

# Challenging Binaries to Promote Women's Equality

## Introduction to Special Issue

Mariz Tadros 1\* Ayesha Khan 2\*

Address

\*Correspondence: [M.Tadros@ids.ac.uk; ayesha.ahsan30@gmail.com]

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### Abstract

*In this issue we are calling for a new interpretive framework that recognises the multiple genealogies that have contributed to binary constructs of the Western/secular versus the authentic/religious; takes into account the different power positionalities of those engaging in global and national struggles temporally and spatially; challenges the static binarism of religious versus secular that obfuscates the plurality of framings and identities around which women and men mobilise for social justice and does not shy away from the question of accountability for equality outcomes.*

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### Introduction: Rationale, questions and epistemology

Feminist scholarship, has exposed, interrogated and critiqued the dangers of essentialising the nature of complex and nuanced power dynamics. Chandra Mohanty's seminal work (1984) was critical in exposing such forms of essentialisms in Western scholarship's representation of third world women as a monolithic category. Mohanty critiqued the representation of third world women as suffering from powerlessness driven by common underlying causes and showing similar manifestations. Other literature, such as *Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: The Struggle for Interpretive Power in Gender and Development* (Cornwall et al., 2009), explored further essentialisms (such as the peaceful, ever-resourceful,

perpetually resilient woman) which were underpinned by particular constructs of reified identities in the international development literature.

There is a large body of literature both from development studies as well as post-colonial and regional studies exposing the politicised constructs of binary framings in relation to Arab and Muslim contexts in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod, 2013, Hatem, 2013, Mahmood, 2011). This scholarship led to a paradigmatic shift in the area of the study of women's agency among scholars of the Middle East (see, for example, the *International Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*). The strength of this paradigmatic displacement is in its exposure of geo-strategic neo-colonialist enterprises. For example Abu-Lughod (2013) exposed how the US invoked the persecution of Muslim women at the hands of the Taliban, making the rescue of Muslim women a justification for the occupation of Afghanistan. In the post 9/11 global context, Western-based scholars (Mahmoud, Lughod, Hatem) developed this critique to broad acclaim in Western academia. Its importance also lies in exposing ways in which Western foreign policy actors politically appropriated "Muslim women" as a category to justify contemporary imperialist ventures in Muslim-majority contexts. It fundamentally interrogates an uncritical acceptance of Western liberal secular democracy as a model for other societies, and Western feminists who deride or dismiss women's experience, agency, and aspirations that lie outside this paradigm.

This scholarship critiquing Western representation of gender matters in neo-colonialist settings has challenged scholars to be reflexive about the normative biases informing interpretive frameworks. For example, Saba Mahmood's widely acclaimed work on women's participation in the mosque movement in Egypt (2011) challenged ideas that religious agency and women's rights necessarily exist in an oxymoronic relationship. In the same spirit, the work of Miriam Cooke (2001) pointed to the exercise of

nanced and active agency among leading pioneering women in Islamic movements (such as Zeinab el Ghazali) as has Ellen McLarney in *Soft Force: Women in Egypt's Islamic Awakening* (2015).

However, we argue for a further paradigmatic shift at this moment, because the body of work that sought to challenge and displace one kind of reified categorisation prevalent in some Western feminist scholarship, that of pitting Muslim women against Western women, has paradoxically re-produced and reinforced another set of binaries around the authentic Muslim woman versus the Westernised disconnected local feminist that is already prevalent in the imaginaries of many postcolonial societies.

The irony is that while displacing particular binaries that are constitutive of highly unequal relations between the West and the Global South, some feminist scholarship often produced in the West (Mahmood, 2011, Abu Lughod, 2013), has reproduced another set of binaries which inadvertently serve to entrench the power base of local actors whose agendas are to circumscribe the rights of women and vilify those that advocate for gender justice, all in the name of fighting imperialism. This is in no way to suggest there is a deliberate collusion between Western based feminist scholars who have challenged the representation and political appropriation of women by Western policy makers and in academia and the ultranationalists and fundamentalists who have widely championed the same grievances. Rather, it is to make the case that there are some glaring similarities in the binaries that have emerged in Western-based feminist post-colonialist literature and those that are deployed to counter gender equality agendas within Southern contexts.

At a workshop held in the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton in November 2017, scholar-activists from Egypt, Tunisia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria (contributors in this issue) questioned and

unpacked binary framings as they applied to their contexts. Professor Deniz Kandiyoti and Dr Rashmi Varma contributed to the workshop as critical allies, interrogating and challenging propositions, exposing areas requiring sharper iterations of ideas and providing critically important insights from the Turkish and Indian contexts as well as cross-country comparisons. These binaries share similar patterns despite being spread across three regional settings (Africa, Middle East, Asia). They all conflate feminists with the secular/elitist/Westernised in their societies, and non-feminists, with the pious, traditional and authentic. This prompted us to interrogate these binaries through a cross-country critical inquiry informed by the following three questions: (1) How have binary framings of women's agency and identity influenced gender equality struggles for women's empowerment and pathways of accountability? (2) How have politicised appropriations of imagined cultures and traditions, homogenised religious norms and anti-imperialist discourses influenced activism around empowerment and accountability for women's rights domestically? (3) What kind of counter-framings and narratives would be helpful to challenge such binaries and enable local gender equality advocates to redress norms and values that circumscribe women's rights?

These questions were informed greatly by both our standpoint and positionalities. We all hold feminist standpoints, in the sense that we all have a commitment to addressing patriarchy and unequal gender relations in their myriad forms and manifestations. Whether we choose to use feminist language in our framings in local struggles is not uniform, neither is the priority issues around which we mobilise or struggle. Our feminist standpoint reflects an analytical lens as opposed to a prescriptive blueprint. In other words, in empirically engaging with our subject matter, we are conscious of gender power relations as opposed to using a number of normative yardsticks as to what equality on the ground should look like.

Our positionality – how we situate ourselves within our domestic and global power configurations is also both similar and different. On the one hand, as those with experience in working with academia in the West, we have a strong appreciation of the significance of historical and contemporary scholarship that exposes Western imperialism both in scholarly and in political endeavours. On the other hand, we are all deeply committed in practical ways to local emancipatory struggles in Tunisia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan and Nigeria. All of us are active in championing women’s rights as well as other justice struggles. Despite our highly different positionalities, we all felt a sense of urgency in articulating why a discourse and set of practices produced in the West to challenge Western normative frameworks and power relations with the rest of the world does not have the same impact of challenging inequality and injustices when it travels to our local contexts (see Elsadda, this issue). Our engagements with local struggles, as complex and turbulent as they may be, have also made us interrogate whether we need an interpretive framework that is far broader than one that restricts gender activism to two binary constructs, that of the Western areligious elitist local feminist versus the local indigenous religious authentic non-feminist.

### **Unpacking Genealogies**

Post-colonialist and post-feminist scholarship has suggested that the ‘otherisation’ of the Global South began in the West. Edward Said (2001) in *Orientalism* elucidated how Western discourse represented the Muslim world in ways ‘antithetical’ to a superior West. Hall (1992) elaborates on the theory, extending it beyond the Muslim world to speak of a discourse of ‘the West and the rest’, intended to justify and rationalise Western hegemony. One of the dimensions of the West and the ‘rest’ as a discourse is that it rests on stereotypical dualism reducing complex realities to two categories, one with positive attributes and the opposing one with negative. The West came to be attributed with all that is normatively

considered good and the 'rest' the non-Western world with normatively negative 'other'. In exploring Western representations of gender relations, some post-colonialist feminist scholarship has also sought, in the same vein, to expose how particular narratives also 'otherise' women belonging to Islamic groups, suggesting that the genealogy of such constructs lies in Western imperialist enterprises.

There are two main challenges in the US/Western political appropriation of women to justify occupation theory which circumscribe its universal explanatory power. First, the political moment in which the US was the sole hegemon ideologically and militarily has shifted. The geo-political moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has passed. The US is no longer the uncontested superpower; the promotion of a neo-liberal democratic order globally is faltering. This is not to suggest that US and Western military imperialist interventions have ceased, nor that the liberation of women is no longer used to justify operations (e.g. US troops were in Iraq to "save" Yazidi women from ISIS in 2015). However, there is a growing scholarship suggesting that the post-Cold War geopolitical moment has shifted. As Brands and Edleman (2017, no page no.) observe,

The defining features of that period were uncontested US and Western primacy, marked declines in ideological struggle and great-power conflict, and remarkable global cooperation in addressing key international-security challenges. Now, however, the world has returned to a more normal - which is to say, more dangerous and unsettled - state.

This is particularly important for many of the country contexts analysed in this special issue; ideological struggles are intense: certainly Western liberal democracy does not have the currency it had at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Formal procedural democracy is under fire, giving way to

resistance through unruly politics as well as highly reactionary populist stirrings. Imperialist military operations are being undertaken by a wide array of local, regional and global actors, with Russia and the Gulf for example playing an extremely powerful role in the Middle East but also their impact, in the case of countries such as Saudi Arabia extending well into Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria. The implications of these tectonic global shifts is that analysing Western foreign policy statements and Western discourses on gender politics in the Global South neither represent the hegemonic narrative (since there are competing ones) nor do they have the explanatory power for geo-strategic manoeuvrings that they once predominantly had. This is in no way to suggest that dynamics of racism, orientalism, Islamophobia are not thriving globally, only to suggest that they are in existence simultaneously with other forms of 'isms' for which Western hegemonic power has limited explanatory power.

Elsadda's elucidation (this issue) of Said's 'Travelling Theory' (1983) proposition is highly relevant in recognising that power dynamics are – in the literal sense- on shifting grounds. This represents the second tension in the scholarship critiquing Western framings of gender politics in predominantly Muslim majority contexts: its limiting, indeed, potentially counter-emancipatory impact when travelling from one discursive context to another, where the power configurations are so different. She astutely observes:

A critique of the manipulation of rights talk to justify imperial interventions by the US and its allies is a critique directed at the dominant discourse of the powerful in favour of, and to empower, the voices of the marginalised struggling to be heard. But, extending this critique of rights to cast doubt on and undermine the credibility of women rights activists or groups, in Egypt or Palestine, becomes a weapon that

consolidates dominant discourses of authoritarian regimes and silences the embattled voices of marginalised groups.

Without falling into Middle East exceptionalism or arguing that dynamics in one context are not replicable in another, what is suggested here is that any power analysis of actors, relationships and outcomes will necessarily expose different power differentials from one setting to another. Elsadda proposes that the deployment of human rights frameworks and instruments will inevitably mean different contestations of power from one context to another not only because the actors are different but the process of interpreting, adapting and channelling such instruments will be different. In some cases as Khan and Kirmani point out in this issue, where it serves to challenge those abusing power in one context, it serves to undermine and mute those challenging the usurpers of power in another context. For example, in Pakistan's conflict-affected north-west, some Western donor agencies have begun to support faith-based NGOs and alternative dispute resolution with tribal councils, or *jirgas*, out of regard for traditional and so-called culturally appropriate institutions. However the spontaneous emerging of youth activism together with new feminists groups in the region reject this approach, that suggests their rights be somehow mediated through faith-based or traditional structures. They demand the formal court system be improved and that people be granted their full constitutional rights from the state instead.

Moreover, an analysis of local discourses of domestic political struggles in Bangladesh, Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Tunisia suggests that the genealogy of binary framings may not lie singularly in Western political projects or historical trajectories as feminist and orientalist critics propounded. Binaries emerge at times of political turbulence and dramatic change - when there have been contending imaginaries of the 'us' - which require an identification of 'them' - particularly in postcolonial societies



seeking to reinvent themselves in the postcolonial era. In Egypt, though, binaries emerged even earlier. It was against the downfall of the Ottoman Empire and under the occupation of the British colonialists, that the Muslim Brotherhood, the first Islamist movement committed to the instatement of a modern state run in accordance with the Shari'a emerged - just five years after the emergence of the first Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923. It was also less than a decade after the Balfour Declaration committed to supporting a Jewish presence in neighbouring Palestine. In such a context, we trace the genealogy of the emergence of a particular binary – that of the religiously, pious Muslim woman versus the deceived, deceptive Western anti-religious feminist. Such a binary could not be disentangled from the broader political struggles of the time.

This issue is rich with examples of the political importance of binary framings. The Muslim Brotherhood labelled Egyptian women who championed women's rights as being corollaries of the Western-Zionist political project to bring down the Muslim family (see Tadros, this issue). The genealogy of an authentic 'African', religious, traditional versus an estranged, non-Muslim, inauthentic people (which came to be played out through the prism of women's bodies and rights) was made in a political juncture of democratic transition in the 1990s during which advocates for the instatement of Shari'a law in northern Nigerian states emerged. These binaries were part of a broader political project of rejecting Western-inspired governance models, due to disillusionment with democracy and governance practices by the state, juxtaposed with a glorification of the instatement of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Islamic system of governance whose demise was brought about by British colonialism (see Chitra Nagarajan, this issue). In that sense the binary distinguishing the traditional, authentic Muslim woman from its secular 'other' was informed by the broader political imaginary of what system of governance would represent a break from colonialism.

In Bangladesh, it was also against the background of colonialism that the genealogy of a ‘Muslim/religious/moral/authentic/traditional’ or ‘Bengali/secular/immoral/Westernised/ modern’ emerged (Sohela Nazneen, this issue). As in Nigeria, Egypt and Pakistan, women became the markers and bearers of contending visions of what the new nation represented. In the context of the emergence of an independent Pakistan as a homeland for India’s Muslims, religious leaders founded political parties, such as Muslim Brotherhood’s parallel in South Asia known as Jamaat-i-Islami, in an effort to shape it into an Islamic polity. This played a key role in the country’s unresolved identity debate in which the status of women continues to feature as a fiercely contested area, rendering female subordination somehow inextricable from the so-called “ideology of Pakistan”. In Tunisia, in the 1980s, this divide involved supporters of ‘modernity and contemporality’ (*al-hadatha wa-l-mu’asara*) on the one hand, and supporters of ‘tradition and authenticity’ (*al-turath wal-asala*) on the other.

The recognition of these genealogies of binary constructs poses a significant challenge to post-colonialist scholarship that singularly focuses on Western discourse as the site for the creation of these ‘stereotypical dualisms’ (Hume in Hall 1992). These genealogies show that though the dualisms are very similar, the actors and political agendas behind them are evolving and shifting until today. For example, Chitra Nagarajan writes that in Nigeria, the notion of an authentic African suggested a deliberate break with the colonialists (and the West more broadly) but also feminists as well. In Bangladesh, Sohela shows that the word ‘capitalist’ was added to the secular/elitist side of the binary by Islamist groups in critiquing development programming; overlapping in part with the Left in its critique of economic liberalisation and the abandonment of socialist principles in the wake of heavy Western donor support for political and economic

liberalisation aid programmes. In Egypt, the word 'Zionist' was added to the list of secular attributes. In Pakistan, the emergence of feminist activism in response to the Islamisation process led by a military regime in the 1980s created sharp polarisations, synonymising Islamists with retrogressive social, political, and economic platforms, as against progressive, liberal, pro-democratic and secular forces which were virtually silenced until women mobilised on the streets.

In Tunisia, such binary framings were fairly new constructs, emerging in the post-Ben Ali transition where deep fault lines emerged between Islamists and secularists as demonstrated for example in the struggle over the constitution. In what was an essentially political struggle between different political factions, new framings emerged, representing the secularist women as morally loose and areligious in contrast with the pious religiously observant women of the Nahdha Party, for whom a new term was coined to describe their female members ('Nahdhawiyat'). These women became pitched against the activists who were not referred to as feminists but as 'secularists'.

Bangladesh, like Tunisia, initially established its post-Independence identity in 1971 as a secular state in a conscious effort to contrast with Pakistan and distance itself from the religious Right that had collaborated with the Pakistan army to repress its liberation movement. As Sohela Nazneen explains,

Given that a common religious identity had failed to deliver on development and national unity, and Bengalis had mobilised around cultural-linguistic identity and secularism, meant that after independence Bangladeshis had a difficult time reconciling both identities in the political sphere. (this issue)

The two identities were pitted against each other in the political domain, a feature which still characterises the country's political landscape today, gradually eroding the secular identity of the state. Women activists implicated themselves with this contestation directly, as the most visible among groups protesting against Islam being declared as the state religion in 1988. Activists' expansion into development work and the NGO sector contrasted with the religious Right's circumscribed view of women's role in society, thus feeding a narrative of activists as agents of capitalism/imperialism/secularism and immodest Western women.

These contending genealogies of binary narratives necessitate a paradigmatic shift in our engagement with post-colonialist and post-feminist critiques of Western narratives on gender relations and hierarchies on a number of accounts. First, just as the "woman question" was part of a broader Western political project, so too in all of the five cases above, the ordering of gender roles and relations is part of a broader political vision (whether, for instance, to establish a Caliphate or a modern nation state run in accordance with Shari'a) which is hegemonic in its own way, in particular in its homogenising impact on politics and society. In the case of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria, in particular, the role of Saudi Arabia in expanding its own Wahhabi ideological mantra across Muslim speaking countries represents an encroachment on popular expressions of religiosity, even if not imposed through military might. What is suggested here is that while scholarship that has exposed the political instrumentalisation of the "woman question" in Muslim contexts for broader political projects has been critical for understanding hidden power exercised by the West, so too, there is a need for understanding how the political instrumentalisation of the "woman question" by local power holders, be they state or non-state actors, is deployed for the expansion of their power.

The obscuring of genealogies of binaries embedded in local and national level power struggles in the work of Mahmood, Abu-Lughod and others has also meant that their impact on local gender equality struggles has not been captured. The unpacking of Western discourses has been extremely important in bringing to the fore the dynamics of Islamophobia and orientalism. However, the impact of binaries construed by Islamists and ultra-nationalists on local champions of women's rights has gone unrecognised by Western scholars critiquing orientalists. Within their countries, women who advocate for rights are represented by their adversaries by use of such binary constructs; they are termed immoral, irreligious or atheist, and Western agents, as in Bangladesh, Tunisia, Egypt and Pakistan. This vilification of women's rights activists aims to delegitimise the causes they champion and has placed activists at considerable risk to their personal safety (see Grami, this issue).

While we recognise that the critique of imperialism's role in 'otherising' and essentialising women and men from the Global South has been important in exposing the levels of intolerance and racism, it is important to equally recognise the historical origins of the binary framings in the local discourses of Islamists and ultra-nationalists too. It is also pertinent to recognise the effect of Islamists and ultra-nationalists' use of binaries against local women's activists. This was, and still is intended to show the superiority of their political vision and agenda, and difficulty in accommodating other contending visions – particularly secular ones. In other words, campaigns were not initiated with the view of supporting a *non-feminist* vision, but a deeply *anti-feminist* agenda.

Moreover, the deployment of binaries by local power holders served not only to defeat the cause of expanding women's rights but also represented a direct inciting of hatred against the advocates themselves. This is in particular in highly conservative contexts where concepts of honour,

morality and piety heavily influence social relations. Amel Grami's description of the vilification of Tunisian women activists by the Nahdha Party and the Taliban's assault on Lady Health Workers in Pakistan are poignant cases in point (Khan and Kirmani, this issue). In a bizarre confluence of their anti-imperialist stance and the Taliban's objection to women's presence in the public sphere, LHWs are being killed for participating in the polio vaccination campaign (militants accuse it of being a US campaign to secretly sterilise male Muslims); militants also accuse them of soliciting illicit sex during their door to door delivery of health services, which further puts their lives at risk.

### **Pathways of Resistance**

The rich empirical history of pathways of resistance presented in the case studies in this issue allows us to inductively consider interpretive frameworks that are premised on grounded theory. Their cross-country similarities, along with local particularities, deeply challenge the relevance of binary framings as they are dynamic and fluid expressions of collective agency demanding accountability in the form of justice and equality.

In Tunisia, women scholar-activists from the Ecole Tunisienne engaged deeply with religion in order to advance gender-inclusive visions of society, yet they were neither anti-religion nor anti-feminist. Most importantly, they wielded authority and influence in the Tunisian context as knowledge-bearers though they did not belong to Islamic parties or movements nor did they necessarily engage in the religious performative of attire and speech associated with piety. Through a constellation of factors, including their mobilisation, they were successful in creating a popular movement against the proposal to substitute the word 'equality' for 'complementarity' in the Tunisian constitution.

Nazneen describes in careful detail how women activists have been subjected to binary framings in their struggles over women's rights as well as employed such framings to make claims from the state and win over unlikely allies in their campaigns. But eventually, the mobilisation against Islam being declared state religion proved a turning point and they began to clash more openly with Islamist groups over a series of issues. The Taslima Nasrin affair, the use of *fatwas* (religious edicts) against rural women, and the post-Beijing national policy for women, all proved to be a rich site for contestation and brought home the reality that rights-based activists did not have a unified stance and had insufficient street power to effectively steer policies in their favour.

However, in Pakistan women's rights activists initially used religious arguments to resist the state-led Islamisation in the 1980s, but eventually decided to abandon that strategy as the discourse in Islam was dominated by fundamentalist actors, backed by the state, and revisionist or modernist Islamic thinkers almost completely excised from public discourse. Instead, activists decided to establish their secular position in an environment in which even more progressive political parties have abandoned secular stances for fear of being labelled atheist or pro-Western. While the public debate over religion has ceded almost completely to fundamentalist dominance, Khan and Kirmani point out that social and political action at the grassroots level for gender justice appears not to engage with Islam at all. For example, women in areas affected by the Taliban insurgency are demanding their voice be heard in the political reform process, and join with a youth-led initiative (Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement) to push for their rights and the tribal belt's full integration with the state judicial and administrative system. Lady Health Workers have successfully mobilised for their rights as workers, repeatedly demanding the state account for its promises to deliver higher salaries and full benefits for these front-line primary care providers. The transgender community has successfully won

recognition from the courts and the right to freely choose and declare their gender on official documents, while the land-rights movement amongst peasants in Punjab has yet to achieve some measure of success.

In northeast Nigeria the ongoing violent conflict has thrust women into new roles, exposing them to increased sexual violence but also forcing them to assume head of household status and actively participate in rescuing men caught up in the conflict. However the influence of Christian and Muslim religious conservative forces has narrowed permissible sexual practices, forcing more traditionally sanctioned exploratory behaviour and non-normative orientations out of bounds. Here, the 'religious' and culturally 'authentic' cannot be read as the same at all, in fact they are pitted against one another as young people struggle to cope. Yet Chitra reminds us of the complexity on the ground, where women organise in both secular and faith-based organisations, Muslim and Christian, to jointly push for women's rights.

The effect of local context on women's rights mobilisations is that women come together variously, depending on the cause for which they unite, and they employ discourses strategically depending on the cause. For example, they use international human rights instruments to lobby with government and faith narratives around violence with religious leaders. Women are cautious when talking about religion, many are active believers themselves, reluctant to challenge religious leaders, and sometimes Christian and Muslim women share in mutual mistrust of each other's communities. Women's rights activists believe they need to work with religious and traditional leaders if they would like change to happen – with mixed outcomes. In fact, many activists hold strongly homophobic and transphobic positions, and a limited amount of success around sexual violence issues (violence against girls rather than intimate partner violence) has been achieved to date.



In Egypt, where human rights violations were across the spectrum of political, economic and social spheres, advocates of gender justice still insisted on using legal instruments to hold accountable those responsible for human rights violations in the form of sexual violence. In a post-revolutionary context, where neither the appeal to the street nor performative forms of using public space to make a case are possible, feminists and gender justice advocates have sought whatever institutional channels are open to fight back. Their struggle is underpinned by a recognition that the state is not monolithic and instruments of claims-making will change from one issue to another.

This article began with a plea for a paradigmatic shift. The shift that the articles speak to cumulatively is one informed by the need to challenge binaries and counter-binaries. Our interpretive framework is therefore structured by a number of propositions emanating from the cross-country case studies presented in this issue.

These are:

(1) *A continuous interrogation of the discursive nature of binaries, their genealogies, political functions and shifting deployments across time and space.*

One of the clear inferences from the various authors' historical tracing of the *where, when, how and by whom* dimensions of binary constructs is that they do not emanate from a singular, linear Western narrative of supremacy. The unpacking of the genealogy of binary framings in Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tunisia all point to local actors' constructing binaries of their own at historical junctures, appropriating them contextually in struggles of power. However, as with Western binary framings, they too are underpinned by political projects of supremacy (of local culture, religion, or both) and they too are hegemonic insofar as they

seek to have a homogenising impact on what constitutes ‘the right pathway’. This is in no way to suggest that the premise for criticisms of orientalist binaries are not valid, certainly, the power of representation to vilify ‘the other’ is clearly manifest in many spaces where racism and orientalism thrive in the West. However, it is to suggest that critiques developed to explain Western policy and discourse are not ‘travelling theories’ that transcend their context-specific origins and audiences.

*(2) The re-engagement with collective agency in relation to accountability outcomes is a necessary driver for a paradigmatic shift.*

Certainly, as Mahmood (2011) and Cooke (2001) eloquently show in their ethnographic studies of Islamist women, there is a risk of overlooking the many expressions, drivers and dynamics of women’s exercise of their agency, if epistemologically we only identify one form of agency, that of the feminist subject. However, the articles in this issue caution against the dangers of a complete disentangling of agency from accountability outcomes for equality.

Our papers together can be read as an argument for reintegrating our understanding of women’s agency with accountability outcomes. In her study of women’s piety movements in Cairo, Mahmood argues for a separation of the analytical from the political in order to maintain anthropological openness to one’s subjects (Mahmood, 2011) - an approach that many scholars of Islamist women’s groups in Pakistan have adopted. However, as Vasilaki (2016, p. 117) points out, there is no scholarship that is apolitical. To argue otherwise is to repeat the mistakes of positivist, Eurocentric scholarship with its claims of being objective and value-free. Rather, all research subjects, including Islamist women, must be placed within their wider political and historical contexts in order to be properly understood. Mufti (2013) argues that in their efforts to paint an empathetic picture of their research subjects, ‘post-secular’ scholars often

fall into the trap of 'ethnographic philanthropy', reaffirming the 'otherness' of pious Muslim women by writing in a manner that is overly sympathetic with their positions and hence uncritical.

For example, Mahmood argues women's engagement in the politics of piety was not connected to the Muslim Brothers in Egypt (2011). However, the exercise of political agency is dynamic and the mosque became an important mobilising space for building political constituencies by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements post the 2011 revolution. It is impossible to dismiss that women expressing agency in piety would not have also expressed their agency in other political ways. In a context in which the Muslim Brotherhood became a leading champion of circumscribing women's legal and social rights in post-revolutionary Egypt, the accountability outcomes of such expressions of political agency of women frequenting the mosques need to be examined as more than expressions of pietistic agency. This became even more apparent in the case of Bangladesh where Nazneen's study of women in Qu'ran study circles showed how in some cases, they became highly active in the Islamist-led campaign against the National Women's Development Policy. This suggests that accountability for agency cannot be overlooked, because the impact is not always merely an expression of personal subjectivity; within a society or country there will be implications when this agency functions as part of a collective.

*(3) The state is a site of struggle for accountability.*

The state is not *necessarily* the primary interlocutor for women's mobilisations in the countries discussed here, but more often than not it is. There may be two important factors at play here: the nature of the conflict in each context, and the strategy employed by activists. Women activists in new formations who have suffered under Taliban violence in Pakistan's tribal areas have unflinchingly turned to the state for both their

rights as well as accountability. They demand the imposition of state structure upon their territory, long ruled by a combination of tribal councils and traditional customary laws and/or non-state militants attempting to impose Shari'a. By articulating their demands in terms of their fundamental (read: constitutional) rights, they are also appealing for the state to regulate itself (i.e. rein in military and assert judiciary) and become accountable to them as citizens. The landscape of gender activism described in Pakistan shows a clear bias in favour of collective mobilisation to demand rights from the state, however weak, ineffective, bias or corrupt it may be.

Can this be interpreted as a vindication of the broader state-focussed and secular women's rights movement in the country, and its strategy not to engage with Islam? In contexts where conflict has torn apart societies, and some non-state actors have proven far more dangerous and unaccountable to women than even a failing state, then the turn to an imagined state can be by far the best choice. The Islamists' call to create a Shari'a state, which is the explicit goal of both non-state actors such as the Taliban as well as religious parties who do participate in parliamentary politics, thus far does not offer a shared platform to the justice mobilisations described above in Pakistan – nor does it appeal to the vast majority of voters, who reject religio-political parties in the polls.

*(4) Activists do not have the luxury of non-engagement in highly volatile and fragile contexts.*

As Elsadda notes: 'The pursuit of rights, similar to the pursuit of justice, must not only be contextualised, but must also be understood against the background of possibilities, struggles and achievable aims, rather than with reference to ideal worlds and abstract concepts'. What our cases reveal is that in highly unpredictable contexts, those that advocate for gender equality on the ground adopt a highly eclectic approach to

engagement. From the women leaders of the Ecole Tunisienne, whose strong mastery of jurisprudence empowers them to challenge any appropriation of religion to circumscribe rights, to the formation of a common platform between Muslim and Christian faith based actors in Nigeria to advance girls' right to education, to women's rights activists using legal instruments to hold an authoritarian state to account for gender based violence legislation, to framing their struggle in instrumental terms in Bangladesh by highlighting the value of women's work to the economy, to the local struggles of the tribal women's association in Pakistan, the message is clear. In the bid to achieve accountability for women's equality outcomes, women's exercise of agency transcends binarism and representations thereof, whether by hegemonic actors in the West or in their own contexts.

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