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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	VAR ANALYSIS OF EXPORTS, IMPORTS AND THE ECONOMIC GROWTH: EVIDENCE OF INDONESIA <i>Dr. CHENG-WEN LEE & NURHIKMAH OLA LAIRI</i>	1
2.	AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF VALUE ADDED TAX TO MADHYA PRADESH STATE FINANCE <i>Dr. VAIBHAV MODAK & Dr. SURESH SILAWAT</i>	6
3.	ECONOMIC FEASIBILITY STUDY OF PLASTIC MIX BITUMEN ROAD <i>DEEPIKA SWAIN & Dr. KAILASH MOHAPATRA</i>	10
4.	THE ECONOMICS OF PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISING OF HEALTH CARE SERVICE SECTOR – A LITERATURE REVIEW <i>Dr. DHANANJOY DATTA & Dr. AMITA KUMARI CHOUDHURY</i>	15
5.	IMPACT OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES ON ASSET, INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT IN HIMACHAL PRADESH: A CASE STUDY OF MANDI DISTRICT <i>Dr. K.C. SHARMA & RAKSHA SHARMA</i>	19
6.	A STUDY ON THE PROBLEMS FACED BY THE FARMERS CULTIVATING SUGARCANE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ERODE AND TIRUPUR DISTRICTS <i>Dr. S. UMARANI</i>	22
7.	DYNAMICS AND DETERMINANTS OF IPO INVESTING BY RETAIL INVESTORS: EVIDENCE FROM INDIAN STOCK MARKET <i>Dr. SATHYANARAYANA & BHAVYA N</i>	27
8.	A STUDY ON CUSTOMER PERCEPTION TOWARDS VALUE ADDED SERVICES IN PUBLIC SECTOR BANKS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ERODE DISTRICT <i>M. SURESH KUMAR & Dr. G. SURESH</i>	36
9.	SWAY ON FDI IN INDIA: SOME RUDIMENTARY CORROBORATIONS <i>Dr. JOSEPH JAMES V, Dr. SAJEEVE V P & CATHERINE E PERIERA</i>	45
10.	PATIENTS' OPINION TOWARDS QUALITY HEALTHCARE SERVICES PROVIDED BY CO-OPERATIVE HOSPITALS: A STUDY ON SHRI J G CO-OPERATIVE HOSPITAL SOCIETY LTD., GHATAPRABHA <i>DINESHA K & Dr. LAXAMANA P</i>	52
11.	THE BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND SAUDI ARABIA <i>Dr. SHEETAL VARSHNEY</i>	55
12.	IMPACT OF TQM PRACTICES ON ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AT WORKING IRON AND STEEL FIRMS KARNATAKA <i>K C PRASHANTH</i>	58
13.	CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PRACTICES BANKS IN INDIA: A STUDY OF TWO PRIVATE SECTOR BANKS <i>DHRITABRATA JYOTI BHARADWAZ</i>	64
14.	DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF MGNREGS BENEFICIARY HOUSEHOLDS IN PUNJAB: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY <i>Dr. SARBJEET SINGH & JAGDEV SINGH</i>	69
15.	AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF LIFE INSURANCE IN GANGTOK, SIKKIM <i>KEWAL RAI, ARUN ACHARYA, ROSHAN SHARMA, ANIL RAI & TSHERING LHAMU BHUTIA</i>	77
16.	EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA THROUGH EDUCATION <i>Dr. P. OMKAR</i>	84
17.	IMPACT OF GOODS AND SERVICES TAX (GST) ON COMMON MAN IN INDIA <i>DODDA YALLAPPA JINDAPPA</i>	87
18.	STATUS OF WOMEN IN EGYPT SINCE INFITAH <i>EREIPHY KEISHING</i>	89
19.	INCOME AND INVESTMENT PATTERN AMONG WORKING WOMEN WITH REFERENCE TO MADURAI CITY – A CASE STUDY <i>R. VENNILA</i>	92
20.	DIGITAL INDIA: INFUSE TECHNOLOGY IN GOVERNANCE <i>POOJA</i>	95
	REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK & DISCLAIMER	98

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STATUS OF WOMEN IN EGYPT SINCE *INFITAH*

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ABSTRACT

Egyptian women who were confined mainly within the household activities were found to have changed in their outlook after embracing education. Slowly women stepped out of their primary private domain to the public life. Educated women were seen in the public arena. Women started contributing in economy and politics. The women belonging to the high strata of society became conscious of their own position in the family and in the society. They began to realize how they were treated and looked down upon by the male dominated social system. Were women just left behind in every field socially, politically and economically? Women lived in the shadow of her husband. For many decades, man carried out everything and ruled the family and society. Some Educated women became more conscious and concerned about their own gender. They started campaigning for propagation and emancipation of women from all adverse clutches and barriers of social, political and economic perspectives. They campaigned for equal right of education for both the sexes. Earlier, women were not given proper education by the family. Family did not encourage them to do so and even the government did not provide facilities for girls' education. Only few interested families, who were rich supported girls' education just for leisure. Other ordinary girls were busy in doing the household chores of their family and they were given away in marriage at an early age when they reached puberty. Egypt is still a strong belt in patriarchal chain. In the constitution of Egypt, the article 40 mentions, "All citizens are equal before the law. They have equal public rights and duties without discrimination due to sex, ethnic origin, language, religion or creed." Nevertheless, we find that Egyptian women do not are treated as equal with men in society. There is still a long way to go.

KEYWORDS

women status in Egypt, Infatih.

INTRODUCTION

The *Infatih* or 'openness' was Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's policy of "opening the door" to private investment in Egypt in the years following the '1973 October Yom Kippur War' with Israel. *Infatih* was accompanied by a departure with long time ally and aid-giver the USSR, and replaced by the United States. It was also accompanied by a peace process with Israel symbolized by Sadat's dramatic flight services to Jerusalem in 1977. *Infatih* ended the domination of Egypt's economy by the public sector and encouraged both domestic and foreign investment in the private sector. The Egyptian Army's cross through the Suez Canal in the October 1973 War, which most Egyptians considered a strategic victory, gave Sadat the prestige to initiate a major reversal of his predecessor Gamal Abdel Nasser's policies.

Since 1973, the clear prevalence and considerable evidences of unequal women position are a major factor responsible for gender inequality in Egypt social system. From the past decades, there is existence of gender disparity in access to quality health, nutrition, and education and employment opportunities. It is also a matter of fact that gender inequality also inhibits economic growth. Enhancing the social, political and economic wellbeing of women in Egypt is an urgent and fundamental condition to achieving prosperous societies. In Middle East region, there is persistent lack of key indicators of women's well being such as female labour force participation, political inclusion, access to health and sanitation, etc. Abolition of gender discrimination requires a logical involvement across social, political and economic spheres. For instance, Egypt has progressed on some areas including health with a reduction in maternal and child mortality and enhanced quality of childcare, though more can be done in pressing health issues such as hepatitis, diabetes, obesity, and malnutrition. Moreover, major improvements have been seen in female literacy and access to education, but still the improvement is marginal and a significant gender gap persists in comparison to males in social, political and economic aspects. The United Nations Human Development Report (EHDR) of 2014 stated that, "Egypt ranks 130 on the Gender Equality Index among 187 countries, thus more urgency is required to bridge the gender gap and promote women's wellbeing".¹ This article deliberates on the social, political and economic status of women since *Infatih* and gender inequality that prevail in Egypt.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse the problems encounter by women in the society in regards to social, political and economy.
2. To examine their rights vis-a-vis work outside home, inheritance and marriage.
3. To examine the rights given to women through Islamic Sharia law.
4. To examine how far religious-cultural factors are responsible for less participation of women in political arena.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is based on primary and secondary data's. The primary source include reports from Egypt government, Egypt's National Council for Women, etc. Secondary include academically published works from Egypt and Middle East area.

POSITION OF WOMEN SINCE *INFITAH*

Under President Nasser, proponents of statism and a command economy with limited private investment dominated the political scene. However, "by the 1970s, critics believed Egypt's economy, with its large public sector, had evolved into a 'Soviet-style system' of 'inefficiency, suffocating bureaucracy, and waste'".² Sadat also wanted to turn Egypt away from its focus on war with Israel and devotion of resources to a large military establishment. "He believed capitalist economic policies would build a substantial private sector, and alliance with the United States and the West would lead to prosperity (*rakhaa*) and eventually democratic pluralism".³ *Infatih* was not only ideologically but also politically motivated by aligning himself with the capitalist West, and the rich and powerful members of Egyptian society, Sadat differentiated himself from his predecessor Nasser while at the same time securing his position in power.

In 1972, the publication of the book 'Women and Sex' by "Nawal El Saadawi"⁴ was symbolic of the re-emergence and radicalisation of another feminist movement. The book demanded "unified criteria for 'honor' for both women and men, and denounced social practices which used religion to justify women's oppression".⁵ The book caused a strong backlash within Egyptian society especially due to the rising religious fundamentalism within the state.

During the 1980s, however, new feminist groups were formed to counter religious fundamentalism. "The New Woman Group was formed in Cairo and was mainly concerned with studying the feminist history of the country in order to determine a new program which would start off from where the previous one had stopped."⁶ Another organisation was the Committee for the Defence of Women and Family Rights, which was formed in 1985. "This Committee was established to support the campaign for the amendment of the Person Status Code".⁷ Emergence of many different feminist groups within Egypt gives stimulus to women movement. Some of the movements are affiliated with the state in some way in that they are women's committees of political parties such as The Progressive Women's Union to the Women's Secretariat of the Labor Party. There are however also many independent feminist associations such as The New Woman Research Centre and *Bint El Ard* (Daughter of the Land) Association. Although the organisations have different goals in general they all entail the improvement of women's position in Egyptian by improving literacy, democratic and human rights, increasing women's participation in political life, and women's health.

An Islamic feminist movement has also re-emerged in recent years. Islamic feminism is a "feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm".⁸ Islamic feminism sees the sexes not as different in capability, but rather in their characteristics and roles in society. "Followers of such beliefs hold the view that their religion has established a framework of equality and rather than calling for change to existing laws, Islamic fundamentalists cry for a return to authentic Islam so that both women and men can achieve their full potential."⁹ Feminism seems to have become a priority of the state since 2000 with the foundation of the National Council for Women (NCW) who is very active in promoting women's rights in Egypt. In the year 2000, legislation was passed allowing women to divorce under the khul-law and to pass on their nationality to their biological children in 2004. These are great steps forward and due also in part to a very friendly Egyptian government and lobby in government and outside the state structures through civil society organisations.

SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN

Domestic violence against women was a significant but rarely acknowledged problem in Egypt. As in other places around the world, there was a tendency to blame the victim and they were few, if any social and economic support for women who must deal with violence in their private lives. These issues were further exacerbated by rigid interpretation of Quranic law and culturally prevailing values that permit man to use violence against their wives as a legitimate form of discipline. There were however limited data on domestic data in Egypt. Because family privacy was highly valued in Egypt, abuses, including wives beating were not a public issue. However, it was known that violence of all kind occurred in all social classes and among most occupational groups. During those days' changes were less to get divorce for the abuses and violence to them. The women must produce eye witnesses, which was often difficult for women if not completely impossible. Even more problematic was that even with solid prove, many court dismiss a majority of cases due to cultural beliefs based on issue of family honor, traditions, and provision in the criminal code that allowed husband to discipline wife. Courts were male dominated and were also characterized by extreme sentencing disparities, with social class often playing a direct role in decisions. It was thus lightly that poorer were less able to get justices in their cases. Although there were no credible statistics, activists believe that despite cultural belief to the contrary retaliation by women was not an unusual occurrence. "This observation was substantiated by the increased in the number of women who killed their abusive husbands".¹⁰ In order to assist in changing the situation, Egyptian female activist were increasingly turning to culturally and religiously based initiative, including reinterpretation of Quranic law, retreatment of women into criminal justice agencies, and the development of support services to deal with these issues.

There was no reliable statistic on rape in Egypt, nor was there any public discussion on this topic, but there was a law against rapist indicating its hidden existence in the society. Under the strict laws, rapist could face death or life imprisonment. However, there were numerous barriers to report rape. Many of those barriers were based on cultural traditions that may bring social dishonor to the woman and her family in the face of even the suspicion of rape. Further complicating this issue was that marital rape was not legitimated concept in Egypt and was legal. "And according to law 291 of 1937, the rapist was allowed to marry his victim in whom the punishment of the rapist could be cancel".¹¹ Those days' people were afraid of reporting and spreading of news because of the social dishonoured to the woman. In rural area, honor killing-the murder of women if she was suspected of having potentially participated elicit sexual relation. This concept was based on cultural conception that the loss of women's virginity was a shame that can only be wiped out in blood. If women were rape, there exists the strong likelihood that she and her family were forever shunned by the community. This stigma was even passed on to the family's offspring. Sentiment about rape was rooted in deep traditional beliefs about the importance of sexual purity of women and the honour or shame that their behavior brought to the families.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL STATUS

The Egyptian government took steps to enhance women's participation in political, economic and social life since the nationalist movement of 1919. "However, achievements with regard to eliminating discrimination and women's political participation were rather modest".¹² According to the report of the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights, the number of women candidates nominated by political parties for the 2008 local council elections, were shamefully very low.

"During the 2008 local council election, the parties nominated low percentages of women candidates. Out of the National Democratic Party's (NDP) 52000 candidates, only 6000 were women. The Wafd Party nominated 24 women out of their 520 candidates. El Tagamoa'a Party nominated sixteen women out of their 234 candidates, and the Generation Party (El Gil) nominated seven women out of their 74 candidates. The Nasserist party nominated only five women out of 151 total candidates, and out of the Republican Party's (El Gomhory) fourteen candidates, two were women. Only 2335 women were elected, totalling 4.4% of the total local council members. The 2008 report of the International Parliamentary Union on Women's Status ranks Egypt 134 in women's participation in parliament out of 188 countries. Rwanda, Sudan, and Cuba come in first, second and third respectively".¹³

In June 2009, the law on the people's assembly was amended so that women were entitled to an additional reserved 64 seats. "The total number of seats in the Parliament increased from 454 to 518, which means women were allocated 12% of the seats".¹⁴ However, the number of female candidates remained very low. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, from the 4,000 registered candidates, 378 were women, most of them running for the 64 women's quota seats. The National Democratic Party (NDP) had 763 candidates, including 69 women, which is a positive development in women's role and representation within the party compared to past elections. The Wafd Party had 168 candidates, including 23 women. Out of the 66 Tagammu Party candidates, eight were women. The Arab Nasserist Party had 31 candidates, six of whom were females, while the wing of the Ghad Party, which split off from Ayman Nour, had 20 candidates, among them five were women. "The Brotherhood had 5 female candidates, which although an improvement from its lone female candidate in 2005 is still the lowest rate of any political grouping".¹⁵

Women's active role in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, gave them a new hope in claiming their full rights and being an active participators in the political life. "Nevertheless, women's status in Egypt has regressed in the realm of civil rights, freedoms and equal representation, especially after the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) won the majority of Parliamentary seats and assumed most of the major offices in the Cabinet, following the holding of Morsi (the MB's candidate) the Egyptian Presidency".¹⁶ One indicator for the undermined inclusion of women was the MB's 2013 constitution that did not safeguard the rights of women for example, "the revocation of women's quota in the parliament in Article 11 of the constitution".¹⁷ In addition, women have been denied their fair share of representation clinching only 2% (only 6 women) of the 2012 parliament seats while 12% of seats were preserved solely for women in the 2010 parliamentary elections during Mubarak era. Moreover, the parliamentarian Azza El Garf from the MB's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) further stated "women had not yet proven themselves competent enough to be appointed".¹⁸ This issue has provoked furious responses as Mervat El Talawy, the President of the NCW, for example stated "How come after a revolution a Constitution is formed with no justice for women?"¹⁹

ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN

In 1971, President Sadat inherited an economy that was debt-ridden due to two Arab-Israeli wars in the previous years. The expenditure on defence was one of the highest spent in the planned economy of Egypt. Due to the imbalance of income and expenditure, Sadat launched the *Infitah* aimed at stabilizing the economy of the Egypt. This policy facilitated the flow of private and foreign investments in the country and brought changes in the field of tourism, land, employment, housing, reopening of the Suez Canal and, especially, improvement in the position of women in society and in the eyes of the state. Women entrepreneurs and the investors found opportunity to utilize their talents in the field of commerce and science. This led to a general enhancement of the position of women in society. As a consequence, by the Law of 1979, women got more rights and freedom in the fields of marriage, divorce, and child custody. The women's participation in economic activities increased and socially they felt more confident owing to reforms in laws affecting personal spheres. Feminist aspect also became more politically active than before in the state.

The Egyptian economy is one of the Middle East's most versatile economies. The sectors of agriculture, industry, tourism and services are engaged in comparable proportions in its basic configuration. "The Egyptian economy depends basically on agriculture, Suez Canal revenues, tourism, taxation, cultural and media production, petroleum exports and remittances of more than three million Egyptians abroad, mostly in the Gulf States, the United States, Europe and Australia".²⁰

The Middle East economy suffers from high unemployment especially among women and youth. "Despite low Labor Force Participation (LFP) of females, and the fact that more than 50 percent of college students in many of these countries are women, the unemployment rate among females is much higher than their male counterparts".²¹ The increase in education for women in recent decades has provided many women in urban areas with human capital and skills that can benefit

society if given the opportunity of employment. The prevalence of high unemployment rate among women not only brings economic costs as lost output but it also brings financial hardship and psychological stress to those unemployed. Studies show that unemployment gives a sense of exclusion and lack of seeing oneself as an active participant in working society. The concept of LFP in Egypt has attracted research on the underlying factors behind women's willingness and ability to work.

In a fragile economy like Egypt, the harsh economic conditions since *Infitah* were justified and perhaps argued away by the requirements of a wartime economy, i.e. the conflict with Israel. "The 1977-78 budget for example, showed a deficit of E 1,300 million pound, inflation was about 40 percent and rising, and the growing chasm between rich and poor was of a magnitude never seen before".²² "The regime apparently hoped that the open door policy will alleviate the employment problem by absorbing the masses of Egyptian underemployed secondary school and university graduates into an expanding private sector of the economy".²³ "The migration propensities of the Egyptian workforce which could slightly alleviate the problem and also provide remittances back home are mainly confined to the white collar skills, and the professionally trained: teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists".²⁴ According to the "Global Competitiveness Report 2014-2015, Egypt's rank improved from 41st out of 144 countries in 2009 to 38th in 2014 for cluster development".²⁵ The improvement is due to recent shift of focus of policy towards supporting existing clusters and establishing new ones.

The Neqdar Nesharek program in Egypt is aimed to empower young rural Upper Egyptian women economically by providing them with business skills and actual support in finding employment or in starting a business. It includes access to microfinance and markets, registration and licensing and other logistics. It also aimed to empower those young women socially and politically through providing them with life skills, health knowledge and legal rights training, while emphasizing the importance of involving the whole community members. "Neqdar Nesharek is a program launched by the Population Council-Egypt office in September 2011 and continued until December 2014 that aimed to enhance young women transition to work in the rural communities of Upper Egypt".²⁶ This programme served as a role model of women's achievements in areas where they face many social and economic restrictions.

The *Infitah* economic policy has coincided with more conservative "official" attitudes toward women's work outside the home. The Constitution of 1971, which was drawn up and ratified under President Sadat, is more conservative on the subject of women rights and duties. Section 2, article 11 states that "the state shall be responsible for maintaining the balance between women's duties towards the family and her activity in society, as well as for maintaining her equality with man in the fields of political, social, economic and cultural life, without detriment to the laws of the Islamic shari'a.

CONCLUSION

Egyptian women who were confined mainly within the household activities were found to have changed in their outlook after embracing education. Slowly women stepped out of their primary private domain to the public life. Educated women were seen in the public arena. Women started contributing in economy and politics. The women belonging to the high strata of society became conscious of their own position in the family and in the society. They began to realize how they were treated and looked down upon by the male dominated social system. Were women just left behind in every field socially, politically and economically? Women lived in the shadow of her husband. For many decades, man carried out everything and ruled the family and society.

Some Educated women became more conscious and concerned about their own gender. They started campaigning for propagation and emancipation of women from all adverse clutches and barriers of social, political and economic perspectives. They campaigned for equal right of education for both the sexes. Earlier, women were not given proper education by the family. Family did not encourage them to do so and even the government did not provide facilities for girls' education. Only few interested families, who were rich supported girls' education just for leisure. Other ordinary girls were busy in doing the household chores of their family and they were given away in marriage at an early age when they reached puberty. Egypt is still a strong belt in patriarchal chain. In the constitution of Egypt, the article 40 mentions, "All citizens are equal before the law. They have equal public rights and duties without discrimination due to sex, ethnic origin, language, religion or creed." Nevertheless, we find that Egyptian women do not are treated as equal with men in society. There is still a long way to go.

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