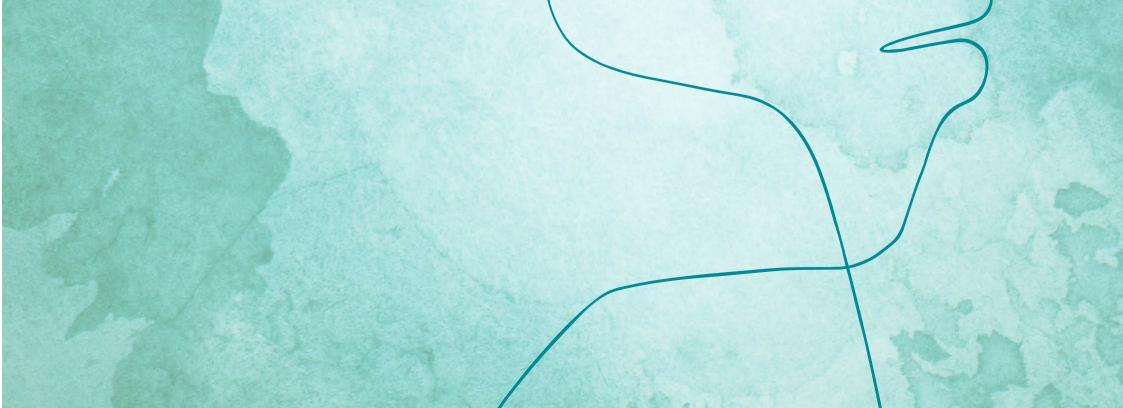




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# Women, Politics, and the Public Sphere: The Evolving Perspective of the Muslim Brotherhood

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## Introduction

I start with a quote from the *Introduction to a Reader on Islamist Thought*: "Many of the voices herein reflect the fact that most Islamist ideologues and activists are male, yet women have become an increasingly crucial part of the [Islamist] movement (Euben and Zaman, 2009, p. 1).

This paper examines the evolving perspective of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) on the rights of women, and women's roles in politics and the public sphere. Limitations of space necessitate a narrow focus on the views of just four prominent contemporary Islamist scholars with strong ties to the MB: Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) who founded the Movement, Sayyed Qutb (1906-1966) the renowned radical thinker, Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917-1996), and Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926- ).

Soon after its formation in Egypt in 1928, the MB became a fixture in Egyptian politics and society, despite persistent government repression for most of its history (Gerges, 2018; Rosefsky Wickham, 2013). The MB also established footholds in most Arab countries. Hassan al-Banna's stance on women's rights was quite conservative, leading some of his prominent followers, including Qaradawi, to characterize it as overly restrictive. While women played a significant role in the life of Sayyid Qutb, his position on women's rights was close to that of al-Banna. Al-Ghazali adopted a more accommodative posture, expanding the provisions on the rights of women in the Guiding Principles of the Movement and penning a work on the status of women in Islam.

Among the four surveyed scholars, Qaradawi adopted the most "progressive" outlook, addressing at some length what he considered the rights of women in Islam and their role in politics and the public sphere. A close examination of Qaradawi's discourse, however, reveals that his stance was conservative and in line with the Islamic tradition, albeit with some limited but significant adaptations to modern realties.

This paper contends that the above scholars, while emphasizing the intrinsic equality between men and women, subscribed to a gendered view of politics and society. They adhered to the traditional notion that the biological differences between men and women rendered each gender more fit to certain occupations and certain roles in society.

Painting with broad strokes, men are the providers, doing most of the physical work and bearing primary responsibility for the upkeep of the household and the running of society. Women are the nourishers. They have primary responsibility for raising children and providing male members of the family with advice, emotional support, and financial support when needed. But in the absence of the male adult, the financial responsibility falls on the woman who is then expected to provide for the family including through work outside the home. As Euben and Zaman note, in the view of the majority of Islamists, and this definitely applies to the four authors discussed in this paper, "men and women are equal in religious belief but perform fundamentally different and complementary functions in society" (Euben and Zaman, 2009, p. 36)

This gendering of roles is also reflected in the MB organization. Men have always held leadership positions in the Movement, with women playing important supporting roles. Almost from the outset, Muslim Brotherhood female activists, such as the famous Zaynab al-Ghazali (1917-2005), immersed themselves in the dense solidarity networks formed by the Movement. They played pivotal roles in the Movement, especially when the men were in prison or in hiding. Thus, despite its conservative ideology, and its narrow construct of women's rights, the MB and its theorists reached out to women with some effectiveness. Its main intellectual adherents addressed, to varying degrees, women's rights and their public role in light of their own traditional—albeit not rigid—understanding of the *shari'a*. Equally important, these theorists and ideologues realized the need to win over women to their worldview and to mobilize them in the political and public arenas. This need for the support of women increased following the Movement's immersion in electoral politics by the late 1970s and 1980s.

Clearly, the MB's approach to women's issues and gender relations has little in common with the approach of radical Islamist movements, such as Al-Qaeda and its successors. It is also more accommodating of the physical, psychological, and social needs of women than Wahhabism is.

Following a brief section on the views of al-Banna, I turn to the views of Qutb. I then provide a more detailed discussion of the perspectives of Ghazali and Qaradawi who devoted more attention to women issues than al-Banna and Qutb, while adopting more accommodative views.

#### Hassan al-Banna

There is no mention of issues of women and gender in the original twenty principles of the Muslim Brotherhood, which al-Banna drafted. Al-Banna subscribed to the traditional view that the biological and psychological makeup of women was fundamentally different from that of men. In this perspective, women are naturally predisposed to be supportive companions to their husbands and nourishing mothers to their children. Women and men have a joint responsibility to maintain a healthy and amicable atmosphere at home that would solidify the familial bond, while providing children with an Islamic education and upbringing. The home is the natural habitat of the woman where she can devote herself to her "natural" roles as a wife and a mother.

Al-Banna argued against women working outside of the home and recommended that women pray at home rather than at the mosque. He did not deem it appropriate for women to mix with strange men in the public sphere and to engage in politics. More broadly, al-Banna rejected a gender perspective—which he believed was a product of Western culture—in favor of a family perspective that was founded on Islamic precepts (E3tidal, 2018). Here, I must point to a disjuncture between the rhetoric of al-Banna and his actual conduct as the founder of the nascent Muslim Brotherhood. We do know that al-Banna reached out to a woman activist, Zaynab al-Ghazali, and tried to persuade her to merge the Association of Muslim Ladies that she headed with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Zaynab Al-Ghazali resisted the offer for ten years in order to maintain an independent sphere of action until she formally joined the Movement in 1948, shortly before al-Banna's assassination. A woman of strong character, unshakeable and conservative Islamic beliefs and considerable energy, Zaynab became a key player within the embattled Muslim Brotherhood movement. Rejecting feminist ideology as a product of Western culture, she shared al-Banna's belief that the family is the basic unit of an Islamic society; and that for the Muslim Brotherhood to make inroads into Egyptian society it needed loyal and dedicated men and loyal women.

At the practical level, al-Ghazali was in charge of the dense solidarity networks that the MB founded to support the families of imprisoned men. During Sayyid Qutb's imprisonment, she along with Qutb's sisters, Amina and Hamida, would smuggle his papers out of jail so that they could be disseminated and published. I cannot do justice here to the thought and political activism of Zaynab al-Ghazali. This has been covered by several academics, such as Miriam Cooke, Lamia Rustom Shehadeh, Leila Ahmad, Roxane Euben, and Margot Badran. Suffice it to say here that women were instrumental in the Muslim Brotherhood from its founding and until today. There is a disjuncture, though, between women's active participation in the Movement and their rather limited contribution to its thought and ideology. Consequently, most studies on the MB have focused on the men in the movement and not the women. This opens the door for in-depth, empirical, inquiries into women's participation and activism within the Muslim Brotherhood. I next turn to the similar views of Sayyid Qutb.

## Sayyid Qutb

Despite the major role that his mother and sisters played in his life, Qutb's perspective on women mirrored that of al-Banna. In his famous work *Al-'Adala al-Ijtima'iyya fi al-Islam* (Social Justice in Islam), Qutb reiterates the traditional Islamic stance towards women. Qutb's starting point is that in the spiritual and the religious realms, men and women are equal. Qutb bases this intrinsic equality on verses 4:123, 16:99 and 3:193 of the Qur'an (Qutb, 2000, p. 73). This intrinsic equality in the eyes of God does

not translate though to material equality. Qutb defends the inequality between men and women in inheritance by referring to men's greater responsibility with regards to the upkeep of the family. Qutb also assumes that men will have greater wealth than women have because they can devote themselves to work outside the home. Qutb's highly paternalistic attitude towards women is reflected in multiple passages such as in the lines below:

A woman is preoccupied for most of her life by the cares of the family. The result is that these responsibilities promote in women growth in the direction of emotions and the sentiment, while in men growth is promoted in the direction of reflection and thought. So, when man is made to oversee woman, it is by reason of physical nature and custom that this ordinance stands. (Qutb, 2000, p. 74)

He is referring here specifically to verse 4:34, "Men are legally responsible for women inasmuch God has preferred some over others in bounty, and because of what they spend from their wealth." Nonetheless, Qutb is cognizant of the basic rights of women under Islam in terms of inheritance, giving consent before marriage, and keeping control over their own wealth, while maintaining an independent identity. Equally important, Qutb emphasizes the right, indeed the duty of women, to seek education. (Qutb, 2000, pp. 76). The right to education, however, does not extend to the right to work outside the home (except when there is a need), to associate with strange men, and to serve in the public arena on equal par with men. While aware that under certain circumstances women need to seek gainful employment (i.e., to provide for the family in the absence of a male adult), Qutb sees this work as a burden on women and not as a right. Qutb, as most Islamists, rails against the status of women in the West. He sees in the work of women in the West a commodification of sex and the exploitation of women. (Qutb, 2000, pp. 76-77).

For Qutb, Western women were compelled to work because men would not or could not spend on them. Their work drove down wages and they were lured into sectors that exploited their sexuality thus dishonoring them and endangering their chastity (Qutb, 2000, pp. 76–77). Broadly, for Qutb men and women have different roles and different duties in society. This does not entail that one gender is superior to the other or that certain roles are more important than others are. But clearly, Qutb sees the gendering of roles in society as both natural and as affirmed by the Qur'an.

## Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali

A prolific author, Muhammad al-Ghazali addressed women's issues in several of his writings. To start with, not content with al-Banna's failure to address the rights of women, and other important matters, in the 20 guiding principles of the MB, al-Ghazali augmented these principles with ten of his own. The first of these ten principles concerned women. It affirmed that women are the sisters of men (*al-nisa' shaqaeq al-rijal*), that it is their duty, as it is the duty of men, to seek education and more broadly knowledge, and to enjoin the good and forbid the vice (*al-amr bi al-ma'arouf wa al-nahi 'an almunkar*). Women also have the right to participate in the building and protection of society, within the parameters of Islamic ethics. The second principle concerns the family. It affirms the joint responsibility of men and women to establish a healthy relationship between them while reiterating the traditional stance that the man is the head of the family and his responsibilities towards the family are determined by what God legislated. (Qaradawi, 2000, p. 34).

In his principal work on women's issues, *Qadaya al-Mar'a bayn al-Taqaleed al-Rakida wa al-Wafida* (Women's Issues between Stagnant Traditions and Newly Arrived Ones), al-Ghazali states that the Qur'an is clear that "humanity flies with two wings, men and women." (Al-Ghazali, 2006, p. 6) Al-Ghazali underscores the intrinsic equality of men and women despite certain biological and psychological differences (Al-Ghazali, 2006, pp. 15–16). For al-Ghazali, women are imprisoned by two forces: ignorance of the teachings of Islam and poverty (Al-Ghazali, 2006, pp. 17–19). Restoring women

to the status that the Qur'an intended for them requires overcoming the accumulated weight of tradition and returning to the original spirit of Islam (AI-Ghazali, 2006, pp. 16, 30–31). While the primary responsibility of a woman is towards her family, she should have the right to work, especially when her income is needed for the maintenance of the family, to voice her opinion on public matters, and to participate in the public arena, including in the political life of the community. But the most fundamental right of a woman is to receive an education that would help her overcome poverty and ignorance (AI-Ghazali, 2006, pp. 60–61). AI-Ghazali nevertheless adheres to the traditional view that certain types of work are not suitable for women because they are physically weaker than men are (AI-Ghazali, 2006, pp. 39-40). This alleged physical weakness of women, however, does not extend to the intellectual and moral domains. Thus, in terms of their ability to think rationally and to decide morally, women are equal to men.

## Yusuf al-Qaradawi

Now in his nineties, Qaradawi is one of the best-known contemporary Islamist thinkers. He has had a lifelong association with the Muslim Brotherhood without ever holding a position of leadership within it. He is seen by many as the Movement's spiritual guide. Qaradawi has addressed women's rights and their public role in several works as well as on Al Jazeera's popular program, *al-Sharia wa al-Hayat* (the *Shari'a* and Life), of which he was a regular guest.

Qaradawi's stance on women's rights and gender relations is informed by his *wasati* (centrist) approach to Islamic jurisprudence which avoids both extremes of excessiveness (*tashdid*) and laxity (*tafrit*). In his first published work, *al-Halal wa al-Haram fi al-Islam* (The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam), Qaradawi discussed at some length what he considered to be the rights and duties of women under Islam. The work's main aim was to provide guidance to lay Muslim individuals, men and women, on how to conduct themselves at home and in public.

With regard to women, Qaradawi reiterated the traditional patriarchal stance that, at home, husbands have authority over their wives and unmarried daughters and are responsible for their wellbeing. Men are the ultimate decision makers at home; but women have every right to voice their views and concerns, and to offer advice to the men in charge. In a subsequent work, Qaradawi clarifies that the authority of the husband is confined to the home setting. At work, the wife can have authority over her husband if she is his superior, for example, if she is his director, or boss, at say a private company or a school (Qaradawi, 2011, p. 224)

In *Min Fiqh al-Dawla fi al-Islam* (The Jurisprudence of the State in Islam), Qaradawi addresses the public role of women (Qaradawi, 2011, pp. 217–241). Influenced by the ideas of al-Ghazali, and his own reading of Islamic sources, Qaradawi acknowledges the public role that women played during the life of the Prophet. Qaradawi emphasizes that the first martyr for the cause of Islam was a woman, Somaiya Um 'Ammar, who was tortured for her belief, while the first convert was Khadija, the Prophet's first wife (Qaradawi, 2011, p. 218).

Qaradawi underscores that, during the early Islamic period, women could freely address the Prophet and his successors with their concerns. Women could openly challenge certain decisions of caliphs, such as when a woman challenged Caliph 'Umar's decision, during a time of economic hardship, to set a ceiling on the amount of the *mahr*. The Caliph had to retract his decision, uttering the famous saying: "the woman was right and 'Umar was wrong." (Qaradawi, 2011, pp. 226, 229–230). The same caliph, Qaradawi points out, appointed a woman, *al-Shaffa*' bint 'Abdallah al- 'Adawiyya, to oversee the market (Qaradawi, 2011, p. 240). Qaradawi extrapolates from this to infer that women can hold public office (can have *wilyaya*) and thus can be in a position of authority over both men and women.

Getting to the contemporary period, Qaradawi approves of women running and getting elected to parliament as well as serving as ministers and as public servants (Qaradawi, 2011, pp. 217–223). He is

more equivocal when it comes to women serving as judges in cases that involve imprisonment and the possibility of capital punishment. After reviewing the conflicting opinions amongst Muslim jurists on whether certain areas of justice are to be restricted to men, Qaradawi ends up endorsing the opinion of none other than the famous Andalusian scholar Ibn Hazm, who did not exclude women from serving as judges in all cases (Qaradawi, 2011, p. 224). As for the position of "*ri'asa*" whether it is *ri'asat al-dawla* (head of state) or *ri'asat al-hukuma* (head of government or prime minister) Qaradawi vacillates but ultimately ends up recognizing that women can serve in these positions in government (Qaradawi, 2011, p. 224-225).

Despite the positive overtures to women, Qaradawi's discourse on women in politics remains quite conservative. Qaradawi introduces many nuances and caveats into the discussion. First, he notes that the women who rose to the highest positions in their states (he names Indira Gandhi, Golda Meier, and Margaret Thatcher) were exceptional women, operating in exceptional circumstances. More importantly, Qaradawi argues that unmarried women and women over fifty, who have already fulfilled their roles as mothers, are better fit to serve in parliament and government offices than younger women are (Qaradawi, 2011, p. 235).

Participation in politics is thus over and above what is expected of women; but when some qualified women believe that politics is their calling then there are no bases in the *shari'a* to deny them the right to participate. Qaradawi also introduces some "practical, but not so practical rules" about women serving in parliament, recommending that they be seated in separate rows to limit physical contact with their male counterparts (Qaradawi, 2011, p. 231). He further thinks that men will continue to constitute the overwhelming majority in parliaments (Qaradawi, 2011, p. 223).

## Conclusion

The divergent stances of al-Banna and Qutb, on the one hand, and al-Ghazali and Qaradawi, on the other, point to certain tensions and divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood regarding the participation of women in politics and their access to public forums and public space. Nonetheless, a careful look at the official discourse of the MB leadership indicates that its perspective on women's rights and women's public role evolved in the direction championed by al-Ghazali and Qaradawi, among others.

Pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood to participate in normal electoral politics, at least until the ousting of former Egyptian president Mohammad Morsi, pushed it to adopt a more accommodative stance towards women's issues and to appreciate the role that women activists and rank and file women supporters can play in elections and in sustaining the Movement's crucial solidarity networks. The MB's more accommodative stance should, however, be seen as emanating primarily from pragmatic considerations rather than ideological ones. In a movement like the MB, however, it is impossible to separate ideology from practical considerations.

In conclusion, one should not underestimate the role of women activists in the Muslim Brotherhood, from Zaynab al-Ghazali to Amina and Hamida Qutb<sup>1</sup> to Ola al-Qaradawi, the daughter of Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi.<sup>2</sup> These women shared the honor of having been imprisoned and sometimes tortured for their beliefs and activism. Equally important, one should explore the reasons behind the appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood, despite its conservative and patriarchal ideology, to broad strata of

<sup>1</sup> For brief references to the Qutb sisters, see, inter alia, Giedre Šabasevičiute, *Sayyid Qutb: An Intellectual Biography* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021), pp. 13, 83, 111, 115,125, 142, 148-151, 167-168. <sup>2</sup> For the imprisonment and release of Ola al-Qaradawi, see, inter alia, <u>https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211231-egypt-releases-ola-qaradawi-from-jail/;</u> <u>https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/08/egypt-renewed-detention-scholars-daughter-unlawful;</u> <u>https://dohanews.co/after-4-years-behind-bars-egypt-releases-prominent-scholars-daughter-ola-al-qaradawi/.</u> women from different ages and social classes.<sup>3</sup> To attribute this appeal to false consciousness, or false ideology, is over-simplistic, and indeed disrespectful towards the female activists and female supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For recent critiques of the Muslim Brotherhood patriarchal ideology, see, for example, Sarah A. Topol, "Feminism, Brotherhood Style Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood have their own take on women's liberation", https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/23/feminism-brotherhood-style/.

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