

Women in Egyptian Public Life

by Earl Sullivan

Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1986. 223 pages.

This book is a statistical survey of Egyptian women in the sectors of business and politics. Professor Sullivan's approach to this study is based on the fact that the class a woman is born into is a determinant factor of her activity and work in life. Women who come from the upper-middle class tend to choose the fields of business and politics for work while purely upper-class women choose the business field.

Women in Saudi Arabia

Ideology and Behaviour Among the Elite

by Soraya Al-Torki

Columbia University Press, New York, 1986. 183 pages.

This book is of enormous impact and interest although it is limited to the elite families of Jeddah, Ahl al-bilad (people of the country). Soraya's book focuses on the human dimension of the problems that face women. She uses in her book two important terms: ideology and strategy, or in other words ideology versus strategy.

The ideology is the traditional norms, women's sub-ordination and seclusion, marriage, inheritance, children. The strategy is the gentle process of change especially with the impact of education. According to *al-Torki*, her book describes the changing domains of discretion and constraint among the elite families of Jeddah.

Changing Faces of Egyptian Women

Nikki Keddie, Editor of *Women in the Muslim World* (1978), is Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles. In an article that appeared in the

Middle East, October 1986, she wrote about books that shed new light on the roles of women in modern Egypt.

Taken together, they suggest the progress which has been made since 1800 towards women's emancipation, as well as the difficulties which remain.

Judith Tucker's Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt (Cambridge University Press, Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Rd., Cambridge CB2 2RU; 268 pages, £25) deserves special mention as the first detailed work in English on the history of Middle Eastern women based on archive records.

The use of court records allows Tucker to show that many women went to court (or, if they were members of the élite, sent their representatives). The courts were inclined to accept their Islamic right to property and inheritance, but were severe on other issues, such as the right of a working mother to retain custody of a young child.

The book deals with poorer women, and more on the élite would have been welcome. It also deals with women's work, suggesting that work outside the home was far more common than many have thought. Tucker demonstrates the changing and disruptive impact of the world market and of internal economic change, which was dramatic from *Muhammad Ali* on.

The book would have benefited from an introduction summarising the position of Egyptian women before 1800, and from a more extensive conclusion. But it is a fine work which ought to inspire other specialist studies of the history of Muslim women, which are strangely lacking despite the widespread interest in women's studies.

Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist by Huda Sharawi, translated and introduced by Margot Badran (Virago Press, 41 William IV St, London WC2N 4DB; 192 pages, £6.95), is about an exceptional woman of the élite who became Egypt's leading feminist until her death in 1947 (her memoirs cover the years up to 1924).

Her boldness in living apart from a husband who continued to live with his first wife, in joining and addressing societies for women and in joining the nationalist struggle after World War I are themes of these memoirs.

Sharawi's life is put into perspective in Margot Badran's fine introduction. Because the memoirs deal with only part of her life, however, we must still await a full biography.

Nawal el-Saadawi's Memoirs from the Women's Prison, translated by Marilyn Booth (The Women's Press, 34 Great Sutton St., London EC1D 0DX; 128 pages, £3.95), concern her period of imprisonment, with many other Egyptians, in the autumn of 1981, during the last months of the Sadat regime.

The book is lively, touching and highly readable, making us re-live with the author the shock of arrest, the dirt and horror of jail, and the nagging uncertainty about when or whether she would be released.

The author gives vivid pictures of her fellow prisoners. Few of the political prisoners were intellectuals like herself, and many were Muslim women activists. Some were not political prisoners, like the gentle peasant woman driven by terrible circumstances to kill her husband.

The book reads like a good novel. It even has a fiction-like ending: Saadawi is taken from jail, whisked off to meet President Mubarak and then taken home. The author's respect and love for her outstanding husband, incidentally, serve as a reminder that being a leading feminist does not necessarily mean being against men.

The budding self-assertion of women depicted in the two other books comes to fruition in Saadawi's memoirs, where we learn what a variety of women think and what they do to find their place in a world which is difficult but not without its hope and joy.