Shifting Borders, Gender Separatism and the Arab Spring: the Case of Egypt

Prof. Nadia El Kholy
Cairo University
nkholy@aucegypt.edu

This paper presents a new interpretation of how women activists played a crucial role in the 25th of January Egyptian Revolution and have introduced new boundaries that have re-defined gender separatism in Egypt, in the Arab/Muslim world and in America’s perception of democracy with the new Arab Spring.

The paper explores different forms of gender separatism, particularly regarding ways in which forms of segregation according to gender are implicated in formations of political and religious extremism. Globalization and the double oppression of Muslim women resulting from both neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism, has led Islamic feminists (and I assume, Muslim women), to respond to these challenges. In particular, I will assess how they are contributing to the construction of a new worldwide civil society based on a culture of human rights and universal values such as democracy, social justice, freedom of conscience and gender equality and how they have created a new public space as a platform for their new identity. One of the basic premises of this new forum for Egyptian women was that there is a positive relationship between globalization, particularly the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), Muslim women’s roles, and the advent of democracy and human rights in Muslim societies.

I will focus on only two main elements of my critique that are pertinent to my argument. One is that ICTs are not necessarily harbingers of equality or democracy and that technology can only transform Muslim women’s (and men’s) lives in meaningful ways if it enables a fundamental epistemic shift in how we interpret and practice Islam. The second is that struggles for equality within Muslim societies must also extend to struggles for equality for Muslim societies in the global political-economy. As I see it, the greatest impediment to building a democratic society is not just U.S. hegemony but the language of rights itself when it acquires the form of a secular universalism; it is therefore necessary not only to use this language with discretion but to contest it as well.