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Family Life According to the Brotherhood

By MONA EL-NAGGAR

CAIRO — Women are erratic and emotional, and they make good wives and mothers — but never leaders or rulers. That, at least, is what Osama Abou Salama, a professor of botany at Cairo University and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, told young men and women during a recent premarital counseling class.

What was striking, though, was the absence of any reaction. None of the 30 people in the class so much as winced.

“A woman,” Mr. Abou Salama said, “takes pleasure in being a follower and finds ease in obeying a husband who loves her.”

Since the Brotherhood rose to power and one of its former leaders was elected president, much of the uncertainty over its social agenda has centered on its plans for women. Will the Brotherhood try to impose a conservative dress code? Will it try to bar women from certain fields of work? Will its leaders promote segregation at schools?

But in a country where a vast majority of women already cover their hair and voluntarily separate from men in coed environments, for most people — women included — those questions are largely academic.

Mr. Abou Salama’s class makes that case. “Can you, as a woman, take a decision and handle the consequences of your decision?” he asked.

A number of women shook their heads even before Mr. Abou Salama provided his answer: “No. But men can. And God created us this way because a ship cannot have more than one captain.”

More than any other political group in Egypt, the Brotherhood is fluent in the dialect of the masses. By upholding patriarchal and traditional values about a woman's place in society, it garners popular support, builds political capital and reinforces social conservatism.

"The woman is the symbol of a moral platform through which easy gains can be made," said Hania Sholkamy, an anthropologist and an associate professor at the Social Research Center at the American University in Cairo. "Those who deprive women of their rights, limit their freedom or place them in a subordinate position believe that the political cost of doing so is very low."

The lectures of Mr. Abou Salama, who has raised three daughters, are part of a four-week workshop called "Bride and Groom Against Satan" and sponsored by Family House, a charity financed by the Brotherhood. It is one of several Brotherhood efforts that have grown since the revolution, reflecting, as much as promoting, the religious values that define a large segment of society. Among its many activities, Family House offers financial support to struggling households, provides a matchmaking service and sponsors mass weddings for low-income couples.

"This is part of the reformist methodology of the Muslim Brotherhood," said Walaa Abdel Halim, the Family House coordinator who organizes the youth counseling workshop. "Shaping a righteous individual leads to shaping a righteous family, and by shaping a righteous family, you get a righteous society that can choose a righteous leader."

Those broader efforts at shaping a conservative religious society, played out over decades by the Brotherhood, were seen as partly responsible for helping elect Mohamed Morsi president in June. At the time, Mr. Morsi, who resigned from the Brotherhood after taking office, gave assurances that he would protect the rights of women and include them in decision making. Less than three months into his presidency, though, Mr. Morsi has not fulfilled a campaign promise to appoint a woman as a vice president. Instead, he named a team of 21 senior aides and advisers last week that included three women.

One of those three, Omaila Kamel, a medical professor at Cairo University and a member of the Brotherhood since 1981, makes it clear that she is not about to press society to change attitudes about women.

"Let's face it, if your work took you away from your fundamental duties at home and if your success came at the cost of your family life and the stability of your children, then you are the one who stands to lose," she said by telephone. "A woman can work as much as she wants, but within the framework of our religious restrictions."

Many analysts and critics of the Brotherhood see that kind of philosophy, one that gives women independence so long as they maintain their traditional obligations, as effectively constraining women to established gender roles.

"There is an absence of a well-defined vision, so they use words like 'religious restrictions,'" said Ibrahim el-Houdaiby, a researcher of Islamic movements and a former member of the Brotherhood. "O.K., sure, so what exactly are those restrictions, so we can know them and figure out how to deal with them? As long as we don't define what those limits are, then we can expand them to the point where women, practically speaking, cannot work."

In Mr. Morsi's political program, called "The Renaissance," there is an emphasis on a woman's "authentic role as wife, mother and purveyor of generations." The program then makes recommendations to safeguard family life; foremost among them are premarital classes for youths.

Free from the restrictions of the government of Hosni Mubarak, which outlawed the Brotherhood, the movement's social outreach programs have mushroomed since Mr. Morsi's election. In less than a year, Family

House expanded from a single office to 18 branches around Egypt and is developing a plan to encourage all couples to attend.

At the group's headquarters, in the densely populated Cairo neighborhood of Nasr City, Mr. Abou Salama walked into a spacious room where the front seats were for men and the back seats were for women. He lectured on qualities to seek in a partner, getting acquainted under parental supervision, dealing with in-laws and consummating marriage. In his social paradigm, understanding that the woman was created to be an obedient wife and mother and that the man was created to fend for his family holds the secret to a happy marriage.

"I want you to be the flower that attracts a bee to make honey, not the trash that attracts flies and dirt," Mr. Abou Salama said as the women listened intently.