

Shifting Notions of Morality and Muslimness in Egyptian Schools

Linda Herrera¹

Abstract

In Egypt, as in much of the world, education policies are being oriented toward the education of a global citizenship. Yet, despite certain standardizing and globalizing policies, the 'upbringing' component of state monitored formal schooling in Egypt serves as a way of ensuring that indigenous cultural aspects, which include the transmission of specifically *Islamic* tenets and codes of morality, are incorporated into national, and tacitly 'secular' education programs. Adults involved in the educational field consider it squarely within their right—if not duty—to enter into the domain of students' moral upbringing. Through a host of 'morality' policies at schools such as religion and morality classes, sex segregation, surveillance of youth behavior in and outside schools, enforcing dress codes and discouraging music and sports, adults try to guide youth towards what they consider acceptable moral behavior within the context of a Muslim, Arab society. This paper, based on extended ethnographic investigations into four Egyptian schools, will consider how notions of multiculturalism and global citizenship take shape in the context of formal schooling in a contemporary Muslim society.

Schooling and Upbringing in Muslim Societies

Schools are socializing institutions, or institutions for the 'upbringing' of youth par excellence. In numerous Muslim majority states the ministries in charge of national schooling include the word 'upbringing' (*tarbeya*) in their formal titles. In Egypt and Jordan, for example, the name of the education ministry is the Ministry of Upbringing and Education (*Wizara al-Tarbeya wa al-Ta`alim*) and in Algeria and Morocco it's The Ministry of National Upbringing (*Wizara al-Tarbeya al-Wataniyya*). The Arabic word for upbringing, "*tarbeya*," is derived from the verb *rabba*, which means to grow up, rear, raise, bring up, educate or teach (Wehr, 1980, p. 320). The 'upbringing' component of state monitored formal schooling serves as a way of ensuring that indigenous cultural aspects, which include the transmission of specifically *Islamic* tenets and codes of morality, are incorporated into national, and tacitly "secular" education programs.

Teachers, school administrators and others involved in formal schooling consider it squarely within their right—if not duty—to enter into the domain of students' moral upbringing. Indeed morality has comprised a central component of the educational process in Muslim societies in the period of modernity from the third quarter of the nineteenth century to the present (Farag, 2001; Metcalf, 1984; Shakri, 1998). Yet by no measure do Muslim societies hold a monopoly on their attempts to integrate moral codes and conduct into the schooling endeavor. In regions and states as diverse as Central Asia, Russia, Japan, China, the United States, France and Egypt, morality has represented a central—

¹ International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden University

and hotly contested—component of formal schooling in during the last two centuries. (Fortna 2002, p. 35-41).¹

Through a host of culturally specific policies which might include sex segregation, surveillance of youth behavior in and outside schools, and enforcing certain dress codes, adults try to guide youth towards culturally and socially acceptable behavior. Yet the contours of what constitutes 'acceptable' at any given time and place, as the debates around sports in contemporary Egyptian society reveal, differ according to individual interpretation, social class, region, and life stage and sex. When it comes to issues around the body, girls tend to be subject to far more restrictive policies than boys, largely due to prevailing attitudes about the importance of modesty of girls. Questions pertaining to whether sports is a suitable activity for adolescent girls often emerge in the context of Egyptian schooling where P.E. is a compulsory school subject.

Sports and Morality

Educators often express reservations about the suitability of P.E. for girls and sometimes even downplay girls' athletics due to concerns that their involvement in sports promotes immodesty and therefore constitutes a breach of religious or indigenous cultural tenets. Discussions around these issues tend to take on a highly religious—or Islamic—overtone in Egypt. Educators often tacitly serve as 'morality advisors' and as such often refer to scriptural sources to justify their positions either in support of, or in opposition to, girls' sports and related issues such as appropriate sports attire. Dr. Nabila Abdelrahman, the Dean of the Faculty of Physical Education for Girls, Alexandria University, establishes the legitimacy of sports for girls and women in Muslim societies, yet a scope of ambiguity and even contradiction surrounds the question of how, in practical terms, females can practice sports in an Islamically suitable manner (1992). She is especially adamant that Muslim girls not emulate behaviors and practices imported from the West since western society represents a materialist, secular culture and its "relationship with Heaven is rather weak or even nonexistent [*sic*]" (p.13). Instead, she posits that girls sports programs can only be compatible with Islam if games are played with "no excitation," and with "polite and exciteless" motion. Moreover, she calls for women to play and compete out of view of men and to wear attire that covers every organ of their body with the exception of the hands and face since covering the body "proves her identity and realizes her values in life [*sic*]" (14).²

The views of Abdelrahman represent part of a larger movement of the Islamization of not only physical education classes, but all aspects of formal education. She herself calls for a reconceptualization of Education, one which integrates Islamic doctrine and practice into the everyday life of schooling. Her views are everyday replicated in schools throughout the country, however not without being negotiated and substantially altered.

In a coeducational preparatory PIS founded in 1981 and located in a middle class neighborhood in Cairo, the new P.E. teacher, Mrs. Hannan, was appalled at the physical condition of the girls whom she described as flabby, pale and lacking in physical stamina. After much negotiation, the conservative school director finally acquiesced to her forming

a girls' basketball team on the condition that the girls retained their modesty by, for example, wearing their white scarves during all practices and games and never playing in view of the boys. Mrs. Hannan promptly began preparing her sixth and seventh grade classes for a district-wide basketball competition, and, to her great delight, they won the championship within the first year. This team represents one example of how, through tenacity, vision and agency, notions about gender roles, the body, dress and morality get altered in contemporary Egyptian society.

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¹ For a discussion of anticlericalism in nineteenth century French education see Theodore Zeldin (1980). For examples of the moralizing aspects of contemporary Christian schooling and its social implications in the United States see Alan Peshkin (1986), Melinda Wagner (1990) and Philip Wexler (1996).

² For a similarly argued position on girls' sports see "Muslim Women in Sport" published in the Australian on-line Islamic magazine, *Nida'ul Islam* (1997). The author, whose credentials are not listed, states, "The restrictions of women participating in sport or physical activity is [sic] more than that of

men. All Islamic observances must be followed, regardless of any school policies or social stigmas. Our obedience to our Creator cannot be given preference to a creature of Allah". She goes on to stipulate that girls should not perform sports in view of men, should certainly not participate with men in sports' activities and must wear "Islamically acceptable" attire such as a scarf and loose clothing. Shorts, swimsuits, t-shirts and leotards, especially in cases when Muslim participants are in the company of men or non-Muslim women, she argues, are not permissible.

The author differs from Abdelrahman in her strong cautioning of Muslim women against revealing their physical selves to non-Muslim women because contact with them can "lead to disastrous results." She provides the following evidence to support her position: "...the Khalif 'Umar wrote to Abu 'Ubaidah Ibn al-Jarrah, the Governor of Syria, to prohibit the Muslim women from going to the baths with the women of the Ahl al-Kitab (the People of the Book). [At-Tabari, Ibn Jazir]. According to Ibn 'Abbas "...a Muslim woman is not allowed to display herself before the women of the unbelievers and non-Muslims poll-tac payers (Ahl al-Dhimmah) any more than she can display herself before other men" [At-Tabari]. (*sic*)"