

Volume 2: Chapter 9

Source 9.1

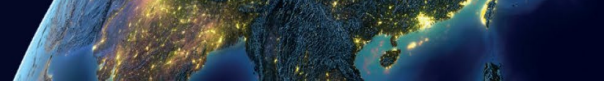
Qasim Amin on the “New Woman” (1900)

Qasim Amin was an Egyptian legal scholar, activist, and nationalist who advocated for Egypt’s modernization. He promoted education and was a founder of Cairo University. In 1899 he wrote The Liberation of Women, which brought issues of women’s rights into public discourse in Arab lands. In 1900 he took his argument further in The New Woman, which envisioned a new role for Egyptian women.

The new woman is one of the fruits of modern civilization. Her appearance in the West was a consequence of the scientific discoveries that freed the human mind from the powers of delusion, suspicion, and superstition, providing all individuals with control over their lives and charting for them a path to follow ...

It is impossible to understand women's present status without an adequate knowledge of their position in history. This is a basic principle of social research, which demands the understanding of various stages of change ...

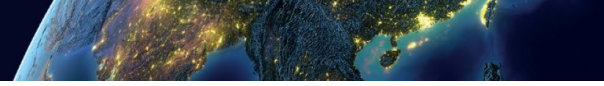
Freedom allows the human species to progress, and is the ladder to happiness. It is considered one of the most precious human rights by those nations who understand the secrets of success. 'Freedom' here means a person's independence of thought, will, and action, as long as this does not exceed legal limits and maintains the moral standards of society. Nobody need submit to the will of others, except in insanity and childhood. And even in the case of children, educationalists are of the opinion that exerting pressure on them is harmful to their self-discipline, and recommend leaving a child to act for himself in freedom, albeit with parental guidance and advice.



This is the freedom—with such broad parameters—that should be the basis for the education of our women. Some people are amazed at my request for women's freedom, and question whether women are in bondage. If they understood the meaning of freedom, they would share my opinion. I do not wish to say that a woman today is bought or sold in the markets. Slavery is not only the purchase or trading of a person: common sense defines anyone who is not in control his own thought, will, and actions as a slave ...

When men's right of ownership over women appeared, the customary law of gradual change required women to live in an intermediate stage between slavery and freedom, a condition where they were considered incomplete and imperfect human beings. It was too difficult for a man to consider a woman his equal, when the previous day she had been his property, so he preferred to place her in a position lower than the one he occupied. Men also claimed that when God created the human race, He gave intelligence and virtues to men but deprived women of these gifts. A woman's weakness, her lack of intelligence, and her proneness to carnal desires made it necessary for her to be dependent on men's power and to be separated from men, secluded in her house and veiled whenever she went out so that she would not seduce men with her beauty or deceive them with her feminine wiles. They also implied that she was not capable of moral or intellectual development, and must therefore remain in ignorance. This is the secret behind the imposition of the veil upon women and for its continued existence. The first step for women's liberation is to tear off the veil and totally wipe out its influence ...

One of the first phenomena that attracts the attention of the Eastern man in European cities is the important position of women. He realizes from the first instant that it is the customary division in our country between life inside and outside the home that prevents the participation of both sexes in all walks of life, and that this practice is based on a principle whose validity is unrecognized in Europe. And if he leaves Europe and travels around the



United States of America, he will be amazed at the astonishing sights there—and his amazement will give way to perturbation. He will discover that the division between the sexes, which he accepts as natural, is almost nonexistent. He will observe women working at men's jobs, and men working at women's jobs. He will hear Americans accusing Europeans of oppressing their women and depriving them of their rights, in the same manner that Europeans accuse Eastern men of despotic treatment of their women.

Source: Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, trans. Samiha Sidhom Peterson (The American University in Cairo Press, 2000), 115, 119, 130-134, 147.

- What does Amin mean by the “New Woman”?
- How does Amin connect modernization to women’s rights?
- In what ways does Amin use slavery as a metaphor for the status of women in Egypt?
Do you think this argument is convincing? Why or why not?
- Why does Amin think that removing the veil is the “first step for women’s liberation”?
- Why do you think Amin compares the status of women in Egypt to their position in Europe and the United States? Do you think his characterization of women’s status in Europe and America is accurate? Why or why not?
- How do you think British control of Egypt in the late nineteenth century might have influenced Amin’s arguments?