas, talk shows and newspaper articles aimed at discouraging youth from resorting to the practice. The el-Hinnawy paternity lawsuit was the first time that this audience saw a young woman boldly appearing on their television screens, together with her supportive parents, to admit to an *'urfi* marriage and to fight in order to prove her daughter's paternity; the usual course of action would be to have an abortion followed by a hymen replacement while doing everything possible to keep the story from becoming public.

El-Hinnawy told the press that she was “trying to say to other people, not only girls, to try to have the courage to be responsible for what you do... I did the right thing: I didn't hide, and eventually he will have to give the baby his name. People prefer that a woman live a psychologically troubled life; that doesn't matter as long as it doesn't become a scandal,” (MacFarquhar, 2005).

Beyond the particular details of the story, el-Hinnawy's stance brought to the spotlight as never before the issue of *'urfi* marriages and the thousands of similar on-going paternity lawsuits in Egypt. Ordinary Egyptians were suddenly confronted with statistics that pointed to some 14,000 to 21,000 cases before the Egyptian courts (Lutfi, 2005), with legal analysts estimating that between 70 and 90 percent of them were a direct consequence of *'urfi* marriages (Shahine, 1999).

For many intellectuals and women's and human rights activists, el-Hinnawy and her parents became heroes for their courage in challenging societal taboos. However, many of those who were supportive chose to overlook the fact that the el-Hinnawys, for understandable reasons, could only go so far. After all, the case remained one of an innocent married woman who was unable to prove her marriage — since she accused el-Fishawy of deceiving her out of her copy of the marriage contract — and who was fighting solely for her child's right to be a legitimate daughter of an identifiable father. And while many of el-Hinnawy's supporters would admit in private conversations that there may have never been a marriage, *'urfi* or otherwise, they all understood that el-Hinnawy would lose whatever little support she enjoyed

outside the circles of progressive elites if she challenged society and the law to recognize a daughter born out of wedlock.¹

Outside this small circle of sympathizers most commentators and ordinary Egyptians condemned both el-Hinnawy and el-Fishawy for creating this scandal, and went on to assign significantly more blame to el-Hinnawy; being the woman, they argued, she should have been more careful to preserve her honor and that of her family, or at the very least to shroud the entire affair in secrecy. On the other hand, the majority of progressive supporters of el-Hinnawy chose to campaign solely for a legal amendment that would force alleged fathers to submit to a DNA test in paternity suits,² ignoring the obvious fact that establishing lineage by a court order, a DNA test, or even the biological father's confession, would not solve the problem if the woman failed to prove there was a marriage, or in cases where there was no marriage in the first place.

The case of Hind el-Hinnawy is significant for understanding the larger picture of the status of public debates around sexuality, especially female sexuality, in Egypt. This paper details and analyzes the strategies of, and coordination among, conservative forces in their attacks on sexual rights³ in general and those of women in particular. These conservative actors dominate the limited space available for public debate around sexuality related policies. This semi-monopoly allows conservative forces more room to influence the formulation of the state's sexuality policies both domestically and in international fora. While some might argue that this is simply a reflection of the increasing power and popularity enjoyed by Muslim conservative forces in the political and social spheres in Egypt and throughout the Arab

¹ Egypt's Civil Status Law, Child Law and family courts apply a certain interpretation of shari'a (Islamic law) that does not recognize the paternity or any ensuing rights of "illegitimate" children. These children often carry the name of their maternal grandfathers, or any other fictitious name chosen by the mother or by public authorities.

² See for example the statement issued by a number of intellectuals and women's and human rights groups after the Family Court ruled against el-Hinnawy in January 2006 on the grounds that she failed to convince the court of the existence of a *'urfi* marriage with el-Fishawy, available at <http://www.hrinfo.net/egypt/nwf/2006/pr0129.shtml>.

³ We use the term "sexual rights" in accordance with the working definition developed by the World Health Organization, which includes the right of all persons to: sexual health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services; seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality; sexuality education; respect for bodily integrity; choose their partner; decide to be sexually active or not; consensual sexual relations; consensual marriage; decide whether or not, and when, to have children; and pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life. See: http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/gender/sexual_health.html.

world,⁴ the paper will show that most empirical evidence reveals that the daily life practices of many individuals in Egypt do not strictly conform to the agenda of these forces. At a minimum, this evidence reveals a significant constituency, mainly of young people, resorting to mechanisms of silent resistance and/or accommodation despite the predominantly conservative discourses and public policies. The long list of these mechanisms includes inventing new fashionable styles of veiling, engaging in premarital sexual encounters and/or unorthodox types of marriage, and having illegal abortions.

The last part of the paper will argue that this constituency is largely removed from discourses and public policymaking around sexuality. Empirical evidence also shows that perceptions, and not only discourses, are also lagging behind current practices. The absence of a progressive counter discourse on sexuality leaves this young population without the necessary tools to defend their individual choices and coping mechanisms. Instead, they are left alone to fight societal stigmas as well as their own feelings of shame and negativity towards their own practices. Confrontation of society's realities is therefore further postponed and moral hypocrisies sustained. The paper concludes that the current challenge for women's and human rights organizations is to mobilize and empower this constituency in order to enable those within it to defend their autonomy in the face of conservative attacks.

The attacks

Religious forces and institutions, and forces that use religious discourse to achieve their goals, are responsible for most of the attacks on sexual rights in Egypt.⁵ In a society where religion has always been a strong element and played a significant role in the daily life of Egyptians, the task of separating religion from everyday customs and socio-cultural beliefs is neither practically possible nor necessarily useful. This section shows how political Islamic groups, as well as official Islamic institutions, the two main forces working

⁴ In the 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood won a surprising 20 percent of the 454-seat People's Assembly, making it the largest opposition parliamentary block.

⁵ For more on the impacts of religious forces, see also in this publication: Girard, F. Negotiating sexual rights and sexual orientation at the UN; Cáceres, C., Cueto, M., Palomino, N. Sexual and reproductive rights policies in Peru: Unveiling false paradoxes, pp. 135-137; Nowicka, W., The struggle for abortion rights in Poland.

against sexual rights in Egypt, capitalize on the central role played by religion in society, and how they employ it in their wars on sexuality.⁶

The history of Islamist politics in Egypt over the past 25 years or so is a complex one that falls beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say there is an agreement among most observers that a key turning point occurred in the early 1970s when former president Anwar Al-Sadat released from jail many Islamist activists that his predecessor, Gamal Abdel-Nasser, had imprisoned in the 1960s. Sadat's aim was to manipulate these Islamists in such a way as to counter influential leftist and Nasserist opposition to his regime. The Islamists welcomed this move, but they had plans of their own. Working strategically to seize power, they have employed a two-track tactic. On the one hand, they oppose and challenge the regime in the political sphere (sometimes through contesting parliamentary, local and syndicates' elections, other times through acts of violence) with the declared aim of establishing an Islamic state. At the same time they work to "Islamize" society (through encouraging veiling among women, establishing religious schools, and generally preaching piety and a "return to Islam" in daily practices) to enlarge their constituency and prepare society for the upcoming political transformation.⁷

At the risk of simplification, these two tactics can be called "Islamization from above" and "Islamization from below," respectively. The first of these tactics suffered some setbacks for the Islamists in the 1980s and 1990s — for example, the dissolution of parliament in 1984 and 1987, where the banned Muslim Brotherhood had a significant presence, and the violent confrontation between the state and militant Islamic groups in the 1990s, which ended in a unilateral declaration of cessation of hostilities being announced by Islamist leaders from behind bars. But the second tactic has been more successful resulting in Islam occupying an enormous space in the public sphere of today's Egypt.⁸

⁶ Because this section focuses on the influence of religion on public policies and societal attitudes, the focus here is on the role of Islamic institutions. The sexual rights of Christian Egyptians (approximately 10% of the population) are equally under attack because of the ultraconservative stands of the Coptic Orthodox Church on sexuality related issues such as access to divorce, the right to remarry after divorce and homosexuality. However, the primary targets of these positions are Christian citizens and, as such, they do not directly influence public policies or discourses.

⁷ The term "Islamist" is used here to refer to the wide variety of actors who describe themselves as such, and to positions and tendencies that are perceived to be Islamic.

⁸ Among the large body of literature on Islamists and Islamist politics in Egypt, the following are some of the most insightful studies: Baker, R. (2003). *Islam without fear: Egypt and the new Islamists*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; Hirschkind, C. (2005). The ethics of listening: Cassette-sermon audition in contemporary Egypt. *American Ethnologist*, 28 (3), pp. 623-49; Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Gaffeny, P. D. (1991). "The changing voices of Islam: The emergence of professional preachers in contemporary Egypt," *Muslim World*, LXXXI (1): 2747; Starrett, G. (1998). *Putting Islam to work: Education, politics and religious transformation in Egypt*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Faced with the growth in popularity and strength of the Islamist movement, the governing regime decided to employ its control over the official religious institution, represented by the thousand-year-old mosque seminary of Al-Azhar, in order to counter the influence of the Islamists. The process of tying Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's highest authority, to the state, started under president Nasser with the 1961 promulgation of Law 103 on the reorganization of Al-Azhar. This process was accelerated in the decades following Nasser's death in 1970 until that venerable religious institution nearly became a branch of the Egyptian state, opening it to attack by political Islamists and their supporters for its lack of autonomy. At the same time, in an attempt to boost its Islamic credentials and to challenge the Islamists as sole spokesmen for Islam, the state was increasingly placing Al-Azhar at the heart of the policy-making process and granting it leverage over key policies on religious matters. All of this had a direct impact on women's rights and sexuality related issues.

It is important to note that Al-Azhar and the political Islamist opposition disagree on fundamental issues such as the Islamic nature of the state, the role of Islam in the legislative process, bank interests, and relations with Israel.⁹ It is quite remarkable, however, that when it comes to issues of morality, women and the family, the two are in total harmony most of the time. These otherwise competing religious camps also see eye-to-eye on the role of religion in the private sphere, the maintenance of the patriarchal family system, the censorship of books and films with content deemed contrary to morality or religion, and many other such issues, and strive to coordinate their efforts in order to serve what they consider to be the "common good." The state rarely opposes them because these efforts are not seen as constituting any threat to its authority.

It is true that since its establishment Al-Azhar has never been on the frontline of defending women's rights, and the first half of the twentieth-century saw staunch opposition by virtually all Azharite officials to the demands put forth by the then nascent feminist movement. When it came to sexuality, the religious institution has almost always opted for the more orthodox and restrictive interpretations of Islamic texts.¹⁰

⁹ On the significance of the difference between "official" and "fundamentalist," "jihadi", revivalist, or salafi Islam, see al-Sayyid, R. (2004). *al-Sira'a 'ala al-Islam: al-usuliyah wa-al-islam wa-al-siyasat al-dawliyah (The struggle for Islam: Fundamentalism, reform and international politics)*. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi.

¹⁰ This paper will not expand on the various positions of Islam and Islamic scholars on the different aspects of sexuality since that falls outside its scope. There are numerous references, in Arabic and English, on Islam and sexuality such as: Musallam, B. (1983). *Sex and society in Islam: Birth control before the nineteenth-century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press; Omran, R. A. (1992). *Family planning in the legacy of Islam*. London: Routledge; Mazrui, A. (1994). Islamic doctrine and the politics of induced fertility change: An African perspective." *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 20, Supplement. The new politics of population: Conflict and consensus in family planning, pp. 121-134.

Yet it was not until the mid-1990s that Al-Azhar was transformed from a minor player to a major one in the wars on sexuality, and since then it has firmly maintained this position. Al-Azhar was thrown into the midst of sexuality debates in 1994 when Cairo hosted the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), seen by sexual rights advocates as a milestone in the struggle for sexual and reproductive rights of women and men.¹¹ Although religious forces, including Al-Azhar, were caught unawares by this conference, Al-Azhar gradually began to challenge and undermine it. Al-Azhar called for a boycott by Muslim states and, together with other religious forces and conservative media, issued statements attacking the conference and its Programme of Action for contradicting what it considered Islamic values on women and the family (Abdel-Hadi, 1996. pp. 47-54).

These attacks probably played a role in pushing Egypt and other like-minded states to introduce reservations and explanations of positions in the Programme of Action, a policy document that is not legally binding on states. Abdel-Hadi argues that the Islamists nonetheless felt defeated when the document, with its groundbreaking language on sexuality, particularly on the right to have a “satisfying and safe sex life,” was adopted by consensus. This sense of defeat, Abdel-Hadi explains, led to the adoption by Al-Azhar and its allies of a new strategy in the months that separated the ICPD from the September 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

The new strategy involved increased engagement in analyzing the draft documents of the Beijing conference — identifying contentious issues and producing lobbying materials that responded to them from a conservative “Islamic” point of view — and actively participating in the preparatory meetings and proceedings of the conference itself. Rather than calling for a boycott and issuing general condemnatory statements against the conference, the Islamic Research Council, Al-Azhar’s governing body chaired by the Grand Imam, issued a detailed statement one month before the conference was held. This statement analyzed the “dangers” contained in the draft document and called on “Islamic countries, and all the peoples seeking a pure and virtuous life... [to] stand up to the destruction and devastation that those who drafted the [Beijing] Platform for Action are aiming for,” (quoted in Abdel-Hadi, 1996).

¹¹ See also in this publication: Girard, F. Negotiating sexual rights and sexual orientation at the UN, pp. 320, 323, 328-329, 333-334; Ramasubhan, R. (2005). Culture, politics and discourses on sexuality: a history of resistance to the anti-sodomy law in India, pp. 104-107; Le Minh, G., & Nguyen, T. M. H. From family planning to HIV/AIDS in Vietnam: Shifting priorities, remaining gaps, pp. 287-288.

Another significant development that followed the ICPD was the decision by Islamic actors to form the first specialized non-governmental organization for Islamist women to counter the influence of progressive feminist and pro-women NGOs at the international level. The International Islamic Committee for Women and Children (IICWC) was established in 1994 as an affiliate body — a coalition of 85 Islamic organizations around the world — chaired by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. In fact the IICWC's website admits: "The idea to establish an international Islamic committee for women, to act as an international council for Muslim women, emerged during the preparations for the 1994 [sic] Beijing conference." As illustrated below, in the years following its establishment, the Committee has become the Islamists' most powerful tool in the struggle over gender issues and sexual and reproductive rights.

Emerging from these two years of intense fighting over women and sexuality, Al-Azhar's interest in these issues was revealed like never before. It became the norm in Azharite discourse and literature — whether by its leadership or any of its thousands of scholars and imams — to speak of an "international war" on the family led by the UN, and to refer to the Cairo and Beijing conferences as landmarks in this war. Furthermore, these two conferences were considered to be aberrations that merited the mobilization of all Muslims to ensure they were not repeated.

While Al-Azhar largely left the battles at the UN to the new IICWC, it continued its domestic efforts to increase its influence on the Egyptian government's policies regarding morality and family issues. In this context, 1994 was another significant year in Al-Azhar's long journey of striving for greater influence. In February the State's Council, in response to an inquiry by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, handed down a legal opinion that gave Al-Azhar the power to issue binding recommendations to the Ministry of Culture and other relevant public authorities regarding the approval or confiscation of books and other artistic products with content it deemed contrary to Islam.¹² Although several ensuing court rulings have attempted to limit the scope of this broad mandate, it was considered a major victory for the religious institution in its attempt to monopolize public policy on morality-related issues.

¹² For a recent legal analysis of this mandate extension see: The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights June 2004 report. In defense of freedom of thought and artistic expressions. Retrieved February 2006, from <http://www.eohr.org/ar/report/2004/re1021-1.htm>.

An executive decision issued by President Mubarak in 1996 to appoint Mohamed Sayed Tantawi as the forty-third Grand Imam of Al-Azhar heralded a more intimate relationship between the regime and the religious institution. Prior to this appointment Tantawi had spent 10 years as the state's Mufti (advisor on religious matters)¹³ during which he had shown less interest in opposing the government's positions on virtually any matter, compared to the late ultra-orthodox and more independent Gad El-Haq, who was Grand Imam of Al-Azhar from 1982 to 1996.

Since his appointment as Grand Imam, Tantawi has often drawn harsh criticism from the political Islamist movement, among other forces, for taking controversial pro-government positions and for occasionally acting as an agent for the regime. Such positions included his 1998 meeting with the Chief Rabbi of Israel in violation of the religious institution's long legacy of boycotting that state, and a joint press conference in late 2003 with the French Interior Minister where he expressed support for France's controversial law banning the wearing of the headscarf by Muslim girls in French public schools.

Portraying Tantawi as a lackey of the regime in political matters should not be overstated, however, as it is important to highlight the power that the religious institution has come to enjoy over the state in social policies. Two recent examples crystallize this new influential role. The first incident occurred in 2004 when the National Council for Women (NCW), an official advisory body chaired by Egypt's First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak, attempted to revisit Egypt's numerous reservations on the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The NCW's intention was to withdraw most of the earlier reservations except for a general declaration in which the government would commit to the implementation of the treaty without violating the principles of Islamic shari'a. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was, in principle, in favor of this effort by the NCW since the government had been criticized for many years over the sweeping language of the reservations, some of which were said to be contrary to the very objectives and purpose of the treaty. However, rather than putting the issue before parliament, which is the legally mandated authority to ratify treaties, the Ministry decided to obtain the opinion of Al-Azhar first.¹⁴

¹³ For the history and nature of the institution of the Mufti in Egypt, see: Skovgaard-Petersen, J. (1997). *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and fatwas of the Dar al-Ifra*. Leiden: Brill.

¹⁴ <http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/news/2004-06/07/article19.shtml>.

Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Council not only rejected the attempt to withdraw the reservations but also proposed new reservations the government had not entered when it ratified CEDAW in 1981. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs then decided to quietly close the file on the reservations fearing a public scandal as the government could be accused of defending anti-Islamic provisions as a result of Western pressure.

The second incident took place in 2005, when the NCW itself decided to seek Al-Azhar's opinion on a new bill to criminalize female circumcision/genital mutilation (FGM) nearly 10 years after the Minister of Health had issued a decree banning the practice in hospitals and medical facilities. Here again, Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Council rejected the idea in a meeting it held in November 2005, reiterating its old position that while there was no consensus on the obligatory nature of FGM, it was considered a desirable act with desirable results and, consequently, must not be criminalized in a Muslim country.¹⁵ Since then there have been no public attempts by the government or the NCW to raise the subject.

In neither of these two incidents was the state legally required to obtain the views of the religious institution. Yet the fact that the state could not go forward with these efforts without the religious authority's support, and was willing to shelve the initiatives altogether when it could not secure this support, is an indication of the power that Al-Azhar has come to enjoy, beyond its mandate, over the state's policy-making processes on women's issues.

The conservative agenda on morality and the family received another push forward with the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2005, when the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the biggest political opposition force and secured an unprecedented 20 percent of the 454-seat People's Assembly. This electoral victory sparked concern among secular circles in Egypt and triggered speculations regarding the positions the MB deputies were going to take in parliament, particularly with regards to women's rights and cultural issues. These concerns were a result of the several attempts by the 17 MB deputies in the previous parliament to increase the government's censorship on artistic works they saw as violating public morality. In fact, the MB put these efforts in the forefront of its own report on its performance in the 2000 parliament issued in the lead up to the 2005 elections. The efforts listed in the report

¹⁵ <http://www.misralarabia.com/article.asp?article=8834>.

included parliamentary procedures against music videos, beauty pageants, magazines with revealing photographs on their covers; banning veiled female presenters from appearing on state television, and enlarging the portion of religious education in public-school curricula.

The electoral platform of the MB during the 2005 elections devoted only a small section to women. It included general statements about women's role in raising future generations and actions like enhancing the political participation of women, increasing efforts to combat illiteracy among them, and establishing financial and credit schemes to assist female-headed households.¹⁶ As soon as the MB launched its electoral campaign its positions on women's issues became prominent in the media coverage of the elections, particularly in the northern Cairo district of Nassr City where the only woman candidate of the MB was running for one of the district's two seats.

The candidate, Makarem El-Diri, was profiled and interviewed in nearly every media outlet in the country, where she elaborated on the Islamist organization's position on women and their role in politics and society. In most of these interviews, El-Diri introduced herself as an active member of the IICWC, and the policy messages of that Committee were reflected in her campaign speeches and media interviews. El-Diri identified "protection of the family" amongst her policy priorities, and reiterated that a woman's primary role was to be a good mother. She also opposed the calls for "absolute equality" between women and men since, she argued, such equality was "against the order of nature."¹⁷ Interestingly, she was the only woman candidate to refer to the Beijing conference and documents throughout the two months of campaigning. In an interview with the website www.Islamonline.net, El-Diri declared that one of her top priorities was "to fight some of the outcomes of the Beijing conference and its follow-up meetings, which violate Islamic shari'a."¹⁸

The electoral campaign of Makarem El-Diri was evidence of the common positions taken by the official state Islamic institution (Al-Azhar) and a chief opponent of the government (the MB) when it comes to issues pertaining to women and sexuality. El-Diri, an Arabic literature professor at Al-Azhar University, was a member and a candidate of the MB, a political

¹⁶ http://www.cihrs.org/Release/PDF/24_123200664331.pdf.

¹⁷ *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 20 October 2005, p 16.

¹⁸ <http://www.islamonline.net/arabic/adam/2005/10/article05.shtml>.

Islamist organization that has always been critical of the official religious institution's lack of autonomy from the regime and the pro-government positions taken by the current Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. At the same time, she was also an active member of the IICWC, an affiliate body of the umbrella organization chaired by the same Grand Imam. The IICWC's website even identifies El-Diri as the head of its research unit. Most of the members of the IICWC are women who are active in the MB and who, like El-Diri, do not appear to see any conflict of interest between the two bodies precisely because their positions and activities on women and sexuality are virtually identical.

Makarem El-Diri did not get elected, perhaps to the relief of feminist and women's rights activists. Her loss, according to MB sources and reports from independent election monitors, was due to heavy government interference in her district including intimidation of voters and the alteration of results in favor of the competing candidate fielded by the ruling National Democratic Party. While parliamentary elections in Cairo were held amidst relative calm and witnessed minimal government interference compared to other cities, the selective heavy-handedness employed in this particular district shows that the regime was well aware that having an MB woman in parliament would boost the MB's profile, especially in Western circles. It also indicates the regime's awareness that the election of a woman MB deputy meant that women's issues would occupy a more prominent place on the Islamic group's legislative agenda, a prospect that the government was not prepared to accept.¹⁹

But while the government mercilessly fought El-Diri in northern Cairo during the elections, the same government's agenda at the UN was coming ever closer to that of El-Diri's IICWC.²⁰ Through creative outreach strategies and savvy media tactics, the IICWC has gained greater visibility in the domestic media in the years following its establishment. This visibility and media coverage, as well as the organization's successful use of its ties with Al-Azhar, gained it increased leverage over the positions taken by government representatives at UN and other international events dealing with women and sexuality. Since 2000 the IICWC has become a regular participant in the annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as well as other major UN events.

¹⁹ In late June 2006 the Court of Cassation nullified the results in this electoral district citing process irregularities. It is not clear at the time of writing if the government intends to abide by this final court ruling and hold new elections in the district.

²⁰ For an overview and analysis of these global debates, see also in this publication: Girard, F. Negotiating sexual rights and sexual orientation at the UN.

Media campaigning and direct government lobbying at the UN started to bear fruit for the IICWC in 2001. The Egypt delegation to the first-ever UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS (UNGASS) led the successful campaign to exclude from the meeting's Declaration of Commitment the only reference to groups that are vulnerable to contracting HIV, namely injecting drug users, commercial sex workers, and men who have sex with men.²¹ Moreover, Egypt proposed a motion to ban the representative of an organization working on sexual orientation and gender identity from addressing the meeting's session on HIV/AIDS and human rights. (The motion was put to the vote and defeated.)²² The Egyptian state-owned newspapers hailed these positions as heroic acts aimed at defending Islamic values. Defense of these so-called "Islamic values" has since become an integral part of Egypt's positions at every UN event dealing even remotely, with gender and sexuality.

The following year Egypt took similar "pro-family" positions at another UN General Assembly Special Session, this one dedicated to children, where the IICWC was more active and visible than ever before. Furthermore, when Brazil presented to the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2003 a draft resolution that would have been the first UN official document to recognize human rights abuses based on sexual orientation, Egypt was at the forefront of the opposition block that used procedural tactics to postpone consideration of the resolution until the following year.²³ In 2004 a large Egyptian delegation fought successfully for the resolution to be taken off the agenda. Reports suggested that Egypt and other Arab states went as far as to threaten Brazil with a boycott of an Arab-South American trade summit meeting scheduled to take place in the fall of the same year.

Egypt was successful in fighting and ultimately defeating the Brazilian resolution on sexual orientation despite the absence of the IICWC or any Islamist organizations, which have limited their sphere of activism to UN meetings held at the New York headquarters, side-

²¹ For more on policy effects on MSM and other marginalized groups, including PLWHA and sex workers, see also in this publication: Ramasubhan, R. Culture, politics, and discourses on sexuality: A history of resistance to the anti-sodomy law in India, pp. 97-99; Cáceres, C., Cueto, M. & Palomino, N. Sexual and reproductive-rights policies in Peru: unveiling false promises, pp. 151, 154-155; de Camargo, K. & Mattos, R. Looking for sex in all the wrong places: the silencing of sexuality in the World Bank's public discourse, pp. 368-369; Le Minh, G. & Nguyen, T. M.H. From family planning to HIV/AIDS in Vietnam: Shifting priorities, remaining gaps, pp. 299-300.

²² <http://www.iglhrc.org/site/iglhrc/section.php?id=5&detail=157>.

²³ For a detailed overview and analysis, see also in this publication: Girard, F. Negotiating sexual rights and sexual orientation at the UN, pp. 339-350.

lining the Geneva offices where the CHR held its annual sessions. By 2003 the Egyptian government had already become an active member in a “pro-family club” that also included the United States, the Holy See, Pakistan, Iran, Sudan, and Malaysia among others. But in this collective of states, the Egyptian government had particular interests in blocking any recognition of human rights violations against homosexuals.

At the same time that Egyptian diplomats were engaged in the heated debate over the issue of sexual orientation at the 2001 UNGASS and the two subsequent CHR sessions, their colleagues at the Interior Ministry were staging an equally active campaign that saw close to 200 men arrested for suspected homosexual conduct from 2001 to 2004.²⁴ This campaign of arrests, torture and other violations of due process and human rights was already being scrutinized and condemned by UN rights bodies such as the Human Rights Committee, the Committee against Torture, and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. It was, therefore, especially important for the Egyptian government to block any further recognition in Geneva of the human rights of the “perverts” it was incarcerating and beating up back in Cairo.

At all the UN events it attends the IICWC works closely with Christian and “pro-family” organizations. The literature published by the committee is remarkably similar to that of its conservative western counterparts, like the focus on the value of chastity (the name of the committee’s magazine is *Al-'Afaf*, which means chastity) and the criticisms they direct at women’s rights organizations for being “reality-based” while making no attempt to change that reality for a better future.

While the coordination between these two conservative factions can be traced back to the 1996 UN Habitat II meeting in Istanbul,²⁵ it culminated in the Doha Conference organized in November 2004 to mark the tenth anniversary of the UN Year of the Family. The Doha meeting is a fascinating example of the smooth cooperation between very different conservative states and non-governmental actors. It was hosted by the Qatari government and was

²⁴ Human Rights Watch Report. (March, 2004). In a time of torture: The assault on justice in Egypt’s crackdown on homosexual conduct.

²⁵ Brian Whitaker, The Guardian, Fundamental Union, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,7792,1398055,00.html>; Cynthia Rothschild, Written Out, IGLHRC & CWGL.

opened by Sheikha Mousa bint Nasser al-Misnad, the wife of Qatar's ruler, who also happens to be the chairperson of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs in Qatar. The government of Qatar had commissioned the U.S.-based World Family Policy Center (WFPC) to prepare the conference's content and to hold preparatory meetings in Mexico City, Sweden, Geneva, Kuala Lumpur, Manila and Strasbourg. The WFPC is affiliated to Brigham Young University, run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons).

While the WFPC was busy convening global preparatory meetings in the months preceding the conference, the IICWC took the responsibility of holding similar meetings in Arab countries, namely Jordan, Yemen, and Lebanon. As at other international events, the IICWC went to the Doha conference with the Coalition of Islamic Organizations (OIC), a transnational network of Islamist organizations for which the IICWC acts as a convener. Among the leaders of the delegation was Makarem El-Diri who, as we have seen, would one year later become the Muslim Brother's sole female candidate in the parliamentary elections.²⁶

The conference culminated in the adoption of The Doha Declaration, which ostensibly reaffirms Article 16(3) of Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "The family is the natural and fundamental unit of society, and is entitled to protection by society and the state." The Doha Declaration, however, subtly sets forth the IICWC's opposition to family planning and abortion as well as its support for traditional marriage between a man and a woman. It states, "We recognize the inherent dignity of the human person and note that the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care before as well as after birth ... everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." It also identifies the need to "evaluate and reassess government population policies, particularly in countries with below replacement birthrates," and to "reaffirm the importance of faith and religious and ethical beliefs in maintaining family stability and social progress."

For its part the UN General Assembly issued a resolution in December 2004, which welcomed the hosting of the Doha Conference by the Qatari government but only took note of its outcome. It did not take long, however, for the IICWC to start using the Doha Dec-

²⁶ <http://www.iicwc.org/conferences/doha/doha01.htm>

laration for advocacy at the UN. At the 2006 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the OIC lobbied Islamic states to introduce language from Doha into the meeting's agreed conclusions on women's equal participation in development. The proposed paragraph recommended that states "evaluate and assess economic, social and other policies to support mothers and fathers in performing their essential roles."²⁷

The Doha Declaration resurfaced again two months later at the UNGASS review meeting on HIV/AIDS, held in New York in May 2006. During the difficult negotiations around the meeting's Political Declaration, OIC member states decided to use language from Doha to counter several Canadian proposals in favor of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The OIC proposed that states "reaffirm the importance of faith and religious and ethical beliefs in maintaining family stability and social progress." The OIC proposal was subsequently dropped in exchange for Canada forfeiting its proposals, but the incident was another example of the influence exerted by the IICWC and other religious organizations on Egypt and other like-minded governments at the UN.

In the same vein, the IICWC has been working to produce alternative documents to family-related international human rights treaties. The most successful in these efforts has been the adoption in 2003 of the Charter on the Child in Islam as a response to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified international human rights convention.²⁸ The Committee has also been working for many years on a similar charter on the family.²⁹ Interestingly, among the resolutions of the Mecca Summit of the OIC in December 2004 was the convening of a committee to draft a declaration on women's rights in Islam. Activists familiar with the OIC's 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam expect that the new women's declaration will backtrack on the rights won by women in international human rights law.

From the above one can see how a marriage of convenience was forged between the Egyptian state, together with the official religious institution, and its chief political opponent, the

²⁷"Amendments suggested to the February 21 draft by the Coalition of Islamic Organizations." On file with the authors.

²⁸ <http://www.iicwc.org/methak/index.shtml>.

²⁹ <http://www.iicwc.org/methak/osra/mithakosra00.htm>.

Muslim Brotherhood, in matters related to women and sexuality. The ensuing conservative collective has been gaining ground steadily in the past few years both domestically and in international fora. However, the work of this conservative collective of religious forces received a significant setback due to the unprecedented public interest and debate sparked by the Hind el-Hinnawy case and the court ruling to recognize the paternity of her child. The ruling was generally welcomed by the media and the public amid many strong calls for a bold and overdue recognition of the prevalence of *‘urfi* marriages and sexual relations among youth. Predictably, the conservative collective moved swiftly to revive calls for the criminalization of *zina* (sexual relations among unmarried couples) — the 1937 Penal Code punishes adultery with imprisonment but does not criminalize consensual sexual relations among single men and women. Not long after the el-Hinnawy ruling, Al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Council met in June 2006 to discuss the implications. The Council issued a call to parliament to expand the scope of the criminalization of *zina*, “in order to bring the law in line with Islamic shari’a.”³⁰

The main argument provided for the call to criminalize consensual heterosexual relations among adults was, once again, very telling of the different perspectives of conservative and progressive forces in society: Al-Azhar maintained that the current law on *zina* “sustains corrupt social realities.”³¹ The following section aims to look at these “social realities” that so alarm conservative forces into investing such considerable efforts to change them.

The realities

Following the airing by an Egyptian satellite station of a talk-show on sexual dysfunction among youth and rising divorce rates among newlyweds on account of sexual problems, Egyptian newspapers were inundated with letters and articles expressing outrage at this “affront” to Egyptian values and morals. Soon thereafter the program was infamously labeled, “the masturbation episode.” The overwhelmingly negative response to the program highlighted the society’s deeply embedded aversion to bringing matters relating to sex and sexuality into the public arena, particularly when such messages are directed towards young

³⁰ (2006, July 1). Al Ahram, p. 9.

³¹ (2006, July 2). Al Ahram, p. 30.

people. The impassioned response also highlighted just how limited the space is for any kind of public debate around sexuality, even for TV programs ostensibly created for educational purposes.

As shown below, the event illustrates the degree to which Egyptian youth are left to contend with the contradictory influences from a conservative religious sphere, on the one hand, and from their own practices and values, which do not always conform to strict socio-religious norms, on the other. The dissonance between these two sides produces a complex canvas where Egyptian youth neither completely accommodate nor resist either sphere; rather, they resort to their own mechanisms to navigate their way through the contradictions.

Coming of age in contemporary Cairo

A recent study on coming of age in contemporary Cairo describes how youths are constantly criticized by the older generation, and confronted with the “diatribe against youth presented in...official discourse,” (Arvizu, 2004, p. 27). In this discourse youths are sometimes accused of being radical Islamists and religious fanatics — paradoxically, the same youth are at other times deemed to be easily susceptible to the corrupting influences of Western culture via the Internet, music videos, TV shows, films and video games that are seen to promote violence and sexual promiscuity. The juxtaposition of extreme religiosity and sexual promiscuity may seem unusual, but it reflects the rise of two phenomena in popular youth culture in Egypt, that of Amr Khaled the lay-preacher and that of the sexualized Arabic music video clip.

Despite the fact that he is not a religiously trained scholar, Amr Khaled has arguably become the most widely recognized preacher in Egypt and in much of the Arab world as well. His use of colloquial Egyptian, his messages and stories told in a simple and straightforward style and his haute-couture fashion place him in an entirely different universe from the stiff, bearded, *gallabiyah*-wearing Azharite scholars. Asef Bayat (2003) describes Khaled’s style as a “marriage of faith and fun” that is “marked and framed by the taste and style of the rich, in particular, affluent youth and women.” Khaled’s audience is, by and large, young and relatively affluent. What makes his message so attractive to this particular audience are his assurances that religious worship and piety can fit with modern lifestyles, which allows “the Egyptian rich [to] feel good about their fortunes,” (Bayat, 2003). Khaled’s message emphasizes per-

sonal piety and bodily modesty, hence his strong encouragement to women to wear the veil. During his lectures he discusses ethical and moral issues in everyday life — from dating, to drinking, to summer vacations — and focuses on values such as “humility, generosity, trust, loyalty, and repentance,” assuring youth that by leading normal and fun lives they can also follow religious principles (Bayat, 2003).

Like no other preacher before him, Khaled’s message has sparked a new search for spirituality and religious devotion among Egyptian Muslims and particularly among upper class and upper middle-class youth. This new spirituality has also influenced other aspects of popular culture, such as Egyptian cinema, as can be seen in the rise of the concept of “clean cinema.” Karim Tartoussieh (2006) explains that the term “clean cinema” was “coined around the mid 1990s to describe a new genre of films in Egypt inspired by a new kind of locally fueled wave of religiosity...[that] eschews...any overt representation of sexuality or nudity.”

Within this new genre, Tartoussieh highlights the importance of female stars because “clean cinema” relies heavily on a “new mode of embodiment” in which the body is experienced and represented in a radically different way both on screen and in society. Prostitutes, seductresses, and adulteresses have become roles that are taboo and shunned by female artists who see the roles they accept as a reflection of their own real-life characters. Tartoussieh (2006) gives the example of one young female actress, May Ezz El-Din, who dismissed emphatically any possibility of playing a role which entails either kissing or nudity because her “essential being” does not agree with such roles. It would seem that Ezz El-Din is heeding Khaled’s calls for actors not to retire, which used to be the standard response of *al-fannanat al-ta’ibat* (the repented female artists), but to continue working in their field on condition that they carefully choose the roles they accept.

However, this wave of religiosity in film is not entirely consistent with other cultural forms. Khaled’s growing popularity is matched by the increasing popularity of the Arabic music video clip, where young female artists can project a seductive and sensual image that is often risqué by Egyptian standards.³² The video clip has become an essential marketing tool for

³² It is important to qualify this statement, as there is a huge diversity in video clips. Armbrust (2005) has noted that the most common fixation of most commentators is with the sexual aspect of certain video clips, but argues that there is far more to Arabic video clips than just women and sex. Many clips project patriarchal and religious values; a mother and her child, raising a family, and deference to one’s parents, are just some of the topics in video clips. See www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring05/armbrust.html; www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring05/kubala.html.

bringing an artist's music to an audience that spans the entire Arab world, and it is no longer unusual for them to show barely-clad female singers dancing provocatively in a variety of sexual innuendos. These video clips, broadcast 24/7 on *Melody* and *Mazzika*, two satellite television channels, epitomize "the other modes of cultural production" that do not exhibit the same moralizing tendencies and religious script that guide "clean cinema" (Tartoussieh, 2006). As Khaled delivers his sermons, video clips, specifically made for and targeted towards youth, are being churned out every hour of every day.

Besides music video clips, other television programs of the reality-based kind have continued to grow attracting much condemnation from conservatives. One of these popular reality-based programs with a large following in Egypt is *Star Academy*, where contestants from all over the Arab world battle in song and dance for a record contract. Significantly, contestants are housed together as in reality-TV shows like *Big Brother*;³³ while the men and women sleep in separate quarters they share the same living space and television viewers can watch their daily activities (eating, cleaning, and just hanging out) and training sessions. In the last two competitions, an Egyptian (a woman in 2005 and a man in 2006) made it into the final top three, generating huge interest in Egypt.

Music video clips and reality-based television programs have provoked a great deal of condemnation within Egypt from conservative Islamists and from the general public who are concerned that these Western-imports are "corrupting morals" and leading to greater "sexual perversity" among youth. Amr Khaled (2005) fears that video clips not only arouse desire, but also "pervert the aesthetic sense" and warns that they are "driving society toward flaccidity and collapse." One commentator suggests it is the immense popularity of these programs among youths that has attracted such calamitous premonitions and bred so much fear among conservative groups. This fear, he adds, stems from the challenge to "cultural patriarchy" posed by such values as "relaxed gender relations, personal meritocracy, infec-tiously joyful music" embodied in these programs (Lynch, 2006). Indeed, while it would be a

³³ In 2004, an Arabic version of 'Big Brother' originating in Bahrain and aired on MBC, an Arabic satellite channel, was suspended after only a few days following protests in Bahrain. Many saw the series as an affront to Islamic values for putting men and women together in the same house. Retrieved May 2006, from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3522897.stm. *Star Academy* on the other hand is based in Beirut, which is considered to be one of the more liberal Arab cities and as such did not attract such an outcry. The popularity of such reality-based TV programs has inspired conservatives to create reality-based shows of their own on a new Islamic channel, *Al Risella* (which has yet to be launched), in an effort to combine "ethical" programming with entertainment. See "Whose Reality is Real? Ethical Reality TV trend offers 'culturally authentic' alternative to Western formats," by Lindsay Wise www.tbsjournal.com/Wise.html.

stretch to herald video clips as a sign that youth values and norms are becoming more liberal and secular, these video clips do represent “part of longstanding tensions over the status of youth in a patriarchal culture” and provide a “powerful palette for sketching out ideas about sexuality and the body” (Armbrust, 2005). The fear held by moral guardians is probably intensified by the fact that young people can actively participate in what they see and hear by sending in song requests to *Melody* and *Mazzika*, by purchasing mobile ring tones, and by their ability to send text messages anonymously to friends or girl/boyfriends through the *Melody* and *Mazzika* crawl lines.

What makes matters more confusing is the fact that the fans and spectators of Amr Khaled and of “clean cinema,” and the fans of music video clips and Star Academy are more than likely to be one and the same. As Tartoussieh (2006) points out, both “clean cinema” and the sexualized video clips “occupy the same cultural space and are both primarily directed towards youth.” In addition, Arvizu (2004, p. 31) notes, “the juxtaposition of such topics is reflective of the varying pressures young people feel. On the one hand, there is a desire to adhere to socio-religious norms, but they also enjoy the freedom from those norms. Clear distinctions exist between the behaviors of religiously oriented youth and liberal minded youth, but most youth exhibit actions indicative of both, depending on the context.”

Indeed, a young, veiled, and religiously inclined Egyptian woman who is an avid fan of Amr Khaled struggles to explain how she fanatically follows each episode of Star Academy, although what takes place in that program goes against her religious principles. She simply concedes that, “Yes, it [Star Academy] is indecent, but I still like to watch it.” As Armbrust (2005) points out, she is “one moment a fan; the next moment an opponent.” Others exhibit these conflicting values in a much more cynical fashion. A young woman interviewed in *Campus* magazine explains how she performs the *‘omrah* (a religious pilgrimage to Mecca similar to the annual Hajj but less important) in Ramadan every year but returns “to the same life” in Egypt, which involves drinking, doing drugs and other such activities that “probably anger God in a million other ways,” (quoted in Arvizu, 2001, p.31).

This contradiction and tension has been the subject of a short film by Ahmed Khaled, a young and aspiring Egyptian director. Khaled’s 14-minute film, *Al-Gueneih al-Khamis* (The Fifth

Pound), produced in 2005, revolves around sexual intimacy among Egyptian youth. Khaled explains that the film tries to tackle “the problem of sexual deprivation among the Egyptian youth” and “the double-standards attitude among the community.” (Khaled website). The film explores how a young couple finds some degree of privacy and intimacy by sitting at the back of one of Cairo’s air-conditioned buses. When the bus finally reaches its destination and the couple step off the bus, the young man returns the two tickets (cost £E2 each) and puts a one pound note into the hand of the bus driver (who could see everything from his rearview mirror), in acknowledgement of his complicity in letting the couple pursue some sexual indulgence at the back of the bus. One of the controversial aspects of the film was the juxtaposition of religious symbols with the illicit acts taking place on the bus. The girl boarding the bus is veiled, usually seen as a sign of greater religiosity and submission to religious principles.³⁴ In addition, the driver plays the Qur’an on the bus, yet at the same time furtively glances at the couple in the rear-view mirror, fantasizes about being in the young man’s position in the arms of his lover, and accepts the extra pound from the young man.

Al-Gueneih al-Khamis is best understood in the broader context of conflicting and contradictory orientations among youth. As Bayat (2003) notes, young people in Egypt “swing back and forth from Amr Diab [one of Egypt’s most popular male singers] to Amr Khaled, from partying to prayers.” The everyday practices of youth reveal a “relaxation of norms within the confines of the Islamization of society,” such as the ubiquitous sight of young lovers (including veiled girls) strolling along bridges or the banks of the Nile, holding hands and even kissing (Abaza, 2001, p.102). Incidentally, one popular music video showed exactly that: a young male singer crooning to his veiled girlfriend (the first music video where the woman in pursuit is veiled) on the Qasr El Aini bridge in Cairo, a popular hotspot for young couples. The video accurately reflects the reality of many in Cairo, particularly those of the lower socio-economic classes, where the Nile’s banks provide both a romantic and cheap location, and affirms that the new cultural forms are providing space for youths to project their own values and the realities of their lives. These new forms also demonstrate how youths are navigating their way through the conflicting liberal and Islamist discourses by creating their own hybrid identities and realities; for example veiling but still dating.

³⁴ However, the veil is also a way to protect oneself from other people’s gossip. The veil-wearer’s manifested “religiosity” allows her to “get away with things” without being suspected.

The following sections explore in greater detail the changing values and behavior of youths, their own perceptions of these changes, and the manner in which conservative Islamist discourse attempts to rein in any challenge to deeply held patriarchal norms.

Premarital sex among Egyptian youth

Walter Armbrust (2005) suggests that the hostility directed at the “sexy” music videos is partly due to the fact that “Arab society gives almost no social sanction to sex for unmarried youth,” hence the video clip “rubs salt in a particularly sore spot.” In Egypt, this remains an extremely sore spot as the taboo against premarital sex, particularly for girls, remains resolutely in place. Nonetheless, Egyptians express an extremely high interest in sex. According to the Google Trends website,³⁵ Cairo is the number one city searching for sex, and Egypt ranks as the number two country searching for sex. With this extremely active interest in sex on the Internet, it is inevitable that premarital sexual relations do exist despite the taboo. The difficulty is in determining the prevalence of these relations, as reports and studies often conflict with one another or are based on anecdotal evidence that is difficult to substantiate.

In a study of patterns of marriage and family formation in Egypt conducted in 2004, young men and women were asked if they knew someone close to them who had been involved in a sexual relationship. Approximately 13 percent of single young males responded affirmatively, compared to only 3.4 percent of single females. The number increased to 22 percent when the question was posed to engaged young males, but remained the same for engaged young females. Married males reported the lowest number among the men at just nine percent, while married females at three percent were on par with single females (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 64). The study also revealed that sexual activity was far more prevalent in urban areas than in rural areas — single, engaged or married men and single and engaged women all reported that the majority of cases they knew were in urban governorates or in urban areas of lower and upper Egypt; the only discrepancy was with married women who reported slightly higher incidences in rural lower Egypt (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 66). When the same respondents were asked to give their own experiences, the numbers decreased considerably (but this is most likely underestimated since revealing one’s sexual history is a very sensitive matter); only 1.4 percent of males reported such an experience compared to less than one percent of females (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 65).

³⁵ Retrieved June 2006, from <http://www.google.com/trends?q=sex>.

In another study conducted in 1996 among university students in four universities in Egypt, approximately 26 percent of males and three percent of females reported having sexual intercourse at least once, which for men at least, is much higher than what was reported in El Tawila and Khadr's study (El-Zanaty & El-Daw, 1996). The number of females having premarital sex is also misleading because most female counterparts of the men interviewed were younger and less educated (they were not university students), and so were not part of the survey (El-Zanaty & El-Daw, 1996). Most researchers admit that the accuracy of surveys probing sexual behavior is difficult to determine because of the hesitation of respondents to report honestly on such a sensitive issue, suggesting that the prevalence of sexual relations may be underreported (Rashad & Osman, 2003, p. 18). But this sporadic evidence does imply that premarital sex is not as rare as might be commonly believed. The perception among a large portion of young people with regards to premarital sex also indicates that youth believe the practice is on the rise; Arvizu's study (2004, p. 79) found that nearly 49 percent of youth agreed with the statement, "More young couples are engaging in intimate/sexual relations before marriage," although they indicated that those engaged in such relations constitute a minority.

Other indicators also reflect the existence of premarital sexual relations, although statistics for these are also difficult to come by and are largely based on observations and anecdotal evidence. Hymen reconstruction surgery is one such indicator. Ahdy Wahid Rizk, a gynecologist based in Cairo, revealed that two or three young women visit his Cairo clinic on a weekly basis requesting hymen reconstruction surgery (Sharp, 2005).³⁶ The demand for hymen repair is not only confined to urban areas. According to Samia Talaat, a general practitioner in El Mansoura, a largely rural governorate in Lower Egypt, women in rural areas are also seeking hymen reconstruction surgery. She gave the example of one woman who had to save for four months before she could afford the procedure, during which time she pretended to be insane in order to avoid sexual intercourse with her husband (Kadela, 1996).

Another gynecologist, Rima Khofash, says she receives approximately one woman per month in her clinic suffering complications resulting from back-street abortions, which she at-

³⁶ According to Majdi Mousa, a Cairo gynecologist, Egypt "is becoming an Arab center for performing illegal operations of hymen repair." (Quoted in Kandela 1996: 1615).

tributes to out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Khofash estimates that some 50 percent of young people have premarital sex, a figure far higher than any studies or commentators have suggested. She also says, “There is a revolution in sex between young people – they do it haphazardly – often in short-term relationships,” (quoted in Sharp, 2005). Yet Sahar El Tawila believes that the Egyptian media has dramatically overblown the prevalence of premarital sex: “It is not widespread. Sexual relationships do exist, but they should be put in proportion” (quoted in Sharp, 2005).

Other commentators have suggested that non-penetrative sex is widely practiced, at least in urban areas (Sholkamy, 2005). Whilst there are no statistics to back up this claim, interviews with men and women who had been involved in *‘urfi* marriages (see below) revealed that all had engaged in varying degrees of sexual intimacy, but not intercourse, with their partners before marriage. This supports the supposition that non-penetrative sex is the second-best option for those who do not wish to break completely the cultural and religious taboos against premarital sex (El Tawila & Khadr, p. 83). Arvizu’s study (2004, p. 79) also notes how young unmarried couples “reported using a variety of methods to avoid actual intercourse while (being) intimate in order to preserve their virginity.” One young woman stated that she and her partner “didn’t have full sex. We didn’t have a place to do it. If it was easier, yes, I think I would have liked to” (quoted in Sharp, 2005).

How youth who engage in sexual activity before marriage assess these sexual relations has not been substantially dealt with in the few studies done, but available evidence highlights the tension between an obligation to adhere to Egyptian norms and practices on the one hand, and youth’s own desires and practices, on the other. The young woman who pointed to the difficulty in finding a place to have sexual intercourse also said, “It’s also our traditions that stopped me. I felt guilty about what we did,” which shows that there is anxiety about transgressing social and religious mores (quoted in Sharp, 2005). In addition, there exist very strong double standards that make it more acceptable for men to engage in premarital sexual relations than women. This may account for the discrepancy between males and females who report sexual activity in the studies mentioned above. One young man described how he tried to push his girlfriend towards further intimacy as a “test” of her values: “I just have to stop at a point when I am sure she will refuse to sleep with me — that means she is a good

girl” (quoted in Sharp, 2005). The high value placed on virginity in Egyptian society also acts as a deterrent. As one youth said, “Even if you don’t care whether your future wife is a virgin or not, you’re still in a community that cares, so you would think twice [about it]” (quoted in Arvizu, 2004, p. 79).

Despite the pressure to conform to Egyptian traditions and expectations — which makes premarital sex such a confusing and guilt-ridden activity — Egyptian youth pursue non-sexual dating relationships with much greater frequency. Although these relationships are still frowned upon in society, they do not hold the same stigma as premarital sex. Approximately 70 percent of single male respondents and 59 percent of single female respondents reported that dating relationships among youth are very common in El Tawila and Khadr’s 2004 study (p. 58). From these respondents, 27 percent of males and 24 percent of females admitted they had been involved in a relationship, and these percentages increased slightly for engaged or ever-married respondents (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 59). Because of the sensitivity of the subject, the researchers believe the figures of those who have actually been in a relationship are under-reported and that the number is “much higher” (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 60). Single male and female respondents from urban areas were more likely to believe in the widespread existence of dating relationships than their rural counterparts but the number of those who acknowledged personal involvement in a relationship was nearly the same for both urban and rural respondents, and the same was true for engaged and ever-married respondents (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 60).

When asked about the disadvantages for men of being involved in a relationship, approximately 31.5 percent of all young men saw no disadvantages, compared to only six percent of women. When the women were asked the same question, approximately 53.5 percent said there were no disadvantages for men, but just 6.5 percent saw no disadvantages for women. Indeed 57 percent of men and 61 percent of women felt that a relationship would be detrimental to a woman’s reputation, but only 10 percent and 6.5 percent respectively felt the same for men (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 63). Both males and females identified the main disadvantages of relationships as the harm caused to the reputation of the young women involved, the damage to her future marriage prospects, and the potential of the relationship to evolve into a sexual one (consequently causing further damage to her reputation and mar-

riage prospects). These answers reveal the pressure on youth, particularly young women, to abide by traditional dictates or risk losing one's reputation.

On the other hand, when respondents were asked about the advantages of such relationships, the majority named several positive aspects. More than 66 percent of males and 50 percent of females believed that these relationships increased mutual understanding between the two partners, and approximately 14 percent of males and 21 percent of females believed that these relationships could potentially lead to marriage. These answers indicate that although young people are concerned about losing their standing and reputation on account of these relationships, they also see the personal benefits of being involved in them. The fact that the majority placed mutual understanding before the possibility of marriage indicates that they do not necessarily see the relationship as definitely culminating into a permanent relationship, but as a means of finding companionship and understanding.

'Urfi marriages

Hind el-Hinnawy's *'urfi* marriage to the actor Ahmed el-Fishawy brought the practice to the public limelight but it is important to note that even before this case such marriages had been scrutinized, dissected, and denounced in newspapers, television talk-shows, and even television soap-opera dramas, with almost all commentators lamenting this growing phenomenon among Egyptian youth. Hania Sholkamy (2005) has described this form of marriage as essentially a "means of legitimizing sexual relations without the financial and parental obstacles that a traditional Egyptian marriage presents." The ability to engage in "semi-legitimate" sexual relations has been a driving force for youths to enter into these marriages and one of the main reasons prompting commentators to condemn the practice so vociferously. It is also important to understand *'urfi* marriages in the Egyptian context where the nuclear family constitutes the central unit of society from which "individuals derive much of their identity and standing" and where young people are bound by "norms of social control," (Al-Tawila, 2003, p. 215). *'Urfi* marriages by their very definition challenge these deeply held norms and beliefs as youths use them to escape parental control and authority and engage in consensual sexual relations that only a close circle of friends – if even that – are aware of.

When asked about the main reasons for entering an *'urfi* marriage, the most common responses given by Egyptian youth are: the desire to initiate a sexual relationship within a legitimate framework; the desire to legitimate an ongoing sexual relationship; family disapproval of a formal marriage proposal; and lack of financial resources to marry officially (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 75). In-depth interviews with individuals who had been involved in an *'urfi* marriage revealed that all had various degrees of sexual intimacy with their partners, although this never resulted in sexual intercourse, but that the “sexual urge was the main driving cause of the secretive *'urfi* marriage” (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 83). Although most young people admitted that *'urfi* marriages are not really religiously acceptable, or at least had doubts about its legitimacy, they nonetheless believed that any kind of framework for engaging in a sexual relationship was better than none at all, which was a view that young men in particular ascribed to: “They expressed a conviction that as fragile as it is, the contract of the *'urfi* marriage is useful in defending the accusation of adultery if caught by the police while having sex” (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 76).³⁷

The urge to keep *'urfi* marriages as discrete as possible was paramount among all those involved, with most expressing fear of the responses of their families should they ever find out. The need to avoid pregnancy was therefore an obvious priority. In-depth interviews revealed how all the couples used at least one method of contraception to prevent pregnancy, usually the pill, condoms or *coitus interruptus*. However, researchers noted that it was unclear if contraceptives were used correctly, and found “indications of incorrect use in some cases, such as non-compliance with correct pill-use” (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 85).

Unplanned pregnancies may account for the large number of paternity cases in Egyptian courts today. The question of the paternity of illegitimate children only recently became a hot topic in Egypt, sparked by the court battle between el-Hinnawy and el-Fishawy during which newspapers reported between 14,000 and 21,000 similar paternity cases before the Egyptian courts. But commentators have suggested that these numbers represent only the tip of the iceberg, as many women may choose not to access the courts for fear of scandal (Lutfi, 2005). Moreover these numbers only indicate the paternity cases

³⁷ Despite the fact that most respondents were wary of the dubious religious status of *'urfi* marriages, when young men were asked for the reasons that attracted them to their partners, most made references to characteristics such as politeness, modesty and obedience, and to the fact that their partners “wore modest Islamic dress” (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 84). Again, the juxtaposition of contradictory sentiments and behaviors (involvement in an *'urfi* marriage, but choosing a partner partly based on Islamic values) reflects how youths both accommodate and reject socio-religious norms.

in courts; there may be thousands of *'urfi* marriages that have not resulted in pregnancy and hence remain invisible.³⁸

When asked about their evaluation of *'urfi* marriages, most young people, including those who had experienced an *'urfi* marriage themselves, believed the disadvantages outweighed any advantages and said they would not recommend it to a friend (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 85). Some expressed misgivings about the religious status of the marriage, and others were anxious about their parents finding out about the marriage or concerned about the possible scandal of pregnancy. This goes back to a point made earlier about the varying pressures that young people feel. There is pressure to adhere to socio-religious norms, which entails obedience to parents and their expectations, but there is also the desire to enjoy freedom from these norms. The ability to enjoy these freedoms, however, is severely hampered by young people's guilt at transgressing social mores. They may consciously decide to become involved in an *'urfi* marriage, but nonetheless they cannot be entirely comfortable with the decision and with their actions.

Young women expressed a further reason for becoming involved in an *'urfi* marriage that was not expressed by young men, and that was "to realize their dreams...in making their own choices and decisions with regard to whom to marry and to live the illusion of escaping their parents' plans for them, without the need for any serious confrontation" (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 89). These young women expressed exasperation at the contradictions between their mobility while pursuing a university education — a mobility that provided them with the opportunity to interact with men and to make their own decisions — and the restrictions on their mobility outside of this sphere, which essentially forced them to lead dual lives. Researchers noted that these women challenged the prevailing perception of docility and kindness that most males used in describing their female partners, although most surveys examining perceptions of gender identity reveal how these perceptions remain strongly patriarchal. For example, the 2000 Population Council's Transitions to Adulthood

³⁸ On the other hand, El Tawila and Khadr contest the belief that *'urfi* marriages are widespread, arguing that "very often this conviction is based only upon the misinterpretation of dating relationships of young couples in public places" (2004: 78). They suggest that unsubstantiated statements on the widespread nature of these marriages may have opened "windows of opportunities for some vulnerable youth" encouraging them to "venture in this direction on the grounds of an existing divide between opponents — mainly parents and the elderly population — and a wide base of supporters; youth just like themselves who...must have had a strong rationale for adopting a pattern that challenges prevailing norms and parents' authority," (2004, p. 90).

national survey revealed how 91.1 percent of boys and 88.5 percent of girls thought that the wife should seek her husband's permission for everything, and 74.5 percent of boys and 59.7 percent of girls believe that if a wife differs with her husband, she must accept his opinion (Population Council, p. 166). However, the researchers noted that contradictions emerged in young people's stated gender views and that "more in-depth research is needed to explore the relationship between their verbal expressions and other manifestations of gender beliefs" (Mensch et al, 2000, p. 31). The sense of frustration expressed by the young women above certainly appears to support this statement.

One observation that would need to be explored further is that young people, especially girls, are not brought up to challenge deeply embedded gender norms despite wider opportunities for education and changing economic and social realities. There are several possible reasons for this. First, education in Egypt "does not always challenge the expression of traditional attitudes for either sex or necessarily encourage wider horizons for girls," and second, a constrained economic environment coupled with discrimination against young women in the labor market provides few opportunities for women to challenge gender norms. Ultimately this means "the traditional gender compact...is unlikely to be seriously challenged for some time" (Mensch et al, 2000, p. 17). The views expressed above by young girls in 'urfi marriages indicates that they do feel a dichotomy in their personal lives between the home and the educational sphere, but they may not necessarily be able to articulate these feelings.

The rising age of marriage and rising divorce rates: A national obsession?

'Urfi marriages are not the only problem challenging the institution of the nuclear marriage in Egypt. Many social commentators lament the rising number of individuals of marriageable age who are not getting married at all, with most putting the blame on high unemployment, the scarcity of housing, rising rents, and other financial difficulties and pressures. In Egypt today, 37 percent of males and 18 percent of females are over 30 when they marry (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 49). In addition, the number of unmarried women rose from 2.8 million in 1986 to 3.7 million in 1996 (El Tawila & Khadr, 2004, p. 362). Other reasons put forward to explain why fewer men and women are getting married are: the apparent reluctance of young people to plan for their future, choose a life partner or make the decision to settle down; unrealistic expectations on the part of women looking for their knight-in-shining ar-

mor; and the desire among some youth to remain single and free with the ability to enter multiple relations without responsibility.

The intense concern about the rising age of marriage and increasing numbers of unmarried people is directly linked to the fear that the sexual frustration experienced by these unmarried people may ultimately lead to sexual deviation. This is clearly articulated in the 2002/2003 Report of the National Council for Services and Social Development, which states that the delay in the age of marriage in Egypt results in deviations, which “threaten the security and stability of society” (Report of the National Council for Services and Social Development, 2003, pp. 363-364). Nadia Haleem, sociology professor at the National Center for Social and Criminological Research, echoes these sentiments arguing that “deviation” among youth is increasing as a direct result of the rising age of marriage. And Fawziya Abdel Sattar, Law Professor at Cairo University and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, believes that since marriage provides the “legitimate avenue with which to satisfy our sexual urges, which start at an early age, delaying marriage is unnatural and will have dangerous psychological effects.” These “effects” usually refer to “deviant” sexual behavior, but one commentator has argued that in addition to the sexual tension caused by this large pool of unmarried people, there is also the danger of religious extremism as religious scholars become willing to “imprison women behind walls or clothes” in order to prevent “easily-excited” men from “enticement,” (Amr, 2002).

As if the rising age in marriage is not enough to cause alarm, another crisis looming on the horizon is the growing number of divorces among newly-weds. According to the Hakim Youth Study (2006), the divorce rate among youth is higher than that of the general population. In 2003, 7.9 percent of women and 14.6 percent of men between the ages of 15 and 29 were divorced, compared to 5.2 percent of women and 5.5 percent of men among the general population. Yet overall, it seems that the divorce rate is actually decreasing — in 1986, 14.4 percent of women and 19.3 percent of men between the ages of 15 and 29 were divorced. There are currently some 2.5 million divorced women in Egypt. Of these 43.5 percent were divorced during their first year of marriage and 12 percent during their second year of marriage. Forty percent are above the age of 30.

The anxiety surrounding the “marriage crisis” in Egypt is nothing new. In 1933, the book *Azmat al-Zawaj fi Misr* (The Marriage Crisis in Egypt) put forward similar concerns about the institution of marriage in Egypt and potential future consequences, including a deterioration in morals and ethics and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). As in the 1930s, present day writers concerned with the “marriage crisis” are apprehensive about what they see as a decline in the moral behavior of Egyptians. They also fear that without marriage many will resort to illicit relations, which is seen as a threat to a stable society. As one commentator put it, “How is it possible for these [men and women] to practice their natural sexual desires particularly in a conservative society such as Egypt, which does not accept sexual relations outside the institution of marriage? Facing us is a society living on top of a volcano caught between inherited values and traditions that are maintained on the outside at least throughout the generations, and new trends that are in opposition to these traditions.”

The rising age of marriage, the perception of increasing divorce rates and the apparent widespread nature of *‘urfi* marriages fuel the belief that young people are, at best, turning towards unconventional means to engage in relations with the opposite sex and, at worst, engaging in illicit relations.

Sexuality and reproduction: Practices vs. perceptions?

The evidence of increased sexual activity among youth and their apparent willingness to choose *‘urfi* marriages as opposed to conventional marriages, in addition to the perception among social commentators of increased deviance and indulgence in premarital sexual relations, indicate that the strict code of ethics propagated by a conservative religious discourse does not exert the only influence over Egyptian youth. Nonetheless, this conservative discourse largely informs how matters related to sexuality and reproduction, are dealt with in the public realm, particularly in schools where sex education remains a controversial topic. The outcome of this monopoly is undoubtedly detrimental to youth in a number of ways: they are kept in ignorance about biological changes during puberty and are therefore more likely to be unaware of the sexual and reproductive health implications of their actions; they are likely to experience confusion and guilt over sexual feelings and probably endure great remorse for knowingly transgressing social mores; and they are ill-equipped to deal emotionally with a sexual relationship.

Many families do little to educate their children about puberty, sexuality, and reproduction believing this gap will “protect a child’s innocence, and discourage inappropriate behavior,” (Population Council, p.143). This approach leaves the majority of young people ignorant about even the most basic sexual matters. According to the Transition to Adulthood Survey, nearly 70 percent of girls but only 45 percent of boys can describe any of the changes that occur during puberty, and the majority of those who can describe the changes learn this on their own. Little information, if any, is disseminated in Egyptian schools about such matters as sexual changes during puberty, reproduction or STDs; only six percent of boys and seven percent of girls reported that they learned about puberty through schools books (Population Council, 2000, p.144). In most Egyptian classrooms the topic of sexuality and reproduction is raised, if it is at all, in biology textbooks, but in most cases “teachers avoid discussing the subject, and when they do, they explain a few biological facts,” (Khattab, 2005, p.18).

Adolescent knowledge about family planning was more encouraging, with 99 percent of girls and 97 percent of boys having heard about family planning. The two methods identified most were the pill (92% of girls and 85% of boys) and the IUD (90% of girls and 77% of boys). However, only five percent of girls and 14 percent of boys could identify condoms as a method of contraception. This finding is significant as condom use is the one method that protects against STDs. However researchers have pointed out that because condoms are often associated with illicit relationships in Egypt, it is likely that knowledge of condoms was under-reported, particularly by girls who may have felt it inappropriate to admit knowledge (Population Council, 2000, pp. 148-151).

The overall knowledge of STDs is rather low — 30.2 percent of girls and 19.7 percent of boys were unable to identify any STDs; only 3.4 percent of girls and 11 percent of boys could identify gonorrhoea; and only five percent of girls and 3.5 percent of boys could identify syphilis. On the other hand, approximately 66 percent of girls and 76 percent of boys were able to identify HIV/AIDS (Population Council, 2000, pp. 151-152). However, according to the Cairo Demographic Center youth survey, 99 percent of males and females between the ages of 15 and 24 could identify HIV/AIDS as an STD. The CDC survey also questioned youths on methods of protection against HIV/AIDS: 95 percent identified abstinence from illicit sexual relations; 57.3 percent identified caution when taking blood tests or having blood

transfusions; 38.2 percent said avoid using un-sterilized or used needles; 27.8 percent said don't take drugs; and 4.8 percent gave other methods (unspecified). No mention is made of condoms, which suggests that the respondents are ignorant of the use of condoms as a method of preventing the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

The ignorance of sexuality and reproduction in Egypt has direct implications for these young men and women. The first concern is that those engaging in premarital sex do not take the necessary precautions to prevent the transmission of STDs since condom awareness appears to be low. Furthermore, while they may have knowledge of family planning, it is unclear if they know how to correctly use various methods of family planning. El Tawila and Khadr (2004) noted there were indications among couples in 'urfi marriages that contraception was being used incorrectly. Researchers such as Hind Khattab (2006) and Ahmed Ragab (1996) have pointed out that ignorance of the reproductive system may explain why methods of contraception fail; if women do not understand how the contraception works and how it affects their reproductive system, there is a greater chance that they will fail to use it correctly.

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