

The State of Egyptian Gender Relations  
The Intersection of Culture, Aid, and the Millennium  
Development Goals

In 2000, the United Nations spearheaded their newest, target-specific development agenda - the Millennium Development Goal. The “MDGs” outlined the eight specific goals that agencies and organizations concerned with development, poverty-reduction, and improved social relations should target in low-performing states<sup>1</sup>. A hallmark of this new initiative within the realm of development was its expanded attention to political and social conditions, and not simply on states’ economic statistics and performances. Despite “development” having been around for several decades, at the time the MDGs were implemented, there existed many critiques of international aid’s ineffectiveness, foreign development aid serving the interests of the donor state and not necessarily the receiving state, a lack of meaningful progress in reducing the conditions and effects of poverty, etc. Unlike many preceding development strategies, the Millennium Development Goals outlined specific targets in eight separate categories considered to be highly relevant and critical in reducing global suffering. Furthermore, within each individual goal, specific expectations were expressed in order to create an internationally appropriate blueprint for all states to abide by. The final stipulation strengthening the developmental value of the MDGs was a stated timeline. The eight goals and their conditional specifics were not to exist as a lofty ideal for states to try and achieve “someday in the future,” rather, they were challenged to raise their countries’ standards to meet the targets by 2015.

### **Gender and the MDGs:**

Because the Millennium Development Goals attack a wide breadth of issues, some states who considered themselves to be well-developed economically speaking, perhaps face

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<sup>1</sup> “Low-performing” in this sense refers to a type of state whose political, economic, and social conditions engender inequitable distributions, lack of freedoms, institutional and socially practiced barriers, poverty, poor health standards, low education and literacy rates, etc.

challenges in political freedoms and mobility. Considering the MDGs cover economic, political, and social measures, states cannot hide behind their strengths in one area and pass themselves as off as a fine performing state. A signature element of the MDGs implemented in 2000 was the issue of gender. Gender relations, inequities, and differences in freedoms, mobility, opportunity, access, and power between males and females had been an issue largely left out of development projects, and in some cases these issues were even exacerbated by them. With the implementation of the MDGs, gender relations were finally included on the agenda and used as an indicator of state performance, and positioned in importance next to economic and political factors.

Specifically, MDG 2, 3, and 5 addresses women's roles, rights, and improved statuses. Millennium Development Goal 2 is set to, "Achieve universal primary education;" Goal 3 is set to, "Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women;" and Goal 5 is set to, "Improve maternal health" (United Nations, 2009). Although Goals 3 and 5 are more obviously targeted specifically towards women and "gender" specific issues, Goal 2 also hold significance for gender relations, particularly girls. Although the Goal states its target as reaching *universal* primary education standards (implying both girls and boys), girls have traditionally experienced far lower rates of school enrollment than their male counterparts, especially in the Third World<sup>2</sup>. Beyond the stated Goals, each of the eight have specific targets to serve as more concrete and definable measurements to gauge program effectiveness. For Goal 2, the Targets include, "Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary

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<sup>2</sup> When situated in this context girls are often unable to attend school for a variety of cultural and economic reasons. Economically, it is thought that girls are more useful and valuable staying at home and helping with domestic needs (cooking, cleaning, etc.), or laboring to supplement family income (growing food, selling at markets, etc.). Also, girls are often unable to attend school because they and their families cannot afford school fees. If the family can afford to send a child to school, it generally is a boy as the perception is that the boy will have a better chance of skilled, formal employment than a girl. Cultural norms and values also contribute to male/female education disparities as gendered roles and expectations are iterated.

schooling<sup>3</sup>”; for Goal 3 the Target is, “Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015<sup>4</sup>”; and Goal 5 Target is, “Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio,” as well as “Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health<sup>5</sup>” (UN MDGs, 2008).

The objective of this paper is to analyze Egypt’s relationship to progress in development, and specifically progress in gender relations. Using the second, third, and fifth Millennium Development Goals, Egypt’s progress will be tracked, revealing its strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness in achieving MDG specified gender equity targets. The main actors examined in this study are those with the greatest ability to achieve change in gender/development issues in the state of Egypt - the United States as the major aid donor (and therefore potentially capable of influencing how aid funds are spent), and the Egyptian government as the major policy-making body responsible for aid distribution to various national programs and initiatives, law enactment, national awareness and campaigning, etc. Considering evidence gleaned from statistical analysis, it is argued that as a nation, Egypt is making significant progress in improving gendered access to education and specific types of health care (most significantly, maternal health). While success in these areas are suggestive that Egypt will likely achieve Millennium Development Goal 2 and 5 by 2015, MDG 3 will likely not be reached. According to various statistics, women continue to hold little political might and influence (as represented by a lack of women parliament members and government officials). Furthermore, despite women having improved

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, monitored figures will include, “Net enrollment ration in primary education,” “proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach last grade of primary,” and, “literacy rate of 15-24 year-olds, women and men.” (UN MDGs, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Also of significance in this target is the inclusion to improve, “Ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education”; “Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector”; and, “Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments” (UN MDGs, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Target 5 also includes, “Maternal mortality ratio”; “Proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel”; “Contraceptive prevalence rate”; “Adolescent birth rate”; “Antenatal care coverage”; and, “Unmet need for family planning” (UN MDGs, 2008).

access to formal employment, the gap existing between the genders remains significant (particularly in technical jobs, high-skilled jobs, non-agricultural sectors, and high-paying fields)<sup>6</sup>. The role of the United States as a major aid donor and persistent cultural values and norms exist as possible variables contributing to the degrees of progress in gendered development initiatives throughout Egypt.

### **Egypt's Progress Towards Achieving the MDGs:**

Since the Millennium Development Goals were initiated in 2000, various agencies and organizations have assumed the responsibility of tracking and monitoring regional and national progress towards reaching the established development goals. Hoping to have the goals reached by the year 2015, data collected from 2008 serves as a good mid-program indicator, determining each country's ability in progressing towards the stated goals, and the probability of their success in fully achieving them within the established timeframe. Upon analyzing the figures and data collected, both successes and weaknesses were identified in Egypt's overall efforts in reaching gender-specific MDGs levels. It is likely that Egypt will achieve MDG 2 and 5, which addresses education and health gender equity, but unlikely that Egypt will achieve MDG 3 by the stated target date of 2015.

Analyzing data, statistics, and population percentages included in the Egyptian United Nations Millennium Development Goals Indicators database, progress in achieving gender-specific goals was tracked from the inception of the MDGs program in 2000, up through the year 2008. The indicators examined may be divided into education, health, economic/employment, and political sectors. As noted earlier, the greatest progress Egypt has made in achieving the

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<sup>6</sup> The study's findings revealed varying degrees of gender equity between rural and urban populations. Figures from rural areas tended to show greater disparity between men and women in all areas. For the purposes of this paper however, in the discussion and conclusions, there will be no distinction made between rural and urban gender gaps, only gender relations as a national whole.

MDGs in gender-related issues is in the education and health sectors. Education shows the greatest improvement and best display of gender gap reduction. Through initiatives such as the Presidential Election Program, New School Program, and various NGO efforts, Egyptian girls and boys now have a near 100% enrollment in primary school (in 1999, 96.4% of girls were enrolled in primary education and in 2008 registered at 97.6%; in 1999 boys were at 99.8% enrollment and in 2008 that remained steady at 99.8%). Literacy rates are also very telling of the progress Egypt has made in opening educational opportunities to women. The literacy rate rate for women went up from 66.9% in 1996, to 81.8% in 2007<sup>7</sup> (the rate for men also went up from 79% in 1996, to 87.9%).<sup>8</sup>

The next sector of society where Egypt shows success in achieving gender-specific MDGs, is in health care. The most impressive, and telling statistics of Egypt's success in MDG 5 is the significant reduction of maternal mortality (only 130 out of 100,000 in 2005), and increased proportion of births attended by skilled personnel (registering at 78.9% in 2008 up from 55.2% in 1998). Also of relevance, more women received antenatal care (73.8% in 2008 up from 47.2% in 1998), lower birth rates, and more access to contraceptive and family planning tools.

Despite progress in MDGs 2 and 5, not as much progress as been made in improving women's access to non-agricultural, private, and high-paying employment, or political influence (as represented by the national parliamentary positions). Using parliament seat figures as an indicator of equitable political power in Egypt, it appears that women play a minimal role.

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<sup>7</sup> Further showing the improvements Egypt has made in improving education for women is the literacy level for women over 50, which is close to 55%. The 81% literacy rate for younger women (ages 15-24) is a vast improvement from their older counterparts (Chase, El-Saharty, Richardson, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Despite increases in women's education, like the case in Bolivia, this does not equate to increases in women's employment opportunities. Increased education and literacy is not to be dismissed in the case of non-complementing employment figures as it can be an important and valuable tool capable of enhancing women's power (as exemplified by the "Arak Wars" in the southeast region of India)

Despite the inclusion of a thirty-seat-female quota established by the People's Assembly in 1970s (which in 1986 helped foster a 30-woman contingent in Parliament), such gender initiatives have since been disbanded and Egypt has seen a decline in women's participation in parliament. In 1997, only two national parliament seats were held by women. By 2009, that number had fallen to only 1.8.

While the government has failed to provide equitable power distributions between men and women in parliamentary representation, they have made efforts to increase equitable gender employment practices. Since the MDGs began in 2000, increases in numbers of women employed in government administration rose (more so than male figures). Although this suggests that the Egyptian government is making an attempt to abide by the stipulations of MDG 5's gender employment qualifications, the trend has not trickled into the private sector, or the non-agricultural sector. Women, as they do in most Third World settings, largely find "employment" in the non-mechanized agricultural sector (this work can either be included in formal or informal economic considerations) (in 2006, only 18% of non-agricultural employment was held by women). Furthermore, women experience significantly higher levels of unemployment (5.1% unemployment rate for men, and a 19.4% unemployment rate for women), and when they are able to access a job, they often struggle with issues relative to the "triple burden" of formally employed women (Weiss, 2009).

### **United States Aid: A Help or a Hindrance?**

In bulk figures, the United States of America is the leading country in the distribution of international aid (in dollar amounts) (Shah, 2009). Topping the list of American-aid receiving countries over the past few years has been Iraq, Israel and Egypt. Aid to Iraq has significantly increased since Americans engaged in the war and proceeding development agenda there, but for

Israel and Egypt, the United States has been a longtime, and generous donor of aid. Israel often ranks at the top of the list for American aid distribution, but Egypt's annual aid package is rarely far behind in valued amounts. Because of the close American/Egyptian partnership in aid relations, Egypt seemingly has been presented with an incredible opportunity in the international system to channel that aid into beneficial and advantageous projects. So what happens to American aid in Egypt, and after nearly 30 years of receiving significant amounts of American aid, why is Egypt still struggling with issues of poverty, unemployment, poor health, lack of education, lack of political freedoms, and other issues represented in the MDG initiative?

In 1975, with the initiation of a "development partnership" (USAID History, 2009) the United States emerged as *the* major contributor of aid to Egypt. According to USAID, the American agency responsible for most development and aid packages, acknowledges that by the end of the 1970s, "In recognition of Egypt pre-eminent leadership role in the Middle East, the United States significantly expanded its assistance program, making Egypt the beneficiary of one of the largest American assistance programs worldwide" (USAID History, 2009). Although American aid to Egypt has consistently targeted public development projects (including projects to expand water distribution, expansion and built efficiencies in agricultural production, electric power infrastructural improvements, telecommunications expansion, port facility improvements, as well as health and education expansions), much of the aid awarded to Egypt seems to have goals straying from altruistic interests in development and poverty-alleviation.

As stated above, the United States had an interest in fostering a positive and friendly relationship with the regional leader, but for what reason? From a closer examination of how aid is distributed in Egypt, it becomes more clear that the United States sees Egypt as a strategic partner in international activities. One of USAID's first achievements through its aid distribution

in Egypt was a program that succeeded in restoring and reopening the Suez Canal (considered one of the world's most essential commercial waterways, connecting the Gulf region with Mediterranean waters and thus, European and American markets). Did an increase in American dependence on energy imports from and economic ties with the Gulf region stand as the major motivator for the project, or was it carried out in the interest of increasing Egyptian national revenue (and foreign exchange) from passage fees?

Another interesting insight into the possible motivations of heavy American aid packages to Egypt lies in the distribution of the amount of dollars certain programs receive. Since the close aid relationship developed between the two countries in the 1970s, there has been an estimated \$28-\$60 billion (USD) exchanged in aid from the United States to Egypt (Alterman, 2006; Levinson, 2004; USAID, 2006). The most striking feature of the annual aid packages averaging between \$1.5 billion and \$2.5 billion is the heavy distribution to military aid. Every year, well over half of the total American aid package to Egypt is devoted military spending. In 2004, one scholar noted that out of the recent average \$2.1 billion that the United States gives to Egypt in aid, \$1.3 billion is contributed to military spending, while the remaining \$815 million is put towards economic, social, and political development (Levinson, 2004). Although \$815 million is a significant amount of money to put towards improving development conditions (and in fact, is much more than most countries receive in total aid),<sup>9</sup> imagine the progress Egypt could make in achieving, or even surpassing the Millennium Development Goals if all of the military spending was instead transferred to public works, campaigning for social change, bolstering civil

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<sup>9</sup> To put into context, in 2004, Egypt ranked third on a list of top recipients of US aid with \$2.1 billion (Iraq was first with nearly \$18.4 billion, and Israel second with \$2.7 billion). Behind Egypt, the fourth highest recipient of US aid was Colombia, which got only \$540 million - only about two thirds of the non-military aid Egypt received. Although military spending dominates the Egyptian aid package, it should be noted that without it, Egypt would have remained in the 3rd highest position on the list in development assistance alone.

society, job creation, or improved health standards. Because the United States is generous with its aid distribution in Egypt outside of the military sector, it is reasonable that Egypt is making more concerted progress towards achieving the MDGs than many other countries, but the *potential* progress the country could be making with a refocusing of aid priority is the most striking caveat.

With its significant contribution to the overall wealth and economic health of Egypt, one might believe that the United States may have some say in determining how the money is spent, to which programs the money is contributed to, and to what ends the money is intended for. The debate over whether or not the United States should enforce conditionalities on its aid to Egypt has emerged as a point of contention. Contemporary problems impeding progress on positive change in Egypt (both within the scope of the MDGs as well as issues beyond the eight goals) include issues of political restrictions, religious restrictions and discriminations, inequitable access to health care, education, and viable employment, violence, and specific to this paper, inequitable gender relations. Although some issues, particularly gender issues, are dependent on changing cultural values and societal norms (which can be difficult to implement and monitor through institutional, top-down governmental activity), could the United States in some way condition their aid to become dependent on realized progress made in Egypt's success in opening up and freeing societal, economic, and political conditions? Whether or not conditionalities should be placed on American aid to Egypt has been debated nearly every year, especially since 2002 when the US National Security Strategy articulated a new aid doctrine which stated that money should only go to, "countries whose governments rule justly, invest in their people, and encourage economic freedom" (Levinson, 2004). If the United States did impart a condition,

that to receive aid, Egypt had to take more aggressive strides in reducing gender divisions,<sup>10</sup> it may be predicted that Egypt would have a very strong incentive to make those changes rather than lose such significant amounts of wealth, capital, and economic capacity delivered through American aid.

As referenced above, it may be argued that, although USAID is actively engaged in projects addressing MDGs issues (including gender relations), the United States has other interests motivating its significant aid distribution to Egypt. Perhaps a reason why conditionalities are not imparted on Egyptian aid is the fact that if the government and/or people failed to embrace the conditions stipulated by the United States, the United States would then be obliged to restrict its aid - both developmental and militaristic. As one author noted, "Aid is central to Washington's relationship with Cairo...The money is seen as bolstering Egypt's stability, support for US policies in the region, US access to the Suez Canal, and peace with Israel" (Levinson, 2004). In this light, it seems as if US security and geo-political interests trump developmental goals, and greatly influences the distribution of its aid. Furthering this sentiment, Edward Walker, the US ambassador to Egypt from 1994 to 1998 said, "US aid has been ineffective at changing economic policy here because Cairo knows that in the end it will get the US money regardless of its economic policy" (Levinson, 2004).

Considering the prime objectives behind US aid to Egypt, is the money furthering or stymieing Egypt's progress towards reaching the MDGs? In many ways, given the efforts and successes seen through various USAID programs to improve infrastructure, electric and water service, educational and health initiatives, etc., one may agree that US aid is helping progress

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<sup>10</sup> Possible projects may include laws for greater political leadership positions held by women only; greater access for women to receive important, gender specific health care; intensify punishment and prevention of female genital mutilation, domestic violence, and other sorts of abuse; open up equitable employment opportunities in non-agricultural, public, and private sectors, etc.

Egypt's development towards accomplishing the MDGs. However, considering the potential changes which could be made if the total \$2.1 billion average aid package was devoted only to development goals instead of military spending and security concerns, or conditions were placed on the American aid given to Egypt, it seems that the United States' role in significantly encouraging MDGs compliance is only mediocre.

### **The Culture Variable:**

Within the realm of social and gender development issues (as relative to the MDGs) the United States presents itself as a relatively disengaged and impartial aid donor. Although it may be argued that the United States may be able to do more to improve gender relations in Egypt, it is not American aid that is at the heart of gender disparities in Egypt. Much research has pointed to the role of culture and social values as the major impediment for Egypt to overcome in its attempts to achieve MDG 3, *the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women*. Considered a member of the Middle East/Northern Africa region, like its neighbors and regional members, Egypt shares a strong cultural link to the Arab and Muslim heritage. Although there is no mandate in the Qur'an or Arabic state legislature, culturally, there exists heavy patriarchal tendencies, male-dominant behaviors (socially, politically, economically, and thus powerfully), and acknowledged divisions of appropriate gender roles throughout much of the Middle East/Northern Africa region. Perhaps due to its friendly ties with the United States and Western nations, higher levels of education and economic health, and other such factors which distinguish Egypt from some of its regional neighbors, the country has more "progressive"<sup>11</sup> tendencies<sup>12</sup>. Reflecting on requisite conditions for meaningful change in gender gap targets, one article read,

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<sup>11</sup> The term "progressive" is used cautiously. Admittedly "progressive" and "conservative" are not necessarily the most appropriate terms to use in attempts to reference varying degrees of cultural norms, freedoms, religious ideologies, etc.

“Traditions and attitudinal barriers are important impediments to enhancing the status of women in Egypt and to their ability to participate in their country’s economic and political life as full and equal citizens. To overcome these cultural constraints and develop an environment supportive of women, a major governmental and non-governmental effort is required to change behavioral patterns and values. Interventions should..focus on changing the perception of women’s role in society from marginal to essential...” (Chase, El-Saharty and Richardson; 2005).

Although the government can easily reform policies and enact laws to open opportunities of education and health to women and men alike, it is probably more difficult to implement meaningful changes in peoples’ cultural and societal beliefs. The difficulty women have in breaking out of their informal, domestic roles and into formal employment (beyond the government provided jobs who has the ability to regulate gender quotas in their employment practices), and in getting elected to political positions reveals the remaining power of underlying cultural perceptions. It is the presence of such cultural values that present the biggest impediment to Egypt’s ability to lay significant inroads in achieving all of the gender-related Millennium Development Goals.

## **Conclusion**

Analyzing data, statistics, and figures collected in Egypt between the late 1990s up to the present day has revealed the country’s varied success in achieving the United Nation’s development strategy - the Millennium Development Goals. Specifically examining gender-specific goals, it seems likely that by 2015 Egypt will continue its progress in equalizing the numbers of literate and educated girls and boys and achieve a near-100% rating. Furthermore, Egypt has shown great progress in increasing maternal health, as determined by the stipulations set forth in MDG 5. As numbers of women made available to antenatal treatment, contraceptive and family planning resources, and medical professionals at the time of birth, maternal mortality rates have declined and more mothers have a positive outlook on their health choices. Despite

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, in the past Egyptian laws have regulated and protected women’s participation and access to parliamentary positions, rights to vote, access to education and employment, etc.

these successes, for Egypt to achieve a “passing score” for MDG 3, more work is necessary. Increased efforts need to be made to allow more women into positions of political influence, and equitable job distribution in the private and non-agricultural sectors must also be expanded upon. The government, as the main aid distributing entity, may be able to expand upon their initiatives to increase women’s political voice and employment opportunities. The United States may also impose some sort of aid conditionality to increase Egyptian will to embrace gender equity. Regardless of what top-down efforts are made, cultural and societal changes must also be established for meaningful change in Egyptian gender relations. As a mid-program report, it seems as if Egypt is capable, and in some regards, on its way to achieving the United Nations gender-related Millennium Development Goals. Although more can be done, in the case of Egypt, the MDGs seem to have exerted a positive influence on resolving some existing gender issues within the country

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