

Civil Society and Women Activists in the Middle East: Islamic and Secular Organizations in Egypt

Wanda Krause

London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012. 288 pages.

While much of the literature related to women and democratization in the Middle East neglects the role of women in this process, Wanda Krause persuasively argues that the grassroots activism of Middle Eastern women plays a vital role in democratizing the region. Krause contends that this scholarly neglect is a result of the literature's (1) prioritizing the state (over civil society) and secularism (over religious groups), (2) ignoring the feminine (at the expense of the feminist) and the practical (at the expense of the political), and (3) relegating women's concerns, like family issues, to "the private sphere and overlooked as having any meaning to the public" (p. 49). She further criticizes this literature for what she considers its orientalist attitude, which often manifests itself as excessive attention to women's dress, segregation, polygamy, and female genital mutilation (FGM) and thus constructs a passive and oppressed image of Muslim women. To fully understand the role of Middle Eastern women, Krause urges scholars to focus not just on the government's formal structures, but also to pay attention to civil society and investigate how beliefs, values, and everyday practices both expand it and advance democratic values.

Focusing on Egypt, the author carefully details the political, economic, and historical experiences of Egyptian women. She identifies poverty and illiteracy as the most oppressive problems. Discriminatory laws and norms, underrepresentation in politics, and the patriarchal interpretation of Islam have exacerbated these problems. Although reforms have improved women's rights – the 2004 reforms raised the marriage age to 18 and banned FGM – discrimination is still present in other areas of the law: women are not allowed to extend Egyptian citizenship to their husbands and children, lenient sentences are given in honor killings, discriminatory divorce laws are unchanged, and such

abusive practices as travelers' and *'urfi* (unofficial) marriages continue. Coptic women face further discrimination because of their religion.

In this authoritarian and discriminatory context, private volunteer organization (PVOs) work to advance women's rights. Egypt has about 30,000 PVOs – one-third of the total number of such associations in the Arab world (p. 132). Krause selects five secular and five Islamic PVOs to study them in detail (The book includes meticulous, if lengthy, descriptions of the difficulties of her field research.).

These organizations contribute to the expansion of civil society and thus democratization by empowering women (p. 115). Women in these organizations do not articulate a democratic theory, but their practices, which cultivate "toleration, trust, reciprocity, cooperation, and compassion," are crucial in building democratic foundations (p. 123). These values are "likely to lead to a more inclusive, transparent, and tolerant society" that supports (the development of) democracy (p. 125). She argues that "The state cannot operate as a democracy without a democratic culture" (ibid.). These organizations essentially weave the fabric of democratic culture.

They also implement democracy-in-practice. Krause details how volunteers and staff deliberate, vote, negotiate, build consensus, and socialize women to a pluralist and inclusive mindset: "They foster 'civility,' which encompasses tolerance, cooperation, trust, and reciprocity" (p. 126). Krause is not blind to the problems within these organizations; she notices that an authoritarian ethos also occasionally appears (p. 131) and notes that the rank-and-file volunteers appeal to *shūrā* (consultation) to check it (p. 129).

Furthermore, these organizations empower women. According to the author, poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy are the greatest concerns in Egypt and, as in other developing countries, women are empowered if these problems are addressed. Since these problems are tied up with various social, economic, ideological, religious, and political structures, feminist rights-based activism's excessive, if not exclusive, focus on rising women's statute vis-à-vis the state and men is too narrow – if not misplaced – in working to empower women. Both secular and Islamic PVOs target these oppressive structures in an overlapping and complementary manner, rather than just focusing on the political (pp. 157-59). The work that Egyptian women have done in the civil society sphere to target the multifaceted oppressive structures has yielded significant and sustainable political outcomes (p. 151). Taking a broad definition of power, Krause argues that even realizing that one is not powerless and recognizing the oppressive forces are forms of power, as this awareness often leads to sociopolitical activism and the expansion of civil society.

One idea that figures prominently in her analysis is *khayr* (doing good deeds in divine service). Grounded in Islamic moral ethics, this is the belief that since God created them, people are dignified beings and an individual should therefore strive for a dignified life for oneself, family, and community. Any action toward these ends is *khayr* (p. 173). According to Krause, this logic enhances the role of women immensely because it elevates them from being agents of physical reproduction to being agents holistic reproduction: It asks women to strive for an improved life for themselves, their families, and communities.

Krause innovatively argues that mobilizing for doing *khayr* is not a protest-oriented or rights-based action that demands receiving rights and holding others accountable, but a duty-based action that demands giving out of one's love of God and holding oneself accountable to God (pp. 174-76). As such, doing *khayr* is endless and transformative (viz., it emphasizes women's agency). Last, it is also democratizing because "the act of giving one's time, money, or other resources" produces civility in society by facilitating "a political culture of generosity" and sharing (p. 177). Although *khayr* is essentially an Islamic moral teaching, it has such a powerful appeal in Egyptian society that even secular organizations frame much of their activism as "doing *khayr*" (p. 181).

Not all women's activism is done through formal PVOs. Krause argues that Egyptian women's activism on the Internet and through social media has been significant. The digital revolution, combined with ongoing state scrutiny and oppression, has caused women to turn to cyberactivism. Besides establishing a forum for women to voice their discontent, blogging influences the priorities of women's PVO networks. For example, online chatter about sexual harassment has caused several groups to become more active in combating it. As the Arab Spring showed, social media was critical and women activists were particularly visible in this forum (p. 219).

This is an important and timely book for both gender and Middle East experts. Scholars of social movements and Islamic politics will also find it useful. The book offers an important critique of feminist literature's conceptual and methodological shortcomings in studying Middle Eastern women. The concept of *khayr* is particularly powerful in linking Islamic moral teachings to activism and the development of civil society. More generally, as Krause illustrates, *khayr* is a moral teaching with significant sociopolitical implications that can provide a better vantage point to scholars when studying Muslim societies and social movements than previously provided by political Islamists.

Turan Kayaoglu

Associate Professor of International Relations, Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences
University of Washington, Tacoma, WA