

The Pitfalls of Disentangling Women’s Agency from Accountability for Gender Equality Outcomes: The Case of Egypt

Mariz Tadros*

Address

*Correspondence: [\[M.Tadros@ids.ac.uk\]](mailto:M.Tadros@ids.ac.uk)

Abstract

The representation of Middle Eastern women in Western scholarship in particular has been critiqued in post colonialist and feminist scholarship for its racist underpinnings embedded in broader colonialist constructs. This rich body of scholarship has contributed to a paradigmatic shift in how the “woman question” is addressed in Western academic engagement with women in the Middle East. This article, however, interrogates whether the counter-narratives have created new binary constructs in their representations of women’s agency whose impact has been detrimental to local feminist struggles for gender equality. It explores the problematics of using an analytical framing that disassociates expressions of women’s collective agency from the gender equality agenda and its implications for coalitional work by looking at examples from the early 20th century as well as in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

Keywords: *postcolonial feminism, agency, Egyptian feminism, Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian revolution*

Introduction

Challenging essentialist, reified, stereotypical representations of women’s identities has been a focus of extensive feminist scholarship. The representation of Middle Eastern women in Western scholarship in particular has been critiqued by feminists, drawing on the seminal work of

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double blind peer review process



© Copyright: The Authors. This article is issued under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike License, which permits use and redistribution of the work provided that the original author and source are credited, the work is not used for commercial purposes and that any derivative works are made available under the same license terms.

Edward Said, for its racist underpinnings embedded in broader colonialist constructs. Feminist and post-colonial scholarly endeavours to challenge these power hierarchies have assumed many forms including: exposing the disconnect between transnational feminist enterprises and women's realities on the ground (Abu-Lughod, 2013; El Mahdi, 2010); critiquing Western normative assumptions informing interpretive frameworks for understanding women's expressions of agency (Mahmood, 2012); and celebrating what are considered alternative framings of women's agency (Osman, 2003; Maumoon, 1999; Cooke, 2001).

These three strands of work have contributed in major ways to a paradigmatic shift in how the "woman question" is addressed both in discourse analysis as well as in empirically based work. This article, however, interrogates whether the counter-narratives have created new binary constructs in their representations whose impact has been detrimental to local feminist struggles for gender equality. The article does not attempt to engage with the many complex and nuanced contentions made in this rich scholarship. Rather, drawing on representations of women's identities and roles in Egypt at two historical junctures, it makes two propositions on how this work has affected constructs of local feminist agency and gender equality struggles.

The first proposition put forward by the author here is that unpacking the genealogy of binary constructs of the indigenous/Western, pious/secular suggests that their foundation lies not only in Western ideological projects, but also in nationalist and Islamist political projects. This paper argues that while the former binary of indigeneous/Western served to re-enforce Western supremacy, the latter binary of pious/secular served not only to enforce patriarchal privilege but to actively mobilise for the destruction of local Egyptian feminist agency. The second proposition is that while women's agency cannot be reduced to accountability for contributing to or undermining the women's rights agenda, it cannot be entirely

disentangled from it either. The argument here is that examining the myriad expressions of women's collective agency independently of their impact on women's rights in a country more broadly is highly dangerous in justifying or overlooking policies and practices that circumscribe women's rights.

The article commences with unpacking essentialised identities and how they particularly apply to the case of Egypt. It explores the conundrum of displacing one hegemonic regime of truth whilst avoiding creating another that also creates supremacies that are destructive in and of themselves. In the second part, I will look more specifically at the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)'s discourse on local feminist movements, and binary constructions and implications for gender equality struggles in the earlier parts of the 20th century. In the third part, I will examine another struggle - a century later - following the Egyptian revolution of 2011, around what a new social contract should entail for gender justice. I will explore the problematics of using an analytical framing that disassociates expressions of women's collective agency from the gender equality agenda and its implications for coalitional work.

Interpretive Frameworks for Challenging Essentialised Women's Identities: Opportunities and Pitfalls

There is a rich literature unpacking the power dynamics inherent in essentialised and reified constructs of identity. Anne Phillips highlighted four distinct meanings of essentialisms in her seminal work *Gender and Culture* (2010). The first form of essentialism attributes certain characteristics to all individuals subsumed within a particular category, e.g. all women are caring. It is the kind of essentialism that produces stereotyping of individuals. The second type of essentialism is the reification of attributes of a group for example where culture becomes the 'explanation of everything members of a culture do or say' (Phillips 2010, p. 77). The third form of reification is in creating new categories to counter

the first two kinds of essentialisms inadvertently overlooking difference within. This would apply to forms of feminism which, in a bid to challenge gender hierarchies, entailed collective organisation around championing “women’s interests” without recognising the intersectionality of identities and agendas. For example, the assumptions that underpinned a certain kind of feminism that was informed by the Western, heterosexual white middle class woman, without recognition of how differences across class, religion, race, and sexuality diverged from this. The fourth kind of essentialism is a more totalising kind, which entails policing of a particular category. Such an essentialism treats its supposedly shared characteristics as defining ones which cannot be questioned or modified, e.g. are you really a feminist when you believe in x or y etc. (Phillips 2010, p. 81). At all of those moments when you are told you are not ‘really’ Indian/working-class/a feminist/a Trotskyist/whatever, there is a kind of categorical coercion at work. You are being refused your own self-definition because you lack some attribute deemed an essential component of the category you have tried to claim, explained Phillips (2010, p. 81) by way of example. In challenging binary constructs and their reified underpinnings, it is the third kind of essentialism that we see at work in the case study below - how in the bid to challenge essentialisms about women in the Middle East, new ones were created that overlooked the intersecting identities and agendas at work at the local level.

The rich body of work from feminism and post-colonialist studies has cumulatively contributed to a number of important inroads in how we approach the complex subject of identities and relationships in various contexts, most importantly, the need to avoid reified identities, binaries of “us and them” and their corollaries such as Northern versus Southern, Western versus Eastern and the central importance of reflexivity in interrogating our normative framings and their methodologies. However, in this article I interrogate whether these important scholarly inroads, as enriching as they are, have created other new problematic binaries and

categorisations. The intention here is neither to “undo” the displacement of earlier Westcentric (and in some cases racist) constructs of women’s agency in the Middle East, nor to downplay these constructs’ continued significance for Western settings, in which some groups have attacked Muslims and Arabs. It is, however, to press for recognition of, firstly, how they have contributed directly or indirectly to another form of reification, that of the vilification of local feminist individuals and organisations as ‘Western, elite, secular, disconnected’ by local power holders opposed to women’s rights in contexts such as Egypt (and other contexts as evident from this volume). Second, the case study here exposes how the well-meaning Western scholarly paradigmatic shift that highlighted the positive contribution of pious women’s movements has ignored the question of accountability outcomes for gender equality locally.

Perhaps a good place to start is the author’s standpoint and its implications for epistemological approaches to the case studies presented here. This author identifies herself as an Egyptian feminist. By feminist, I mean I am politically committed to redressing intersecting inequalities along the lines of gender, class, religion, geographic background and other identifiers that entrench power hierarchies which distort our humanity and perpetuate injustices. From a positionality point of view, this has given me access as an insider with feminist individuals, organisations and campaigns, enabling me to undertake both formal and informal interviews, be privy to internal documents, and engage in activities as a participant observer (see Tadros, 2016). In engaging with representatives from Islamist movements, I have been able to undertake formal interviews as well as have access to a vast amount of secondary literature on thematic issues, narratives on the history of the movement and the country, as well as some of the sources of instruction shared with the rank and file (see Tadros, 2012). I have also been treated as an outsider, however, especially on account of being a non-Muslim (Coptic) woman, for example, blocking my participation in religious instruction classes in the mosques or in internal member

meetings of Islamic movements. Consequently, my analysis here is not so much on the institutional dynamics within both movements vis-à-vis questions of expressions and pathways of agency, rather it is more specific to the relationship between representations of binary framings, political projects and gender equality outcomes. The pitting of the secularists and religionists has taken different forms. The first a framing of the grassroots, authentic versus a Westernised/elitist. For example, in *Do Muslim Women need Saving*, Abu-Lughod (2013) contrasts the priority issues of local feminist organisations in Egypt with those of women in a poor rural context that she visits. She perceives of these feminist organisations as corollaries of Western transnational feminist networks. In Cairo, she notes,

the women's rights industry creates careers, channels funds, inspires commitments, gives credibility to new actors, creates and disrupts social networks, and legitimizes intellectual and political frameworks and ideals. Women's rights provide a conduit for foreign intervention and government involvement in ordering the daily lives of both the middle classes and those at the margins. (Abu-Lughod 2013, p. 171).

That some women's (and human rights) organisations have suffered from a focus on policy at the expense of building local constituencies is undoubtable (Tadros, 2016). That there has been a struggle in the use of language and framings of justice issues is also a very valid critique (ibid). However, in the bid to challenge Western hegemonic political projects or what she terms the "new gender orientalism", Abu-Lughod creates a new binary, that of the authentic versus elitist.

The problematique with that is its creation of two monolithic categories that do not exist on the ground. Women in rural contexts hold varied positions on gender justice issues and they are very differently positioned along lines of class, geographic location, education and religion. In *Do*

Muslim Women Need Saving, intersectionality is so missing that one is not even made aware that Coptic women exist in Egypt. It also puts all women's rights organisations in Cairo in the same basket, again negating their diversity in political orientation, grounding, positioning and relationship with the West (Al-Ali, 2000).

The same creation of binaries in a bid to challenge Western hegemony can be used in the construct of the secular, feminist versus religious feminist or woman of faith. Feminists are assumed to be secular and are pitted against Muslim feminists/Islamic feminists or women of faith more broadly (Osman, 2003; Maumoon, 1999). That there are ideological differences between some women who mobilise for example under the Muslim Brotherhood and some who work through rights-based organisations is undeniable, however, as will be discussed below, this does not clearly translate into a secular/anti-religious versus a pious/religious stance.

One of the ways in which some Western-based scholars have sought to challenge earlier binary framings premised on the supremacy of Western normative conceptions of selfhood and subjectivity is through exploring multiple expressions of agency. In examining piety movements, Mahmood asserts that 'it is quite apparent that this particular strand of the Islamist movement is only marginally organized around questions of rights, recognition and political representation' (Mahmood 2012, p. 193). Mahmood challenges readers not to 'assume that all contemporary social movements find their genesis in a politics of identity and should be analysed as responses to the juridical language of rights, recognition and redistributive justice' (Mahmood 2012, p. 193). Mahmood's thesis is premised on a critique of the feminist epistemology of exploring women's agency in the context of Islamist movements such as the mosque movement. The challenge, discussed below, is that both historically and contemporarily, the mosque movement founders have had highly

developed positions on issues of rights, recognition and redistributive justice. The question is whether in such a situation, it is possible to disentangle their interests and agenda from the broader gender equality struggles.

What is argued below, is that while agency cannot be reduced to gender interests, its collective exercise has implications for gender equality outcomes. When these outcomes are reflective of local struggles and influence policies, discourses and practices that affect whole populations, then we cannot ignore the question of accountability. At the most general level, accountability refers to the process of holding actors responsible for their actions (Fox, 2007; Joshi, 2007). This involves ‘answerability’, usually formal processes in which actions are held up to specific standards of behaviour or performance. However, accountability here is used to refer to the process of understanding outcomes in terms of responsibility of different stakeholders for the advancing of particular agendas. Hence, in a context such as Egypt, discussed below, the kind of accountability outcomes under exploration are those associated with answerability of actors for the agendas they advance. This should in no way be understood in prescriptive terms, i.e. a list of requirements against which actors are made answerable for their agendas. Rather, it is about unravelling the power struggles occurring around gender agendas in any context and exploring how the different political interests and policy influencing pathways contribute to, or undermine, equality outcomes. Such power struggles are historically and contextually specific and must be examined as such.

Troubling the Genealogy of Binary Framings of Women’s Identities in Egypt

In *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood discusses her ethnographic experience as a participant observer from 1995-97 in the mosque movement in Cairo. While she dissociates the mosque movement from the Muslim

Brotherhood, she traces its genealogy to two key Brotherhood leaders. The first, Hassan El Banna, is the founder of the mosque movement and its first Supreme Guide. Mahmood notes that El Banna harnessed the power of da`wa [prosletisation, or call to God] through mosques to counter what he perceived to be the unsatisfactory religious education offered by the `ulama (scholars). As for women's involvement in the mosque movement, Mahmood traces the growth of all-women learning circles to the spiritual godmother of the Muslim Brotherhood, Zeinab el Ghazali. In analysing the contemporary mosque movement, Mahmood seeks to challenge feminist reductionism that does not give credence to the complexity of women's agency within mosques. Yet inadvertently she creates another binary, that of Western interpretive framings that are by default antithetical to religious agency and the piety movement which is grounded in a particular expression of religiosity. '

What is at stake in Western critiques of Islam, in other words, is not simply a question of ideological bias, but rather these critiques function within a vast number of institutional sites and practices aimed at transforming economic, political, and moral life in the Middle East. (Mahmood 2012, p. 191).

What is missing from this critique, however, is the counter narrative about feminist agency as framed by the founders of the mosque movement. In the early 20th century, the power struggle over "the woman question" in Egypt involved various actors drawing on different sources of legitimacy. The political cohort known as the liberals in Egypt comprised parties and figures along both the left and right and their position on women's rights varied. Similarly among nationalists, there were some who were the most vehement opponents of the Egyptian Feminist Union and its founder Huda Shar'awi while others were occasional allies in supporting their demands for greater equality (or less injustice). The Muslim Brotherhood played a major role in influencing the national debates and policy directions with

respect to the status and role of women in Egypt. The writings of Hassan El Banna provide critical insights on Egyptian feminism, and gender matters in public and private lives. It is pertinent that the first (formal) Egyptian feminist movement (the Egyptian Feminist Union, 1923) and the Muslim Brotherhood (1928)¹ were established within just five years of each other. One of the publicised campaigns of the Muslim Brotherhood became to counter the Egyptian Feminist Movement (Amin 2003, p. 168²). El Banna's vision was of a universal movement that would promote a revival of the idea of an Islamic community whose political, social and economic directions were in line with Islamic precepts (Tadros, 2012). However, it is clear from the writings of El Banna that a key element of his vision for the instatement of a just and righteous Muslim society was teaching on gender identities and relations in private and public space.

Hassan el Banna openly attacked local advocates of women's rights as seeking to emulate the West, being blind to the physiological differences between men and women and its implications for gender division of roles. While Huda Shar'awi and the Egyptian Feminist Union were respectful of religion and many of their struggles for women's rights sought to show the disconnect between Islamic Shar'ia and social practice (Badran, 2005), nonetheless, they were consistently vilified by the Muslim Brotherhood as enemies of Islam. El Banna called advocates of women's equality downright liars if they denied that a woman's primary role is in the home, taking care of her husband and raising her children and doubly liars if they failed to recognise the value of marital union as the oldest union on earth (El Banna, 1944 in Amin 2006a, p. 250). In a chapter dedicated to 'the Brothers and women's issues', Amin shares writings which warn that,

the influence of the proponents of women's liberation has grown, through the stirring/guidance of the Crusader and Jewish imperialism in order to destroy the Muslim family and society in its

entirety from within, to enable their onslaught onto the Muslim Ummah [nation] (2003, p. 165).

Amin decries champions of women's liberation as impious, sexually immodest, areligious destroyers of families.

The existence of the women's liberation movement became a driver for an anti-feminist mobilisation bent on challenging what they believed the movement stood for. The Brothers launched a movement to emphasise the importance of a woman's place being at home, the necessity of veiling and gender segregation and blocking any proposals to reform personal status matters.

The Muslim Brotherhood were relentless in countering this ghastly plan [of women's liberation] that destroys society from inside, so they warned the Ummah of its evils, exposed its goals, and tried to remove these thorns from the path of the Muslim woman (Amin 2003, p. 175)

In an article in the Muslim Brotherhood weekly newspaper *Al Ikhwan Al Muslimoun* (El Banna, 1935 in Amin 2006a, pp. 238-41), El Banna tells Eastern women that they have two paths to choose from: 'that of the pious Muslim woman or the immodest Western woman who mingles [with men] in the markets and streets'. The binary framing serves the political function of delegitimising Egyptian feminists.

The context of this framing was El Banna's attack on the Egyptian Feminist Union for attending the 1935 International Alliance of Women Conference in Istanbul. At this conference Huda Shaarawi was selected vice-president of the International Alliance of Women and presented her own critiques of Western feminism (Badran, 1995). While the Egyptian Feminist Union initiated large-scale campaigns against colonialism in Egypt and

imperialism in the region and challenged Western feminists to condemn their governments' policies in the region in particular towards Palestine, none of this was recognised in El Banna's writings. For Egyptian women to have challenged patriarchal gender hierarchies automatically relegated them in the eyes of the Muslim Brotherhood to the category of Western corollaries.

Hassan El Banna addresses 'those who call themselves advocates of the women's cause' (Amin 2006a, p. 237), accusing them of being 'imposters, deceivers, fighting a non-war, playing with phrases, you are taking as your opponents those who are the true guardians of this issue...' (Amin 2006a, p. 248). Presenting them as opponents to Islam, he then proceeds to explain that they are either ignorant that all women's rights are guaranteed in Islam or are not faithful in adhering to its precepts (Amin 2006a, p. 248). In the latter part of the article, he asks a rhetorical question to,

those who demand for women [right to] work, office and vote: don't they agree with us that the prime place for a woman is her home and the most noble of her missions is to form a family, raise it and build the Ummah? If they say no, then you are lying a thousand times [over]. (Amin 2006a, p. 250).

The casting of men and women who championed women's rights as enemies of religion was from the perspective of the Muslim Brotherhood as legitimate guardians or upholders of Islam.

Yet in practice Huda Shaarawi and many other feminist leaders engaged with Islamic leaders and sought to widely disseminate enlightened interpretations of Islam by learned scholars. Amin recounts that the Muslim Brotherhood sent a complaint to King Farouk of Egypt when they heard that Sheikh Moustapha Abd el Razek, an Alazharite scholar and the

then Minister of Islamic Endowments, attended a party at Huda Shaarawi's house. Amin was outraged that Abd el Razek would be in a place where there was a 'combination of girls and women who were Muslim and non-Muslim, foreigners and non-foreigners, saferat,³ with mixture of men' (Amin 2006b, p. 204). The Brothers had been advocating against gender mixing, and against women's instigation of cultural events and salons. However, what is interesting in this case is the reference to the mixing with non-Muslim, presumably Egyptian women, as perhaps indicating another level of digression. The Brothers considered an Islamic scholar interacting with women as an affront to Islam itself. For Amin, the danger was that such women would be associated with an Islamic leader in the minds of the public and that became a major driver for seeking the King's intervention in punishing the Minister of Islamic Endowments. The action intended to confirm that even when women's rights champions seek Islamic authority, they should be denied the legitimacy that comes from drawing on Islam and its symbols.

Mahmood has challenged us to extricate our conceptualisations of women's agency exclusively from the prism of rights and equality. Epistemologically, this is a welcome endeavour since it challenges us to reflectively think about our normative standpoint and the biases and assumptions that it wields. However, if we were to engage with women's collective agency as an actor whose agenda and policy-influencing work directly or indirectly affects the local struggles for gender equality, then we cannot disassociate agency from accountability for women's rights. Hassan el Banna was not engaged in a doctrinal exercise about what an ideal Muslim society should look like, he and the Muslim Brotherhood were active in seeking to shape policy in Egypt. For example, while the Muslim Brotherhood recognised women's right to a particular kind of gender appropriate education, they consistently blocked every policy measure put forward to expand women's rights in Egypt. When Naema al Ayoubi obtained her law degree and the Lawyers Syndicate refused her

application for membership (on grounds of her gender), El Banna commended the syndicate for their wisdom. When Fatmah Fahmi obtained her high school certificate and applied to join the Faculty of Engineering, and her application was rejected, again he congratulated them and the Minister of Education for protecting the public good against those who do not respect the natural division of labour between men and women (El Banna, 1933 in Amin 2006b, pp. 227-29).

In 1944, Zoheir Henry MP's proposal to parliament to grant women suffrage was rejected. Hassan el Banna vociferously attacked the proposal saying that women's place is at home and any energies spent on the electoral process should be for the education of men on their responsibility to vote (El Banna, 1944 in Amin 2006b, p. 249).⁴ When women were allowed to enrol at Cairo University, the Muslim Brotherhood launched a campaign to prohibit women from entering higher education institutions and to create parallel learning institutions whose curricula would be more suited for their gender roles (Amin, 2003; 2006a).

Collective agency, whether pious or otherwise, has a consequence for gender equality outcomes. Amin's account of the Muslim Brotherhood's campaigning against the women's rights movement indicates a high level of policy engagement, involving writing letters to the King, to parliament, to sympathetic MPs and ministers as well as grassroots mobilisation. It was both a proactive policy of educating men and women of gender relations and responsibilities but also reactive, seeking to block any policy that would enhance women's rights.

The above historical account is significant for narratives that have sought to challenge Western essentialisms and biases in three major ways. First, the omission of Islamist movements such as the Brothers' vilification of local feminist movements from such narratives creates a highly distortive narrative. It negates the experiences of local women's rights activists in

engaging with such hostility and locally-led campaigns to delegitimise them through attacks on their personal integrity and allegiances. Second, the negation of the Brothers' own political appropriation of framings that label women's rights activists as agents of imperialism in Western scholarly narratives that challenge gender orientalism, leads to a selective engagement with hegemonic political projects, ignoring that spearheaded by Islamist movements. Third, it fails to recognise how scholars' own narratives collude with that of local Islamist movements in undermining local feminist agency. While this is not to suggest that academics who have inadvertently created a binary of an orientalist West versus locally authentic Islamic women have colluded with the Muslim Brotherhood to undermine local Egyptian feminist movements, it is to say that there is an unfortunate convergence in the two discourses. The impact of disentangling women's collective agency from the broader gender struggles experienced at a national level are equally glaring when exploring another critical juncture in the history of Egypt, the revolutionary phase associated with the ousting of President Mubarak in 2011.

Women's Agency and Accountability for Gender Equality in Revolutionary Times: The Litmus Test



(Streets of Cairo during 2011 Revolution, March 2011. Photo: Ali Atef.)

The ousting of President Mubarak in 2011 through a people's revolution opened the floodgates of citizen activism through social movements and political parties across right, left and centre. Irrespective of how historians retrospectively appraise the democratic potential in 2011, it represented for the people a historical juncture full of opportunity for establishing a new order. Across the spectrum of different political groups of women (Al-Ali, 2000), there was intense mobilisation around influencing on women's rights, the gendered nature of the constitution, the future of the National Council of Women (the national machinery formerly headed by Suzanne Mubarak, the First Lady⁵), and the new legislature (2012).

Against the political ascendancy of the Muslim Brothers to power in Egypt in 2011, informally, and more formally in 2012, it became possible to examine first, what notions of equality are advanced when Islamists are empowered to shape policy and practice, and second, what opportunities present themselves for coalition-building across ideological divides. Prior to the Muslim Brotherhood's political empowerment in Egypt after the 2011 revolution, some scholars (Abdel-Latif and Ottaway, 2007) suggested that the movement may be propelled towards reforming its position on gender. Like all movements, there is always a dynamic interface between context, the political moment and internal dynamics influencing internal institutional politics.

For a number of historical and contextual reasons too complex to capture here, the political scene following the ousting of President Mubarak became highly divided along several axes politically and economically. With respect to gender equality issues the political fault-lines were deeply polarised between two groups: an "Islamist" camp comprising various Islamic movements who held varying positions on gender roles and rights, and a non-Islamist camp (often called a secularist camp by the Islamists)

who were highly differentiated on economic and political issues. During this period (2011-2013), the mosque became a space for political mobilisation of Islamic groups of different political orientations. For example the Muslim Brotherhood had a stronghold on particular mosques, the Salafis others, the jihads yet another set. As Mahmood did not mention the names of the mosques in which she undertook ethnographic work in Cairo (and they probably represent a very minute percentage of the total number of mosques in the capital city anyway), it is impossible to examine the political affiliation of the women who studied in these mosques after the revolution. However, at a national level, there is evidence that the Muslim Brotherhood relied on the mosque frequenters, women and men, who though not being formal members of the Brotherhood were seen as sympathisers (*mohebeen*) for political mobilisation during that period (Tadros, 2017). The suggestion here is not that all women who frequent mosques for religious instruction would have become supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, only that it is impossible to dismiss the inevitability that there would have been some in this category on account of the broad historical trajectory of the country at that juncture.

There were a number of issues around which the fault-lines on gender between the Islamist and non-Islamist camps became ossified, perhaps the most acute being around how gender relations and issues were framed in the new constitution symbolically (gender sensitive language) and substantively (articles defining women's rights). Other issues included the nature of gender-related legislation during the short-lived Egyptian parliament (January 2012-August 2012) as well as the official Egyptian governmental stance on the theme of gender-based violence in the Commission on the Status of Women of 2012. Women leaders of all political persuasions sought to influence the framing of a new social contract for Egypt on political, economic and social issues. A number of female members of the Muslim Brotherhood rose to the highest echelons of its political party established in 2011 - the Freedom and Justice party

(FJP) - and in its government, after Dr Morsi assumed presidency in June 2012 (Tadros, 2017). Feminists organised into coalitions to present their vision of a new contract, with particular respect to gender justice issues. However, an analysis of the political coalition-building and alliance forming strategies pursued between 2011-2013 does not point to any major political campaign or theme around which women belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood and feminists joined forces. Both camps vilified each other, and the ideological and political polarisation became acute.



(Protestor in Cairo during 2011 Revolution, February 2011. Photo: Ali Atef.)

Hatem suggests that contrary to the narrative critiquing the Muslim Brotherhood for their gender ideology, the only piece of legislation they issued when in power was one protecting the rights of female-headed households through medical insurance (Hatem, 2013). The promulgation of this legislation represented a positive policy measure that responded to a real need experienced by poor, economically disadvantaged women, divorced, abandoned by their husbands or widowed. It is also commendable that in drafting the constitution of 2012, a similar article was introduced stipulating that ‘The State shall provide special care and protection to female breadwinners, divorced women and widows’.⁶ Hatem suggests that the Muslim Brotherhood’s gender agenda reflected their sensitivity and awareness of the economic needs of vulnerable women which was disregarded by elite feminists and the media intent on vilifying the movement (Hatem, 2013). Hatem’s framing suggests a clear binary distinction between feminists who pursue an elitist agenda focused on political rights versus women of an Islamist orientation who are more focused on bread and butter issues facing economically excluded women. Yet in reality, it was feminist organisations who had lobbied for decades for state recognition of the rights of female-headed households and for comprehensive national policy on social transfers, legal aid and medical insurance (Bibars, 2001). The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood-led authorities advanced such a policy both in parliament and inscribed it into the constitution was highly commendable, but its genealogy lay in feminist policy-making demands of the 1990s, well before its uptake in Brotherhood social policy.

The broader gender strategy that was rolled out by the Muslim Brotherhood in practice sought to entrench gender hierarchies cementing male privilege. The Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists capitalised on the deep hatred that Egyptians held for the First Lady (Suzanne Mubarak) seeing her as responsible for Mubarak’s downfall, to call for a repeal of

legislation that they had objected to during Mubarak's tenure by representing it as 'Suzanne's laws' (El Sadda, 2012). For example, they lobbied for a change in family legislation to repeal the right of the mother to have guardianship over her children's education, on account of its violation of the Shar'ia. In July 2011, Al-Azhar, the highest Sunni Islamic authority that issues legal opinions endorsed their call. The Brothers launched a campaign to press for Egypt's abdication of its commitments to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Children's Convention on account of their violation of the Shari'a. Leading MPs in the 2012 parliament, such as Azza Garaf, openly advocated for a de-criminalisation of female genital mutilation as inscribed in the Child Law that was passed in 2008 during Mubarak's reign.⁷ She argued that the matter should not be regulated by legislation but left to personal choice and medical opinion (interview 2012 in Tadros, 2016). Other leading members of the Muslim Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood interviewed insisted that this was only her personal opinion and that the FJP did not put forward any proposals to parliament of this kind (interview 2012 in Tadros, 2016). However, even though decriminalisation legislation was not officially presented to parliament, informally, the Muslim Brotherhood's FJP was endorsing the practice. For example, the FJP mobile health clinic due to visit the village of Abou Azziz in Minya, announced among its services '*circumcision for males and females for LE30 a case*'. The Muslim Brotherhood denied they ever provided such a service but the flyer announcing the mobile health clinic's arrival suggests that at the very least there was an intention to provide it (Tadros, 2016).

In 2013 the Muslim Brotherhood sent its own representative to the Commission on the Status of Women to denounce the document against violence against women that the UN had put forward that year.⁸ The Muslim Brotherhood issued a statement condemning the Agreed Conclusions on account of their incompatibility with the specificity of the

needs of Muslim women and their destruction of family values. This created a major rift with women's rights groups in Egypt who protested that the Muslim Brotherhood's stance did not represent them (El Sadda, 2012).

Ironically, both feminist and Islamist women's groups have shown a greater ability to engage in transnational solidarity with other women's groups than amongst themselves locally. This is highly significant in challenging the binary representation of feminist women drawing on transnational solidarity whilst Islamist movement women focus exclusively on local stakeholder engagement and bonding. El-Mahdi (2010) describes as a participant observer the emergence in 2005 of an initiative called 'Women for Democracy' which brought together women from across the ideological spectrum (Islamist leaning and secular leaning) in order to link women's subjugation to pro-democracy demands. She suggests that the fault-lines between Islamists and non-Islamists were so deeply entrenched by unhelpful binaries such as the authentic versus Western, the universal versus local that they led to the speedy dissolution of this initiative. El-Mahdi (2010) identifies the failure of local secular feminists to recognise the potential for coalition building with Islamist leaning women around common agendas as the cause behind weak mobilisation around gender interests. She particularly holds secular feminists to account for the demise of the initiative, first for their inability to view their Islamist peers as partners rather than foes and second, for seeking solidarity with international feminist networks rather than looking 'inside' for joint action (El-Mahdi 2010, pp. 395-6).

It is true that Egyptian feminists have extensively drawn on solidarity with transnational feminist platforms for advancing a pro-equality agenda (though not uncritically). However, it is also true that women belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood have drawn on transnational alliances and solidarities to advance their gender agenda. Though the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement has a strong anti-Western ideological

standpoint, they have chosen on occasion to forge alliances with American evangelical pro-family groups to counter transnational feminist platforms in the international arena (pers comm Camellia Helmy 2006). Heba Rauf Ezzat, a highly respected thinker⁹ notes that the vision of women who endorse an Islamic framework has more in tune with the New Right activists as a counter reaction to feminism (Maumoon 1999, pp. 278-9). On matters pertaining to the family (and against women's equality), and on sexuality and reproductive health, the Muslim Sisters have found more in common with conservative evangelical Christians than with local feminists and activists in Egypt. This challenges the contention that the absence of a local ideologically cross-cutting platform that brings together Islamist women and feminists is because the latter prefer international solidarity over local coalition-building (El-Mahdi, 2010). It is clear that the Muslim Sisters and Islamist women have also sought to build support around a gender agenda at an international level as well. By challenging any simplistic binary constructs of local feminists being outward looking and local women Islamists being inward looking, it becomes possible to explore the wide array of ways in which organised movements make strategic choices about where, when and how to mobilise. This applies as much to Islamic women's mobilisation as it does to their feminist counterparts, be it regionally or internationally.

Conclusion

The rich scholarship exposing and challenging orientalist interpretive frameworks is to be credited for creating a paradigmatic shift in essentialist constructs of women's agency in the Middle East. This article, however, has argued that other totalising binary constructs need to be exposed and contested if we are to avoid replacing one hegemonic regime of truth with another. Much of the literature critiquing scholarly, media or policy representations of women's agency in the Middle East rest on exposing the normative biases of feminisms towards Islamist movement women. In this article I have reversed the inquiry to interrogate how

Islamic movements frame local feminists and women's rights struggles by exploring one archetype of Islamist movements, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood and his representation of local women's struggles in the 1920s and 1930s. The article has argued that the binary constructs of feminists as Western, anti-religion and elitist versus non-feminists as authentic and religious can be genealogically traced back to the work of the Muslim Brotherhood. By failing to interrogate the Islamist movements' own constructs of binary framings, some feminist scholarship enforced the same tendency to create reified identities that its critique of orientalism had sought to challenge. The negation of binary constructs in Islamist movement literature served to obfuscate another hegemonic political project - an element of which was the vilification of local feminist struggles. This deliberate or inadvertent oversight of the confluence of the binary framings of orientalist critiques and those of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood meant that the hegemonic political project of the West was exposed, but not the political project of the Islamists. Such an omission had a major detrimental impact on the representation of local feminist agency which has had to contend with the double whammy of the vilifying discourse of both the Islamists and Western scholars.

The second contention made in the article is that when both Western and non-Western scholars, policy makers and activists represent feminists as secular (proxy for anti-religious) and Islamists as religious (proxy for pious), they distort a complex reality in which these categorisations are often artificial. The Egyptian Feminist Union sought to represent itself as aligned with, and emanating from, its Muslim roots, thereby challenging the binary framing of secular/Western versus religious, authentic framed by El Banna and other leading figures of the Islamic movement. The binary construct depicting women's rights organisations in Egypt as being outward-looking, forging alliances at a transnational level whilst Islamist-leaning movements operate on a national/local level has also been empirically questioned.

While it is true that many feminists groups in Egypt draw on CEDAW as an instrument of appraisal - one that is clearly secular - it is also true that they have drawn extensively on religious and cultural repertoires. Conversely, while it is true that the Muslim Brotherhood has positioned itself as the guardian and upholder of Islam, this has not deterred the Muslim Sisters from publicly allying themselves with conservative Western Christian evangelical forces at key international events. El-Mahdi and Abu-Lughod's (2011) critique of some Egyptian feminists as elite and lacking in grassroots constituencies is to a certain extent well-founded. However, caution is needed not to generalise about feminists and women's rights activists in Egypt. By engaging in the reification of local feminists, such scholarship is feeding into the misrepresentation of feminism by Islamist leaders, starting from the rhetoric of Hassan el Banna to that of the Brotherhood's contemporary leadership.

The third contention has been to empirically interrogate the epistemological approach proposed by Mahmood to disentangle the study of women's collective agency from the broader gender equality agenda. On the one hand, it would be highly reductionist to reduce women's collective action to the women's rights agenda. As the wide array of literature has shown, women may exercise their collective agency to pursue a wide range of issues, underpinned by different visions. An interpretive framework that exclusively explores women's collective agency in terms of gender rights may overlook broader contextual dynamics that are critical for understanding accountability outcomes. For example, authoritarian regimes may endorse women's rights while showing no accountability for the broad spectrum of rights that enable women to exercise their agency, individually or collectively (Tripp 2013, p. 515). On the other hand, when women's collective action influences the expanding or circumscribing of women's rights, it becomes

epistemologically problematic to disentangle agency from accountability for equality agendas.

The case study selected by Saba Mahmood (2013) to make the plea for epistemologically disassociating agency from rights epitomises this problematique. The very binary constructs premised on vilification and othering that Mahmood attributes to a Western political project are genealogically also prevalent in the early writings of the Muslim Brotherhood - a movement whose leading figures Mahmood acknowledges to be the founders of the women's mosque movement. Stretching from the early days to the contemporary movement, the Muslim Brothers have established a dialectical opposition between platforms that press for more rights for women and their own as advancing a pious Islamic social, economic and political order. The Muslim Brotherhood's ascension to power, albeit for a short period after the ousting of Mubarak, offered an opportunity to test the case that 'rather than calling to change existing laws, Islamic feminists¹⁰ cry for a return to "authentic" Islam, so that both women and men can achieve their full potential' (Osman 2003, p. 77). While the promulgation of a new law extending medical health care for female-headed households was a commendable policy, this was countered by a broader gender strategy that sought to maintain and deepen patriarchal power relations. Gender activism of Islamist movements as described by Abdel-Latif and Ottaway (2007) may have politically empowered its participants but their agendas served to advance policies and practices that entrenched gender unequal power hierarchies.

While this paper engaged with a particular contextual and historical case study, its contentions are relevant for scholars examining the relationship between the dialectics of representation of women's collective agency and gender equality in other settings. The first proposition is the importance of exploring the genealogies of the reification of identities. Historicised

and contextualised approaches to unpacking genealogies through situated narratives is key. This enables us to understand the nature of struggles and how the construction of binary frames serve as a function of advancing broader political projects. By examining the genealogies, it is possible to identify the wide array of actors involved in political appropriation of such constructs and how they change over time and space.

The second proposition for future work in this area is the relationship between normative values, prescriptive framings and interpretive frameworks. This article has argued that feminist epistemological notions of clear articulation of standpoint and positionality are analytically useful in unpacking normative values and how they have affected the conceptual and methodological approaches to the topic. However, there remains the question of how to avoid normative values rendering prescriptive rather than analytically open frameworks. What has been proposed here is that examining agency in relation to the dynamic power struggles in which it is being exercised is critical, agency cannot be simply examined in terms of the vision and actions of those exercising it, it has to be relational to other actors in the same context.

The third and final proposition relates to the relationship between agency and accountability in relation to women's identity and gender equality. The article recognises the dangers of reductionist analysis that exclusively analyses women's collective agency through the lens of women's rights, and cautions against the enunciation of any simplistic linear causal relationship between women's collective agency and accountability outcomes for gender equality. At any one point, gender equality outcomes can be attributed to a complex constellation of influences, some of which we can hold actors accountable for their roles and some of which are the unintended outcomes of a confluence of circumstances and dynamics. However, in exploring the plurality and richness of women's collective agency, including those of non-feminist and anti-feminist women, it is

equally impossible to dismiss its influence on gender equality outcomes. If for example, one of the purposes of binary framings is to delegitimise the agency and struggle of local feminist actors, then inevitably there are accountability outcomes that cannot be overlooked. Nothing short of a paradigmatic shift is needed here - not to reverse the gains of exposing orientalism - but to recognise ways in which the creation of counter-framings for challenging imperialist projects may inadvertently hurt local struggles for gender equality if they create new binaries and reified identities.

Professor Mariz Tadros obtained her doctorate from Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford in 2004. She is an IDS Research Fellow specialising in the politics and human development of the Middle East. She convenes the Coalition on Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID), launched in November 2018, and is also the co-leader of the IDS Power and Popular Politics Cluster, and currently Co-Director of the DFID-supported RPC on Action for Empowerment and Accountability. She has authored over one hundred publications, and her books include: *Resistance, Revolt, and Gender Justice in Egypt*, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt: Democracy Redefined or Confined?* and *Copts at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Building an Inclusive Democracy in Contemporary Egypt*.

References

Abdel-Latif, O. & Ottaway, M. (2007) *Women in Islamist movements: towards an Islamist model of women's activism*. Carnegie Papers 2, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Abu-Lughod, L. (2013) *Do Muslim women need saving?* MA Thesis, Harvard University Press.

Al-Ali, N. (2000) *Secularism, gender and the state in the Middle East: the Egyptian women's movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Amin, G. (ed.) (2006a) *Min Tourath Al Imam Al Banna Al Islah Al Ijtima'i* [From the Imam El Banna's heritage: social reform]. Cairo: Eldaawa Publishers (in Arabic).

Amin, G. (2006b) *Door Al Ikhwan Al Muslimeen fi Mujtama' al misri min 1938-1945* [the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian Society 1938-1945]. Cairo: Eldaawa Publishers (in Arabic).

Amin, G. (2003) *Al Ikhwan Wal Moujtama'a Al Misri Wal Dawli Min Fatrat 1928-1938* [The Muslim Brotherhood and Egyptian and international society from 1928-1938]. Cairo: Eldaawa Publishers (in Arabic).

Badran, M. (2005) Between secular and Islamic feminism/s: reflections on the Middle East and beyond. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1 (1): 6-28.

Badran, M. (1995) *Feminists, Islam, and nation: gender and the making of modern Egypt*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bibars, I. (2001) *Victims and heroines: women, welfare, and the Egyptian state*. New York: Palgrave.

Cooke, M. (2001) *Women claim Islam*. London: Routledge.

El-Mahdi, R. (2010) Does political Islam impede gender-based mobilization? The case of Egypt, totalitarian movements and political religions. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 11 (3-4): 379-96.

El-Mahdi, R. & Abu-Lughod, L. (2011) Beyond the "woman question" in the Egyptian Revolution, *Feminist Studies*, 37 (3): 683-91.

Elsadda, H. (2012) Women's rights activism in post-January 25 Egypt: combating the shadow of the First Lady syndrome in the Arab world. *Middle East Law and Governance*, 3 (1-2): 84-93.

Fox, J. (2007) *Accountability politics: power and voice in rural Mexico*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hatem, M. (2013) Gender and counterrevolution in Egypt. *Middle East Report*, 268: 10-17.

Joshi, A. (2007) Producing social accountability? The impact of service delivery reforms. *IDS Bulletin*, 38 (6): 10-17.

Karam, A. (2002) Islamisms and feminism in Egypt: three generations of women's perspectives. In: Bacchetta, P. & Power, M. eds. *Right-wing women from conservatives to extremists around the world*. New York: Routledge: 225-44.

Mahmood, S. (2012) *Politics of piety, the Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Maumoon, D. (1999) Islamism and gender activism: Muslim women's quest for autonomy. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 19 (2): 269-83.

Osman, G. (2003) Back to basics: The discourse of Muslim feminism in contemporary Egypt. *Women and Language*, 26 (1): 73-8.

Phillips, A. (2010) *Gender and culture*. Cambridge: Policy.

Sholkamy, H. (2012) The jaded gender and development paradigm of Egypt. *IDS Bulletin*. 43 (1): 94-8.

Tadros, M. (2017) Does revolutionary politics reconfigure Islamist women's agency organizationally? The case of the Muslim Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (1928-2013). *Feminist Dissent*. 2: 85-114.

Tadros, M. (2016) *Resistance, revolt and gender justice*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Tadros, M. (2012) *The Muslim Brotherhood in contemporary Egypt: democracy redefined or confined?* London: Routledge.

Tripp, A. (2013) Political systems and gender. In: Waylen, G., Celis, K., Kantola, J., & Weldon, L. eds. *The Oxford handbook of gender and politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 514-31.

Notes

¹ The doctrine of the Brotherhood is addressed in Tadros, 2012 and marginally in Tadros, 2017.

² Gom`a Amin, a leading member and historian of the Muslim Brotherhood, oversaw the process of compiling, organising and publishing of the works of Hasan El Banna, including speeches, press articles and other writings. There are three key publications which are drawn on here extensively (Amin, 2003; 2006a) in which Amin draws on primary data from the writings of El Banna and Amin's (2006b) compilation of El Banna's writings from various newspaper and magazines on the subject of social reform: *Min Tourath Al Imam El Banna Al Islah Al Ijtema'i*.

³ Saferat is the plural, singular is Safera, a word that is used to refer to non-veiled women, but has nuances of being exposed, of being sexually immodest.

⁴ The information in this paragraph is corroborated by the Muslim Sister, Makarem el Deiry (pers comm. 2007).

⁵ The author has been selective about which cases to present here on account of limited space. The struggle over the nature of gender rights, language and hierarchies in Egypt's constitution is one that perhaps best epitomises the fault-lines between an Islamist camp and a non-Islamist one, however, it would not have been possible to capture its complexity and many nuances here. For further information on this struggle see Tadros, 2016.

⁶ The introduction of this legislation was uncontroversial within the Muslim Brotherhood because it did not challenge power relations between men and women in any fundamental way and in fact was completely congruent with their overall paternalistic welfare policy (See Sholkamy, 2012 for a discussion of the latter).

⁷ Female genital mutilation (FGM) or female circumcision as it is popularly called, involves the removal of the clitoris and part of the labia minora under the pretext that this will protect a girl's chastity. FGM, although practiced for thousands of years, has been on the decline in the past decade thanks to a socially sensitive and nationwide campaign to show that FGM is neither religiously prescribed, nor linked to a woman's moral behaviour.

⁸ At the 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2013, the Commission issued a set of 'agreed conclusions' on the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls which reiterated many of the principles highlighted in CEDAW and reinforced the message regarding a zero tolerance policy towards both private and public forms of gender-based violence.

⁹ Though not an official member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Karam (2002) notes that Raouf was taught by leading Muslim Brotherhood figures such as Zeinab el Ghazai.

¹⁰ While noting that the Muslim Sisters do not call themselves Islamic feminists, some of the figures that Osman mentions in her article do happen to be leading personalities in the Muslim Brotherhood.

To cite this article:

Tadros, M. (2018). The Pitfalls of Disentangling Women's Agency from Accountability for Gender Equality Outcomes: The Case of Egypt. *Feminist Dissent*, (3), 57-87. Retrieved from:

<https://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/feministdissent/index>