Issue 3, 2018 – Special Issue on Challenging Binaries to Promote Women's Equality

Co-edited by Mariz Tadros, Ayesha Khan, and Jenny Edwards

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Special Issue on
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Introduction to Special Issue

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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.

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

nuanced 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

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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.

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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 20th 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 20th century. Formal procedural democracy is under fire, giving way to

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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

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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

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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 19th 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.

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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

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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)

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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.

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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,

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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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Women, Feminism and Politics in Post-Revolution Tunisia: Framings, Accountability and Agency on Shifting Grounds

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Abstract

During periods of flux generated by Tunisia's transition to democracy, all classes of women found the 'political opportunities' to push for change even if they did not necessarily share the same ambition or dream. The mobilisation, contestations, confrontations and struggle of Tunisian women in the post-revolution period alert us to the need to examine the factors behind this activism and the extent of its visibility. It is important to revisit the Tunisian women's movement in order to understand its interaction with other forms of power such as politics, religion, and class; as well as the extent to which such activism is a renegotiation of women's identities and status in post-revolution Tunisia. Indeed, the extent to which the rise of Islamism and its conservative gender ideology can affect feminist movement activities has been one of the main issues of debate. The divide between Tunisian women - secularist and feminist versus Islamist women (Nahdhawiyat) begs to be explored. This divide can be understood as the expected materialisation of binaries that manifestly reveal the hard task of pursuing accountability of feminist movements regarding broader and universal feminist issues of epistemology, agenda, and ethics within the new local context.

This article is an attempt to address the binary framings of secular/liberal/elitist/Westernised feminist movements against the re-

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emerging religious/indigenous/ethical and conservative discourse. It aims to shed light on the influence of such opposed frames and their impact on women's struggles for empowerment, and the accountability of both state and non-state actors.

Introduction

During periods of flux generated by Tunisia's transition to democracy, all classes of women found the 'political opportunities' to push for change even if they did not necessarily share the same ambition or dream. The mobilisation, contestations, confrontations and struggles of Tunisian women during the post-revolution period alert us to the need to examine the factors behind their activism and the extent of its visibility. It is important to revisit the Tunisian women's movement in order to understand its interaction with other forms of power such as politics, religion, and class; as well as the extent to which such activism is a renegotiation of women's identities and status in post-revolution Tunisia. Indeed, the extent to which the rise of Islamism and its conservative gender ideology can affect feminist movement activities has been one of the main issues of debate. The divide between Tunisian women - secularist and feminist versus Islamist women (Nahdhawiyat) begs to be explored. This divide can be understood as the expected materialisation of binaries that manifestly reveal the hard task of pursuing accountability of feminist movements regarding broader and universal feminist issues of epistemology, agenda, and ethics within the new local context.

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This article is an attempt to address the binary framings of secular/liberal/elitist/Westernised feminist movements against the re-emerging religious/indigenous/ethical and conservative discourse. It aims to shed light on the influence of such opposing frames and their impact on women's struggles for empowerment, and the accountability of both state and non-state actors.

A Historical Background to Emerging Binary Frames

The first Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba led the country after its independence from France in 1956 until his removal from office in 1987 by Zine El Abedine Ben Ali[1]. Bourguiba chose to establish a modern educational and welfare system and promote women's rights rather than build a strong military and involve it in politics. Since 1956, the Personal Status Code[2] banned polygamy, granted equality in divorce proceedings and established a minimum age for and mutual consent in marriage. It granted women's rights to work, move, open bank accounts, and start businesses. Bourguiba insisted on the maintenance of women's rights through social institutions (see Charrad, 1997; 2007). Still, Bourguiba's regime continued to rely on basic Islamic tenets. While promulgating the CPS, his administration maintained the new was not a break with Islamic heritage, but 'a new phase in Islamic innovation, similar to earlier phases in the history of Islamic thought' (Charrad 2007, pp. 15-19).

It was the second president, Ben Ali, who promoted women's rights and continued to implement reforms favourable towards women. In 2007, the minimum age of marriage was raised from 15 to 18 for both men and women. In the 2000s Tunisia expanded women's rights with regard to marriage contracts, alimony, and custodial rights over children. These top down policies for women's rights were intended to portray Tunisia internationally as embracing modernity.

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The polarisation between the secularists/liberalists/leftists and the Islamists became visible during the 1980s, and characterised the broader debate on political, economic, legal and social choices and policies. The debate included women's rights and other issues, framed within opposing visions that pitted the Western model of liberation against a conservative one rooted in the Islamic perspective. This divide involved supporters of 'modernity and contemporality' (*al-hadathawa-l-mu'asara*) on the one hand, and supporters of 'tradition and authenticity' (*al-turathwal-asala*) on the other. The debate over the role of language in society continues to elucidate this divide, even today. While leftists, modernists, and secularists believe French is more appropriate for the new context of nation state modernisation, Islamists and nationalists link Arabic language to religion, the 'sacred book', and collective identity. Hence, modernity and tradition compete for ideological influence and, at times, hegemonic political expression.[3]

Although the first generation of educated women were part of Muslim organisations during French 'rule', many of the post-independence figures were Western-educated and became involved in political life and social activism. Political leadership, and its only dominant party, championed women's involvement in the public and political spheres. State-sponsored women's organising contributed to this activity in the fields of education, health and other key sectors. A large number of women leaders travelled to Europe for education and training before returning to Tunisia and participating in this state agenda. However, in 1975 a 'reactionary' discourse emerged when President Bourguiba and his guests gathered during Ramadan for a scholarly lecture given by a female scholar. Instead of praising Bourguiba and the progressive Personal Status Code, renowned philosophy professor Hind Shalabi criticised key provisions of the Code and

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called for a return 'to the fundamental foundations of [Islam]' (Toraifi, 2012). From the mid-seventies to the early eighties a divide between the state's project and the emerging Islamist movement became apparent. It initially involved universities whose students fascinated by communism and nationalism and those who were divided between those who supported the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Muslim Brotherhood activism in the region.

The divide impacted perceptions of accountability related to political order and social justice. The state accused Islamists of seeking to return to the dark ages, while Islamists attacked the government for uprooting Muslim women from their Islamic identity. The period was marked by repression and trials of several Islamist activists, and a widening social divide between supporters of a modernist view and those calling for the return to the rule of Islam. There was no emergence of an autonomous feminist movement, women's activism remained circumscribed within a national political conflict between the state and the dissident Islamist voices. Leftists were part of this debate; although they were also feared by the ruling party, they had no specific women's or feminist agenda.

(Demonstration organised by the Tunisian Association of Women Democrats (ATFD) for a secular Tunisia. Author Amel Grami (wearing blue). Photo: Lina ben Mheni).

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In the 1990s, a new class of female scholars emerged the majority of whom were bilingual or trilingual and either were the product of the new educational system or educated in Europe. Many worked in the State's education and judicial institutions before engaging in political life. Although some were initially used by the dominant state-led feminism to fight radical Islamic movements, many became active on more than one level. They became increasingly visible in the public sphere through the media and political participation through the ruling party. However, some pointed out the low level of women's representation in the government, the parliament and civil society organisations and unions. Radhia Hadded, President of UNFT (National Union of Tunisian Women-the major State-sponsored female organisation), criticised the lack of freedom of expression and association. Amel ben Aba and Zeineb Cherni were among other feminist members of the communist organisation 'Perspectives' to denounce the state feminism.[4] Despite his revolutionary ideas, Bourguiba chose to reinforce the more traditional Tunisian women's roles, often represented in his speeches as mothers, wives, and guardians of Islamic tradition.

Due to Tunisian system of education and educational policy in general, the field of religious studies mainly remained male-dominated. Feminists used the West as their frame of reference and held that it would be counter-productive to employ a local religious framework. Most of these women were more aligned with the left and not knowledgeable about religious issues,[5] having a feminist liberal socialist view. However today, educated women are increasingly embracing an Islamic vision as a pathway to liberation and empowerment. Accordingly, their vision of Islam is often described as a way of life, a cultural force and consists in wearing the veil, trying to exemplify Islamic values, helping the marginalised and vulnerable people and promoting 'moderate Islam'. Along with this trend, a number of feminists have emerged who, because of their knowledge of Islam's

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founding texts and heritage have chosen to work within the field of religion and cultural identity while simultaneously defending their feminist and women's rights agendas.

Thanks to an increasing reception of new approaches to humanities, and a rich and complex debate on religion, women and culture since the late 1990s, a new group of feminist scholars have focused on a reinterpretation of religious texts. This opening has created new venues for Tunisian feminist scholars who initially did not see themselves as 'Islamic feminists'.[6] The deconstruction of religious discourses has been one of several strategies for addressing patriarchy and state feminism as well as contesting men's monopoly of religious discourse and knowledge.

The fact that the Islamic movement politicised religion and appropriated its norms and values influenced feminist scholars of the 1980s to act and react. They endeavoured to counter this discourse and defend themselves against charges of being Western pawns, implementing an imperialist agenda, lacking religious knowledge and legitimacy/authenticity. Some feminists, including myself, started to deconstruct religious discourses, explaining that women's status in Tunisia is related to not only the history of the reformist movement but also the history of Islamic thought in the country, which includes the Tunisian 'brand' of Maliki *fiqh*.

Being a Member of 'The Tunisian School of Islamic Thought'

As a university student, I was particularly influenced by the work of Nawal el-Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi. Both women illuminated for me the differential treatment of men and *women* in a *patriarchal society*, helping me to reflect on processes by which *women* are constructed as 'other'. Some of my male professors, too, encouraged students to learn more

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about feminist theories and approaches, believing feminism was a tool for female advancement. At that time, I witnessed the rise of the Islamist movement and its confrontation with leftists/secularists at the university. Some young scholars chose to align themselves with either the Western feminist tradition (often influenced by second wave French feminism) or Islamist ideology. I preferred to focus on historical critical approaches to tradition influenced by the work of pioneers such as Nasr Hamed Abu Zaydand Mohamed Arkoun, among others.

Believing that women can participate in the effort to develop 'fresh' interpretations of religious texts (both Sunni and Shi'i), I decided to study 'feminist interpreters of the scripture' in different religions. As a member of an international interfaith research and dialogue group, 'GRIC' (Groupe Islamo -Chretien) I value openness towards, and cooperation between and among, women activists of various ideological inclinations. Since I was aware that the strategy of locating gender equality within religion has its limitations and may not result in equality for all women in the world, I decided to analyse women's history and experiences from different perspectives and through new lenses. Moreover, as a scholar and activist, I needed to reflect on the question of whether or not taking human rights conventions as a point of departure would be strategically more effective in advancing women's rights than the reinterpretation of religious texts. I finally chose to combine both strategies, combining different perspectives and working on the potential intersectionalities rather than established theoretical categories. As a result, today I situate my analysis of the legal relationship between the state and women within a framework of 'equality', and citizenship.[7] Employing a multidisciplinary approach and taking gender as a category of analysis, I question religious texts and challenge religious scholars who defend a literal reading of the Quran and consider themselves authentic representatives of Islamic heritage. In fact, I was among the few women scholars who agreed to debate with men

representing official religious institutions in various Arab countries, which brought me recognition and a certain authority.

Today I identify myself as a feminist, but I am not among the secular feminists who view religion as fundamentally incompatible with feminism. Rather, I think that it is time Tunisian feminists take religion into account, recognise social change and different women's needs. Neila Sillini, Olfa Youssef, Zahia Jouiro, myself and other scholars as women who have

> … reshaped the debate on the role of Islam in society and on Qur'anic hermeneutics. They play the role of public intellectuals detached from the Islamic feminism movement as conceived in other Muslim countries.' These scholars are known as 'the new reformists', and are now part of The Tunisian School of Islamic studies (*L'école Tunisienne d'islamologie*) founded by Abdel Majid Charfi,[8] who holds there are different Islams and we should be aware of the diversity of Muslims' environments, ways of life and understanding of religious texts at different historical moments. The Moroccan, Abdu Fillali Ansary agrees, adding, 'Terms such as 'democracy,' 'human rights,' or 'civil society' do not exist in a vacuum, but travel, are translated to Arabic and become part of the political discourse (Ansary 2012, p. 10).

The establishment of modern university departments, following the Western model, has influenced this wave of scholars. They have focused on fields as diverse as sociology, political science, philosophy, philology, history and anthropology, leading them to use modern critical disciplinary tools to analyse their own societies and adopt a historical perspective towards contemporary issues. Feminist scholars trained in this vein seek the empowerment of women through knowledge and critical engagement rather than a repudiation of their cultures. Using modern disciplinary

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methodologies, they deconstruct the classical discourse on interpretation elaborated mainly by men. This new Islamic reading of religious texts emphasises the role of context and history in interpretation, without questioning the texts' ontologically divine nature. These scholars also rigorously examine the Hadith tradition (sayings of the prophet Muhammed) and are unanimous in their demand for gender justice as integral to a just society.

Women's Activism and Binaries in the Aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution

Tunisian women have been transformed into symbols of the tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, feminism and Islamism. The 'woman question' has become a symbolic terrain for political and ideological struggles in periods of instability – post-independence as well as post-revolution. During the years preceding the Tunisian revolution, growing anti-Bourguiba sentiment emerged among certain segments of the population despite a long standing reverence for the Personal Status Code.[9] These dissenters felt his numerous achievements came at the expense of estrangement from Islamic identity, norms and authentic social values; a view shared by some women who defended the return to an authentic patriarchal order. In this sense, the divide among women reveals an important disparity regarding their status and the impossibility of reaching a unified voice or vision for the future of women in Tunisia.

Scholars like Sillini, Youssef and myself became more visible after the 2011 revolution and we participated in many talk shows, debates, and conferences. After being used by the authoritarian regime as a political tool, the media industry has transformed following the revolution. Tunisians began to discuss openly and freely: the role of religion (Shari'a law)[10], the Personal Status Code, secularism, and other theoretical

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subjects considered fundamental in the process of writing the new constitution as well as building a new civil and democratic state. Female scholars have used all the tools available: mainstream media (press, radio and television), social media (Facebook pages, YouTube, blogs) and publishing to play an important role in clarifying many religious concepts, including some used by Nahdha Party[11] deputies in the Constituent Assembly.[12] By using oral narratives, popular proverbs, life stories, and testimonies we have drawn attention to the forgotten or marginalised female voices that have shaped the history and culture of our society. In short, feminist scholars have helped to refashion the consciousness of the new generation from a gender perspective.

Scholars like Youssef, Sillini and myself are also committed to action in the public sphere and have targeted policy makers, as well as civil society to sensitise them to the high cost of excluding women from social reform and democratisation. As scholar-activists we demonstrate our commitment to accountability in the sense that, 'If being accountable involves being answerable for one's actions, the principle of accountability can be extended from formal to informal institutions and from collective to individual actors' (Cornwall 2017, p. 11).

Scholars have become increasingly involved in 'action research', merging intellectual and academic activities with militant action where appropriate. Action research is:

> a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes…
> It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more

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generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (Reason and Bradbury 2001, p. 1).

When women engage in the interpretation of religious text and enter the public arena for debate or action, they create a different form of knowledge, using different tools for both its production and dissemination. The post-revolution Tunisian experience led to public acknowledgment of some secular feminist scholars as specialists on religious knowledge. Nonetheless, secularists are not yet ready to concede to the idea of a fully privatised religion, or the total separation between religion and politics.[13]

In Egypt, religious scholars at Al-Azhar University have been actively involved in the political restructuring currently ongoing in their country, calling incessantly for the reform of religious discourse. In Tunisia, however, scholars at the theological school Zeitouna University[14] have remained outside the transformation process, despite a long reformist tradition, since most are supporters of the collapsed regime. After the revolution, some joined the Nahdha Party and a few became close to Salafist groups. The majority of women scholars from Zeitouna have shown no interest in playing a role during the transitional period. Many either express conservative views or reject the secular perspective in the belief that the gender perspective is a threat to Islam, and a Western heretical approach. Fatma Shakout, for instance, who has campaigned for a radical and conservative interpretation of Islam, dismissed the Personal Status Code as dissident from Shari'a. On many occasions, conservative voices have risen against progressive projects involving women such as the Parity Law, the suspension of reservation on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other reforms. By looking at the Islamic past for a model, Zeitouna scholars

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have sought to reproduce sexual difference as both a cultural and theological necessity.

After the revolution, the Personal Status Code was at the heart of the ideological conflict between feminists, secularists and extremist views (some members of En Nahdha and Salafists). Bourguibawas dismissed by Nahdha, CPR (Congress for the Republic, a centre-left secular political party) and the Salafists for imposing on Tunisian women a Western perspective that undermined their role in the construction of an authentic Islamic order. Secularists defended Bourguiba as 'the liberator of women', insisting on the need to advance women's rights. The conflict highlighted a serious cleavage among scholars leading to a visible divide between those seeking an authentic lost Islamic order and those seeking to advance women's universal human rights. The latter were criticised for being defenders of immoral and dissident practices, and in favour of LGBTQ rights.

The Impact of the Divide on the Political Process

After the revolution, some women activists decided to run for election in 2011. While women from Nahdhawere supported by their party, leading female figures from the democratic block[15] and human rights activists (Saida Garrash and Boshra Bel Haj-Hamida among others) dealt with Islamists' manipulation of their image, stories and agendas. Although they had opposed the Ben Ali regime, these activists were dubbed traitors because they had built coalitions with other feminist groups around the world. They faced harassment and intimidation from Islamists and were subjected to police surveillance. Social networks dismissed them as liberal women of bad reputation and a disgrace to the ideal of a pure Islamic order.

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In their electoral campaign, Islamist groups represented feminist activism as a threat to men's natural privileges and status in society, often portraying women activists as deviant and morally transgressive of a divine and ideal social order. Being secular, activists were portrayed as 'non-believers', Westernised women trying to impose Western values on Tunisian women, and thus to undermine their religious and cultural traditions. Attacks on rights activists were designed to undermine their legitimacy, an echo of previous regimes. Caricatures and cruel videos[16] were widely shared by Nahdha supporters, portraying women activists as enemies of the *ummah* (Muslim society). As Manel Zouabi writes,

> Soumaya [Ghannoushi, Nahdha leader] polarizes feminist activists from the start. She constructs them as the evil side and herself as the righteous one. … Soumaya restricts secular feminist women's agency to inappropriate dress code, dictatorial elitism, and un-Islamic consumption of cigarettes and alcohol. These feminists, therefore, are transformed into a social repulsive threat (Zouabi, 2016).[17]

While feminists received regime support from the ruling government before the revolution, following the revolution Islamists saw them as supporters of the state. They treated them as if they are against Islam as a whole. Their objection to wearing the veil in public was considered not only as hostility against Islamic principles but also against democratic ones.[18] Yet for many activists, the fight against fundamentalism was and continues to be a profoundly democratic struggle and inevitably associates them with a regime that has held a similar discourse on women's rights.

As a result of the Islamist campaign, women's rights in general have become closely associated with Bourguiba and Ben Ali, both of whom are seen as dictators and enemies of religion. Islamists often fail to grasp what

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activists understand - not all acts against the state are acts of resistance, and not all acts supporting the state signal acquiescence. Because of the campaign, most feminist candidates experienced harassment and violence in public. Men from various political parties (Islamists as well as leftist and secular) used different methods to silence women's voices, devalue them and perpetuate stereotypes, confirming political parties to be 'private clubs for men' (UNDP 2012, p. 14).

Islamist parties (Nahdha, Ansar Asharia and Hizb Attahrir) have a negative perception of women's rights; they reject family laws as a secular action against Shari'a and believe the idea of women's empowerment has already gone too far and has disempowered men. Some political leaders from En Nahdha close to the Salafists believe the moral and even economic ills of society are the result of estrangement from Islamic cultural heritage and laws.

To get voters' support, Islamists used the narrative of oppressed veiled women as victims of the former authoritarian regime. They published documentaries and interviews with some mothers and wives of prisoners to evoke people's empathy and support for Islamist women as bearers of an authentic moral and political order that had been repressed. Although the veil was no longer considered a problematic issue in the new political context in the sense that women were free to wear it, Islamists provoked a debate about its earlier ban under Ben Ali. They accused feminists of being accomplices to the repression Islamists had faced. Thus, the veil itself has become an iconic sign of difference (both political and ideological). This in itself was a strategic move altering the visual, and therefore the ideological landscape. The first legislative elections after the revolution gave Nahdha Party a majority of 89 seats. There were 49 women elected to the Constituent Assembly out of 217 representatives

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(equating to 26.3 per cent). Nahdhawi women MPs were a majority among women in the parliament, clearly identifiable by their dress code, unified discourse and attitudes.

Rather than normalising religion as one identity point among many, or as a complex category that often defies easy characterisation, the identification of religion has become a festish and the starting point from which social relations are enacted and from which institutional policy is developed (Beaman 2013, p. 147). Nahdhawi women defended their party as a civil, 'moderate political party'; however, they made use of their emotional experiences as veiled women. This positioning was constituted by dissociating themselves from 'feminists', their discourses and their way of doing activism. Not all women MPs supported the feminist agenda; feminists were dismissed as representive of only a small class of liberal Tunisian women, acting against the authentic values of Islam and indigenous culture. Nahdhawi women never denounced the campaign against feminist activists nor the death threats from some preachers.[19] During the process of drafting the new Constitution 2011-2014, En Nahdha supporters verbally and physically attacked many activists for so-called violations of Islamic morality. In this sense, Islamism in contemporary, post-revolutionary Tunisia is much more complex than just piety and virtuous bodily practices.

The presence of women on Nahdha's electoral list helped convince people that, against all established perceptions and its proven track record, the Islamist party was 'women-friendly' and believed in women's ability and eligibility to lead and act in all fields. On many occasions, Ghannoushire assured women that his party would neither alter nor want to cancel any of the legal or social achievements of women. He also gave assurances that his party would not challenge the law on polygamy or impose the veil on

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women. The supposed political enfranchisement of women was used as a progressive front, and once again a political leader tried to reserve the right to decide on women's rights. Hence the demand for women's rights was instrumentalised in political Islam as well as anti- Islamist discourses.

The years 2011 to 2013 witnessed a shift under the new Islamist government towards a more explicit state-led anti-women's rights agenda. Some Nahdhawi political leaders expressed their will to Islamise the country and society.[20] Rached Ghannouchi suggested holding a referendum about the Personal Status Code to reconsider the clauses that he believed contradicted Islam, such as the prohibition of polygamy and the right to adoption, while some of his deputies proposed imposing Shari'a law. To convince people of the necessity of Shari'a law, an unveiled woman deputy from Nahdha, Souad Abderrahim, spoke out against Ben Ali's policies and gave an impassioned tirade against liberal secular feminists for calling for measures to protect and support single mothers (Kouichi, 2011). Moreover, she defended the need for their children to receive social and legal protection but pointed out that they should not be treated legally on equal terms with married women. 'We do not want to normalize children outside marriage' (El Ouazghari, 2014). It is important to note that the En Nahdha party decided to recruit some unveiled women and give them importance. In this sense Nahdha women are not seen as associated with spiritual but with political Islam. Religion is a political agency rather than a religious one.

The long history of the instrumentalisation of women for political reasons has made many Tunisians aware of the real incentive behind the Islamist party's promotion of women. In fact, the party's real attitude towards women was made clear when it suggested reforming of Article 28 of the draft constitution, defining women as 'complementary' to men.

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Thousands of people protested against this move on 13 August 2012, Women's Day in Tunisia.

Many actions such as violence against women activists (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016, p. 643), the call for segregation, and attempts by men to control women's behaviour in public, were sufficient evidence that an established lifestyle was being challenged (Sgrena, 2011; Wolf and Lefevre, 2012). There were nationwide protests against any plan to revoke constitutional rights. As John L. Esposito and François Burgat (2003) pointed out, 'Islamists do not intend to dismantle modernity but to Islamize it, to create an alternative modernity' (Esposito and Burgat 2003, p. 65).

Women's Resistance

(Author Amel Grami (left) and a university colleague Mounira Remadi (right) demonstrate with thousands of Tunisians for equality, not 'complementarity' between men and women on National Women's Day in Tunis. 13 August 2012. Photo: Amel Grami.)

It is evident that there is a polarisation of issues related to women in post-revolution Tunisia. This is visible in the binarism and dichotomies that emerge from the debates and perception of women in the public and

political spheres. Many Tunisians have adopted the idea that revolution is not a one-off moment, but requires momentum and continuous resistance. The gap between women's agendas being debated within the Constituent Assembly and civil society organisations has led to head-on-collisions. The result is an increasing polarisation between the 'Islamists' and 'secularists'. Civil society and other women's rights actors hold hostile political actors accountable for any regression or cancellation of rights that women have hitherto enjoyed. This accountability has become a weapon for a trading off between political parties at the Constituent Assembly. Statements about female excision made by a deputy from Nahdha, Habib Ellouz, angered a few Constituent Assembly women who demanded an apology. Nadia Chaâbane, elected member from Al Massar reacted by stating, 'I am surprised that the ANC [National Constituent Assembly] and, by that, I mean the presidency of the ANC, has not yet ruled on this issue. It is responsible for enforcing the law and ensuring its compliance, and so far, it has rather kept silent'[21].

The old divide between urban and rural women and educated and non-educated women has gradually been replaced by another divide between Islamist and secular women. There was a clear divide between the large number of Nahdhawi women and those from other political parties. However, women from left and progressive parties constituted a progressive block and had a unified voice thanks to their outstanding knowledge of and background in women's and human rights activism at both the local and international levels. Some established women's organisations such as AFTURD and the Association of Tunisian Women Democrats (ATFD) have long lobbied for legal reform, such as the parity law, and a law to end violence against women. Learning from the experiences of women's movements in the region, Tunisian activists have acquired tools of resistance. Many became famous for their outspoken

views on the media; other politically active women have also stepped forth to defend the cause.

The debate over the issue of 'complementarity' in the new constitution dramatically highlighted such divergence on women's issues. Nahdha proposed,

> The State guarantees the protection of women rights and the promotion of their gains, as a real partner of men in the mission of the homeland building, and the roles of both should complement each other within the household … The State guarantees the extermination of all kinds of violence against women. (Draft Tunisian Constitution, see McNeil, 2012)

Many Nahdha members were convinced that men and women are equal before God but that they should indeed have different roles within society, especially with regard to family obligations. Others stressed the privileged status given to women in the Shari'a namely through instructions on how mothers, wives and daughters should be by men. Beyond being a linguistic battle, the conflict revealed sharp differences and a tendency to pave the way for the adoption of Shari'a principles that see women as supplementary to men, rather than as full and equal partners.

This binary revealed two frames of reference for women in Tunisia. One a push toward full and legal equality between men and women, and another that sought to establish a softened moral agenda of instituting difference. Some Constituent Assembly members launched a broad protest movement[22] along with civil society organisations (Democratic Women's Association, Tunisian Women's Association for Research and Development, Tunisian General Labour Union, Human Rights League and others). It culminated in a large march on August 13 2012, which rallied

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7,000 women and men through downtown Tunis to protest against women's perceived complementarity to men in Article 28 (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014, p. 236). By pushing politicised women to demand their rights from within a religious framework, En Nahdha leaders were obviously trying to alter the discourse on gender equality and give it a meaning compliant with the religious principles of natural inequality.

Luckily, after this huge demonstration on the street and popular pressure, the first women's battle was won and the term 'complementarity' was removed from the constitution, but statements by some women Constituent Assembly members revealed the protest did not end the divide. Accountability was a weapon used by activists who accused those in power of betraying the trust given to them. Any lost right meant further polarisation. Although Ghannoushi declared his party would not change the status of women in Tunisia or the Personal Status Code, some party members opposed parity law, and argued for gender segregation at school. Moreover, some Islamists spoke of overturning the ban on polygamy or tolerating 'religious marriages' that would enable a man to have more than one wife simultaneously or to 'marry' one 'temporarily' (Moghadam, 2016).

The consequence of this battle and the impact of the fall of Morsi regime in Egypt on Nahdha strategies was important. By placing demands on women deputies to function as public representatives of the 'moderate Islam' they represent, Nahdha tried to show that Tunisian Islamists were different. They claimed to be preaching a moderate political Islam, neither incompatible with democracy, nor hostile to the modern status of women in society. Nahdhawi women MPs maintained that they enjoy freedom of action, but they did not show any independence from party policies, decided mostly by a male-dominated central committee. They did not adopt, individually or as a group, any position championing women's roles

and rights in political or social spheres. This shows the extent to which the political discourse and agendas remained divorced from visible action. The contrast between Nahdha's advocacy of women's equal participation as citizens in the political arena and its efforts to limit women's rights as individuals (as reflected in Abderrahim's comments, and in Nahdha's proposal to define women as complementary to men) partly reflects divisions within the party. It also suggests that the party's male cohort make all the decisions on the matter of women's rights.

The rise of Islamist power revitalised the women's movement in post-revolution Tunisia. Fear, anger, uncertainty and doubt pushed many women to join demonstrations and to raise their voices. More importantly, those feelings were fertile ground for productive and deep dialogues about the future of Tunisian women, feminist activism and feminist accountability. This, however, shifted the focus on accountability from State responsibility and duty to that of civil society and its activist leaders. Yet this situation has helped women voters to emerge as a political force to reckon with. The 2014 elections marked the advance of the newly constituted liberal Nidaa Tounis at the expense of Nahdha, a victory decided primarily by women's votes.

Just as there is a politics behind the vocabulary of activism, there are also multiple strategies, forms and techniques of resistance. Many feminist activists have patched together events, convinced others of common objectives, and circulated knowledge about opportunities and tactics. They have also used Facebook, Twitter and other social media to promote societal change and gender equality. Associations like 'Chaml' have become prominent, with an aim to renew feminist discourse based on contemporary realities, mounting conservatism, yet aware of the pitfalls of the inherited past. 'Chaml' seeks to create a space where the intersections of various perspectives of women's identities are expressed.

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From these intersectional identities, they can create a diverse, plural form of feminism that is not shaped by Ben Ali or the media, but by women themselves, through their words, stories, expressions, and interactions with different feminist ideas in online spaces. 'They do not want feminism to be defined at the top, because it does not represent the diversity of women in Tunisia, so they use online spaces to define and conceptualise a new form of grassroots Tunisian feminism' (Mulcahey 2016, p. 63).

Activists are aware that new media is creating a new sense of accountability toward a public increasingly challenging in its demands for greater transparency in state decisions and policies. Feminists have used these media outlets to make the state more accountable, as well as for outreach in an attempt to adjust negative perceptions of feminism. They have expressed their concerns and voiced their responsibility for the advancement of women's causes and rights, giving their sense of accountability a social dimension shaped by and reflecting alternating alignments of politics, cultures, social norms and institutional expectations.

Many feminist practitioners and scholars have questioned whether their work is feminist enough. Others have started to draw attention to feminist accountability and expressed their discomfort and hesitation. As the feminist Allen (2001) asked: 'What is my responsibility to the people whose lives I am studying? What do I owe them for giving me the opportunity to get inside their lives? What do I want to give back?'[23] If we agree that reflexivity demands continuous self-criticism, we can understand why some associations have adjusted their feminist agendas in the aftermath of the revolution. They have focused on the issue of social justice and have done a lot of work on rural areas. It is obvious that the uncomfortable feelings from feminist exchanges have furthered their

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thinking and encouraged them to work toward more accountable practices.

Aware that the digital world is increasingly a space of political and social struggle, where individuals and institutions use social media to project their voices and expand their sphere of influence, women from En Nahdha party have used this platform to convince women to integrate the political vision of the party and to work for its agenda. Some of them try to focus on issues related to the construction of religious identity and to help young women to be 'good Muslims'. What is missing in Islamist online activism is the debate on women's associations' accountability and a serious debate on the future of the Tunisian women's movement.

Despite increased women's activism on both sides, challenges to the state's corruption, arbitrary arrests, and systematic injustices remains limited. There have been few attempts to build coalitions in the parliament around women's rights and advancement. Some Tunisian women feel the need to bridge divergent discourses and share the idea of Margot Badran that '[t]oday, in the final push to achieve equality in the family in Muslim societies, Muslim reformers as secular feminists and Islamic feminists need to work cooperatively more than ever before. Non-Muslims with knowledge, insights, and experience who share concerns about living together with Muslims in the same families and societies need to be an integral part of the debates and activist initiatives' (Badran 2009, p. 7). But to date the Tunisian experience has notyet meaningfully disrupted the classic yet artificial secular/religious binary.

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Conclusion

The experiences of women in post-revolution Tunisia show the extent to which binaries and frames may shift. But what such binaries confirm is essential to any feminist action, rooted in the past, responding to emerging complex realities, and eager to think of the future as mutually constructed. They also confirm that women remain agents and a force to be reckoned with, yet they still have much to do to liberate their action from tutelage and dependence. Achieving autonomy and acquiring free will have to start with dismantling residual forms of accountability, instrumentalised and invested with inherited crippling ideologies. State feminism of the pre-revolution period used accountability to ensure the loyalty of women by appropriating their cause whilst ensuring that the state remained the real actor. Any form of progress or achievement that women enjoy is developed using the existing male structures of decision-making. Although Tunisian women have enjoyed political and civil rights that women in other countries of the region envy, such rights have always been used to disarm feminists and cripple their agency.

Post-revolution Tunisia has shifted the responsibility and accountability from the hands of the state to that of the lawmakers and civil actors. The polarisation that emerged involved a resurfacing of the conservative Islamist agenda that obliged the progressive, modernist block to unite around the issue of women's rights. The battle around concepts was but the visible tip of the iceberg. The divide involved a clear collision between two ideologies and worldviews. The battle that women won marked their entry on the stage not as civil activists but as a political force that ended with changing the balance of powerthrough a massive vote by women who chose to support a liberal candidate. This shows the extent to which women's activism is essentially political. There is no alternative to political involvement.

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The post-revolution events helped shape a new female agency rooted in a history of state feminism and shaped by the divide between progressive and conservative societal projects. Throughout this process, the history of feminist action and activism in Tunisia reveals the extent to which the process is dynamic and volatile requiring a continuous rallying of forces, education, and appropriation of language and spaces of decision-making. Accountability is not necessarily in the hands of the same power structure but is changing location and meaning. Throughout this process, female agency is struggling under the weight of changing structures of power and authority. To emerge fully, it needs an 'enabling environment' and the construction of a collective agency aware of its weight and determinant role in challenging authority. Its liberation is in educating women, in making them aware of the need to change location in terms of framing issues, to transgress the rule of male domination and all its residual forms. This is happening at various levels. For the first time, two elected presidents of Tunisian universities are women and in some university councils, women now hold the majority. There is no doubt that the future of Tunisia is in women's hands. They are aware of the impact of accountability on social relations and on the configurations of power.

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Women and Terrorism', Tunis, Meskliani, 2017 (with the collaboration of the journalist Monia Arfaoui).

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Notes

[1] Ben Ali was President of Tunisia 1987-2011.
[2] 'On 13 August 1956, less than five months after the proclamation of independence from French colonial rule, the Republic of Tunisia promulgated the Code of Personal Status (CPS). A set of laws regulating marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance, the code profoundly changed family law and the legal status of women. Together with the Turkish civil code of 1926, the Tunisian CPS of 1956 represented a pioneering body of legislation that reduced gender inequality before the law in an Islamic country', https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/tunisia-personal-status-code
[3] In 2012 a controversy sparked by a member of Tunisia's Constituent Assembly having difficulty communicating in standard Arabic reopened the debate about the role of language in national identity and the meaning of 'Tunisianity', see Guellouz (2016). Feminism and religion started clashing after the nationalist movement moved towards a more patriarchal and culturally traditional model that included religious language and symbolism.

[4] The term 'state feminism' or alternatively 'institutional feminism', was employed under Bourguiba and Ben Ali's regimes as a tool to promote gender equality and women's rights to exclude the alternative politics of independent feminist activists.

[5] Scholar activist Khadija Ben Hasine scholar argues, 'Why should we return to the religious text, spend our lives reading and re-reading this text, stretching it like an elastic to see what it will allow us?' To use the Koran as a reference is to 'give up on the universal, on our constitution, on international treaties' and to engage with fundamentalists who reduce religion to talk of 'nothing else but women's bodies' (Lindsey, 2017).

[6] Some scholars define themselves as feminists, some call themselves human rights activists while others see themselves as scholars/activists. Some shun labels altogether. After the revolution, Olfa Youssef and Zahia Jouiro declared themselves part of the 'Islamic feminism movement', while Neila Sillini and I define ourselves as 'Muslim feminists'.

[7] Unlike Charrad, who often draws her discussions into the theoretical, both Chekir and I analyse the impact of Tunisia's laws on women to explore the practical implications of the legal status of women in Tunisia as compared to men. To that end, we both pair discussions of progress with diagnoses of remaining inequalities, citing the distance between the three points of law, implementation, enforcement, and practice (Petkanas 2013).

[8] For more on Charfi see Charfi (2004), Benzine (2004), Ansary (2003), and Zeghal (2008).

[9] The Personal Status Code was passed by the first President of the Tunisian Republic, Habib Bourguiba, on 13 August 1956. It was sympathetic to the spirit of feminist egalitarianism and gave women some essential rights.

[10] For more see Colombo (2015), Debuysere (2015), Grami (2015), Johansson-Nogués (2013), Labidi (1998), Tais (2015), Tchaïcha and Arfaoui (2012) and Zamiti-Horchani (1983).

[11] Formed in the early 1980s as an Islamic opposition movement, EnNahdhais is one of Tunisia's oldest and most well-organised political parties. Persecuted by the former regime, many leaders lived in exile or were imprisoned until the 2011 Revolution.

[12] For example, Olfa Youssef is very active on Facebook and YouTube, raising awareness about liberties, commenting on Al-Nahdha, the hegemony of the Ulama, and discussing violence against women and homosexuality.

[13] Petkanas (2013) argues the dominant narrative of the autonomous women's movement in Tunisia is secular feminism. 'It focuses exclusively on a secular, humanist, and internationalist discourse of feminism enshrined in organisations that acted as a kind of counterweight to the government. This dichotomy, which may well have been reflective of the public conversation, renders impossible the existence of any other feminisms. The prominence of female Nahdawi deputies in the post-revolutionary political scene prompts questions concerning the development of Islamic feminism in Tunisia, for which the dominant framework does not allow' (2013, p. 6).

[14] Zeitouna University has trained theologians since the eighth century. In the late 1950s, Bourguiba, dismantled and replaced it with a simple faculty of Shari`a and Theology. Under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali some forms of religiosity were excluded from public space, and Zeitouna was only able to continue Islamic instruction under close state observation. Recently, most of its scholars opposed the presidential initiative to reform inheritance law. Noureddine al-Khadmi, a former Minister of Religious Affairs and a professor at Zeitouna, said any other interpretation of the Quranic law was impossible (The Guardian, 2017).

[15] Such as Ettakattol Party, The Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (one of the secular coalition partners within the Islamist-led government), Ettajdid (or Renewal) Movement, and The Movement of Socialist Democrats.

[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yfP2JC4WoY (Accessed 12 February 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FJBKqeGpao (Accessed 12 February 2018).

[17] On many occasions Soumaya Ghannoushi insulted feminist activists (Ghannoushi 2011). For more on the use of Facebook to insult activists see Zouabi (2016).

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[18] In 2006, Saida Akremi, a well-known Tunisian human rights lawyer, filed a lawsuit on behalf of a teacher contesting the scarf's ban in state buildings and schools. She won, but the government would not enforce the ruling throughout the country on the grounds that it would 'divide rather than unite' (Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2012).

[19] Two days after I gave a lecture on gender equality and inheritance law in 2016, some preachers declared in their Friday sermon that I was an apostate.

[20] Tunisians, like Egyptians, Moroccans and others have been exposed over the last decade to radical religious discourse and misogynic attitudes. In fact, one consequence of globalisation and the rapid growth of satellite TV channels in the new millennium is giving conservative radical preachers a powerful pulpit from which they can reach Muslims all over the world and sensitise them to a more conservative interpretation of Islam.

[21] Interview with Nadia Chaaban, by *African Manager* (https://africanmanager.com/site_eng/author/african-manager/?v=79cba1185463, 29 March 2013).

[22] Selma Baccar, a theatre director, and member of the Constituent Assembly.

[23] We adopt K. R. Allen's definition: '[F]eminist accountability is expansive, non-quantifiable, collective, and engenders deep reflexivity, critical thought, and fundamentally troubles the status quo' (2001, p. 806).

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

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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

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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

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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

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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 Trotsyist/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

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categorisations. The intention here is neither to "undo" the displacement of earlier Westocentric (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

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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*

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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

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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

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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, Mahmoud 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

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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. 168[2]). 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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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(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 Lady[5]), and the new legislature (2012).

Against the political ascendency 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)

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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

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(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.)

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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

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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

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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

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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 thinker[9] 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 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

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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.

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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

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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 feminists[10] 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

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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

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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.

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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.

Travelling Critique: Anti-imperialism, Gender and Rights Discourses
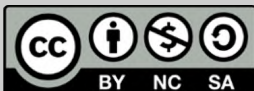
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Abstract

The article engages with the feminist anti-imperialist critique of rights discourses, particularly when used as a theoretical lens to understand or evaluate women's rights movements, or gender related campaigns for justice in non-democratic settings. I argue that the anti-imperialist critique is caught up in a locked binary of universalism versus cultural relativism, a form of a meta-narrative that disregards the details, the personal narratives of struggle and accommodation, or what would constitute the fragments of history that are necessary for a holistic understanding of historical moments; that the anti-imperialist critics disregard the insights gained from Edward Said's important intervention about "Traveling Theory", and how "travel" to another context enables a new process whereby the theory or concept is assimilated and new meanings emerge that are attuned to the new context; and that in many cases, the feminist anti-imperialist has not been attentive to the geopolitics of critique, i.e. that meanings and consequences of critique can be radically different in different contexts and against very different power relations. I pose the following questions: how do ideas/paradigms/concepts change when they travel? Or, how are new ideas integrated and appropriated in different contexts? What are the implications/consequences of the feminist/anti-imperialist critique when it travels and is used as a framework to interpret different realities on the ground? Who uses the anti-imperialist critique and for what purpose in these new contexts? And who uses the rights approach and for what purpose?

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Keywords: *Anti-imperialism, Arab women, women's movements, rights discourses, traveling theory, gender justice.*

Introduction

The use and abuse of rights-based approaches to furthering social justice in general, and gender justice in particular, has been the subject of much debate and contestation in feminist scholarship. Across postcolonial, development, and gender studies, critics have debated the positive and negative manifestations of the politics of rights. The key arguments against "rights talk" have been: that human rights discourses are universalist and Eurocentric (Rajagopal, 2008); that they put undue focus on the rights of the individual at the expense of the rights of the community (Baxi, 2006); that they often divert attention from the pressing needs of women (Hodgson 2011); that they are too focused on political rights and push aside social and economic rights (An-Naim, 2014); that human rights are espoused by elites aligned with globalisation projects and identifying with western paradigms (Mutua, 2001); that the liberal feminist over focus on legal reform and relative disregard of societal norms and power structures has often undermined good laws or even led to results not necessarily in the interests of women; that rights discourses aim to monopolise political spaces and hence impede the realisation of 'other kinds of political projects … [that] may offer a more appropriate and far-reaching remedy for injustice' (Brown 2004, pp. 461-2); that they constitute a form of imperialist dominance (Cornwall and Molyneux, 2006; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

All of the above critiques have a solid basis in theory and practice. Needless to say, advocates for using a rights framework acknowledge the validity of the above critiques but warn against the danger of throwing the

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baby out with the bathwater. And just as there is a significant amount of scholarship that critiques the rights paradigm in activism, there is an equally significant amount of scholarship that engages with those critiques. In the field of critical legal theory, scholars are addressing the issue of how legal litigation is empowering mobilisation and social movements in lieu of focusing on whether or not using the law matters (Boutcher and Chua, 2018). Lynn Stephen uses empirical data to demonstrate how rights discourses have been assimilated and reworked in new contexts to respond to local needs and questions. The Oaxaca social movement in Mexico appropriated rights discourses and enabled the production of 'a gendered local vernacular of rights talk' that became accessible to both men and women (Stephen, 2011). In a similar vein, Claret Vargas has argued that rights discourses can be redefined and adapted 'as a tactic for subaltern self-actualization' (Vargas 2012, p. 3).

Critics have also pointed out that rights discourses are sometimes the only viable option for the marginalised and oppressed at a particular juncture to allow them entry into the political arena. For example in Egypt, Mona El-Ghobashy has argued that the internationalisation of the political regime in Egypt in the 1990s and its endorsement of human rights conventions and treaties in order to enter the club of civilised nations, was one of the factors that gave human rights activists, feminists and ordinary citizens 'unexpected political leverage in their asymmetric share of public power with the executive' (El-Ghobashy 2008, p. 1593). UN conferences and commissions have become sites of struggle and contestation between state actors and non-state actors who use the language of rights and rule of law to lobby their governments and enforce compliance with international law. In many cases, rights discourses become very powerful discursive tools for reemphasising local values as well as aspirations that are reinforced by reference to international standards and mechanisms. In general, critics who emphasise the value of rights discourses in non-

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Western contexts approach 'international human rights doctrines and resolutions as spheres of contention, sets of signifying practices and repertoires of tools that have no 'ideal form' or singular direction of dissemination, nor one meaning or legacy that would maintain them as exclusive property of the West' (Amar 2011, p. 304).

In this paper I will engage with the feminist anti-imperialist critique of rights discourses, particularly when used as a theoretical lens to understand or evaluate women's rights movements, or gender related campaigns for justice in non-democratic settings. The anti-imperialist critique of rights regimes is premised on two key ideas. The first questions 'the political legitimacy of a western-inspired agenda of liberal rights and its fit, or lack of fit, with existing rights regimes and practices in different cultural contexts' (Cornwall and Molyneux 2006, pp. 1178-77); the second foregrounds the potential, and actual, propensity of rights discourses to be abused by imperial powers to justify imperialist agendas (Cornwall and Molyneux, 2006; Abu-Lughod, 2013). Regarding this last point, critics always refer to how the banner of safeguarding women's rights was used by the US to justify the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

My argument will be grounded in the following propositions: that the anti-imperialist critique is caught up in a locked binary of universalism versus cultural relativism, a form of a meta-narrative that disregards the details, the personal narratives of struggle and accommodation, or what would constitute the fragments of history that are absolutely necessary for a holistic understanding of historical moments. Secondly, that the anti-imperialist critics disregard the insights gained from Edward Said's important intervention on 'Traveling Theory', and how 'travel' to another context enables a new process whereby the theory or concept is assimilated and new meanings emerge. Thirdly, that in many cases, the

feminist anti-imperialist has not been attentive to the geopolitics of critique, i.e. that meanings and consequences of critique can be radically different in different contexts and against very different power relations. I pose the following questions: how do ideas/paradigms/concepts change when they travel? Or, how are new ideas integrated and appropriated in different contexts? What are the implications/consequences of the feminist/anti-imperialist critique when it travels and is used as a framework to interpret different realities on the ground? Who uses the anti-imperialist critique and for what purpose in these new contexts? And who uses the rights approach and for what purpose?

My engagement with the feminist anti-imperialist critique is shaped by my position as an academic, a feminist and an activist for women's rights in Egypt. As an academic in the Department of English Language and Literature at Cairo University, I have taught courses in postcolonial literature and facilitated numerous discussions and debates about colonial representations of Arab women and men, exposing the trope of saving Muslim women from Muslim men, and the abuse and manipulation of cultural practices out of context to justify colonial interventions and domination. As an academic at the University of Manchester for a few years (from 2005-2011), I became even more aware of the legacy of colonial mis/representations and discourses about the status of Muslim and Arab women and their re-emergence in new forms to feed Islamophobia and justify imperialist interventions in the 21st century. Yet at the same time, and as a feminist with strong links to the Arab women's movement, I have been deeply concerned about the extent to which this manipulation of women's issues becomes a weapon to silence women's rights advocates in Arab countries and prohibits them from engaging critically with their societies under the pretext that any criticism of social ills can and will be used by imperialists to defame Arab culture and justify military and political interventions. The question was and remains: how

can we as Arab feminists expose misogynistic practices and ideas in our own societies whilst avoiding having our voice taken out of context and manipulated to consolidate imperialist prejudices and stereotypes about our societies? In the aftermath of Arab revolutions in 2011, new spaces have opened up, and new ventures and initiatives have become possible, hence enabling feminist voices to rise and be heard. As the voices of feminists have become louder and clearer, the conservative campaign against them has gained momentum and the same old accusations about feminists being part of an imperialist project, are repeated. What I describe as a conservative campaign consists of very unlikely allies: state actors keen on discrediting social and political rights movements that have been gaining strength in the post-revolutionary phase and challenging their authority; and religious extremists, advocates of political Islam on ideological grounds who consider women's rights agendas as tantamount to an assault on cultural values and norms. These conservative voices use the exact same arguments put forward by feminist anti-imperialists to discredit and undermine women rights activists. The intensity of the confrontation has made three things very clear to me. First, the language of rights is extremely powerful not only in confrontations with state actors, but as a means of engagement and advocacy with ordinary men and women. In Arabic the word for 'right' is *al-haq* (plural *huquq*), extremely powerful on more than one level. In addition to usage comparable to its English equivalent, *al-haq* is also one of the names of God in Islam. Moreover, the Faculty of Law in Egypt is literally called *kuliyyat al-huquq* (Faculty of Rights), a consolidation of the link between law and rights. The language of rights resonates deeply and at more than one level with local communities. Second, the fact that words or the language of rights as used in local contexts can be appropriated and abused in global contexts should not result in silencing activists who engage critically with their societies and cultures. In fact, local and global campaigns that seek to stigmatise our culture for their own purposes must strengthen our determination to own our cultures, to speak for our cultures from a position of rights and justice,

and make sure that our adversaries do not have a monopoly over defining what our culture means. Third, there is a need to revisit the feminist anti-imperialist critique from a theoretical perspective.

Violence Against Women: The Case of Egypt

I will engage with the questions posed above by focusing on the issue of violence against women in Arab and/or Muslim societies, examining the struggle of women rights activists in Egypt to campaign and raise awareness. This particular struggle has been the target of criticism by anti-imperialist feminists based on the following assumptions: that the violence against women agenda is an essentially Western agenda that is not sensitive to local contexts; that advocacy campaigns on violence against women in Muslim contexts consolidate essentialist colonial stereotypes about the "inherent" violence of Muslim societies and their disrespect of women and human rights, hence propagate a culturalist narrative in lieu of a political narrative; that the violence against women agenda has been transformed into a profession and a business by international organisations; that all women's groups who receive funds from international donors wittingly or unwittingly promote an agenda that is divorced from reality on the ground and solidify an imperialist narrative that manipulates the issue of 'violence against women' to justify political even military interventions in the affairs of sovereign states (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Again this critique is not without merit and substance: feminist critics have challenged the US-led invasion of Afghanistan on the pretext of saving Afghani women (Scott, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 2002) and have exposed the feminist imperialist discourse that was instrumentalised to justify the assaults. But the question is: when and where does a critique act as a force of resistance to dominant power networks and relations, and hence act as a tool of empowerment? And when and where does it become a tool of oppression and disempowerment?

The answer, I argue resides in the geopolitics of power relations: in other words, an anti-imperialist critique that seeks to challenge dominant power relations must be particularly attuned to its impact and consequences when it travels to another context with different power relations and different power struggles. To clarify, I will examine the trajectory of the struggle against violence against women as it has been addressed by rights organisations in Egypt. I will argue that while the struggle of feminists in Egypt has benefited from international solidarity and experience, it has also accommodated the battle to local concerns and struggles.

Campaigns to raise public awareness on issues related to violence against women, in both the public and the private spheres started as early as the 1990s, with the work of a number of feminist organisations notably al-Nadim, New Woman Foundation and the Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance. These organisations used a rights based approach to challenge inequalities in society in general, and gender inequalities in particular, as well as oppressive practices by the ruling regime. In an article that focuses on the activism of rights organisations against violence against women, Paul Amar demonstrated how international human rights frameworks are reworked, rearticulated and reinvented in local contexts. He highlights the praxis of Egyptian feminists and their approach to sexual harassment, foregrounding the work of Aida Seif al-Dawla and Mozn Hassan to challenge the dismissal of rights activists in Egypt by right wing groups and state actors, as conscious or unconscious implementers of Western agendas (Amar, 2011). With reference to the work of El-Nadeem, he points out that it focuses 'critique on the state; on the practices of the state security services and on police and prison officials' (Amar 2011, p. 312). This focus is significantly different from other anti-violence campaigns in democratic contexts, where the issue of state violence is not at the forefront of concerns and challenges. The focus on politically

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motivated sexual violence, became a hallmark of activism against violence in Egypt in the aftermath of the 25th January revolution in 2011 and resulted in a radical break in addressing the problem.[1]

What happened in 2011 and why did events lead to significant advances in dealing with the issue of sexual violence? The revolutionary wave that swept Egypt in 2011 opened up new spaces for challenging dominant power structures and dominant authoritarian discourses, with varying degrees of success. It was only after the mass protests in 2011 that sexual harassment and assaults on women became the subject of public media debates. Before 2011, while feminists conducted advocacy campaigns to raise awareness and attempt to rectify legal constraints that impeded a serious offensive on sexual violence, their efforts did not succeed in making the issues a matter for public debate and concern. This was primarily due to the undemocratic political environment that limited serious efforts to address sensitive social and political issues. Hence, feminist efforts to address sexual violence were restricted to closed circles of experts and limited audiences. When an incident of sexual violence attracted public attention, it was usually treated with stereotypical and prejudiced arguments, invariably blaming the victim for not being dressed properly or for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This prejudiced approach deterred victims from filing complaints and pursuing justice. Needless to say there were important exceptions. In 2008 a young woman called Noha Roshdy filed a sexual harassment lawsuit resulting in a prison sentence for the harasser.

At the end of 2012/beginning of 2013, incidents of sexual assaults against women present in large protests were reported. Activists recognised the problem and responded by organising groups to intervene to help women assaulted in public spaces. *Bassma* (Imprint) was founded in June 2012,

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Shoft Taharush (I saw harassment) was founded in October 2012, and *OpAntish* (Operation Anti-Harassment), and Tahrir Bodyguards were established in November 2012. The new groups, together with already established activist groups working on violence against women, notably Nazra, El-Nadeem, and Harassmap, succeeded in raising media and public awareness of the extent and scale of the problem. They formed rescue groups that intervened to save women from attacks; they provided survivors with psychological and legal aid; they offered self-defence classes; they collected the stories of women who suffered assaults; and they pressured new political parties and civil society actors to recognise the problem.[2] January 2013 marked a turning point in the issue of sexual violence against women as a matter for public debate, as survivors of attacks felt empowered to talk about their experience in public and on live TV. Together with the efforts of the anti-sexual harassment support groups, or possibly as a direct result of those efforts, powerful public testimonials from women broke the taboo inhibiting discussions of sexual assault. Political parties and groups finally acknowledged the problem and issued statements to denounce the violence and participated in a demonstration under the slogan 'The Street is Ours', asserting women's right to public spaces and also reviving the memory of the earlier women's movement in response to the assaults in 2005.

So how were these incidents framed and narrated by feminist groups? Who are the culprits? In February 2013, a report that documented testimonials of survivors of sexual assault in Tahrir between 2011 and 2013 was published by three prominent Egyptian women and human rights organisations (El-Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, Nazra for Feminist Studies and New Woman Foundation, 2013). Many of the survivors told of systematic and organised attacks: a woman would be isolated from her group, encircled by men who would start groping her at the same time telling her that they are protecting her,

maximising her confusion and helplessness and rendering attempts to save her almost impossible as she would be unable to work out who to trust and who to fear. In the foreword to the report, Dr Magda Adly, prominent human rights activist and founding member of El-Nadeem, unequivocally holds state security forces responsible for the attacks. She grounds her analysis in the memory of Black Wednesday[3]:

> We know the method and have experienced it before, and we know who is behind it. Our certainty that the crime was committed in a systematic manner was evidenced in the decision of the prosecutor general to close the case due to failure in finding the perpetrators. Despite the fact that tens of pictures and videos of the criminals and the cars they used (bearing signs of famous members of the then ruling party, National Democratic Party) were submitted, the case was closed due to insufficient evidence. (El-Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, Nazra for Feminist Studies and New Woman Foundation 2013, p. 5)

The report also includes a statement signed by more than a 100 organisations and public figures denouncing the attack. The statement again frames the matter with reference to the 2005 assaults:

> Ever since Mubarak's regime started using sexual violence against female protesters in 2005, gang attacks against women have not stopped… According to more than one survivor, these gangs are very well organized and they do not appear to be thugs who harass women (random harassments), as they are organized and trained in a clear way to accomplish the task assigned to them (Ibid. 2013, pp. 46-47).

The statement directly accuses state security forces of ordering the attacks to destroy the revolution. And while it recognises the occurrence of attacks during Eid and other public holidays, it nevertheless sees them as a direct consequence of the founding moment of state-sanctioned gang violence in public spaces during Mubarak's rule.

The report also includes a statement by feminist organisations, supported by a number of public figures, and a position paper written by Nazra, a feminist organisation. The statement is entitled: 'It's Our Right … The Street is Ours', reviving the activism of women's groups vis a vis previous attacks. The statement highlights: solidarity with victims of sexual assault; demand for accountability and responsibility; recognition of victims of sexual assaults as amongst those injured by the revolution, i.e. recognition of sexual crimes as political crimes; holding political parties and forces responsible for women's safety during political events; asserting women's power and ability to reclaim the square.

The position paper by Nazra also emphasises the social climate that enables and justifies violence against women with perpetrators of violence continuing to violate women's bodies with impunity:

> We believe that this social climate, which has begun to resemble a daily psychological war on women, has directly fostered these crimes and led to their present brutal incarnation…In our view, those recent events are a brutal escalation of the widespread social pathology that is sexual violence (Ibid. 2013, p. 52).

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As demonstrated in the above account, the campaign against violence against women was adapted to the local context: activists challenged state-sanctioned sexual violence while also drawing attention to the issue as a social problem aggravated by political responsibility or the lack of, by state actors. As a direct consequence of feminist activism as well as that by other pro-democracy actors, four concrete gains can be identified. First, Article 11 in the Egyptian Constitution endorsed in a referendum in 2014, commits the state to combating violence against women. This is an important development, as it overrides long-standing discourses that blamed women for the violence inflicted on them because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or because they were not dressed modestly. The campaign against violence against women, championed by women rights advocates and several youth groups at a time when political spaces were opened and allowed for serious discussions of social problems, gave rise to counter discourses that highlighted the social, political and discursive roots of violence against women and contributed to the success in rendering the issue a matter of public concern and interest.

Second, an anti-sexual harassment decree was passed in June 2014 imposing harsh sentences on offenders. This decree resulted in the establishment of anti-sexual harassment units in police stations charged with handling complaints and supporting victims of sexual violence. Third, the first anti-sexual harassment unit in a national university in Egypt was established at Cairo University in September 2014. This was the work of academics and activists who capitalised on the legal developments in the constitution as well as on the anti-harassment decree and drafted an anti-sexual harassment policy for implementation in national universities. The policy became a powerful tool in advocacy campaigns against sexual harassment in university campuses across the country and within other youth communities. Finally, the issue of sexual harassment is no longer a

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topic discussed within the confines of meetings and conferences of rights groups: it has become a matter of national concern, a regular theme in the media, featuring women who talk about their experiences without fear of retribution or shame. This can be counted as one of the unequivocal gains achieved by women rights activists empowered by a revolutionary moment.

This detailed account of the success of women's rights activists in Egypt in addressing the challenge of sexual violence against women which lead to important modifications of the law and a change in societal attitude is told to support two points: that rights agendas can, and have been instrumental in addressing local concerns; and that a rights agenda, when adopted in a new political and cultural environment, is more often than not appropriated and modified to suit local struggles and agendas.

Travelling Critique

In an article about the challenges facing feminists today, Deniz Kandiyoti highlights the plight of women's rights activists who employ international rights frameworks in their battle for gender justice. Not only do they have to contend with local and global patriarchal authoritarianisms, but they are also depicted by anti-imperialist transnational academics as accomplices of imperialism at worst, or as 'uncritical dupes' at best (Kandiyoti, 2015). I have argued that the main problem with anti-imperialist critiques is their disregard of geopolitics: the context of power struggles at a particular time and place. A critique of the manipulation of rights talk to justify imperial interventions by the US and its allies is directed at the dominant discourse of the powerful purporting 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's rights activists or groups, in Egypt or Palestine,

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becomes a weapon that consolidates dominant discourses of authoritarian regimes and silences the embattled voices of marginalised groups.[4]

A good example of potential misunderstandings/misrepresentations that result from travelling critique is exemplified in an exchange on the pages of the e-journal *Jadaliyya* in 2012. In an article entitled 'Tradition and the Anti-Politics Machine: DAM Seduced by the "Honor Crime"', Lila Abu-Lughod and Maya Mikdashi (2012a) put forward a strong critique of an Arabic song produced by Palestinian hip hop group DAM entitled 'If I Could Go Back in Time' about honour crimes in Palestine to condemn violence against women. The authors take DAM to task for:

> succumb[ing] to an international anti-politics machine that blames only tradition for the intractability of (some) people's problems. Why, when they decide to speak up about violence against women, do they suddenly forget the gritty and complex realities of life on the ground in the places they know?.

The authors go on to point out that the group is supported by UN Women and 'faithfully follows the script of an international campaign against the so-called honor crime'. The key assumptions underlying this critique of DAM is that honour crimes and sexual violence against women are used as a stick to chastise Arabs and Arab cultures and even justify Israeli violence and occupation; that an apolitical rights agenda that foregrounds sexual violence against women in Muslim cultures is championed and pushed by international organisations, in this case UN Women; that a local group receiving money from a UN organisation makes them suspect, i.e. local agents propagating a global anti-politics agenda; and, more importantly, in the case of Palestine, a focus on cultural and social problems deflects

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attention from the ugly realities of the Israeli occupation. DAM responded to the critique (Nafar et al., 2012), also in *Jadaliyya*, with a strong rebuttal and somewhat vexed tone. They emphasised the following: that the song is in Arabic and addresses an Arab audience; that they are not obliged to worry every time they produce art about what the Americans or the Israelis think; that there is a problem of violence against women in Arab societies that must be addressed; that they respect the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement) and do not understand why the authors of the critique fault them for receiving money from UN Women as it is not on the boycott list; that the implication that they are 'intellectually naïve' disregards their history and their activism. Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi responded by emphasising solidarity, that it was not their intention to fault DAM, that they 'never doubted your [DAM's] integrity' and hoped that DAM would also respect their integrity 'as sisters and comrades in the struggle for justice for Palestinians of all ages, genders and classes' (Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi, 2012b). The exchange highlights an important point: that both sides have excellent arguments and justifications for their positions; both are politically savvy; and both are trying very hard to navigate difficult positionalities in extremely complex contexts; and with reference to the last item in the exchange, there is no doubt that both sides have no desire or reason for becoming entrenched in adversarial positions. It is my contention that the misunderstandings/conflicts are a consequence of the inevitable effects of the travel of critique, a factor that requires more critical attention of the use and abuse of interpretive frameworks in a globalised world.

In his essay, 'Traveling Theory' (1983) Edward Said explored the potential of travelling theory in changing and adapting to new environments and also warned against turning theories into cultural dogma. In his later essay, 'Traveling Theory Reconsidered', he strongly refutes the claim that theories are fixed in time and place and argues that 'the point of theory

therefore is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile' (Said 2001, p. 450).

Joan Scott uses the term 'reverberations' to describe 'circuits of influence' (Scott 2002, p. 12) in today's world and proposes an alternative way for conceptualising the global circulation of feminist strategies and knowledges that circumvents the more conventional notion of unidirectional flows of influence from a powerful centre to less powerful margins. She subverts the notion of origins by examining the intellectual trajectory of Julia Kristeva, acknowledged as a prominent theorist of French feminism. Kristeva was Bulgarian and was influenced by the work of Bakhtin. According to Scott, 'What came to be called French feminism … was crucially influenced by philosophical movements opposing communism in the "East"' (Scott 2002, p. 15). She also draws attention to the movement entitled 'Women in Black', which started in 1988 at the time of the first intifada and organised weekly protests against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This movement spread to many other countries, not identically, but always accommodating itself to local needs. So in Germany, Women in Black protested against Neo-Nazi attacks on migrants, in Italy they marched against the Mafia and so forth (Scott 2002, pp. 16-21). The point made is that ideas/concepts/movements cause reverberations that are more often than not, transformed and appropriated to meet local agendas and needs. 'Difference … must be understood not as sharp contrast, but as a succession of echoes, reverberations' (Scott 2002, p. 20).

In 2011 in Egypt many women's rights advocates were subjected to vilification campaigns by local right wing religious extremists, as well as nationalist elites invested in maintaining the status quo, both accused women's rights activists of pursuing Westernised agendas that were not

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indigenous enough. This line of attack is not new, and has roots in postcolonial nationalist histories. Conservative, religious as well as nationalist discourses in society have historically dismissed women's rights on the grounds that they are mere reflections of Westernised agendas.[5] While 'saving Muslim women' has been a battle cry of imperialist powers since colonial times, and more recently during military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has been manipulated to justify the invasions, the cultural specificity argument of 'our women are different' as well as 'we must protect our values' has been the battle cry of authoritarian Arab postcolonial regimes to justify human rights violations and the suppression of rights.

Moreover rights activists in the Arab world have also had to contend with feminist anti-imperialist critics whose critique of imperialism, rightly directed against imperialist discourses in the West that have arisen and gained prominence in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, results in very different consequences when used as the theoretical lens for understanding rights movements in postcolonial contexts. To posit that rights movements in postcolonial contexts are duplicates of Western agendas, in both direction and aims, is erroneous practically and theoretically. From a practice point of view, as demonstrated above, and as evidenced in many other contexts, rights agendas can and have been adapted and reworked to suit local settings and respond to local needs. From a theoretical point of view, I contend we need to foreground the relation between theory and practice, or the geopolitics of theory in our global world. We also need to pay attention to the details, the fragment, the declared or undeclared drivers of action, to the actors' agency and location in the political and social spheres. In other words, we need to address the challenges of contexts that limit or shape aspirations. As Wendy Brown puts it: it is impossible to make a generic pronouncement on the 'political value of rights' as it is not feasible 'to argue for them or

against them separately from an analysis of the historical conditions, social powers, and political discourses with which they converge of which they interdict' (Brown 1995, p. 98).

Amartya Sen highlights the importance of context in addition to the awareness of actors/activists in their pursuit of justice:

> The subject of justice is not merely about trying to achieve – or dreaming about achieving – some perfectly just society or social arrangement, but about preventing manifestly severe injustice… For example, when people agitated for the abolition of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were not laboring under the illusion that the abolition of slavery would make the world perfectly just. It was their claim, rather, that a society with slavery was totally unjust. (Sen 2009, p. 21)

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.

Anti-imperialist critiques of universalist rights discourses, important and valid in exposing imperialist agendas and discourses, have often missed the mark when extended to authoritarian postcolonial contexts where the location of rights advocates in the power spectrum is tenuous to say the least. They are constantly subject to vilification campaigns under the pretext of cultural specificity or safeguarding sovereignty. In fact anti-imperialist critiques of rights discourses are not used 'by the people whose rights are being violated' (Chanock 2000, p. 16). In Egypt, ruling regimes

have repeatedly employed the anti-imperialist critique in order to 'nationalise', and undermine the efforts of human rights groups advocating for universal rights to all citizens by 'manipulating the discourse of human rights in order to shore up its failing legitimacy' (Abdelrahman 2007, p. 286).

The anti-imperialist critique reproduces the binary opposition of universalism versus cultural specificity. The adoption of a universal rights approach is tainted by the fact that it has been manipulated in Western contexts to justify imperial interventions. Laura Bush's famous speech about saving Afghani women as a justification for the US invasion of Afghanistan, is an excellent example of such imperialist manipulations. This is a woman in a powerful position using or abusing a rights agenda to justify a war of aggression. The power relations are clear: it is the powerful who is using the rights approach. However, a rights advocate in Egypt or Iraq or Syria who makes use of the moral and legal authority of an international rights agenda to advocate for rights in a highly charged and beleaguered political context is in a very different position. Here the rights advocate is the weaker link on the power spectrum, and is up against more often than not an authoritarian system that does not necessarily respect or implement rule of law. This rights advocate is in effect the voice of the underdog and the silenced speaking truth to power.

Concluding Remarks

In my engagement with the feminist anti-imperialist critique of rights movements in postcolonial contexts I have highlighted the need for a geopolitical grounding of theory that addresses global manifestations and variations of power relations in different contexts. I have faulted the tendency in feminist anti-imperialist critiques to overlook the consequences and implications of the different locations of rights

advocates in different contexts and have argued for contextualisation as an imperative for bridging the gap between theory and practice. Contextualisation here is both geographical and historical: it is about the details of a particular struggle in a specific location and at a particular moment in history. Contextualisation will illuminate the power spectrum in different geographies and can help in avoiding ahistorical renderings of struggles for justice. With reference to the history of the women's movement in Egypt, it would be totally ahistorical to undermine the interaction/exchanges and contribution of Egyptian feminists to the conceptualisation and formulation of ideas and rights movements. It would be ahistorical and reductionist to confine their engagement with rights discourses to the time when the UN became a key factor in furthering women's rights agendas. The story is much richer and much more nuanced.

This plea to historicise and to stay focused on the global/local variations in power relations is admittedly a huge challenge and a massive responsibility, as it requires a constant reappraisal of our critical lens and our tools for understanding and making sense of the world. From the standpoint of a feminist contestation of power grounded in theory and praxis, it will enable us all to avoid the pitfalls of our interpretive frameworks becoming normative dogma.

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Notes

[1] For details of politically motivated sexual violence post-2011 see Tadros (2013).

[2] For a detailed account of the anti-sexual harassment groups post-2011, see chapter 9 entitled 'The Changing Face of Gender Activism in Post-Mubarak Egypt' in Tadros (2016).

[3] 'Black Wednesday' refers to 25 May 2005 when women protesters were subjected to mass assaults in broad daylight and in public view. The occasion was a protest organised by the pro-democracy movement, Kefaya, to denounce a referendum on the constitution that was taking place on the same day, and which was seen by political activists as an attempt to ensure the ascension to power of the President's son, Gamal Mubarak. Women were abused and violently harassed by hired thugs and/or plain-clothed policemen. All the evidence pointed to thugs hired by the NDP, and the complicity of the police, who did not intervene to protect protesters. The incident led to the formation of a movement called 'The Street is Ours', which brought together activists, journalists and many of the women who were assaulted on 25 May. In 2006, and after exhausting all domestic legal venues, the case was submitted to the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR). Two human rights organisations represented the four women applicants, and in 2013 the Commission ruled in favour of the applicants and requested Egypt to reopen the investigation and provide monetary compensation for the victims.

[4] Kandiyoti further points out that these critiques do not only target liberal secular feminists, but also 'Muslim feminists endeavouring to find an indigenous voice for change and reform' (Kandiyoti, 2015).

[5] For a detailed discussion of the assault on women's rights post-2011 and its roots in history see Elsadda, 2011.

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Culture/Religion/Tradition vs Modern/Secular/Foreign: Implications of Binary Framings for Women's Rights in Nigeria[1]

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Abstract

This article examines the binary of culture/religion/tradition and modern/secular/foreign and its impact on women's human rights struggles in particular in northern Nigeria. This binary is commonly perpetuated by state and non-state actors, including politicians, community leaders and religious leaders, who weaponise culture, religion and tradition to resist the struggle for gender equality. It highlights how progress around some concerns, such as rape of young girls, has occurred concurrently with attacks on other rights, particularly sexual and reproductive rights including abortion and sex outside marriage, and of those with non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. This hardening of attitudes and narrowing of what is seen as permissible not only obscures the diversity of how people lived and thought in the past but is also far from the reality of how people live their lives presently. It further reflects the increased influence of religious fundamentalism and conservatism in northern Nigeria.[2]

Keywords: Nigeria, Shari'a, women's rights, Boko Haram, LGBTQI, feminism

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Introduction

I write this article based on my work as a feminist, human rights and peacebuilding activist, researcher and practitioner in Nigeria. Although born in Nigeria, I left the country as a child, and returned in 2013. Not only am I not Nigerian but I was also not raised in either Christian or Muslim traditions, with my knowledge of both the result of activism, social networks, study and work rather than lived experience. To inform this article, I draw on three strands of work and activism: with human rights, peace and women's rights activists in five northern states (Borno, Kaduna, Kano, Plateau and Yobe) on conflict management and peacebuilding; research and work with communities in the conflict affected northeast; and collecting queer women's narratives for a book entitled *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak*, which aims to address dehumanisation and change public discourse. It is challenging for me to write on this subject. Not only do I continue to live and work in northeast Nigeria where there is limited space to discuss these issues, but I count many activists whose attitudes I challenge and critique below as good friends with whom I have worked closely for human rights, including those of women, justice and peace for many years.

This article is divided into three sections. It first traces the genealogies of these binary framings. It then examines the ways these binaries draw on particular understandings of culture/ religion/ tradition and suppress other understandings and realities that existed in the past and are present today. It ends with examining how women's rights activists mobilise and implications of these binaries on their activism. While women's rights activists are strategic in engagement, their framework of mobilisation tends to be constrained by these binaries and the determination of the rights and rights-holders worthy of protection and advocacy.

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Historicising the Binary

The binary between culture/religion/tradition and modern/secular/ foreign has historical roots in northern Nigeria, a region seen as an Islamic monolith but which has large numbers of Christians, the continued (hidden) presence of Maguzawa, followers of indigenous Hausa religions, as well as those who do not believe. As will be explained below, over time, culture/religion/tradition came to be linked with justice, morality and effectiveness governance and in opposition to the modern/secular/foreign which became associated with corruption, injustice, immorality and predatory governance.

The arrival of Islam and the Sokoto Caliphate

Islam first came to and was spread in West Africa through trade, patronage and conversion by elites (Ubah, 2001). In the land now known as northern Nigeria, there was a vibrant Bori culture before Islamisiation with keen understanding of medicinal herbs, the role of music in worship and importance of dance in connecting with the divine. The ruler of the Kanem Bornu Empire converted to Islam in the 11th century and rulers of the Hausa kingdoms following suit from the 14th or 15th centuries onwards (Ubah, 2001). In the late 18th century, the Fulani scholar Uthman dan Fodio and his followers declared war on the Hausa kingdoms to standardise Islam and align 'Hausaland eastward, namely within a wider Islamic civilizational complex whose centre was Arabia' (Eltantawi, 2017), eliminating syncretic versions that had arisen over centuries. Dan Fodio seized on grievances against corrupt and unjust leaders, excessive taxation, elite decadence and the prohibition of veiling for women and turbans for men. Primarily a movement to reform supposedly 'lax' Muslims rather than convert 'pagans' (Last, 1979), the caliphate aimed to increase social morality in accordance with Islamic ideals through

education reforms, the development of markets and economic reforms and improved communications (Smith, 1971).

Dan Fodio's daughters played important literary and political roles, particularly Nana Asmau who was a leading scholar, teacher, historian and adviser to her brother when he succeeded to the caliphate. She was committed to women's education, training a network of itinerant women teachers (jaji) whose objectives were conversion of women to Islam, education within Islam and harnessing of women's talents in the service of the caliphate. The jajis were symbols of the state and Islamic learning, held important and influential positions of power and were active in public discourse and debate. By training women, they integrated the newly conquered Maguzawa as well as the poor and those who lived in rural areas into caliphate practices and principles, their obligations as Muslims and what was seen as inappropriate behaviour (Mack and Boyd, 2000). Dan Fodio emphasised the importance of women leaders and women's rights within Islamic frameworks but he also banned certain women's hairstyles, tried to stop his wives going to market thereby setting a standard for seclusion as the marker of good Muslim households, closed houses to adult men and required women to pray separately from men in the mosque (Last, 2015).

Sinikangas (2004) has argued that increasing restrictions on public, political and economic roles of women after the jihad encouraged some women to turn to Bori, which was prohibited with performance punishable by death (Mustapha, 2018). Despite its repression, Bori has survived because 'it has a firm gendered base among women in Hausa society, it offers valuable psycho-medical services, and it is flexible and adaptable by nature' (Mustapha, 2018).

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The death of dan Fodio in 1817 saw gradual return to pre-jihad practices, forming the basis for later calls for reform and revivalism (Mustapha, 2015a). There was dissidence as regimes failed to live up to expectations (Last, 2015) but in popular narratives among northern Muslims today, the caliphate is presented as a time of high levels of religiosity, morality and good governance. However, while Nana Asmau is remembered, the role of women more broadly in governance and expansion is all but written out. Thus, the binary, pitting 'universalised' Islamic practices and values and improved governance against other customs and beliefs, including a plurality of Islamic interpretations, syncretic practices as well as more indigenous belief systems, first became apparent.

The caliphate created and solidified links between governance according to Islamic law, morality and effective and just rule as opposed to the corruption of the 'state' i.e. the rulers of the Hausa kingdoms who were seen to be inauthentic followers of Islam interested only in themselves. This narrative decentres the experiences of those who resisted the caliphate's political and religious control, the Magazuwa and others subject to enslavement and slave raids and the scaling back of reforms and continuation of many aspects of pre-jihad inequality, especially after the death of dan Fodio (Mustapha et al., 2018; Kendhammer, 2016; Smith, 1954). However, even in present-day discourse around Shari'a codes, it remains difficult to focus on contemporary events rather than the caliphate which continues to loom large in 'political and symbolic influence' and remains a 'mythologised moment, an idealised reminder of what's possible through Shari'a, and a (potentially) plausible template for the modern Nigerian state' (Kendhammer 2016, p. 52).

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Conquest and colonisation

The defeat of the caliphate by the British Empire in 1903 added the influence and actions of 'outsiders' to the nascent binary. Colonisation did not fundamentally change the nature of who held power with administrative structures recycled to facilitate indirect rule and local elites imbued 'with formal and legal authority while the colonial state drew on their social and religious legitimacy' (Hoffmann, 2014).[3] Conquest led to emirs with enhanced powers but seeking to buttress their Islamic legitimacy, the ulama divided in attitudes towards the impact of colonialisation on Islam and whether to call for opposition, accommodation or passive resistance and ordinary people confused by foreign rule and sectarian divisions (Mustapha et al., 2018).

The infusing of colonial power into caliphate structures caused problems for non-Hausa/Fulani and/or non-Muslim communities and increased conversion to Christianity (Hoffmann, 2014). A retired civil servant and historian whose grandfather was one of the first Christian priests in Gwoza in northeast Borno state talks about there being a contest for souls during this time (personal communication). Missionaries set up schools, dividing Islamic forms of education from what became seen as 'western' education. Consequently, the word boko, which had originally meant fraud, sham, inauthentic or hoodwinking, came to be equated with the latter form of education, connoting 'a feeling that colonial schools could mislead Muslims into accepting false knowledge' (Thurston 2017, p. 15). In contemporary times, it has come to mean westernised people and elites and western style frameworks, culture, institutions and education (Thurston, 2017). Piety and rates of seclusion among Muslims, thinking this was necessary for Allah to rid northern Nigeria of Christians, increased (Last, 2015). These dynamics reinforced the earlier binary into which narratives of corrupted governance due to foreign influence became infused.

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From independence to democracy

While independence movements rose in southern Nigeria in the early twentieth century, northern elites resisted independence due to fears of marginalisation within a democratic dispensation due to educational, social and economic disadvantages relative to southern Nigeria. Religion (Islam) and identity politics (northernisation) were invoked to prevent southern Christian domination replacing European domination (Mustapha, 2018). Many northern Muslims suspected outside influences, saw modernisation as constituting unacceptable innovations to Islam and were resentful or ambivalent to secular forms of governance with a stronger religious sense of identity replacing ethnic or local identities (Hoffmann, 2014).

The post-independence state, structured around colonial administration with state symbols, the working week and governance style based on a secular Western model, was resented by many Muslims as 'Christian' (Clarke and Linden, 1984). While most Muslims could accept this model, this attitude began to change by the 1970s as the 'growing moral, political and economic crisis of the state' was identified with the failure of the imported secular western model (Mustapha, 2015a p. 10-11). The Iranian revolution was a galvanising influence for many young Muslims who believed 'Western impositions must be cast off, pious Muslims must rule and Shari'a must be the law of the land' (Ostien, 2018) and looked back to the earlier caliphate and jihad as solutions (Kendhammer, 2016). This period saw influence and financial support from groups in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan and Iran changing religious discourse. It also saw diversification and fragmentation of religious affiliation (Mustapha and Bunza, 2015) and sectarian violence (Ostien, 2018). The duty to command right and forbid wrong aggravated sectarian intolerance, resulting in

'perpetration of subversive violence or the invasion of individual privacy in the course of allegedly doing 'God's work'' (Mustapha 2015a, p. 9).[4]

Here, we start to see increasing religious intolerance and fundamentalism, attacks on different religious interpretations and the further narrowing of actions and beliefs seen as permissible superimposed onto previous binary framings. The binary deepened with democratic transition in 1999 after decades of military rule mixed with intermittent civilian rule. Many people reflecting on this time speak of the shady nature and political thuggery of electoral mobilisation, continued impunity for leaders and corruption with 'the coming of politics' which further increased disappointment with and alienation from democratic governance. For many, democracy continues to be connected with secularism with both overlaid onto Nigeria political problems whereas a return to Islamic governance is seen as meaning justice, morality and effective governance.

The institution and implementation of Shari'a codes

Shortly after the democratic transition in 1999, northern states, starting from Zamfara, instituted Shari'a codes against a backdrop of supportive protests with 'Shari'a' seen as a solution to corruption, injustice, poverty, unemployment and inequality (Hoffmann, 2014; Eltantawi, 2017) and an 'oppressive denial of the diversity of thought' (Uwais, 2004) in the development of these Shari'a codes.[5] A survey conducted in 2000 shows that Shari'a codes were unpopular nationally with only 38 percent of Nigerians approving of Zamfara's actions but, although 33 percent of Muslims said the federal government should have intervened more forcefully to prevent Zamfara from implementing Shari'a, this was popular in states with large Muslim majorities (Kendhammer, 2016). Politicians seized on Shari'a codes to mobilise the electorate and win votes. These moves were a reaction to the transition, in particular power in the hands

of a southern President, reawakening fears of northern marginalisation in a democratic dispensation (Hoffmann, 2014). Many Muslims looked for a symbolic northern identity and effective and just governance and Shari'a codes provided both.

However, despite pockets of effective implementation (Mustapha et al., 2018), the institution of Shari'a codes has not met these high expectations. People talk of 'political Shari'a' to describe the insincerity of politicians, pointing to how institution of Shari'a codes has become embroiled within the same corrupt political process that had sparked their demand (Eltantawi, 2017; Kendhammer, 2016). While 'Shari'a' was failing to bring about fundamental and transformative change addressing poverty, inequality, corruption and injustice, there became increased emphasis on religious performativity and forms of 'immorality.' Women's bodies became *the* way to demonstrate Shari'a's effectiveness. Women's sexuality increasingly was treated as a source of immorality. As Last (2015, p. 46) points out, 'the way a community regulates its womenfolk becomes a marker for its concern for Islamic propriety.' Karuwai (prostitutes) were warned to get married or leave states (Gaudio, 2009). Policies were passed to 'save' single and divorced women, seen as vulnerable to prostitution, including through mass wedding ceremonies and payment of dowries to men who came forward to marry them. Many women – Christians and Muslims alike – have told me of street harassment and admonitions by friends, family and neighbours to change their dressing to become 'more modest.' In one of the narratives I collected, IX refers to her university Muslim Students Society who policed Muslim women's behaviour, stopping them from drinking alcohol, telling them not to live outside hostels as this would allow men to have access to them and threatening those dating men with exposure (Mohammed et al., 2018). Women were legally discriminated against with more women than men charged with and convicted of zina[6] and different standards of evidence applied

(Pereira, 2005).[7] Restrictions on sexuality are not confined to heterosexual women alone.

While homosexuality, although not approved of, was seldom discussed in the public domain beforehand, it became part of political, media and public discourse around the passage of the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2014 with increased preaching against this particularly in churches, arrests, detention and disruption of parties and celebrations (Mohammed et al., 2018). Furthermore, the legacy of jihad prohibitions against Bori, which has a base of women practitioners as mentioned above, continues. There is discrimination and oppression against Bori groups, worshippers and those affiliated, with efforts at repression increasing post implementation of Shari'a codes, for example through prescription of the death penalty for participation in 'pagan' rites and prevention of gatherings (Mustapha, 2018).

At every stage of Nigerian history, the development of the binary has been linked with governance. Since independence, the state has abrogated its responsibility, with the quality and availability of state infrastructure and services having noticeably declined in recent decades and religious institutions filling the gap.[8] Often, religious leaders and institutions provide needed services and are the most accessible and available, with women in particular able to go to imams or pastors. Not surprisingly, religious institutions are often perceived to best work. Religious leaders are the actors that most people trust (Ehrhardt and Ibrahim, 2018; NSRP, 2012). While this perception may be somewhat inflated given social pressures around religion, these findings show failures of all other institutions.

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In response to this, there is increasing push from donors to work with religious and 'traditional' leaders seen as the power holders necessary to bring about change. Many women's rights activists have always worked to influence these leaders. This approach can work.[9] However, programmes sometimes skip out women's rights activists or pursue parallel streams rather than hold interventions and leaders accountable to women mobilising for rights. This is problematic given these leaders are not known to be feminist allies and the limited possibility of one intervention changing this reality. This engagement can lead to perverse outcomes. A few years ago, I was facilitating a conflict analysis session when the representative of Jama'atu Nasrul Islam, an umbrella body for Muslim organisations, offered a potential solution to high incidence of gender-based violence: to mobilise imams to preach about hudud punishments. He felt telling people Islam requires stoning for zina or hand amputation for theft would show the seriousness with which Allah took gender-based violence and corruption. While his sincerity is unquestioned, this story shows potential dangers of engaging with these leaders without thinking through interventions and making them accountable to feminists.

As the institution of Shari'a codes has not brought about longed-for transformation, people have decreasing avenues to pursue within the current state frameworks. Around 2003, Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad, commonly known as Boko Haram,[10] started preaching that modern western education, democracy and government employment were religiously forbidden (Ostien, 2018). Protesting the corruption and inequality produced by state structures and calling for a return to a 'purer', more Islamic way of life, the group garnered substantial support among a population disenchanted with the fledgling democracy and failed Shari'a code institution. According to Mustapha (2015b), five inter-related factors are critical to understanding the group: religious doctrines; poverty and inequality (vertical and

horizontal);[11] the political context of electoral competition post democratic transition in 1999; the geographical and international context; and personal agency of those involved. This binary between rule according to Islam as ensuring morality and effective and just governance in contrast to the secular Nigerian state corrupted by outside (foreign/non-Muslim/southern) influences, the rise and normalisation of religious fundamentalism and failures of governance laid the framework for making the rise of jihadi armed groups possible.

Cracks in the Binary

Having traced genealogies of the binary, this section interrogates it. While much of its power is based on purported links to unchanging culture, religion and tradition, this obscures the multi-faceted nature and diversity of ways people lived in the past and present lived realities. Culture, religion and tradition are three different concepts seen as synonymous with combined symbolic weight weaponised against the rights of women and those of non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. A common statement made by mostly men to justify gender inequality is 'I am a traditional African' with no understanding of the diversity of gender roles across the continent, within Nigeria or historical shifts. (Mohammed et al., 2018). After all, Christianity and Islam came to the region through processes of conquest and conversion and, in some areas, relatively recently, purposefully displacing indigenous religions in acts of cultural and physical violence than continue today. It is now considered deviant to even learn about Bori with all traditional religions seen as synonymous with devil worship (Nagarajan, 2016a). Moreover, with conservative and fundamentalist religious interpretations holding sway, we are witnessing deliberate erasure of culture, religion and tradition, including through a process of what Bennoune (2013) quotes Hassan Rachik as calling 'Islamic globalisation' displacing and de-Nigerianising people's lived Islams. Furthermore, rigid demarcation

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between culture, religion and tradition and modern, secular and state breaks down given the nature of the polity. If secularism is separation between religion and the state, Nigeria is not a secular country but rather aims to treat Christianity and Islam equally. Moreover, many northern states, having instituted Shari'a codes, have integrated Islam into governance and administration of justice. Societal performativity of religion translates into requiring this of political and governing classes who are also close with religious leaders, with religious actors being important political players. The binary characterises the state as secular in opposition to culture/religion/tradition but this is not borne out by the reality.

Binary framings also engage in historical erasure. They are used by those contesting women's rights to perpetuate ideas of men as active leaders and decision makers and women as passive followers in the household and in public life (Voices for Change, 2015). However, northern Nigerian history includes women such as Nana Asmau, her sisters and the jaji mentioned above, the eight queens of Daura who were part of a matrilineal and matriarchal tradition, the warrior and military strategist Queen Amina of Zazzau, and Ya Magira Aisa Keli Ngermaramma who ruled the Kanem Bornu Empire for eight years.

There has also been a considerable narrowing of what is considered permissible and acceptable when it comes to sexuality. Pereira (2005, p. 55) shows the distinction between Shari'a codes and prevailing Hausa sexual culture as lived cultural practices in the context of 'state-sponsored efforts by the Muslim religious right to reconstruct discourses of heterosexuality.' Pereira (2005) writes of modern courtship including spending time in the potential bride's house engaging in sexual intercourse to test compatibility and how these practices contrast with prosecutions for zina. She writes about tsarance, common in the early 20th century but

no longer practiced, where village groupings of girls and boys would engage in cuddling and sleeping together, and kawance or angwance, where friends of the bride or groom would gather for the wedding away from parents and have sexual freedoms with neither religious scholars nor anyone else condemning this practice. She quotes Asma'u Joda talking of older women in Adamawa state reminiscing about the past, saying they were 'laughing at us. They said, "You people that now have the 'real' Islam, your life has been destroyed." They [the older women] used to enjoy themselves.' (Pereira, 2005, p. 55.)

Moreover, northern Nigeria's long history of people of non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions is deliberately erased by Christian and Muslim conservatives and fundamentalists who paint these identities and practices as deviant, un-Islamic/un-Christian, 'un-African' and 'against our culture and religion' (Mohammed et al., 2018). Actually, Hausa society has a 'reputation for homosexuality' in other parts of the country whose denial of people who engage in homosexual acts can be contrasted to Hausa people's inclination to be more likely to gossip about than deny this (Gaudio, 2009). The 'yan daudu are a 'strictly distinctive social category of males who have adapted feminine mannerism, speech and dress' (Sinikangas 2004, p 26). They do work seen as that done by women such as preparing and selling food, may or may not have sex and relationships with men who they refer to as miji (husband) and may get married to and have children with women (Gaudio, 2009, 1998; John, 2016; Sinikangas, 2004). In the past, there were brothels for men of men and for women of women in northern Nigeria (Mohammed, Nagarajan and Aliyu, 2018). However, after implementation of Shari'a codes, many 'yan daudu left 'Shari'a states' due to fundamentalist preaching and fear of attacks and violence (John, 2016) as well as rhetoric of the need to rid the state of 'yan daudu to create 'social conditions necessary for the full implementation of Shari'a' and

'improvement of public morality along Islamic lines' which 'would lead to justice and prosperity for all' (Gaudio 2009, p. 23).

Furthermore, while there is a strong social norm of men as household heads and breadwinners (Nagarajan, 2016b), this does not match reality. For example, in northeast Nigeria, violent conflict has forced women to assume new roles and decision-making power due to numbers of men killed, detained, disappeared, recruited or who have left the area (Nagarajan, 2017). Women have been responsible for saving the lives of men by hiding them and smuggling them to safety. Many households now are headed by women (Nagarajan, 2017). Even if men are present, their power has diminished due to inability or unwillingness to financially support the family, with women and girls having to earn incomes or acquire food, including through survival sex. Humanitarian and development actors hold discussions and consultation with women, try and address gender-based violence and mostly choose to distribute aid to women as this is more likely to reach the entire family. We are already seeing some backlash against these changes, with increasing incidence of violence against women and girls (VAWG), attempts to stop women talking of their actions to save men and imams and traditional leaders preaching against NGOs as changing culture and tradition when it comes to women's roles and responsibilities. However, we are also witnessing changing attitudes towards 'western' education and women's empowerment with people talking of how times are changing, those displaced from rural areas having new choices in urban spaces and lack of education seen as a key causal factor of conflict.

Beyond Binary Framings: Activism on the Ground

Women organise in both secular and faith-based organisations. The work of Nana Asmau and the jaji live on in groups such as the Federation of

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Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN) and Muslim Sisters Organisations, women's groups who engage in da'awa and focus on women's rights with campaigns against early and forced marriage, genital mutilation, women's exclusion from education and public life, early pregnancy and maternity rights. Christian women mobilise in faith-based organisations and are active in churches and in the women's wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria. They challenge narratives around the normalisation of VAWG as part of women's submissiveness in marriage. They conceptualise women's rights within Christian and Islamic frameworks which has implications for rights, as discussed below. On the other hand, many women working for secular organisations are religious, indicating the prevalence of religiosity in northern Nigeria (performative and otherwise). The choice of whether to work within a secular or religious framework can be as much a matter of strategy and circumstance as personal ideology (Nagarajan, 2016a).

Activists work in coalitions of secular organisations, Christian organisations, Muslim organisations and interfaith organisations to push for women's rights. They make strategic choices, for example talking about the need to be compliant with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325) when talking with interlocutors in ministries, departments and agencies, making the case for action on VAWG by stressing its incidence and their duty to act with the police and faith narratives around violence when talking with religious leaders.

While knowledge of international frameworks may not be high in rural areas, women activists in state capitals, depending on to whom advocacy and influencing is directed, often use international instruments, Nigerian constitutional and other law or religious frameworks. They take different

approaches to fundamentalist and conservative interpretations of religion when it comes to women's rights. Many women's organisations fail to challenge the profoundly patriarchal interpretations of culture, religion and tradition that abound within binary framings, conceding this point and rather talking of needing to move into a new era and discard some of culture. Using arguments grounded in contesting interpretations of culture, religion and tradition is not enough in itself as prospects for change become limited within these frameworks but this is a missed opportunity to combat religious fundamentalism and patriarchal entrenchment by keeping these spaces and terrain open, particularly given 'any agitation for change that does not cloak itself in the rhetoric of 'Islam' stands almost no chance of gaining any popular support' (Eltantawi, 2017).

Other women's organisations, including faith-based organisations, put forth interpretations of culture, religion and tradition that promote and protect (certain) women's rights, arguing for example that,

> Muslim women in Northern Nigeria, like women in other societies across the world, have been subjected to practices that violate their rights. Some of these violations are carried out in the name of Islam in spite of the fact that such practices are against the teachings of Islam' and 'striving to protect the rights according to women… is one of the obligations imposed by God on all members of Muslim societies (Sada et al. 2005, p. 6, 8).

They educate women, judges, policy makers and the general public on women's rights under Islam and encouraging women to access their rights.

Adamu (1999, p. 60) writes the difficulties Nigerian Muslim feminists face: viewed with suspicion by their own communities and 'branded as Western agents, funded by foreign powers to undermine Islam' with focus on women's rights seen as 'a means of diverting attention from the pressing economic and political problems facing many members of Muslim societies' in which international economic and political bodies and local elites are implicated. This work is done and interpretations put forward within the framework of Islam rather than that of international human rights and is having some positive impact. According to Suberu (2009), strong internal critiques from Muslim civil society organisations have moderated controversial aspects. In certain 'pockets of effectiveness', 'Shari'a institutions appear to facilitate access to justice, to enhance law enforcement and even improve the socio-economic position of the most poor group of women and widows' (Mustapha et al., 2018).

An example of some choices made can be seen by the decision to engage the hisbah board[12] in VAWG prevention and response. I worked with women's rights activists in five northern states between 2013 - 2016 on running Observatories on VAWG, platforms for reporting, referrals, response and advocacy. They brought together key actors in steering committees including government ministries and departments, security agencies, human rights and peacebuilding organisations and religious and traditional institutions to discuss cases and referrals, look at broader trends and determine prevention and response strategies. Members used information to push change in institutions. However, this strategy has required involvement of actors not known for their support for gender equality. For example, a few months after its launch, it was decided to invite the hisbah board to join the steering committee in Kano. This decision required a lot of work to influence hisbah board members to shift attitudes. While known these attempts at attitudinal change would not be completely successful, it was agreed to nonetheless include them as they

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received approximately 1,300 VAWG reports every month as the agency closest to and living in communities in Kano (Nagarajan and Nwadinobi, 2016).

However, the binary outlined above also impacts mobilisations. Many women's rights activists are careful when talking about religion due to level of risk and personal beliefs. This hesitancy to challenge constrains action. An illustrative example is the way the culture of silence around VAWG is reinforced when perpetrators are religious leaders. Women's rights activists have to strategise carefully when it comes to cases of sexual violence committed by Islamiyya teachers and imams due to likely risk and ensuing uproar. In one particular case, the mother of a girl raped by her Islamiyya teacher focused on persuading her husband to move her to another Islamiyya school rather than tell him or the community what had happened. Activists felt constrained in knowing what to do, beyond providing services.

Moreover, divisions in the country along ethno-linguistic and religious lines are reflected in group organising and challenges faced. In some instances, women create faith-based organisations when services are open to all. For example, Christian Women for Excellence and Empowerment in Nigerian Society (CWEENS) runs the only shelter in Plateau state. They have found resistance among Muslim communities due to perceptions they are Christian women seeking to convert Muslims, which has made Muslim women wary of seeking help. We also see fault lines between and within women's organisations. They still work and mobilise together but there can be some mistrust.

Furthermore, particular issues are not tackled. Despite stringent laws around abortion, [13] risks women face procuring abortion[14] and personal convictions of many activists, particularly those working in sexual and

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reproductive rights, there is no open mobilisation around the right to choose. Not even the high numbers of women and girls abducted by armed groups and raped before returning to communities pregnant has sparked public debate. Some Muslim women openly discuss having had abortions and FOMWAN even released a legal opinion in the wake of these abductions that spoke of the permissibility of abortion within certain term limits in Islam alongside guidance on not stigmatising the women concerned and the children born to them. However, there is no strong push by women activists to change the law as it is seen too sensitive for Christians.

Attitudes are particularly anti-choice among Christian communities. Women's rights activists who have been known to counsel women, girls and their families who want to abort pregnancy that resulted from rape against doing so, talking of sanctity of life. Indeed, many women's rights activists are moralistic about sex outside of marriage or between people of the same gender. They focus on what women, girls and their families can do to keep themselves safe, such as the clothes to (not) wear or not allowing girls to engage in street hawking which smacks of victim blaming. That displaced girls engage in survival sex with men in power is seen as wrong not just due to unequal power dynamics and exploitation but also as it constitutes sex outside marriage and will affect future marriageability.

Many women's rights activists in Nigeria are also profoundly homophobic and transphobic. I have facilitated VAWG workshops where activists have labelled lesbianism as a form of violence, spoken of homosexuality as synonymous with paedophilia and talked of the need to address 'sexual initiation practices' of 'lesbian cults.' Reports of increasing cases of 'lesbianism' in IDP camps are seen as symbolic of the immorality to which people have degenerated. Referral services are likely to be staffed with

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people of discriminatory attitudes and queer women need to be warned to be selective about details they reveal (Mohammed et al., 2018). Of course, not all women's rights activists in northern Nigeria feel this way, but it seems to be a dominant attitude and there is little to no solidarity and alliance building between women's rights and queer movements.

These dynamics highlight another binary: between issues such as sexual violence against young girls, early and forced marriage and education where there has been some progress (Nagaraian and Nwadinobi, 2016; Eltantawi, 2016) and issues around sexuality, abortion and people of non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. While 'sexual violence and abuse against girls (and boys) is being regularly condemned, there is an acceptance that this happens in 'our' communities and parents and guardians are increasingly coming forward to report despite the fear that still persists around doing so,' reported VAWG cases are overwhelmingly those of minors with people less likely to report when survivors are adult women or when perpetrators are partners (Nagarajan and Nwadinobi, 2016). This is unsurprising given attitudes around intimate partner violence and marital rape and the victim blaming adult women experience for their dressing, behaviour and even deciding to have sex for money and food when all livelihood sources are lost. Limited progress made around women's rights is still on 'easy' issues with girls who provoke empathy. Many women's rights activists, whose analysis and mobilising does not necessarily equate to feminist activism are unable, unwilling or wary to challenge beyond a certain limit, thereby reflecting the regressive nature of dominant thinking in society as a whole as well as the influence of this binary on women's rights organising.

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Conclusion

I have sought to define the binary between culture/religion/tradition and modern/secular/foreign, showing its historical roots and developments and ways these are grounded in struggles against corruption and injustice.

The binary first noticeably emerged during the Sokoto Caliphate when 'universal' Islamic practices and values were set against a plurality of Islamic interpretations, syncretic practices and more indigenous belief systems and links between governance according to Islamic law, morality and effective and just rule as opposed to the corruption of the Hausa rulers, seen as 'inauthentic' and self-centred Muslims developed.

Conquest and colonisation by the British brought about social if not administrative rupture with populations struggling to understand defeat by Christians and believing governance structures had become corrupted due to foreign influence. Post-independence, increasing religious intolerance, fundamentalism and sectarian violence further attacked the idea of diversity of religious interpretations. The binary framing deepened with democratic transition with democracy, secularism and the corrupt nature of Nigerian politics seen as inextricably linked and in opposition to just, moral and effective Islamic governance. Shari'a code implementation failed to bring about the transformative change addressing poverty, inequality, corruption, injustice and ineffective governance for which people were agitating. Its 'success' rather became tied up with religious performativity and policing of 'immorality' with women's bodies *the* demonstration of effectiveness.

I have interrogated the dissonance of such binaries with past and present lived realities pointing to women having influence and occupying positions

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of power throughout history, lived cultural sexual practices between heterosexual people, the existence of non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities and current gender roles. Despite this dichotomy between binary framings and historical and current realities, the binary continues to have weight. While women activists mobilise using both religious and human rights frameworks and are able to come together in coalitions to achieve some success, the progress made tends to be limited by binary framings and on issues with empathisable victims such as the rape of young girls. However, the silence around VAWG generally is magnified when it comes to matters close to religion, some issues such as abortion are not the focus of mobilisation and many activists can take profoundly anti-feminist stances through engaging in victim blaming, policing of women's and girls' sexualities and perpetuating discrimination against those of non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. Yet even here, mobilising occurs outside these binary framing with varying levels of success, with women's rights activists working for secular and faith-based organisations coming together and deploying a range of strategies.

It is also important to acknowledge that gender discussions take place outside these frameworks. Social media is used to challenge and interact with those in power and change narratives and norms. Although online spaces are limited in terms of access for the most marginalised women and they can be sites of violence with women publicly shamed and harassed, activists use new technology and social media and traditional media such as radio to drive forward conversations. Women share experiences of marginalisation and violence on Twitter using hashtags such as #BeingFemaleInNigeria. Female in Nigeria, a Facebook group, enables women to tell stories in a non-judgmental space and be linked to support. #BringBackOurGirls was a worldwide phenomenon leading to protests

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across the world. During many of these conversations, religious arguments are ignored or sidelined.

Moreover, while the binary posits rights discourse as linked to democracy that has proved inherently corrupt in contrast with just and effective Islamic governance, people themselves clamour for rights. The rights discourse still resonates with many and the binaristic approach has not been successful in winning over a significant proportion of the population, particularly those who are marginalised. The desire to combat early and forced marriage is present across the ideological spectrum in northern Nigeria with even some Islamist activists conceding it is a result of poverty, ignorance and incorrect understanding of Islam and women at the forefront of fighting this practice despite negative reactions from some Islamist forces (Eltantawi, 2016). Furthermore, Muslims, including religious leaders, across northern Nigeria are hungry for education for themselves and their children, pursuing both Islamic and 'western' education (Ostien, 2018) as they see it as needed for personal and community development and growth (Nagarajan, 2016a). Change is starkest in northeast Nigeria where conflict has led to fundamental societal rupture and attitudinal change. That women and girls have been left with the burden of providing for their families and communities and with decision making power, has fundamentally shifted gender roles and is starting to change gender norms. Despite protests of religious and other community leaders who are unhappy about these changes in gender roles, many women desire education and opportunities for their daughters, pointing to their own inability to earn decent incomes due to lack of education and wanting their girls to be more self-sufficient and less likely to experience these same hardships.

Women's rights activists would do well to build on these opportunities by utilising a range of strategies and approaches. As well as challenging the profoundly patriarchal interpretations of culture, religion and tradition that abound within binary framings externally, activists need to do internal movement work to centre feminist analyses, particularly around sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights, and link and work in solidarity with other movements. Focus should also be on facilitating discussion of how gender roles are changing and helping individuals, families and communities to adapt to new realities hence mitigating likely backlash while expanding and challenging gender norms.

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Notes

[1] The author thanks Fatimah Kelleher, Ayesha Khan, Nida Kirmani, Mariz Tadros and the anonymous reviewer for their useful comments on earlier drafts.
[2] I used the term religious fundamentalism as distinct from religious conservatism and to signify the project whereby those engaged in it 'construct 'tradition' in a way that is highly selective, at the same time as dogmatically insisting that their reconstructions of text are 'sacred' and so unable to be questioned' (Cowden and Sahgal 2017, p. 15), deny 'the possibility of interpretation and reinterpretation even while its adherents engage in both' (Bennoune 2013, p. 16) and centre the importance of control of women's bodies and sexuality and rigid gender roles. Religious fundamentalists 'believe in the imposition of God's law, something called *the* Shari'a – their version of it rather than others' – on

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Muslims everywhere and in the creation of what they deem to be Islamic states or disciplined diasporic communities ruled by these laws,' denounce secularists, seek to bring politicised religion into all spheres, want to police, judge and change the behaviour, appearance and comportment of others and aim to sharply limit women's rights, sometimes in the name of protection, respect and difference (Bennoune 2013, p. 16). In contrast, while religious conservatism remains problematic, it does not make claims to possessing the only true interpretation and can be 'protective of certain traditional spaces for women as well as being capable of reform and change' (Cowden and Sahgal 2017, p. 18).

[3] This system of indirect rule in northern Nigeria differed from the approach used in much of the south with this difference in the colonial project creating a division within Nigeria that still echoes today.

[4] There is today a large body of 'neutral' Muslims who, wary of sectarian contestation and turmoil, shun affiliation (Mustapha 2015, p. 4) with as many as 44 per cent of Muslims surveyed in 2010 seeing themselves as 'just Muslim.'

[5] The word 'Shari'a' is used in political, popular and media discourse as fixed, immutable and with one correct interpretation deliberately obscuring the existence and practice of interpretation. This paper will use 'Shari'a codes' to refer to laws passed and 'Shari'a' to refer to the concept, such as the people's desire for Shari'a, and when giving the names of the bodies that were created.

[6] Zina connotes 'illegal' sexual activity i.e. any form of consensual sexual relations between a man and a woman who are not married to one another. Offences are referred to as fornication or adultery, depending on marital status.

[7] For example, in the cases of Amina Lawal and Safiya Hussaini, who were sentenced to death by stoning in 2002 for zina, the men involved were set free due to lack of evidence. The women's rights organisation Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), supported by Baobab for Human Rights and other organisations, mobilised legal defence and both women were subsequently acquitted on appeal.

[8] At the same time as the state is relinquishing its responsibility to provide for those living in it, coercive control has been increasing, in reaction to perceptions of growing power and civic education across the country. The Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014 criminalises the registration and operation of, participation in and support for gay clubs, societies and organisations. A Bill Prohibiting Frivolous Petitions, popularly known as the Social Media Bill, designed to regulate communications and use of the social media, was successfully resisted by civil society in May 2016. A Non-Government Organisations Regulatory Commission of Nigeria (Establishment) Bill, which has been said by civil society organisations to threaten the independence of NGOs and CSOs in Nigeria, is currently in the House of Representatives.

[9] For example, there have been examples of 'traditional' leaders that, as a result of this work, have decided to expand their council of advisers to include women so they can be aware of and responsive to women's concerns (Nagarajan, 2017).

[10] In the interests of conflict sensitivity, this article will use the exact names of groups as opposed to using the blanket term 'Boko Haram' which, rather than being the name of groups, is one ascribed by the media and serves to simplify message and aims.

[11] Mustapha defines vertical inequality as inequality between individuals and horizontal inequality as inequality between groups and regions.

[12] Following the introduction of Shari'a codes, the hisbah board, a force charged with upholding morality was set up formally by the state or informally by communities in many states where Shari'a codes had been passed. While there are many accusations against the hisbah, including for violation of privacy, seizure of property, targeting non-Muslims and harassment of political enemies of state governors, the hisbah are a major service provider, particularly of arbitration and dispute resolution for the poor: (Mustapha and Gamawa, 2018).

[13] Although post abortion care is allowed, providing or procuring an abortion itself is a criminal act except if the mother's life is at risk.

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[14] It is freely available, including in medical clinics, for those with money while poorer women are blocked from access to safe abortion.

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This Is Not A Feminist Poem

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Wana Udobang is a freelance journalist, poet and documentary

filmmaker based in Nigeria.

This is not a feminist poem

This is not contorted metaphors with neither punch line nor chorus

This is not a feminist poem

It is a woman learning to trade possessions before her lover takes his last breath.

She will never get the chance to say goodbye because those final hours are one match-point away from the backstroke of ravenous relatives.

You see where we come from, widows learn to bid their dead farewell even before they are lowered into the ground.

Because grief requires time and time is a luxury she cannot afford.

But I don't want to talk about funeral rites or a daughter's non-inheritance

Because this is not a feminist poem

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It is a thirteen-year-old leaking between her legs. She cannot will her waste to stop because culture demands that babies must birth babies even before they are whole.

This is Mercy, waiting to be fully formed before the doctors can fix her. We exchange broken smiles but mine is crackling with questions and I want to ask, how does a six year old ask to be gang raped for lunch after school?

As she fiddles with the beads of a rosary that crawl around her neck, my lips are too drowsy to ask God why?

But I am trying to not be feminist about this because

This is not a feminist poem

It is the landlord who pays off your father to clench his teeth over choking tears for what his son had done to you.

And your daddy knows that homelessness is too close to home so he washes of your shame with a sponge, dabs your wounds with scripture hoping these words will in turn douse the stench of the breath, erase the handprints that form maps across your skin, and glue together all that is broken of you.

But instead memory has an interesting way of refusing to disappear, so this is how you exist with a tape loop in your head playing over and over again.

I am not here to talk about the kidnap of justice in my country or whom, how and why we have refused to pay her ransom

Because this is not a feminist poem

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It is piercing screams of gaping mouths choking as hands stifle their lungs of ambition

It is men in uniform with bellies swollen from bribe, sworn to protect you but tell you that domestic matters are family matters.

So you drink up your pain till you are full, your throat is parched and yet again you begin to thirst for it yet again.

It is walking around with a womb too hollow to bear an heir that you take in the seeds of betrayal wanting it to pull together the remnants of matrimony. This is what it means to be a real woman.

It is the girls who are sent to school only to come back home knowing that their future is dangling between their bodies and their silence, yet deciding which to betray first

It is those 2 am text messages from your boss' phone that leaves you reminded that you will always lose so you grin, dust it off a shoulder and bear it. You return to your job because this meagre wage pays for your little brother's tuition and your mother's heart medicine.

But this is not a feminist poem

It is acquainting yourself with the normalcy that your body is a minefield, trampled upon by the politics of culture

It is a reminder that you are click, you are bait, you are currency and by virtue of your existence you are only half human never equal, never the same.

It is learning that the heavy medals of your success are meaningless until they are smelted into a ring on your finger

But I told you at the beginning that this is not a feminist poem

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It is not a rant or a call to action

It is not a call for your attention

It is not a checklist of everything you already know

This is not a feminist poem

This is a poem about life, about rights, for my sisters who struggle and continue to fight

Inspired by Efe Paul Azino's 'This is not a political poem'

Available at: http://wanawana.net/2016/06/27/this-is-not-a-feminist-poem/

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Moving Beyond the Binary: Gender-based Activism in Pakistan

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Abstract

This article challenges the binary framework within which women in Pakistan have been viewed, by political actors, the state, and more broadly as well, as either 'secular/feminist/godless/Westernised' or 'authentic/ Islamic/traditional'. It begins by contextualising the genealogy of this binary in Pakistan's colonial and political history, which has led to the state's side-lining of moderate religious voices and promotion of right-wing religious parties that suited its political objectives. Even the scholarship produced by the women's movement, which arose in response to a politicised Islamisation process begun under military rule in the 1980s, inadvertently reproduces this binary as activists sought to assert a rights-based agenda and were supported by international donor funds. A shift in recent years in response to West-based international scholarship post 9/11, which focusses on the subjectivity and organisation of Islamist women, has influenced work on women in Pakistan as well as a donor turn to funding faith-based initiatives. The paper then examines current gender justice movements that emerged independently at a grass-roots level, and draws attention to their effectiveness despite lack of strong linkages with either the women's movement or Islamist women. These include rights-based mobilisations by peasant women, community health workers, tribal women in the Taliban/conflict-affected north-west, and transgender activism. It ends by challenging feminists to engage more deeply with these forms of activism.

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Introduction

This paper challenges the binaristic approaches to understanding Muslim women's subjectivities as either pious subjects or as Westernised, secular feminists. In Pakistan, this binary is present in the discourse of various political parties and is reflected in the media as well. More subtly, it is often reproduced within scholarship about women, which, by focusing on either self-professed secular feminists or explicitly Islamist women's groups, ends up reinforcing the notion that women must fall into one or the other camp. This raises serious concerns for us as feminist scholar-activists because it has limited the public debate around women's issues. In the context of heightening sensitivities around the question of religion, it has also led some external development actors to fund faith-based organisations and support informal cultural institutions, which contributes to making such bodies appear more relevant and authentic at the expense of rights-based initiatives.

This binary can be traced to the reification of the category of religion in the period well before Pakistan's inception, as colonial discourses attempted to solidify religious boundaries in terms of their depiction and strategies of rule vis-à-vis 'the natives' (Pandey, 1992; Ludden, 1993; Kaviraj, 1994; Oberoi, 1994). These framings were reinforced by indigenous Hindu and Muslim elites as part of religious revivalist movements that emerged in the decades preceding independence (Robinson, 1974; Metcalf, 1993; Mayaram, 2004). However, the secular/religious distinction has evolved and been reinforced in recent decades following the growth of Islamist movements worldwide and in

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Pakistan in particular since the 1980s and following the global war on terror post 9/11.

The solidification of this binary must be understood within the wider political history of Pakistan where the state has played a defining role in cultivating the notion that a foreign, 'Western' hand has had a suspicious role to play in fostering corrupt, secular, and liberal values amongst some women, who benefit from donor funds as they run their fundamentally un-Islamic (read 'anti-state') NGOs (Khan, 2001). This is in contrast to the state's historical elevation of religious parties, which are often used to lend credence to military rule in the name of Islamisation (Nasr, 1994). With the support of the United States, the Pakistani state supported the use of *jihadi* ideology during the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan during the 1980s. It also allowed Arab funds to flow unchecked into a burgeoning *madrassa* (religious seminary) sector to support these policies (ICG, 2007; Dreyfuss, 2005).

Further, the state has consistently sidelined moderate Islamic *ulema* and academics, for example, forcing out of the Council of Islamic Ideology, and country, the internationally acclaimed modernist Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman in 1969 (Noorani, 2014) and the liberal scholar Javed Ahmed Ghamidi in 2010 (Walsh, 2011). Whether within the state apparatus or in public discourse such as television channels, the space for moderate and modernist interpretations of Islam is virtually blocked. These processes have strengthened right-wing ideologies in the country as a whole and marginalised both leftist and liberal voices, including those of women's rights activists.

Most of the academic literature on women's activism in Pakistan since the 1990s inadvertently reflects this binary, falling into one of two camps: writings produced about the self-identified women's movement, focusing largely on the Women's Action Forum (WAF), and research on Islamist

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women's groups. The former body of scholarship highlights the narratives of those activists who largely identify as 'secular' and 'feminist'. Much of this work has been written by members of the WAF themselves and highlights their efforts to resist the Islamisation policies introduced under the dictator, Zia ul Haq (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987; Khan, Saigol, and Zia, 1994; Shaheed et al., 1998; Saigol, 2016). The latter studies emerged more recently (Iqtidar, 2011; Jamal, 2013; Mushtaq, 2010; Ahmad, 2010) and examine women in religious political parties such as Jamaat-i-Islami or the Islamic academy for women, Al-Huda. This research builds upon a wider body of international scholarship that is concerned with understanding the subjectivities and agency of Muslim women in various contexts (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahmood, 2005). It is largely produced by scholars either from, or trained in, universities in Europe and North America, many of whom are influenced by poststructuralist approaches and operate within a context of increasing Islamophobia inside and outside of the academy. While their critiques emerge from their particular positionalities within Western academia, their influence has travelled far beyond its borders, inadvertently contributing to efforts to delegitimise local rights-based activists.

One of the detrimental effects of this binaristic approach has been to perpetuate the notion that feminism is a Western import and that an 'authentic', culturally sensitive and hence more effective approach to gender-based development interventions must operate within a religious framework. Thus some donor agencies increasingly support initiatives framed in religious terms, which engage with local 'religious' and 'traditional' actors, thus sidelining and de-legitimising women's and other civil society groups operating within a rights-based framework.

This paper begins with an overview of the literature produced thus far on women's activism in Pakistan over the past three decades. This includes a discussion of the writings and activism of the self-identified women's

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movement, particularly related to the question of the movement's engagement with religion written largely during the 1980s and 1990s. This is followed by an exploration of the scholarship produced on the activism and organisations of Islamist women and the women's piety movement more recently in the period following 9/11. This literature represents a shift within the scholarship, from highlighting the work of feminist activists to reflecting scholars' increased curiosity about the subjectivity and organisation of Islamist women. This shift is further reflected in donor policies which increasingly fund faith-based initiatives.

We then turn our attention to more recent examples of gender activism that do not conform to the rigid religious/secular binary. This includes the struggle amongst peasant women in Okara, the movement for the rights of lady health workers, women's activism in the conflict- affected north-west, and transgender rights activism. These cases highlight the diverse and vibrant nature of gender activism, generated spontaneously and without the direct engagement of either the women's movement or pious women's groups/religious parties, both of whom represent particular middle to upper class interests and contestations generated within the context of increasing Islamisation (Khan, 1994). These cases demonstrate that while the self-identified secular women's movement may have declined in recent years in numbers and influence, and Islamist women's groups opposed to gender equality may be expanding in size and scope (Jamal, 2005; 2009; 2013; Iqtidar, 2011; Ahmad, 2010), gender activism continues in multiple forms across the country that exceeds the confines of the religious/secular binary. Understanding these diverse forms of gender activism allows for a more complex and nuanced view of gender politics within a variety of contexts, challenging the state and other actors seeking to address women's issues in Pakistan.

Discourse on Women's Rights Activism

The contemporary women's movement emerged during the 1980s, when Pakistan witnessed a dramatic political and cultural shift rightward due to military dictator Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation programme, which focused to a great extent on the control and regulation of issues related to gender and sexuality.[1] Zia's government introduced the Hudood Ordinances, which included punishments such as amputations, public whippings, and stoning to death as part of the formal criminal justice system. These ordinances also criminalised consensual sex (*zina*) between unmarried women and men and made it necessary for a woman to produce four male witnesses in order to prove that she had been raped; if she was unable to do so, she could be charged with committing *zina*, the maximum punishment for which is death by stoning (Shaheed, 2010). The government also introduced the Law of Evidence in 1984, making the financial testimony of two women or two non-Muslim men equal to that of one Muslim man. Islamisation included a range of measures to control women's mobility and dress, such as mandatory headscarves for those working in government offices or appearing on television, and a ban on women's participation in certain mixed public events such as spectator sports (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987). The aim was to push women back into the confines of the *chador* and *chardiwari* (the veil and the four walls of the home), thus marking women's bodies as symbols of the Islamic nation. The contemporary women's movement emerged from within this context of Islamisation. Hence, it is no surprise that much of the writing about the women's movement at this time deals with the issue of Islamisation/secularism.

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(WAF Poster. Artist: Lala Rukh)

WAF, which spearheaded the modern rights-based women's movement, was established in 1981 as a platform to organise against Zia's Islamisation programme. WAF maintained a publicly ambiguous position vis-à-vis its

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position on religion out of political necessity throughout the 1980s. However, they largely chose to work within a universalistic rights-based framework. Hina Jilani (1986), prominent human rights lawyer and WAF member, explained this choice, arguing that engaging with Islam was thought to be futile for activists as Islam contains many schools of thought, and it would inevitably be the school favoured by the government that would dominate. Similarly, Rubina Saigol said many activists by the late 1980s realised they would never win if they played on the 'mullah's wicket' (Saigol, 2016), that is, by the rules set by conservative religious groups and leaders.

However, not all members of the women's movement agreed. Khawar Mumtaz argued that it was impossible *not* to engage with Islam at the time:

> We thought the best way of responding was to get progressive interpretations of Islam given that context, given the nature of the law, and given at the time it was an Islamic, very conservative religious government and military government that had imposed the law. The parameters were in a sense defined. (Interview, 11 May 2011)

For this reason, throughout the 1980s, WAF periodically engaged with religious scholars and texts in order to prove that laws passed during Islamisation such as the Hudood Ordinances, the law of *Qisas* and *Diyat*, and the Law of Evidence, were in fact fundamentally un-Islamic (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987). However, differences of opinion over the strategic use of religion remained throughout the 1980s, and were one of the reasons for WAF's brief split within its Lahore chapter. WAF officially declared it stood for a separation of religion and state during its 1991 convention (Shaheed et al., 1998).

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The issue of whether to engage proactively with religious discourses, despite WAF's secular position, was never quite settled within the women's movement. There is a consistent concern amongst some activists that a secular approach - one that openly advocates for a separation of religion from the state - has been alienating to the vast majority of women in Pakistan (Shaheed, 2002). Thus, for practical and strategic reasons, a handful have continued to engage with religious texts and scholars periodically in order to defend against religious-based justifications for the denial of women's rights (Kirmani, 2013; Bradley and Kirmani, 2015). This has also been a strategy for dealing with the frequent charge lobbied against them by political parties and the media of being 'Westernised' and therefore inauthentic (Charania, 2014). For example, some activists from the feminist NGO Shirkat Gah provided legislators with religious-based arguments against the Hudood Ordinances during the Musharraf regime (1999-2008) to support legislative debates leading to the passage of the Women's Protection Act (2006)[2] (interview, Khawar Mumtaz). However, the use of such arguments has been very limited in practice and even that has drawn criticism from some feminists within and outside of the movement who argued it was exclusionary with regards to women from religious minorities, and played into the hands of right-wing forces (Gardezi, 1990; Sumar, 2002; Zia, 2009).

The women's movement has been prolific in generating research, and through its NGO work providing the majority of the discourse and analysis that forms the basis of knowledge production about gender in Pakistan. While activists have written on the detrimental effects of Islamic laws on women (Jahangir and Jilani, 1990), they have also addressed the long-term repercussions of Islamisation more broadly. This includes its effects on the education curriculum as a whole (Saigol, 1995), the rights of women in the context of the judiciary and Shariah courts (Shirkat Gah, 2000), the increase in violence against women in the name of culture/customs (Brohi, 2017; Shah, 2017), and the rise of religious extremism and the Taliban

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movement in the north-west, which greatly restricted the rights of women and girls in the region (Brohi, 2006; Bari, 2010.).

Activists have not limited themselves to contending with the discourse and impact of Islamisation alone. They created and led the campaign for the restoration of a quota for women in elected assemblies,[3] generating the knowledge base to support arguments in favour of this and other legislative reforms.[4] Following a series of weak, civilian governments in the post-Zia era (1988-1999), activists produced research that focused on increasing women's political voice and strengthening inclusive democratic governance (Shaheed et al., 2009; Zia, 2005; Bari, 2015). They have also produced some of the first research and awareness-raising material on sexual and reproductive rights (Saeed, 1994),[5] environmental issues (Sadeque, 2012; Hanif, 2011), and citizen-based initiatives for peace between India and Pakistan (Sarwar, 2007). While the movement is criticised for its urban middle and upper-class bias, activists have built periodic cross-class linkages and supported women in workers' associations, trade unions and rural groups such as the Sindhiani Tehreek (Khan and Saigol, 2004) and the Anjuman Muzareen Punjab (see below), which they also document.[6]

Their research has fed into activism and political lobbying, and contributed to the movement's influence despite its limited size. For example, since the early 2000s, several pieces of legislation were passed in favour of women's rights. In 2002, the number of reserved seats for women in the national and local assemblies was increased, precipitated by Musharraf's strategy of promoting 'enlightened moderation'. It facilitated the passage of a series of women-friendly pieces of legislation in subsequent years, including laws related to honour killings, acid attacks, and harmful customary practices (Mirza, 2011). Although the women's movement may have waned, dispersed and to a large extent become NGO-ised during the 1990s - a fate that has befallen women's movements across the world -

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women's rights activists have maintained an impressive influence on policy-making and legislative reform (Saigol, 2016).

Despite these gains, moves to protect and promote women's rights continue to be met with consistent opposition from conservative religious groups, with support from some parts of the state, such as the Islamic Federal Shariat Court (FSC) and the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII).[7] For example, the FSC ruled in 2010 that some parts of the Women's Protection Act 2006, which amended the Hudood Ordinances, were unconstitutional (Butt, *The Express Tribune*, 23 December 2010). The CII has subsequently taken positions in favour of child marriage, against the use of DNA testing in rape cases, and against women's right to object to her husband's second marriage (Ali, *Dawn,* 11 March 2014; Nangiana, *The Express Tribune,* 30 May 2013). Women representatives from influential religious parties, although they tacitly supported the women's movement in its activism to oppose the *zina* laws (Hussein, 2006), joined with their male colleagues in the National Assembly to resist the amendments, agreeing it would be tantamount to promoting a 'free-sex zone' in Pakistan (Pakistan News Service, 15 November 2006). This ideologically fraught environment is a major reason, despite WAF declaring its secularity in 1991, that women's rights activists rarely if ever openly 'come out' as secular in public debates.

Islamist Women's Subjectivities and the Post-secular Turn

Since the 2000s, there has been a shift within the academic literature on women's activism in Pakistan from a concern with the women's movement to a growing interest amongst scholars in the organisation and self-identification of Islamist women's organisations. This is part of a wider trend amongst scholars of gender internationally, particularly those focusing on Muslim-majority contexts. These scholars are working within the context of an increased deconstruction of the origins of secularism,

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liberalism, and rights-based discourse - three sets of ideas often viewed as interrelated products of the Western Enlightenment.

Within this broader field is a subset of works highly critical of the ways Muslim women in particular have been depicted, both within Orientalist and Islamophobic discourse produced after 9/11 and within the discourse of feminist scholars in the West and Muslim-majority countries themselves. Scholars Saba Mahmood (2005) and Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) have argued against the determinism that feminism, and liberal feminism in particular, has imposed on Muslim women (whether Western or 'indigenous'), which they argue essentialises the complexity of Muslim women's lives and is unable to understand forms of agency that do not conform to the Western, liberal model of an autonomous subject (Mahmood, 2005). These scholars call for approaches that highlight Muslim women's agency and are sensitive to the specificity of their lived experiences. This trend within the academy has inspired a burgeoning of research on Islamist women's groups in Pakistan over the past two decades.

There are several detailed studies conducted by scholars based in Pakistan and in the diaspora that shed light on women's participation in Islamist political parties and movements. Through her research on the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), the largest and oldest religious-based political party in Pakistan, Amina Jamal (2005; 2009) has argued that secular feminists in Pakistan have failed to grasp the manner in which Islamist women negotiate with modernity actively through their political struggles. Her work demonstrates how women in the JeI use the language of rights to assert their religious identities in the public sphere. In her research on Islamist groups, Humeira Iqtidar (2011) also argues that women in the JeI and the Jamaat-ud-Dawa[8] are asserting their agency through their active participation in these groups and they should not be viewed as victims of false consciousness, which is often how they are understood by feminist

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researchers. She takes the argument even further by arguing that the political activism of Islamist parties in general may be critical of secularism as a project but is actually facilitating secularisation through the rationalisation of religion - by bringing religion into the competitive public sphere.

Since the 1990s, there has been a growth in women's piety movements across the country, with Al Huda being the largest and most well-known. Al Huda is a women's piety movement founded by Dr Farhat Hashmi in 1994, which promotes Islamic education for women and follows the Wahhabi[9] school of thought. Sadaf Ahmad (2010) explores Al Huda's appeals to rationality as a means of garnering support amongst middle- and upper-class women through a detailed study of their pedagogical methods. Faiza Mushtaq's (2010) work focuses on the organisational strategies of the Al Huda movement and the manner in which its founder, Farhat Hashmi, is able to establish her authority, at least amongst a certain section of middle to upper class urbanised women in the country. Neelam Hussain (2014) too has written about *dars*[10] organisations such as Al Huda and Al Noor. She argues that, while participation in *dars* may be a form of agency, this agency will not lead to systemic or long-term change and rather reinforces unequal power relations for women. While the foci and arguments of each of these authors differs, all of these works are part of a wider effort amongst scholars of gender in Pakistan to take the activism of Islamist women seriously - something that was felt to be missing within the writing of feminist scholars during the 1980s and 1990s.

While the growth in detailed analyses of Islamist women's activism presented in the aforementioned studies deepens our understanding of these increasingly influential groups, the fact that this type of literature occupies growing space within the discourse on Pakistani women, and that research on Pakistani women in general has in many ways moved on from the study of feminist women's organising, raises some concerns. With the

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focus on Islamist women, there is a danger of falling into the essentialist trap that many of these authors are actually aiming to critique - one that romanticises the notion of the pious subject and that does not account for the 'messiness' of identities as they are practiced in everyday life (Bangstad, 2011; Zia, 2009). By labelling only particular women 'pious' or religiously-motivated, namely those who hold conservative views with regards to Islam, these studies risk reaffirming the notion that only those who hold conservative positions are truly 'Islamic' and hence have a right to define the realm of religion.

The result of this is the inadvertent recreation of a binary between right-wing *religious* women and liberal or left-wing *secular* women - a divide that scholars like Mahmood (2005), who builds on the work of Asad (2003), actually aim to undo through their critical work on secularism; hence their work remains trapped within the system of binaries that they are actually aiming to deconstruct. This is also a distinction that Pakistani women's rights activists (Khan, 1994; Shaheed, 2009) have been actively critiquing and resisting even before these studies were published.[11] This approach can prove problematic for locally-based feminists because of the ever-increasing political challenges they face directly from Islamist movements, which include the female members of these movements (Zia, 2009). Further, as the following section demonstrates, the binaristic approach has called into question the social or cultural authenticity of women's rights activists, contributing to a change in donor funding approaches.

Faith-based Interventions and the Reification of Culture

In the belief that instrumentalising faith and tradition implies greater cultural authenticity, and thereby greater acceptance in an increasingly anti-Western milieu, foreign donor agencies have begun to fund faith-based organisations to defuse potential government hostility and increase their acceptance within communities. For example, USAID funded an

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expensive project to 'sensitise' religious leaders to win their support for contraceptive use and got a family planning manual approved by the controversial CII (Brohi and Zaman, 2016). The WHO and UNICEF invited Maulana Sami ul-Haq, widely known for his leadership of a religious seminary that trained many Taliban on both sides of the border, to be a spokesperson for the polio vaccination campaign in 2015 and 2016.[12]

External actors such as the UK's Department for International Development and United Nations Development Programme, also support alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms in the conflict-affected province of Khyber Paktunkhwa (KP).[13] The purpose is to help the government reduce the enormous backlog of cases in the formal court system, which was viewed as one reason for initial support amongst some communities for the Taliban and their form of swift justice. Donor interest extends to financial support for government training of *jirgas* (tribal councils) in human rights (Bureau Report, *Dawn*, 7 December 2013) despite the fact they exclude women's representation and voice. Research shows *jirgas* represent the interests of the male elite and perpetuate traditional practices such as honour killings and exchange of girls to settle disputes (Shah, 2017). For this reason, they are becoming increasingly unpopular (Brohi 2017, pp. 47-8). Some women politicians have called for women's representation on ADR panels and question the enthusiasm amongst donors for these mechanisms (Raza, 2017). Further, the women's advocacy coalition Takra Qabailee Khwendo, working in conflict-affected tribal areas, rejects these efforts to formalise the all-male *jirga* councils (Shah, 2013).

Farida Shaheed argues the instrumentalisation of religious discourse by some NGOs should not be misconstrued, 'Just because somebody calls themselves faith-based does not make them the holders of the truth'.[14] Afiya Zia warns against growing donor support for the 'theocratization of development', in which rights are framed as negotiable and subject to

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religious interpretation rather than as clear demands that one can claim from the state. If the moral imperative of a universal human rights approach is abandoned in favour of faith-based social development, she argues, 'then anything is possible on this slippery slope' (Zia 2013, pp. 201-5).

Moving Beyond the Binary: Gender Activism in Multiple Forms

Although the self-identified women's movement has gradually reduced in visibility over the past decades and fragmented as a result of NGO-isation, this does not mean that gender-based activism has ceased. In various parts of the country, women are pushing back against oppressive forces and engaging in collective action in multiple forms - without relying on Islam to legitimise or frame their demands. They are doing so in a context where public mobilisation and criticism of the state carries great risks.

The last decade has witnessed an increasingly repressive culture of silencing all forms of dissent. Vigilante killings, generated by spurious charges of blasphemy against targeted individuals, has frightened non-Muslim religious minorities and silenced dissident intellectuals. Cases of enforced disappearances or 'missing persons' and extrajudicial killings have increased, particularly in FATA[15], KP and Balochistan, under the cover of national security (HRCP, 2016).[16] Among the affectees are not only suspected terrorists and criminals, but also those critical of the state. And women are not exempt. Karachi lost two prominent women activists in recent years, Perween Rahman and Sabeen Mahmud, both outspoken in their criticism of powerful interest groups and both murdered in their cars under mysterious circumstances.

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(Aurat March, Karachi, 8 March 2018. Photo: Hum Aurtein)

Despite all of this, gender-based resistance continues in multiple forms throughout the country. The following section documents some recent instances of activism amongst women and transgender communities that persist despite varying degrees of state/military repression.

Punjab Peasants' Resistance

Women have had a growing role to play in the peasant struggle which began in 2000 for proprietary rights over land owned by the government and military in the state of Punjab. Peasants formed a non-violent resistance organisation called Anjuman Muzareen Punjab (AMP)[17] to resist changes from sharecropping to a new contract system for tenant farmers, which left them vulnerable to eviction and limited their earnings. They rejected the new tenancy terms and demanded ownership rights over the land instead. Women wielding *thaapas,* or sticks, formed groups to protect their villages from police action and resist government efforts to force

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compliance. A female leadership emerged from the peasants' Christian and Muslim communities, both working together to recruit support, block highways, stage hunger strikes, attend court hearings and speak at public engagements to rally support. As the AMP grew into a movement, women were inducted at all levels (Mumtaz and Mumtaz, 2010).

Women's spontaneous and self-generated involvement in this collective action has led to their improved mobility, greater say in domestic decision-making, reduced domestic violence and an increased desire to educate girls (Mumtaz and Mumtaz, 2010). In 2008 they formed a Peasant Women's Society and began to demand land rights for landless women peasants, as well as women's recognition in all property deeds drawn up during a government land reforms process (Yusuf, 2016). WAF and numerous other civil society organisations support their cause, which also receives occasional sympathetic media coverage. Political parties have promised to address the peasants' grievances, yet no elected government has yet delivered.

Peasants continue to be arrested on charges they are terrorists and land grabbers, indicating institutions of the state, whether government or military, are united to ensure the movement's goals are not met (Our Correspondent, *The Express Tribune*, 2018). In April this year, the Supreme Court rejected a petition by an AMP leader, incarcerated for being a terrorist and represented initially by women's and human rights activist Asma Jahangir, to be shifted out of solitary confinement. The movement has persisted in the absence of substantial backing from political parties, external development funding, or recourse to religious/cultural rhetoric, demonstrating the strength of their resistance and claims to the land.

Lady Health Workers' Mobilisation

The backbone of Pakistan's primary health care system is a cadre of 125,000 Lady Health Workers (LHWs) operating in rural and peri-urban

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communities delivering vaccinations, antenatal screenings, nutrition counselling and contraceptives through home visits. Starting in 1994, the government programme paid LHWs a nominal sum as contractual workers. But as their numbers increased it soon became apparent they were making a significant difference to health outcomes, despite inefficiencies in management (OPM 2009, pp. 4-8). LHWs were often the main breadwinners in their families, and their jobs one of the only forms of non-agricultural paid work opportunities for women in their villages (Khan, 2014).

After years of receiving inadequate compensation under insecure work conditions, LHWs began to organise sporadic protests and sit-ins around the country to draw attention to their delayed and inadequate salaries, and demand to become regularised government employees with all associated benefits. Their national association made its first significant gain when the Supreme Court ordered in 2010 they be paid the minimum wage of a skilled full-time worker, a meagre Rs 7,000 (GBP 45) per month (Khan, 2011b). Two years later it ordered provincial governments to integrate them fully into the service structure.

Along with polio workers, LHWs risk their lives at the hands of militant groups. As the Taliban insurgency gained momentum in the aftermath of 9/11, militants began to abduct and kill LHWs for their involvement in the polio campaign, which they maligned as part of a US plot to sterilise Muslims. Between 2012-17 at least 22 LHWs were killed (Our Correspondent, *The Express Tribune*, 2017a). Attacks continue in the conflict-affected north-west and cities, where militants have a strong presence and the government struggles to contain a resurgence of polio.

LHWs are also subject to multiple forms of gender-based discrimination and must contend with routine sexual harassment and lack of control over their earnings at home. Civil society organisations are now stepping in to

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highlight their struggles and support their efforts to make sure their voices are heard and demands met (Baloch, 2017). LHWs' mobilisation is possibly the most sustained, widespread, and successful example of women-led collective action in Pakistan's recent history, yet somehow their endeavour has operated quite independently from the women's rights movement and the NGO sector.

Tribal Women's Association

After the military cleared much of the country's tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan from Taliban control, the government initiated a FATA reforms process to end the colonial-era rule through Frontiers Crime Regulations and mainstreaming the region's governance and administrative structures. With support from another prominent women's NGO in KP, in 2012 the first tribal women's association was formed, called Takra Qabaili Khwendo (TQK). It is a network, bringing together women from diverse backgrounds and education levels in FATA. Members employ a mix of strategies - workshops, awareness-raising sessions, press statements, and political meetings - to ensure women's voices are heard in a context marked by the exclusion and silencing of women in 'an area where political citizenship is barely in its infant steps', dominated by militancy and 'myriad forms of violent intervention' (Fleschenberg 2015, p. 68). TQK began by presenting their demands to elected politicians; they included a government-allocated quota for FATA women within parliament (similar to reserved seats for women from other provinces), women's presence in election offices (to offset cultural and political controls against women voting), and inclusion in tribal *jirgas* (Shah, 2013).

The TQK have since shifted their position on *jirga*s, now rejecting these councils altogether because of their patriarchal implications (Shah, 2013). They have done so by opposing the government's proposed Riwaj Act, which is intended to be a first step in the FATA reforms process and legalises the informal *jirga* system while at the same time extending

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jurisdiction of the higher courts to the area (Committee on FATA Reforms, 2016).[18] They demanded to be part of the FATA reforms process, arguing the *jirga* system should be replaced by the formal criminal justice system, which recognises women's civil and political rights (Our Correspondent, *The Express Tribune,* 2016).

Recently tribal women's groups have been surprised and encouraged by a spontaneous youth uprising from FATA with demands similar to their own. Known as the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), it is pressing for meaningful reforms in FATA, including full integration into the state administration and judicial system, recognition of their fundamental rights, and an end to excesses by the military forces in their communities. Contrary to established patriarchal tradition, PTM leaders have reached out to tribal feminist groups and other KP women activists. Many now openly support them by attending their rallies and making statements in favour of PTM's goals.[19] In response to PTM mobilisation and criticism of the military, the government has restricted the group's right to assembly; in a recent crackdown one woman activist from KP was also detained.

Transgender Rights Activism

The last ten years witnessed a dramatic growth in activism around the rights of sexual minorities and transgender communities in particular. While the presence of the third gender, or '*Khwaja Siras*'[20] as they have been come to be legally known in Pakistan, has deep historical roots, the rights of *Khwaja Siras* has only recently emerged as an issue in public debates. One of the reasons for this might be the increase in funding for HIV/AIDS-related projects, which has benefitted from organising amongst sexual minorities across the developing world (Fried & Kowalski-Morton, 2008). This has led to the emergence of several NGOs working for the rights of the transgender community across the country.

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A series of Supreme Court rulings between 2009 and 2012 gave legal status to members of the *Khwaja Sira* community. The first major victory for *Khwaja Siras* was the addition of a third gender category in the national identity cards in 2011 (Khan, 2011a). This landmark decision, i.e. formal recognition of more than two genders, paved the way for recognition of other rights such as the right to education, healthcare and a reservation for members of the third gender in government jobs. Next, activists came together to draft a new law to protect transgender people from any form of discrimination or violence based on their gender identity. The Senate passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2017 in March 2018, which many transgender activists had previously rejected because of its problematic definition of 'transgender' and its inclusion of medical tests as a determinant of transgender identity. However, after lobbying with legislators, the Senate passed a bill which does not require medical examination to claim transgender status, allows transgender people to register for drivers' licenses and passports, prevents harassment and discrimination at multiple levels, includes provisions for transgender persons to be provided with loans and employment opportunities, along with several other progressive provisions (Guramani, *Dawn*, 7 March 2018).

The *Khwaja Sira* Society in Lahore, GIA in Karachi, Wajood in Islamabad, and TransAction in Peshawar are some NGOs slowly gaining prominence at the national level. They raise awareness about the rights of members of the *Khwaja Sira* community and work on issues related to health and economic justice. In Karachi, activists such as Bindya Rana, have been highlighting the neglect of the community by the state for years in terms of access to employment and education. In KP, where several incidents of violence against the community have surfaced in the news and on social media, TransAction lobbies for greater protection from the police (Our Correspondent, *The Express Tribune*, 6 December 2017b).

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The efforts of transgender rights activists are shaking established gender hierarchies at their very foundations. While the presence of *Khwaja Siras* may have a long history in South Asian society, the fact that the majority of transgender rights activists are challenging the biological basis of sex/gender as it is defined by law opens up space for a reconceptualisation of gender itself. At the same time, it must be noted that most activism on this issue has taken place by those identified as *Khwaja Sira*, who either identify as a third gender or as trans-women. There is very little advocacy by or on behalf of transgender men apart from a select few cases (Khan, 2009). For the most part, the concept of trans-manhood or gender nonconformity still has little or no recognition in the Pakistani context, but this has also started changing.[21]

Conclusion

This paper provides a brief overview of the academic discourse produced over the past four decades with regards to Pakistani women's activism. Much of the scholarship about women's rights activism has come from within the women's movement itself and focused on the negative impact of Islamisation on women's lives, along with a wide range of social, economic, and political issues. The movement's extensive project of knowledge production represents their developing and deepening understanding of women's issues since the movement began its resistance to Zia's Islamisation. On the other hand, scholarship produced since the early 2000s on women in religious parties and piety movements provides insight into the current trend towards religious engagement that is arguably sweeping across swathes of middle- and upper-class women. Both bodies of work, which sometimes also overlap, have provided key insights into the important women's mobilisations across the politico-ideological spectrum in Pakistan.

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However, we contend here this discourse has also inadvertently reproduced a restrictive binary distinction between 'secular' women's rights activists and 'religious' piety movements and women's wings of Islamist political parties, which overlooks the vast array of gender-based social and political activism in recent years. In order to highlight the shortcomings of this binary, we draw attention to new sites of activism that have emerged which cannot be understood through the narrow prism of a binary lens and rely on neither set of discourses. These newer forms of mobilisation embed gender justice demands within movements for workers' rights, peasants' rights, ethnic and gender identity struggles and citizenship rights. Hence, they challenge the confines of the secular/religious binary as an adequate framework within which to comprehend gender justice issues in Pakistan.

Neither the 'religious' nor the 'secular' activists can lay claim to forging deep linkages with more recent forms of gender-based mobilisation such as the collective action amongst lady health workers, Punjabi peasants, tribal groups, and transgender activists. Islamist women have not expressed support or otherwise engaged with these forms of activism as their underlying ideology does not challenge existing class, caste, and state structures. On the other hand, the engagement of the women's movement with these newer forms of activism has mainly been by way of support through NGO networks, legal aid and research, but this has been limited and fragmented. However, because the women's movement articulates its demands in the language of citizenship rights, there is more scope for a deep engagement with these new sites of activism. The fact that this has not yet occurred in any significant or sustained manner suggests that the class composition and urban bias of the rights-based women's movement has contributed to a failure to develop deeper alliances. This is also a result of the general decline of the public profile of the movement since the 1990s. Feminists find themselves in a challenging moment; to remain relevant they must build bridges with these newer

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forms of claims-making in demanding accountability from the state for marginalised citizens.

The newer sites of gender-based activism also pose a challenge to donor-driven faith-based development initiatives, demonstrating that Islam and idealised notions of cultural authenticity are neither necessary nor relevant to driving these emerging mobilisations; in some cases these mobilisations pose a significant challenge to these donor-driven initiatives. In particular, in Pakistan's conflict-affected north-west, the grassroots campaign for ethnic Pashtun rights is a demand for citizenship status from the state and a rejection of the tribal *jirga* as means to deliver justice to both men and women. Thus, these newer forms of activism demand the state be held accountable to ensure citizenship rights and entitlements, in effect a rejection of the attempts of some donor agencies to earn legitimacy by reifying informal structures and Islam. Since the donors in question represent supposedly secular states that are meant to adhere to human rights within their own borders, it is all the more unacceptable they suspend the same standards in some of their activities in Pakistan.

While these new forms of mobilisation and resistance provide reason for hope, the risks of demanding rights for marginalised citizens are growing as the state closes spaces for social and political action by incarcerating and disappearing activists, holding trials outside the public purview, and imposing controls on NGOs in the name of security. This has limited the successes of the newer movements and further restricted the space of older movements. It has also affected the working of civil society organisations, many led by feminist activists, subjecting them to increased scrutiny and vetting to ensure they are not functioning to serve 'Western' interests, or opposed to 'the [Islamic] ideology of the state'. Thus, the state continues to rely on support from Islamists, whose NGOs and seminaries operate with relatively little oversight, to selectively circumscribe dissent.

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The growth and spread of Islamist ideologies, spread via state and non-state actors, has limited the space for all forms of dissent, including around issues related to gender and sexuality.

We have argued that the restrictive secular/religious binary operative in Pakistan must be understood within the context of the state's historic instrumentalisation of Islam for its political purposes. Thus an explicitly secular, rights-based women's movement arose in reaction to the state's cultivation of Islamist social and political activism, including amongst some groups of women, in order to further its interests. While the binary framework has historical relevance for understanding the contestations over women's rights since the 1980s, its instrumental purpose may finally be coming to an end. This is made clear by the recent gender-based mobilisations that we highlight, each of which demand accountability and recognition from the state. The efforts of these groups cannot be understood within a simplistic binary framework, and hence cannot be dismissed as either a 'Western' import nor justified as 'faith-based'. These emerging mobilisations demonstrate that while older spaces of feminist activism may be shrinking, newer spaces are being forged. Hence, this is a moment that is filled with transformative potential and may mark a turning point in the history of gender justice activism in Pakistan. As feminist scholars and activists, we would be foolish not to take note.

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Notes

[1] This must be understood within the backdrop of the Cold War, with the Pakistani government acting as a bulwark against the Soviet Union in the region and strongly supported by the US, and the evolution of the Pakistani state, in which leaders have ceded increasing space to conservative forces for political gains.

[2] The Women's Protection Act (2006) took the teeth out of the Hudood Ordinances by placing rape within the jurisdiction of civil law and making it illegal for a woman to be convicted of adultery on the basis of her own complaint.

[3] A constitutional provision for a few reserved seats for women in parliament lapsed with the 1988 elections. Activists from WAF and some women's NGOs campaigned for their restoration and an increased (33 per cent) quota to include provincial assemblies and local government bodies. Between 2000-2002 the government introduced a 33 per cent quota for women in local bodies and 17 per cent in the assemblies and Senate.

[4] *Legislative Watch* newsletters, published by the activist-led NGO Aurat Foundation, have been a rich source of information and analysis on all laws affecting women since the 1990s.

[5] Activists also took part in the NGO delegation to the UN Conference on Population and Development in 1994.

[6] The NGO Applied Socio-Economic Research (ASR) led by Nighat Said Khan has ongoing links with women in trade unions and rural women. See: http://asr.asrresourcecentre.org/history-rationale).

[7] The Federal Shariat Court was established in 1980 to adjudicate on matters pertaining to Islamic law. The Council of Islamic Ideology, established in 1962, is a constitutional

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body comprised of religious scholars to advise legislators on whether given laws are in conformity with the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah.

[8] Formerly Lashkar-e-Taiba, this proscribed group is accused of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack, amongst others.

[9] Wahhabism, an austere and ultra-conservative form of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia, encourages the literal interpretation of the Quran.

[10] *Dars* refers to gatherings in which ideas about Islam are imparted through lectures and discussion.

[11] Nighat Khan (1994) problematises this binary, pointing out that even the so-called secular states of Europe and North America are intertwined with religion. She argues in Pakistan there is no clear division between those who argue for an Islamic state versus those who want a separation of religion and state; rather, there is a spectrum of beliefs with regards to the relationship between religion and the state. Farida Shaheed (2009) points to the impossibility of separating religion from other aspects of social and political life, cautioning against labelling groups as 'faith'-based which implies those not labelled as such have no relationship with religion.

[12] He temporarily suspended support for immunisation after alleged US use of a polio vaccinator in its successful hunt for Osama bin Laden, linking it with the cessation of drone strikes in the area (Crilly, 2012).

[13] Bureau Report, *Dawn*, 25 September 2014; 7 December 2013.

[14] Interview with author

[15] The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), population 5 million, are under indirect government rule and lie along the western border of KP. Literacy levels are only 13 per cent for females (Bureau of Statistics 2016, p. iv).

[16] In 2015 alone, 1,390 cases of enforced disappearances were pending with the government's commission of inquiry; there were at least 15 attacks on journalists and human rights defenders, and hundreds killed in faith-based attacks against religious minority communities and sectarian conflict (HRCP 2016, pp. 4-5, 95-97, 108). More recently, Mashal Khan, due to his Marxist and secular sympathies, was killed by fellow university students for alleged blasphemy (Khan, 2018).

[17] Society of Landless Peasants of Punjab.

[18] The high-level committee includes no women. A second, but similar, version of the Riwaj Act was proposed in 2017 but subsequently withdrawn by government in the face of severe criticism.

[19] Author interview with women members of Qabailee Khor, an offshoot of TQK. Also, see Naseer (2018).

[20] *KhwajaSiras* identify either as members of a third gender or as trans-women. Not all trans-women in Pakistan identify as *KhwajaSira.*

[21] In 2017, a transgender man was able to obtain an ID card and passport, which legally declared that he was male.

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We Sinful Women

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Kishwar Naheed (b. 1940) is one of Pakistan's leading poets, a feminist, and activist in the women's movement. Below is her well-known poem, translated from the original in Urdu.

It is we sinful women

who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns

who don't sell our lives

who don't bow our heads

who don't fold our hands together.

It is we sinful women

while those who sell the harvests of our bodies

become exalted

become distinguished

become the just princes of the material world.

It is we sinful women

who come out raising the banner of truth

up against barricades of lies on the highways

who find stories of persecution piled on each threshold

who find that tongues which could speak have been severed.

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It is we sinful women.

Now, even if the night gives chase

these eyes shall not be put out.

For the wall which has been razed

don't insist now on raising it again.

It is we sinful women

who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns

who don't sell our bodies

who don't bow our heads

who don't fold our hands together.

Available at: https://urduwallahs.wordpress.com/2016/09/03/we-sinful-women/

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Binary Framings, Islam and Struggle for Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate how binary framings of women's identity have influenced struggles for women's rights and the interpretations of the relationship between Islam and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. These binary framings position women at opposite ends by dividing them between 'Muslim/religious/moral/authentic/traditional' or 'Bengali/ secular/immoral/Westernised/ modern'. I trace the particular genealogies of these binary constructs which emerged during specific historical junctures and are influenced by the shifts in regional and international politics. Drawing on primary research with women in religious political parties and women's movement actors and newspaper reports, I provide an account of how binary framings have been used by the Islamist actors and the counter framings used by the feminists to make claims over the state. I show how these framings have influenced the politics of representation of gender equality concerns, and reflect on what this means for possibilities of women's empowerment and strategies for resistance.

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Introduction

On 5 May 2013, Hefazat E Islam, a loose Islamist platform, composed of a dozen or so Islamist organisations, based at 25,000 *madrasshas* (Sabir, 2013) and allegedly financed by Saudi Arabia (Banyan, 2017) organised a sit-in in downtown Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital. It was attended by more than 500,000 people from all over the country (Boussou, 2013). A month ago it had organised a similar sit-in and had promised to return if the state failed to act. Hefazat was demanding the enactment of a blasphemy law and exemplary punishment for the on-line activists who criticised the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and insulted Islam in their writings. Its thirteen point demand to the government also included: the abolishment of the National Women's Development Policy[1] and measures to prevent the 'infiltration of alien culture,' and 'a ban on immodesty, lewdness, misconduct and free mixing of men and women in public in the name of freedom of expression' (Sabur 2013).

These demands on limiting women's mobility, women's interactions in the public sphere, and control of women's dress and economic participation, are not unusual. The head of Hefazat, Moulana Shah Ahmed Shafi, described unveiled women as 'tamrind' (a popular sour fruit), implying that men have no control over themselves when they see an unveiled woman just as one has no control and starts to salivate at the site of tamrind (Dhaka Tribune, 2013). The show of strength by Hefazat, made actors working on women's rights question whether their positions and strategies were effective to protect the gains made so far and whether the state would backtrack and compromise on women's rights.

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Undeniably, the demands and framings used by Hefazat to mobilise support were anti-women. But they were based on an older narrative that placed Bangladeshi women in two camps - those who are 'religious/moral/good/traditional/authentic' and those who are 'secular/immoral/bad/modern/ Western'. These framings have a strong appeal and legitimacy among the wider public. The large numbers of Hefazat supporters brings home the fact that despite the rapid social development gains- attaining gender parity in girl's education, declining fertility rates and improved access to contraception, and improving financial and other services for women; a large number of Bangladeshis hold very complex and conflicted views on women's empowerment and rights (Jahan, 1995; Hossain, 2017).

In this article, I investigate how these binary framings of women's agency and identity influenced struggles over women's rights and the interpretation of the relationship between Islam and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. By examining particular episodes when these framings were deployed by religious political parties and religious scholars (*ulema*) and the counter framings developed by feminists, I trace the genealogies of these binary constructs and how these were influenced by the shifts in regional and international politics.

The examination of the genealogies of the binary framings and how they have influenced the struggle over women's empowerment in Bangladesh is important for several reasons. First, empirical research on Bangladesh questioning the binary framings and its implication on struggles for women's empowerment and over state accountability in light of the rise of Hefazat E Islam, are few. The existing scholarship on Islam, women's empowerment and Bangladesh has veered between development

research that identifies Islam as a barrier to modernity and women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1989; Rozario, 1992) or research on political Islam, identity politics and their impact on women's rights and NGO work (Hashemi,2000; Shehabuddin, 2008a). The findings presented here contribute to the scholarship on Bangladesh by extending the analysis of women's religious subjectivities (Huq, 2008; Huq 2010) beyond the individual domain to the realm of politics. A focus on gender and Islam in a non-Middle Eastern, democratic, Muslim majority country also contributes to the body of scholarship on Islam and gender studies, which generally privileges the Middle Eastern and North African countries, Iran, Turkey and to some extent Pakistan (Shehabuddin, 2008b).

Second, this article demonstrates the importance of taking the broader context into account when interpreting the mutually constitutive relationship between religion and women's empowerment. Scholars have long highlighted that women belonging to the Islamist movements are able to exert considerable agency. They also point out that women's engagement in Islamist movements can be read as a resistance against Western imperialism or as a failure of modernising projects of oppressive regimes (Mahmood, 2005). Bangladeshi scholars have used this understanding of women's religious subjectivity to explore women's agency, the multiplicity of women's subjective positions and self-actualisation through construction of the virtuous-self based on the good/moral/authentic/Muslim womanhood (Huq, 2008; White, 2010; Naher, 2010; Hussain, 2010; Huq, 2010). However the construction of this virtuous-self based on the good/moral/authentic/Muslim womanhood by the women in the organised religious groups have implications for the room available for 'bad/immoral/ Westernised' Muslim women or secular or non-Muslim women in Bangladesh in negotiating rights and empowerment with society at large and the state. The construction of

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group identities through Qu'ran reading classes and engagement with religious political parties, have implications beyond individual change. How is this group identity deployed by the women and also used by other actors to attain political goals?

In the next section I discuss my positionality and methods used to collect data. I provide a brief overview of how religion and politics are intertwined in Bangladesh and the major developments in Bangladesh politics in the next section. I also discuss the specific historical junctures when these binary framings emerged. A brief analysis of the main trends in scholarship on women's empowerment and religion in Bangladesh in the third section reveals how the relationship between women and Islam is interpreted and unpacked by scholars producing knowledge on women's empowerment. Some of this analysis uses these binary framings. Based on my interviews and secondary data, I provide an analysis of some of the key episodes during the last and present decades where these binary framings were used by the Islamists against the women's rights activists to delegitimise their claims. I also explore the counter framings used by the feminists to advocate for women's rights. In the last section I discuss the implications of these binary framings for women's empowerment and state accountability.

Positionality and methodology

The primary research used in this paper was conducted for a large research programme consortium –the Pathways of Women's Empowerment funded by UK Aid through the Department of International Development. The data is drawn from three research projects conducted between 2008-2011. The data collected from these projects were supplemented by newspaper

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scans and web materials collected during 2013-14 when Hefazat had placed its thirteen point demand. This supplementary data allows me to comment on how binary framings were being deployed by Islamist groups and the women's movement during episodes of contention at different points of time. It is not possible ascertain whether the response collected on how different actors viewed these contentious episodes would have been the same if data were collected in 2018. However, the secondary sources consulted for this article shows that the positions of these different groups have largely remained unchanged or hardened over time.

The three research projects mentioned above include: one on women's movement actors and their constituency building strategies; another on women in religious political parties; and the last one on the conceptualisation of women's empowerment by different actors in Bangladesh. The research with women's rights activists focused on three national level organisations mobilising around specific gender equity issues. The members of these groups interviewed were professional middle-class women. The methods included semi structured interviews with twenty key informants, secondary document analysis and validation workshops with all three organisations.[2] The research on women in religious political groups focused on how urban-based middle to lower middle class women perceived specific policy changes. The methods included: newspaper scans of five dailies with different political leanings on selected policy debates, statements made by religious political parties on these policies, analysis of party manifestoes and publications on women's rights, twenty life histories with selected women leaders, ten interviews with male leaders, and four group discussions with women's associations linked to these parties and Qu'ran reading groups. The research on the conceptualisation of women's empowerment used secondary document analysis and archival research.

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My own and the research team's positionality influenced the access to the three women's rights organisations and also the religious political parties and Qu'ran reading groups for women. Gaining access to women's rights groups as a feminist academic was relatively easier as the members of these groups were familiar with my work and that of fellow colleagues. Access to the religious political parties and Qu'ran reading groups proved to be a challenge. We used the informal networks our team members had built through their previous work to approach the interviewees. Pre-existing informal relations allayed the resistance that we may have faced as researchers working on women's rights. While the existing informal connections were useful for initial contact, we, then, had to formally approach the female interviewees through the male leaders we interviewed. This was a necessary step as the female members of the religious political parties wanted to ensure that they had permission from the party hierarchy.

My position as a feminist academic, who was based in and has deep connections to Bangladesh, influenced my interpretations. I hold specific views on the policy cases discussed here. I had to challenge myself to reflect on how my own views might limit my understanding of the positions taken by the women belonging to the religious political parties and Qu'ran reading groups. I am a political economist by training. I largely focus on the role played by religious political forces in formal politics. The political economy analysis was useful for moving beyond the focus on women's subjectivities and for unpacking how ruling elites maintain power through balancing various group interests, including interests promoted by women's rights actors. It also helped to explore how shifts in the power – organisational, ideational and material, held by different groups (including

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women's movement actors and the Islamist groups) influences the actions taken by the political elite.

Islam and Politics in Bangladesh: Genealogies of Binary Framings

Tracing the genealogies of these binary framings that divide Bangladeshi women in two camps requires an exploration of the unresolved question around Bengali Muslim identity. Bangladeshis are ethno-linguistically Bengali. About 1.3 per cent of the population are non-Bengali and about 12 percent are non-Muslim (BBS, 2010). Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. The two units of Pakistan were created by dividing the subcontinent into India and Pakistan; the latter was created out of the Muslim-majority provinces. Pakistan proved to be a short lived project as the division of resources between the two units became increasingly lopsided (Sobhan, 2015; Jahan, 1972). The attempts to 'purify' the Bengali language (i.e. Bengali written in Urdu script, a ban on works of the Nobel Laureate poet Tagore) and culture (ban on Tagore songs or critiquing saris as immodest covering) into a more Islamic form by the West Pakistani government antagonised the Bengalis against the use of Islam to justify dominance (Azim, 2017).

Bengali cultural/linguistic identity and secularism gained prominence in the mobilisation against West Pakistan's rule. The refusal to hand over power by the West Pakistani political elite after the Bengalis won a resounding majority in the national parliamentary elections in 1970 and the army crackdown in 1971 meant inevitable separation of the two units. Given that a common religious identity had failed to deliver on development and national unity, and that the Bengalis had mobilised around a cultural-linguistic identity and secularism, meant that after

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independence Bangladeshis had a difficult time reconciling both identities in the political sphere. These identities were pitted against each other by the political parties over the years to gain political legitimacy and support (Yasmin, 2016).

(Women protesting during language movement, University of Dhaka, February 1953. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1971_Bangladesh_genocide#/media/File:21_Feb_1953_Dhaka_University_female_students_procession.png)

Gender has a central role in interpreting the relations that exists between the state and society in Bangladesh. The 'woman question' divided the Bengal Muslims into two camps. The traditionalists drew on the revivalist traditions from the Middle East and wanted to preserve orthodox notions of Islam. The modernists advocated reform which included education for women, relaxation of extreme *purdah* norms and women's participation in public life *à la* Turkey (Jahan, 1995). These positionings constructed a dichotomy between Islam and the modern during the colonial era. The dichotomy came to the forefront during the nationalist struggle for independence. Women became the markers and bearers of Bengali culture. Visions of modern and secular Bangladesh included specific visions

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about women's position and status that was distinctively different from the traditional notions espoused by the religious quarters (Azim, 2017).

Bangladeshi politics is dominated by two major centrist political parties. The Awami League, a centre-left party, led the nationalist struggle. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a centre-right party, was founded by General Ziaur Rahman, after he took over power in the mid-1970s. Both of these parties led the struggle for democracy in the 1980s against General Ershad (1982-1990). The political Left has a very weak presence in Bangladeshi politics (Hassan, 2013). The religious political parties have steadily gained ground in the public sphere since the creation of the state. Electorally the largest Islamist party, Jamat I Islami, has secured between four to eight percent of votes in national elections since 1991, and has been in the coalition government through tacit or overt alliances with the AL or the BNP since 1991 (Siddiqui, 2006; Hassan and Nazneen, 2017). This significantly raised the Islamic bloc's power (Siddiqui, 2006;).

The Constitution formulated in 1972 included secularism as a key principle but this was removed by Ziaur Rahman and replaced with 'faith in the almighty Allah'. In 1977, Ziaur Rahman also allowed for religious political parties to function. These changes were made to consolidate Bangladesh's identity as a Muslim majority country and to strengthen ties with the Middle East. The religious political parties were banned by the AL given Jamaat and other groups had supported the Pakistani army during the liberation war in 1971 (Riaz, 2014). General Ershad further blurred the boundaries between the state and religion, when he pushed for the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, which declared Islam as the state religion in 1988 (White, 2010). Secularism was included as a principle again in the Constitution after a Supreme Court verdict led to another amendment of

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the Constitution. However the Eighth Amendment was not removed from the Constitution[3] (Yasmin, 2016).These shifts indicate the increasing dilution of secularism and the rise of religion in politics.

While secular nationalism was useful in defeating the two nation theory and in separating from Pakistan, once this aim was achieved, the appeal of secularism waned among the wider public, especially the middle class. Religious nationalism had served the Bengali-Muslim elite and the nascent middle class well in countering the dominance of the Bengali-Hindu elite and to push for the division of India in 1947. In fact, religious nationalism has steadily gained space since the 1990s, which has led to increased questioning of placing Bengali identity along with the secular, and a re-examination of how religion can be accommodated with the cultural identity in public discourse.

The rise of religious nationalism and the dilution of the secular have meant that the state and the political parties hold contradictory positions when it comes to religion. This contradictory position is not entirely new. Women's rights have featured prominently in these negotiations between the ruling regimes and their religious political allies. The religious parties and the *ulema* have significant veto power in areas that pertain to the cultural, which includes women's position in the family and in the public sphere (Nazneen and Masud, 2017). This veto power comes from the legitimacy these actors have over determining the boundaries of what is religiously permissible. The mainstream political parties have to balance between their position as 'modernisers' which means engaging women in the economy and visibilising women, while also ensuring that their electoral legitimacy is not eroded by being portrayed as anti-Islamic. This need to balance has deepened as more and more Bangladeshis migrated to the

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Middle East (primarily to Saudi Arabia) and were exposed to the cultural practices and brought these conservative practices based on *Wahabi* Islam back to Bangladesh (Kabeer, 1991; Harrison, 2015).

Aid dependency during the decades of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s meant that the Bangladeshi state pursued a women's development agenda to secure funds and gain international legitimacy. In the last two decades aid dependency has significantly reduced (only 2 percent of the annual budget), but the development and NGO sector work remains donor driven (Hossain, 2017). Foreign funding has shaped the gender and development agenda in Bangladesh as issues that gained prominence in international development were prioritised to secure funding. The decades also witnessed the growth of a large foreign-funded NGOs sector that targeted rural poor women in their programmes on microcredit, health, education, and legal aid (Hossain, 2017). The growth of the NGO sector created scope for women's rights actors to engage in designing development programmes and create allies for promoting women's rights (Nazneen and Sultan, 2014). But this engagement came at a price as the availability of international funding influenced the women's rights agenda and the autonomous nature of the movement was questioned by the wider public (Chowdhury, 2009). Women's movement actors have struggled to retain their legitimacy as representatives of women's interests. They have packaged their demands in a manner so that they would not be branded as 'inauthentic/Western/elite' (Nazneen and Sultan, 2014).

At present, Bangladesh is at a critical juncture where changes to the social and cultural fabric is taking place at a fast pace. Recent years have seen a rise in the number of organisations funded by Middle Eastern countries providing services to the rural and urban poor. Significant funds have been

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invested to establish hospitals and Islamic schools (both *madrassh* and English medium schools).[4] There is also an increase in veiling and public practice of Islamic rituals (*namaz*) among the wider public (White, 2010). This shift in the public presence of Islam is accompanied by the growth of the new middle class and a moneyed elite class whose position on religion's presence in public life is different from the old cultural elite, who played an active part is emphasising Bengali nationalism and viewed religion as belonging to the private domain (Yasmin, 2016). Several factors have influenced the middle class to push for a more overt presence of religion in public life. These include: the rise of religious nationalism since the 1990s; the need to reassert a Muslim identity given global and regional push-back against Islam in the last decades; and the change in access to communications technology and the rise of popular TV and other types of virtual platforms that promote a more austere and pure form of Islam.

After 9/11 Bangladesh also witnessed the presence of home-grown extremist groups such as the banned Jamat-Ul-Mujaheedin (JMB) that carried out a series of bombings in 2005 (Griffiths and Hasan, 2015). Bangladesh also witnessed an increased presence of globally connected networks such as Hurkatul Jihad-I-Islmai Bangladesh (HUJI-B), and other groups such as Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), Ahle Hadith Andolon (AHAB). These groups reject the secular/liberal laws and systems of governance and demand an establishment of Shari'a law and systems in Bangladesh. They have carried out attacks against state officials, scholars and on-line activists (Griffiths and Hasan, 2015). While links these extremist groups may have with the local Islamist political parties or with Islamist civil society organisations is debatable, their sporadic activities have created a sense of vulnerability among the liberal scholars, activists and civil society organisations. The latest in the strings of attack was carried out by an extremist group which claimed a link to Islamic State (IS).

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The attack on the Holey Bakery in 2016, a popular cafe in Dhaka, drew international attention given all foreign hostages were killed by the extremists (BBC, 2016).

The state is currently cracking down on these networks. Needless to say, the rise of anti-Muslim views in the West and in neighbouring India has created a sense of marginalisation and powerlessness among the Muslim population. The state is under pressure to demonstrate that it has a clear position regarding Islam in public life. The waning power of the Western donors as Bangladesh becomes less aid dependent means that donors have limited influence over the political elite. These shifts in regional and international politics have created a complex situation.

Gender Binaries and Scholarship on Women's Empowerment and Religion

'Does religion empower women?', is a vexing question that the scholars researching women's empowerment in Bangladesh have had to grapple with. There are four overlapping bodies of scholarship on religion and women's empowerment (White, 2010). These bodies of work illustrate the way binary framings have influenced interpretations on women's empowerment in Bangladesh and the attempts to move away from these easy binaries by the feminist scholars.

The development literature on women's empowerment from the 1970s to the mid-1990s discuss religion mainly in relation to *purdah* (Women for Women, 1975), women's rights contained in religious texts and its influence on existing law (Sobhan, 1980), and ethnographic studies that

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explore local religious norms (Hartmann and Boyce, 1983; Rozario, 1992). The focus of these studies is on the modernisation of women through economic, social and political participation (White, 2010). These studies position religion as traditional/backward that constrains women against the modern.

The second strand includes political studies conducted during this period that focus on Islamisation of the state and its negative impact on women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1991; Jahan, 1995). These studies point out that the state has a contradictory position when it comes to women and Islam. Reliance on aid meant that the state had taken an instrumental position and promoted women's inclusion in the economy and the public sphere. However the need for political legitimacy led the political parties to take measures to bring back organised Islam into politics, allowing Islamist groups to function within public universities and Islamist newspapers and media to flourish (Karim, 2004).

The third strand of scholarship which began largely in the mid-1990s explored the politics of religion in the society. These studies focussed particularly on the attacks on NGOs by the Islamist groups and *fatwas* in rural areas against women (Hashemi, 2000; Naher, 2010). Studies also analysed discourses around the *fatwa* on Taslima Nasrin, a writer, for promoting minority and women's rights and critiquing Islam (Hashemi, 1995). These studies explored how the 'politics of representation surrounding gender, modernity and Islam' (White 2010, p. 338) is repeatedly acted out in the personal, family and community life and in programmes and policies pursued by NGOs, development agencies and the state at local, national, global levels. Religion in these analyses by Bangladeshi and international scholars is seen as an antithesis to women's

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empowerment and religious groups are associated with 'traditional/backward/moral/authentic' vis a vis women in development programmes who are identified with the secular/modern/progressive.

Recent feminist studies have questioned these easy binaries and explored how 'women are caught between...contradictory movements at the local/global levels' (White 2010, p. 338), and how women negotiate or exercise agency by subverting, resisting or using religious framings (Shehabuddin, 2008b; Huq, 2008; Huq, 2010). The emphasis on the latter two studies is to show that women's agency within religious structures and participation in religious groups do not necessarily translate into extremist activities. This interpretation is influenced by the analysis forwarded by Mahmood (2005). These studies are also a reaction to correct the simplistic interpretations that exist in the scholarship on Islam in the West that equates religiosity with extremism. The work produced by the Bangladeshi scholars should not be categorised under another strand of work prevalent in the West that valorises all forms of Islam and equates any criticism of the religion as Islamophobic. However work produced by Bangladeshi scholars does not undertake an analysis of the political implications of the creation of these apolitical organised groups. Furthermore the broader questions on what the creation of these seemingly apolitical but organised group identities based on religion mean for other women who do not belong to these groups and women's empowerment, remain largely unexplored.

Contentious Episodes and Strengthening of Binary Framings

In this section, I examine selected episodes of contentions between the Islamist groups and women's movement actors to reveal how binary

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framings have influenced debates over women's agency, identity and empowerment in the recent decades. I focus on the movement against Islam being declared as the state religion, the anti-fatwa movement and the mobilisation around the National Women's Development Policy, 1997 (amended 2004; 2011) as cases to illustrate how binary framings influence struggles over women's empowerment.

In the debates over women's rights and empowerment in the 1980s and 1990s, women were 'set up as key bearers of symbolic opposition between the mullahs who were retrogressive and women as advocates of modernity' (White 2010, p. 338) by those working in development. While this interpretation placed women and religious political parties and the local religious authorities in contention with each other, an analysis of the positions held by the latter groups show that this interpretation does hold merit. While modernity need not be conceptualised as 'liberal and Western,' the predominant understanding of modernity at that time in Bangladesh was influenced by this notion. The opposition to women's empowerment and rights agenda came from rural patriarchy aided by local *mollahs* who wielded limited power. Women's rights activists were willing to engage with this group to gain support for development interventions, even though the feminists were aware that they were stereotyped by the rural mullahs as 'immoral/Westernised/secular/inauthentic'.

One of the women's rights activists I interviewed said:

[W]e had to engage to get them on board... to ensure marriages were registered and women could come to the meetings... To them we were short haired, Westernised/elite women, but we came from urban areas

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and from a different class and we talked about the state law (they feared the state then) - which helped. (Feminist lawyer 1, March 2009)

However, 1988 proved to be a turning point for women's rights activists as they decided to publicly protest and file a case against the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution which declared Islam as the state religion (Azim, 2017). General Ershad pushed this through to secure political legitimacy. Various civil society groups protested the blurring of boundaries between religion and the state and the risk it posed for the religious minorities. The women's movement actors were unequivocal that this change violated the spirit of the Liberation War (*ekatur-erchetona / arodsho)* and that religion should remain in the private sphere. The iconic slogan *jar jardhormo tar tarkache, raste-r tatekibolar ache* (religion is a private matter what does the state have to do with it) was used to mobilise in the streets of Dhaka. Women's organisations led these public protests.

This specific interpretation of secularism in the European sense went beyond the established interpretation that secularism means *dhormoniropekhota* or 'equal rights to all religion and freedom of religion'. It is this interpretation that is currently espoused by the general public in Bangladesh. Women's movement's stance in this matter has created a distance between them and the general public. Women's rights groups' position on the Eighth Amendment is criticised by the Islamist groups and political parties using binary framings. These critiques framed women's rights activists as Westernised urban elites who are 'immodest/immoral' (interview, Islami Okiyo, Jot leader 1, February 2011), and who do not represent the views of Bangladeshi women on the role of Islam in public life. The religious leaders, during the 1980s, argued that women's rights activists were 'possessors of dangerous visions that would turn Bangladesh

into Turkey' (i.e. a secular republic), and that this vision undermined Bangladesh's identity as a Muslim majority country.

Expansion of development activities during the 1980s and 1990s by the women's rights organisations and NGOs specifically targeting rural women also rattled the religious groups.[5] The religious groups attempted to undermine the development work undertaken by the NGOs and women's organisations by questioning whether these groups were the 'real representatives' of rural women's interests and concerns. The religious quarter presented a narrow role for women in the society –that of the mother and the dependent wife and discouraged women's engagement in the productive economy. The religious leaders attempted to delegitimise development work by branding women's rights activists and NGOs as 'agents of capitalism/imperialism'. They pointed out that NGOs engage rural women in exploitative relations of production through credit programmes. They stressed that women's movement's support for expansions of these development programmes disempower rural women (interview, Khelafat Majlis leader 2, March 2011).

The 1990s saw a transition to democracy after the fall of General Ershad. Women's movement actors' significant role in the anti-authoritarian movement along with international events such as the Beijing Conference opened up policy spaces for the women's movement actors. Throughout the 1990s, Islamist groups and women's rights groups came to loggerheads several times over different issues. One of them was the Taslima Nasrin affair. A fatwa was issued against Nasrin for critiquing the Qu'ran in her book. The women's movement groups came out in support of Nasrin arguing for freedom of expression and denouncing the misuse of fatwa. But they were sharply divided among themselves as many felt Nasrin's

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comments were insensitive and had damaged the gains made by the movement (Hashemi, 1995). The Islamist political parties and the *ulema* grabbed this opportunity to portray women's rights groups as Westernised elites whose position on personal freedom and secularism undermined Islam (Hashemi, 2000).[6]

It was during this period that the use of *fatwa* against rural women for violating sexual/social/religious norms (i.e. pre-marital sex, extra-marital relations, violation of *purdah* norms) by local imams and *mollahs* gained attention. Women's movement actors intervened in specific cases, filed complaints, and mediated at the local level on behalf of the victimised women. Women's groups at the national level, particularly feminist lawyer groups, were able to intervene because of their members' class positions and networks. They also demanded legal change and argued that it was a modern state's obligation to protect its female citizens (interview, feminist lawyer 1, March 2009).

In 2001 the High Court issued a *suomoto* rule that *fatwa* could not be issued by *mullahs.* This ban became a rallying point for the *ulema* and religious political parties[7] to mobilise against state's encroachment on the rights of the *ulema*. It was interpreted as an effort to secularise and undermine Islam (Interview, IOJ leader 1, March 2011). Interviews with male political leaders of Khelafat Majlis and Jamaat I Islami revealed that the former opposed the ruling on the ground that Bangladesh was not a secular 'Western' state and the latter felt there was no democratic dialogue and that a blanket ban did not meet the needs for religious guidance by the people (interviews, Khelafat Majlis leader 1, March 2011; Jamat I Islami leader 2, January 2011). They argued that women's rights and entitlements were clearly defined in the Qu'ran, and implementation

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of the provisions made in the Shari'a would ensure justice for women. They also argued that the Western notion of equal rights failed to protect women from violence and complementarity of gender roles ensured better protection of women.

The women's association with close links to Jamat I Islami held similar views (group discussion, *Nari Odhikar Andolan*[8], March 2011). While these women largely endorsed the views of the parent political party when it came to the need for democratic dialogue and the complementarity of gender roles ensuring women's rights, there were some divergences. When questioned about the use of *fatwa* against rural women and the work done by women's rights activists they were ambivalent. They were unable to deny the misuse of *fatwa* but argued that the members of women's rights groups were 'not schooled in *fiqh* and had limited engagement at the grassroots level'. The group pointed out that women's rights activists had limited understanding of the value of *fatwa*s in the lives of people in need of guidance (group discussion, *Nari Odhikar Andolon*, March 2011).

The ban on *fatwa* was later taken up by Hefazat E Islam to rally support. Appeals were filed in the Supreme Court by two religious scholars, which led to the partial revoking of the ban. Undeniably, the actions by Jamaat I Islami and *ulema* and the position espoused by the women's groups associated with Jamaat, meant curtailing freedom of expression, and in the case of the partial revoking of the ban on fatwa, adversely affecting the rule of law and women's status.

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The discussion above demonstrates how binary framings were used by the religious political parties and the *ulema* to delegitimise women's rights work and the women's rights advocates. It also shows how women rights actors attempted to counter these by using the language of rights, state obligation, and by alluding to the spirit of the Liberation War. But the limits of these counter-framings and the appeal of the binary framings become clear when we turn our attention to the National Women's Development Policy (NWDP).

The NWDP was formulated in 1997 by the state to meet its international obligation imposed on UN member states by the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA). The Bangladeshi state also wanted to enhance its gender friendly reputation. The 1997 policy contained visions and actions points for all critical areas identified under the PFA (Shahid, 2017). The policy was later used by the women's movement actors to exhort the government to take action in specific areas by reminding the state to meet its national and international commitment (interview, women's rights activist 3, June 2008).

However, it was alleged by the Islamist groups that NWDP contained a clause that demanded equal property rights for women (interview, Jamat I Islami leader 2, March 2011; Islami Oikyo Jot leader 1, March 2011). In reality the policy contained no such clause. In 2008, protests were organised by Islami Okiyo Jot (IOJ), arguing that the policy was against Qu'ran and Shari'a (Shahid, 2017). The women's rights groups also formed an alliance composed of 40 women's groups which protested the government's decision to form a review committee that included Islamic clerics. They argued that the *ulema* were against the spirit of the Liberation War and trying to promote fundamentalist politics (The Daily Star, 2008).

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In interviews with male Jamat I Islami and IOJ leaders it became clear that apart from the issue of equal inheritance, the bone of contention was that the policy states that the state will fully implement the CEDAW. Article 2 of the CEDAW requires the state to reform all gender discriminatory laws which would mean changes in religious personal laws that govern marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody (interview IOJ leader 2, March 2010).

The women's association closely linked to Jamaat did not diverge radically from the position held by the parent political party. They felt that the policy did not fall within the Islamic framework and needed to be revised. When probed about the question of inheritance, particularly property being important for poor women in rural areas, they argued that complementarity of gender roles meant that women can depend on male members of the family. They also argued that men should inherit the larger share as they are providers (group discussion, *Nari Odhikar Andolon*, March 2011). Interestingly, none of the members had read the policy.

Their views on the position taken by the women's rights groups was similar to that held by the male party leaders, that the women's movement was misdirected as these actors demanded equal rights based on the Western conceptualisation of rights. They argued that women's movement actors failed to understand that men inherited a larger portion as they had responsibilities from which women were exempted. They pointed out that the Islamic position of daughters inheriting half of what the sons receive was fair given that the majority of women in the Bangladesh did not bear responsibilities of their parents and extended families. This position held

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by the male political leaders of Jamaat and the women's group associated with the party, of course, did not take into account that female headed households may be bereft of male guardianship or that in many cases male members are unwilling to meet their duties as providers.

The debates over the policy created a stir within the female Qu'ran reading groups, which are apolitical but many members have connections with Jamaat E Islami and other Islamist political parties. Interviews with women from one such group (all were professional women) revealed that they viewed family law reform as unnecessary which was similar to the views held by these parties. They also argued that the international conventions (CEDAW) were framed by Western countries, and these conventions are designed to undermine Islam and promote Western values. They felt that the UN and other organisations were not legitimate as these organisations were biased towards powerful Western countries. These arguments were also put forward by the male political leaders of Jamaat I Islami and other political parties.

When probed about whether women in the Qu'ran reading groups would be active in opposing the policy, they pointed out that they had discussed the policy at the community level meetings and have made public statements wherever possible. Whether they would come out onto the streets would depend on the leaders of the religious political parties. The women also argued that the women's rights groups should not claim they represent Bangladeshi women's interests, as these groups were not 'rooted in the real culture and beliefs of the country' (group discussion, Qu'ran reading group 3, March 2011).

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Even though the caretaker government had withdrawn the draft NWDP in 2008, it became a rallying point for garnering support for a range of Islamist actors and religious political parties. In 2011, a new draft policy was introduced by the AL which called for equal access for women to credit, land, and labour markets but it did not make any mention of legal changes to ensure equality of marriage, inheritance, divorce or custody in line with the CEDAW (Shahid, 2017).A series of national protests were led by the IOJ against the policy. The religious political parties also changed tack. They formed Hefazat E Islam, an Islamist civil society alliance, to counter the alliance created by the women's rights activists. Hefazat was not explicitly linked to any political party but drew widespread support of the *ulema* and the general public (The New York Times, 4 April 2011).

The *ulema* portrayed the protest against the policy as a responsibility of *all* Muslims. They argued that the democratic principles required a dialogue on any policy and that they had the support of the majority (interview, IOJ leader 1, March 2011). Emphasising that women's needs were met in a just and fair way under the Shari'a*,* they argued that the government was a puppet in the hands of secularists/Western elite (interview, KhelafatMajlis leader 1, 2011). The Westernised/elite/liberals, including the women's groups, were branded by the *ulema* as 'Kolkata Haji,' meaning who had performed the *haj* in India and took their instructions from 'Hindu' India-- the 'other' in Hefazat's imagination. The reference to India was to undermine the demands made by the liberal/secular quarters.

The women's movement also organised protests to counter these allegations (Haq, 2011), again emphasising the spirit of 1971 and obligations of a modern state towards its female citizens. In their framings, women's movement actors argued that unless Hefazat was contained,

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Bangladesh's situation would be similar to that of Pakistan. However it was palpably clear that in street politics, women's movement activists were at a disadvantage, given their smaller numbers. As Hefazat had overtly disassociated itself from Jamat I Islami, it meant that the exhortations by the women's movement about the spirit of 1971 as a counter mobilisation strategy worked less well. This is because Jamat was culpable of the war crimes in 1971 and not the *ulema.* Also there was a disjuncture between the women's movement and how the large majority of the rural population and the new middle class perceived the role of religion and women's empowerment. These groups believed in women's right to work, healthcare, and education but they did not want to challenge the religious personal laws that governed private lives and also the core patriarchal structures.

In the end the policy itself was passed by the Cabinet. However NWDP came to symbolise the rise of the religious right wing in the shape of Hefazat E Islam, a deepening of the rift between religious and secular in the society, and with women's movement actors losing clout (Nazneen and Masud, 2017). The AL which passed the policy later backtracked on its implementation. Ministers made public statements about taking into account the particular context in Bangladesh which was not amenable to all the provisions made in the CEDAW (Shahid, 2017).The abolishment of the policy was later included in Hefazat's thirteen point demand that was discussed at the beginning of this article.

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(8 March rally organised by Jatiyo Nari Shramik Trade Union Kendra (National Women Workers Trade Union Centre). Photo: Soman. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:8marchrallydhaka_(55).JPG)

Conclusion

In this article I explored how binary framings were used by the Islamists and countered by the feminists to make claims over the state. These binary framings positioned Bangladeshi women at opposite ends of the spectrum by dividing them between 'Muslim/religious/moral/authentic/ traditional'

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or 'Bengali/secular/immoral/Westernised/modern' and erased the complex position religion has in the lives of Bangladeshi women. So what does the Bangladesh case tell us? The analyses of the genealogies of the binary framings and the contentious episodes when these framings were deployed reveal the following points.

These binary framings are used by religious political parties and the *ulema* to delegitimise the claims made by women's movement activists. By emphasising that women's groups espouse a Westernised vision of modernity, they question the authenticity and representative nature and the legitimacy of the changes proposed by women's rights groups. The analyses of the various contentious episodes also reveal that the binary framings have adverse implications for women's empowerment and state's accountability towards women. In the cases of the ban on *fatwas* and the NWDP, the state had backtracked and watered downed largely positive measures taken to advance women's rights. In both cases, state's accountability *for* promoting gender equity and the ability to protect the interests of female citizens have been significantly diminished.

The Bangladesh case also reveals the disconnect that exists between the individual women's experience of religious subjectivities as empowering and their expression of collective agency that may have an adverse impact on women's rights. Undeniably, women who are members of the religious political groups and Qu'ran reading groups are empowered through their engagement with religion. However, they also hold specific visions of what women's position in society is and what the state should or should not do in terms of policy and legal reforms. Their support for the visions that limit women's role in the public sphere exists as a counter-narrative to the visions espoused by the women's movement actors. The religious women's

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group's willingness to engage with the public on policy reform matters also raises questions about whether they could be mobilised by political parties for causes that are distinctively anti-women. Admittedly, the women in religious groups covered in this paper do not subscribe to the extreme views held by some of the Islamists groups. However, the possibility of women in religious groups mobilising for causes that are distinctively anti-women, raises the need to explore the broader implication of individual women's religious subjectivity and its link to collective agency not only in Bangladesh but other Muslim majority contexts.

Academic research on religion and women's empowerment in Bangladesh have explored how positionality of both of the researcher and the participants influenced interpretations. However the location or context within which religion is empowering to women should be given equal weight as positionality to understand how the boundaries are set for women who do not fit the category of Muslim/religious/moral/authentic women in Bangladesh (and also in similar contexts). The construction of the binaries which promote 'virtuous womanhood' based on religion in a Muslim majority location bears political risk for feminists and their work.

In electoral politics, while religious parties may not secure a large percentage of the votes in Bangladesh, taking a pro-gender equity stance rarely generates popular electoral support. In addition, women do not vote as a bloc on these issues. Women's rights activists have a lot less to offer to the ruling elites in terms of patronage or numerical support. The popular appeal of Islam and the fear of being branded anti-Islamic allow religious groups to have veto power in matters related to women's rights that challenge deep-seated cultural and religious norms. While strategies for countering binary framings by appealing to the nationalist vision, the spirit

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of 1971 and international obligations of the state have been effective in the politics of representing women's empowerment, these framings have their limits, as we saw in the way state had backtracked. In fact, in recent years the AL has shifted its position and now has close relations with Hefazat E Islam to counter the rise of extremist groups linked to global terrorist networks in Bangladesh. The AL is vulnerable to pressure from religious quarters given its legitimacy has been questioned after the 2014 elections, which was boycotted by major opposition parties.

One of the ways that women's movement actors have been able to remain relevant is by weaving their demands with the reputation the AL has built around being a government that delivers social development. Women's empowerment is a major part of this narrative of development success (Hossain, 2017). But is this a sustainable strategy to engage with the state?

The re-introduction of religious into the political space in the last decades nationally, regionally and globally coupled with Bangladesh's own historical experience with religious nationalism may mean that the space to raise doctrinal issues may shrink further and the strategies that were effective in the past to engage state actors may not work. The framings that are used such as universal rights and the types of actors who may support women's movement will change.

In fact, the women's movement faces significant challenges at present which means very difficult trade-offs. The rise of social media, which is extensively used by the new wave of Islamist groups, means that women's movement actors have to fight battles not just in the streets but also in the digital space, where they lack skills. The waning of donor power in

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Bangladesh means that the avenue that women's movement actors have generally used to place pressure on the state to promote women's empowerment (albeit sometimes a narrow donor vision) is limited. And the rise of extreme right ideology worldwide that vilifies Muslims, both in the Western world but also in neighbouring India, coupled with the rise of political Islam inside Bangladesh and in other Muslim majority contexts, including extreme right thinking in Saudi Arabia and Iran that interpret gender roles based on a crude reading of the Qu'ran, may mean that binary framings will be rife and the space for promoting the women's empowerment agenda that aligns with a liberal vision may be shrinking.

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Notes

[1]Hefazat alleged that it contained a clause on equal inheritance, although it does not. See Shahid (2017).

[2]See Nazneen and Sultan (2014) for details of this project.

[3] It should be noted that the civil and penal codes in Bangladesh do not follow the Shari'a, except for matters related to personal law for Muslims.

[4]See Asadullah and Chaudhury (2007) or Harrison (2015) for details on madrassah education; see Hussain (2010) for details on Hibut Tahrir and establishment of English medium schools.

[5] The practices of the NGO sector in 'delivering development' are open to question and many of these practices are exploitative (Karim, 2004).

[6] Nasrin later fled the country and lives in exile.

[7] Religious edict- this ban was later curtailed by the Supreme Court in 2011.

[8] Formed in 1989, registered with the NGO bureau.

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Excerpts from the writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1832) was a feminist author and educator who remains an inspiration to all Bengali Muslim feminists. Below is an excerpt from her utopian novel Sultana's Dream (1905), which depicts a society in which women rule. Sultana, an Indian Muslim woman, visits the utopian land called Naristan and converses with a woman called Sara who cannot understand the patriarchy she comes from.

Sara: Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?'

Sultana: 'Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.'

Sara: A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.

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Hossain also reinterpreted the role of Eve in the creation story believed by Muslims. Below is an excerpt from 'The Fruit of Knowledge', in Rokeya Rachanasamgraha, [Miratun Nahar ed. 2001, Calcutta: Viswakosh Parishad] 175–182.

Eve requested him to eat the fruit which was in her hands. Adam too awoke to knowledge on eating the rest of the fruit from his wife. Then he began to feel his own deprived condition in every layer of his heart. – Was this paradise? This loveless, workless, lazy life – was this the pleasure of paradise? He also realised that he was a political prisoner…

Now the happy dream of heavenly pleasure, which was in fact ignorance, was shattered – he clearly felt the wakeful condition of knowledge

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Voices of Dissent

Azza Karam on the implications of binary framings for western actors

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Plus Ca Change…? Reflections from a Policy Scape

"Religion must support gender equality and women's empowerment. The agenda of creating a planet 50-50, an equal world for men and women will not and cannot come true if religion, religious leaders and faith actors remain outside the conversation on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment."

The above words come from a speech, made by a senior UN official, in 2017, during an event at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. There are many interesting features of the above quote. The following is an attempt to unpack some of these, while narrating, and raising questions, based on the personal experiences and interactions of a policy practitioner cum scholar.

"Religion must support…"
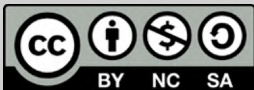
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But which religion? One should ask. Or is it that all religions of the world, to which over 80 percent of the world's peoples adhere, are essentialised into the one "religion"?

The presumption of "religion must…" is also striking. The wording presumes that "religion" can be ordered, used, or positioned to perform in a certain way.

Arguably, the statement can be seen as condescending to women's (so-called) 'empowerment' itself to describe the gamut of "religion, religious leaders and faith actors" – a broad swath by any stretch of the imagination – as remaining outside "*the* conversation on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment". For here, it would appear that there is but one such "conversation" taking place at any time anywhere in the world.

"…*the conversation on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment*…"

But what of the multiple struggles for women's basic rights and dignity in almost every single corner of the world – i.e. beyond the one conversation? And what becomes of the diversity of women's, and men's, and indeed other genders' myriad journeys towards what they may consider to be their own sense of dignity and self-worth? Indeed, what of the multiple face-offs which take place, within diverse religious institutions – let alone between different religious traditions – which involve women, and yet argue against what are considered 'givens' from western feminist perspectives? Put differently, what of the collusion between women and

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men inside the same religious tradition (be it Catholic, myriad forms of Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist) which stand by the fact that women's unique 'calling' is to serve as loyal wife and mother, and balk at any notion of "gender" let alone of "gender equality"?

Is it so black and white a matter that religion should just waltz into 'the conversation' on achieving gender equality? Are all the complexities of religions – institutions, manifestations, narratives, epistemologies, jurisprudence, histories, to note but a few, simply waiting to be invited to the conversation? Or perhaps they are all envisioned to be laboring under some minor misapprehensions, and now that the international community calls upon them, they will feel chagrined enough to 'see the truth'. Once this happens, the presumption goes, they shall join forces to work together for women's empowerment and gender equality.

The above features are to be further nuanced by two emerging myths among some western policy actors – including some feminists. One is that religious women's organisations working on/for/with women's issues somehow are all alike. The ability to distinguish between them is, at best, still to be learned. When these are positive perceptions, they tend to be informed largely by a few encounters with a small group of 'feminist theologians' – themselves based mostly in the western hemisphere. When the perceptions of religious women are less rose-tinted, they are influenced by the stereotypical understandings of religious women as 'fundamentalists'.

Another myth is that "religious women's organisations, or groups" somehow work differently than secular women's rights organisations. The perception is that "religious women" (another essentialised category)

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somehow, are more calm, less argumentative, and more likely to "make reasonable compromises with their religious leaders" – more so than their secular counterparts - ostensibly because their faith renders them magically more 'zen', or something to that effect. Needless to say, just as women differ, their organisations – religious or not – also differ. And widely so.

Apart from the worldview underlined by the speech, what is even more interesting was to observe how many of the so-called "religious actors"– men and women - reacted to the speech, and to similar discourses. But here I must qualify that the audience were largely divided between international civil servants, as well as women and men working with and within international faith-based development, humanitarian and advocacy NGOs (FBOs), and some (ordained) religious leaders.

I fully expected some sense of discomfort among the so-called 'faith-based' actors. Instead, there was a palpable sense of celebration among many. Upon enquiring about this immediately after the event was over, I was told that the religious leaders and FBOs present, were "very pleased that [the European and North American governments and the UN] representatives on the panel, were finally acknowledging how important it was to involve 'religion' in policy making …and gender equality".

"So you did not notice any condescension, essentialisation or even plain arrogance in the manner in which your own religious communities and the diversity of religions was portrayed"? I asked. Apparently not. Instead, some FBO members argued that this "marked a turning point, a response to the prayers, and decades of efforts, by FBOs to be recognized by secular policy makers".

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The above speech was written, and read out in public, by women who tend to work along a worldview which often risks essentialising the vast realms of 'religion' while also seeking to "use" religious actors to affirm specific strategies and ends. As noted by the lines of the speech above, far from appreciating that the realms of religion are complex, heterogenous and hard to categorise, this is the same mindset which, when requested to include the 'religious domains' into civil society, will ask for "one NGO that represents religion".

But does it not take two hands to clap? Some of the 'religious actors' who work with some of these western governments, and are pleased to be "recognized", are they not - either wittingly or unwittingly - part of the essentialisation and instrumentalization inherent in the emerging metanarrative of 'religion is good'?

Fast forward to 2 years later, when another UN official addresses a similar audience of FBOs, some of whom were in the room hearing the above speech. This time, the UN official is articulating a concern with the fact that some western governments appear to be instrumentalising FBOs for their respective national security concerns, rather than efforts towards realization of the human rights agendas. Indeed, the UN official warns that the scale up of certain government interests (not the UN/multilateral but specific governmental ones), in "working with" religious leaders on conflict and peace, is at once securitizing religious engagement, while also jeopardizing the women's rights agenda.

Why? Because by doing the due diligence of gathering religious leaders from different religions under one umbrella (ostensibly to mobilise them

for the sake of "global peace"), per definition, will mean seeking "common ground" between them. The fact is, however, that gender equality and women's empowerment, as defined clearly by the Sustainable Development Goals signed unto by 193 governments, are not common ground among diverse religious leaders. In fact, many aspects of gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly around the realm of sexual and reproductive health and rights, are precisely – and historically - where religious leaders break rank. Not only that however, but in the current geopolitical context of rising nationalism and right wing populism, even some governing regimes in the western hemisphere are breaking rank with legislation and practice meant to guarantee women's sexual and reproductive rights.

This the UN official notes, and in a rare moment of public self-criticism, the official laments the fact that while the UN raised the flag of the value of engagement with religious actors around the Sustainable Development Goals, the same UN may be unable to protect its religious civil society partners from being instrumentalised by certain governments with overriding security concerns.

Interestingly, the same FBOs who, a couple of years earlier were pleased that the governments and the UN were "finally" recognising their worth, turned around to decry "the paternalistic attitude" of the UN presenter. "We are adults… we do not need UN protection", some said with barely concealed disdain.

A reality check?

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Most policy makers often operate with relatively short-term trajectories reflecting the politically appointed - or elected - leadership of their respective governments or intergovernmental institutions. Moreover, governmental funding of development, humanitarian, and peace and security-related work is the oil that keeps the machines of both governmental as well as intergovernmental organisations running. At the same time, religious institutions have, historically, always played a role in the political landscapes – either colluding with or opposing ruling regimes. As such, the realms of the religious domains are not 'safe' or politically neutral spaces. Far from it. Assuming that any woman stands outside of the above currents in some miraculous virginal policy or academic space, is unrealistic and unwise.

As long as these are realities we continue to contend with, the politics of certain interests will override the needs and concerns of ordinary citizens, especially the most 'vulnerable' individuals - including the poor, the destitute, the refugees, the internally displaced, and those marginalized because we may be the 'wrong' race/ethnicity/gender/religion/ persona/etc.. There was a time when I thought that engaging with religious actors for common human rights objectives could be a formula to change business as usual for some western policy makers. I assumed that this engagement might encourage us to think in more self-reflexive ways – to question our inherited Enlightenment influenced colonial generalisations, to rid ourselves of the yokes of oppression leveraged by religious institutions, and to embolden all (women's) human rights defenders to speak truth to power. Now I find myself still struggling … to believe.

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Voices of Dissent

Hina Jilani on the value of the rights discourse in the context of political Islam

Excerpts from an interview with Ayesha Khan

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Hina Jilani is one of Pakistan's most influential human rights activists and a leader of Women's Action Forum, the group that began the modern women's movement in the country. She co-founded the first women's law firm and legal aid organisation, AGHS, and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. At the international level she has held numerous positions as well. She is a member of the Eminent Jurists Panel on Terrorism, Counterterrorism and Human Rights. In 2009, she was appointed to the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict. She was also UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders (2000–2008); appointed to the UN International Fact-Finding Commission on Darfur (2006); and served as President of the World Organisation Against Torture (2016).

Jilani received the Amnesty International Genetta Sagan Award for Women's Rights (2000), and the Millennium Peace Prize for Women (2001). She is a member of The Elders, an independent group of global leaders working together for peace and human rights, founded by Nelson Mandela.

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Below are edited excerpts from an interview with Ayesha Khan held at Jilani's home in Lahore on 23 October 2015.

On what happened to women's mobilisation during and after the Pakistan movement led to Independence from British India in 1947:

Firstly the promises and the expectations women had were kind of set aside and amalgamated in the Pakistan movement. They separated the Muslim interests from the women's interests in the sub-continent, which was [originally] a joint struggle of women. So Muslim women then separated themselves from that struggle, [as a result] they lost consistency and force. And at the same time [they] came into a country where it was not a question of rights, it was a question of enforcement of Islamic injunctions. Those very people who had heard the Quaid [Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah] express whatever he had expressed all throughout[1] - I mean, frankly, the Quaid had also used this Muslim interest to create constituency for himself.

But having said that, I don't think his conscience would reconcile to the fact that these kinds of retrograde policies and social messages should in any way constrain the progress of this country and the rights of people whether they are women or anybody else, [including the religious] minorities. He didn't mean it to be that way [...] but by that time the damage had already been done, because all these Muslim leaders were mediocre people, who had no leadership quality, absolutely none. And the only thing that their insecurity could hang onto was Islam.

So if the Jamaat-e-Islami[2] was an opponent [of the Pakistan movement], the state had to be [even] more Islamic to overcome them [after

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Independence]. This was the extent of their imagination on how to politically keep themselves above the Jamaat-e-Islami and the retrograde Islamic forces that at that time the establishment thought of as opponents. [The state thought] if Jamaat-e-Islami is Islamic and they are insisting on Islam, then we either surrender or give them some points without any evidence. [Jamaat-e-Islami] are still in the past, they are still trying to tell the Muslims that they are different. [But] for God's sake, now you are in a country where 95 per cent of the population is Muslim. What are you saying? So this was the extent of their imagination and the quality of [the government's] leadership.

Nonetheless the state managed to withstand religious opposition to pass some progressive legislation in the early years, such as the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961, which gave women improved rights of divorce and controls on polygyny.

When [these] laws were promulgated, they were a step forward. The problems came really during Zia's time [military rule from 1977-88] because the actual, concrete and specific legislation that came in was anti-women.[3] So I think in a way this time was the most painful and difficult time we had. At the same time in one sense it was good because it took away our complacencies - and this movement really became dynamic because it was a resistance movement.

So there were advantages and disadvantages to that. The advantage was that it gave importance to women to come together again and come out of their complacent modes. But at the same time the disadvantage was that the period we could have spent in going further than what we had in the 1950s and the early 1960s, we were now spending that time to at least save that and resist what was coming. So this was a long period of resistance, which is lasting till today.

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On the genesis of Women's Action Forum and her position using Islamic arguments to advocate for women's rights:

Being human rights people we do believe in the freedom of religion. I am not advocating that everybody has to become an atheist. Religion is there but it should have nothing to do with the public domain and certainly laws and rights cannot emerge from religious edicts and injunctions. They should not be the basis of law making because there is inequality of rights in all religions, including Islam. Even though they say Islam has given women a lot of rights, well fine, if that is the spirit of the law in Islam then it should go up and always progress and not stop. There is no capping, there is no sealing on rights.

[But] there was a part of the WAF movement that [said] we will justify everything we are saying from Islamic injunctions. Soon this was stopped because within WAF thinking developed; and I am happy and proud to say that I am one of the leaders saying this is not on. Already in Pakistan there are 72 different sects of Islam, obviously these have come from different views on the same injunctions, a 73rd view is not going to help us.

Secondly this is not an Islamic issue, it's not a religious issue. It's a political issue because religion is being used for some kind of political control and power. So you fight it politically. Why do you want to fight on the mullahs' wicket and lose? You have scholars of Islam whose interpretations of Islam are as good as our ideas on our rights, [yet they] can't even live in their own country [they are being] driven away by these forces that were using Islam for their political ends. So we thought this was a useless fight, it was going to tire us out.

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On the achievements of WAF in an Islamising state:

This is the biggest victory of the women's movement in Pakistan. We may not have been able to get rid of the Hudood Ordinances[4] for 25 years, but we put women on the political agenda in Pakistan. When the 1988 elections [took] place [after Zia's death] every political party had a women's rights programme. Since then in every election, every political party including Jamaat-e-Islami, whatever their views may be, have to put women's rights as a part of their manifesto.

So how can anybody say that this is not a successful movement? This you must acknowledge, and we don't need to convince anyone.

So, this is WAF's contribution, bringing women into this whole question of democracy, Pakistan's politics, and Pakistan's foreign policies. Because from here a movement of women is generated. From here only [do] women stand up and consolidate civil society power in the whole of South Asia. Internationally today the only movement that sustains itself is the international women's movement, and South Asian women and women from Pakistan are very much a part of building that movement and sustaining it. And many of them are active members of WAF.

In an environment that has grown increasingly conservative, where liberal spaces are shrinking, is WAF's demand for a secular state realistic?

That doesn't matter, [although] it is the best thing if it does, as long as mindsets change and become more progressive and more secular in their analysis and everyday thinking. Look, I had this tea, even if I am very religious while having tea I won't think about how Islam has guided me to drink it. So I don't think that in our everyday life that [religious framework] counts, unless for some political purpose it is made into an issue. This is

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something that [the religious lobby] have created artificially. [Therefore nowadays when you hear some women speak] they don't say, 'We went to such and such place at 4 o clock', they say that 'I went there at Asr', because now this has become a value - that if I talk like this then I am very virtuous.

This can only be undone gradually. But if democracy stays for some time then with the political and state concentration on Islam, Islam will change. [So] many protests of different interest groups take place throughout the country, other than [those led by] the mullahs. Some protest on water, some against police, some about inflation. How many from the public really stand up for religion, unless [the protest is] started by a mullah who brings in all the kids from their *madrassa*.[5] Where are these happening spontaneously? This is the reality of our country. And as democracy advances, as people-centred progress or development initiatives start, then the [public] debate will be focused on that.

Water, electricity, energy crisis, inflation, police issues, some one's child being killed, sexual abuse, these are the only issues of [spontaneous peoples'] protests. So when the problems are such that you don't want to solve or you cannot solve them, then you [as government] deflect and push the concentration [on religion]. Since 1947, we have always been pushed towards Islam by political elites because they had nothing in their pockets, nothing else.

Jilani insists on the importance of using the courts to push for women's rights even though the judiciary may not always understand progressive legislation. One indication that it is becoming more open-minded was the Supreme Court's 2012 recognition of transgender persons as a third

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gender. New laws passed in Parliament, those on sexual harassment passed in 2010, may still need improvement but legal activists must make maximum use of them in court.

This is what I keep on saying to NGOs and human and women's rights defenders that just sit after the law has been made - use it, because we never get the perfect law! The law is never exactly like what your expectations are, unless you improve it by use. We have taken out good results from the worst of laws. This is legal activism. There are many bad laws, but we take relief for women. In my life, I have won 81 per cent of the cases that I have gone to court with, despite this very horrible framework we have.

The judges, too, get this in their consciousness that we cannot [just view a case] technically, we have to see the parties in front of us, what their circumstances are, and then apply the law to it.

Now in sexual harassment cases I am telling them to bring in more jurisprudence, by taking up more cases of this issue. The problem is that a very small number of women want to come in front [of court], because with sexual harassment in the workplace it has to be a professional woman taking the risk of losing her job. [Nonetheless, by taking up cases in court] hopefully we will bring out good jurisprudence - especially on the standard of proof. We claim that in sexual harassment cases what the women should have to prove is that there is an absence of malice, that's all - that we aren't prosecuting maliciously. If absence of malice is proven, [we argue that] then all the presumption must be in her favour. I am trying to find ways of doing that.

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Notes

[1] Here Jilani is referring to Jinnah's statements during the independence struggle that the new country of Pakistan would separate religion from the affairs of the state and the contradiction this implied with creating a state for Muslims.

[2] This religio-political party was founded by Maulana Maududi in 1948 in Pakistan. Maududi himself was opposed to the Pakistan movement in the years preceding independence.

[3] These included the Hudood Ordinances (1979), Law of Evidence (1984) which equated the evidence of two women to that of one man in financial matters, and numerous curbs on women's participation in public life.

[4] Promulgated in 1979, these were among the first laws passed during Zia's regime to enforce his Islamisation programme. They brought Islamic punishments for theft, intoxication, rape and sex outside of marriage, and false accusation. The laws made a woman charging rape liable to be punished (by stoning to death) for illegal sex if she could not prove the rape.

[5] Religious seminary.

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Who are the liberators of Raqqa? Review of A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State

By Meredith Tax, Bellevue Literary Prize 2016

Review by Rahila Gupta*

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Western media tells us very little about the society behind the Kurdish forces who have, with the help of air-cover from the US and European coalition, pushed ISIS out of Raqqa, the capital city of its so-called caliphate. Now public discourse is agonising about the level of threat posed by ISIS fighters returning to their European homelands, about morally superior forms of Western retribution and justice and about fears that ISIS will regroup.

They say that history is written by the victors. However, this focus on ISIS has drowned out the voices of the people behind the rout of Raqqa. There are a few commentators - Meredith Tax, American feminist writer and activist, is one of them - who have understood the huge significance of the secular, radical democracy that is taking shape in the Democratic federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) or Rojava. Her well-researched book, *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State,* was published in 2016, four years after the 'Arab Spring' triggered a revolution there and delivered a society where women are in the driving seat, where racial inclusivity, class equality, ecological sustainability and a co-op based economy are guiding principles.

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It was during the siege of Kobani (started in September 2014) when Tax saw 'pictures of smiling rifle-toting girls in uniform defending the city' against ISIS that her curiosity was piqued. What she discovered left her stunned. She wrote to her friends on New Years' Day 2015 to tell them about Rojava "At the end of such a dark and difficult year, one searches for light. It can sometimes be found in unexpected places."

With Tax's long history of activism, she has been witness to many false dawns of women's liberation. Naturally she approached this feminist revolution with the same degree of hope and scepticism that I share: the question that simmers under this book is, 'So what makes the Kurdish women's movement different?' A particularly pertinent question as it evolved out of PKK, (Kurdistan Workers' Party) which began as a classic Marxist-Leninist party paying lip service to the equality of women.

In her preface, Tax says that the book revolves on two axes, 'One axis is the collision of three visions of social organisation, all reflections of larger global paradigms but particularly intense in Kurdistan: the Islamism of Daesh, the "capitalist modernity" (Ocalan's phrase) of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and the new kind of leftwing, non-state, democratic formation developing in the liberated cantons of Syria. The other axis is the role of women in these paradigms.'

Rojava cannot be understood without reference to the Kurdish struggle for self-government in Turkey and the political philosophy of the jailed leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, Abdullah Öcalan, whose ideas underpin the Rojava revolution. Although the KRG is politically opposed to the revolution, their history is also intertwined with that of the Syrian Kurds. The fourth part of Kurdistan which falls in Iran has not had as much

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influence on events in Rojava which explains why Tax has concentrated on the Iraqi and Turkish histories as the context for Rojava.

The book begins with the siege of Sinjar mountains in Iraq by ISIS in 2014, the massacre of the Yazidis and the abduction, enslavement and rape of the Yezidi women. The way the three Kurdish areas respond to this siege captures the essence of their interrelationships in a microcosm. The Iraqi Peshmerga desert the Yazidis, which stirs the women's defence forces of Rojava (YPJ) and the women's unit of the PKK (YJA-Star), accompanied by their male comrades, into action, knowing the brutality that ISIS visits upon women.

Sinjar and the Yazidis are also an important reference point for the women of Rojava justifying the use of arms. Tax quotes a number of Kurdish women who argue that the only way to avoid femicide is to take up self-defence, that the Yazidi women would not have suffered the fate that they did if they had been armed, that you cannot negotiate with a force like ISIS who are not just an existential threat to the whole community but whose entrenched misogyny is the polar opposite of the gender equal society that the Kurds are trying to build. It is a robust rebuttal to the feminist pacifist tradition further bolstered by Öcalan's support for an autonomous women's army as essential to building women's self-confidence.

Tax tackles another question that troubles feminist activists – the issue of celibacy for revolutionaries, presenting arguments from both sides without actually stating her own position. These are doubts that I too have shared but have been persuaded by women fighters who say, it is your choice to give up your life for the revolution. Celibacy is part of that. Öcalan's theoretical position on the necessity of celibacy is that a new

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culture has to develop before sexual intimacy can be detached from power relations because personal love relationships turn women into slaves.

This is a book expressing critical solidarity with the cause. Tax does not shy away from criticism of the ruthless execution of cadres on suspicion of being police agents under Öcalan in the early years but that does not prevent her from recognising that Öcalan's renunciation of violence later on was genuine.

With all the doubts that Tax expresses about Rojava, for example the difficulties of assessing the strength of its democracy during war time, she concludes with a resounding affirmation that 'It is already clear that, even under wartime conditions, Rojava may well be the best place in the Middle East to be a woman.'

Rojava has all the ingredients that should interest Western media: a David versus Goliath story; a clash of civilisations in the Middle East itself; and women in the frontline against barbaric Daesh fighters who believe that death at the hands of women will mean that the door to Paradise will be shut forever. And yet it is almost invisible. What might seem to progressive minded people all over the world like a good news story is actually too threatening for the establishment to contemplate as its success and spread could signal the demise of capitalism.

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Review of Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century

By Mark Sedgwick, OUP, 2009.

Review by Alison Assiter*

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Mark Sedgwick's book, *Against the Modern World,* was published in 2009, but it is compulsive reading for commentary on the contemporary world, beset as it is with the rise of the traditional far right as well as far right religious fundamentalisms*.* The book spells out some intellectual influences on both traditions of thought*.*

Sedgwick provides a powerful and interesting history of 'traditionalism' – a body of ideas stemming from the work of a philosopher, Guénon - who was working in the early 20th century and whose work combined a very specific reading of Hinduism, reducing it to the Vedanta, with some insights from Marsilio Ficino. The latter was a medieval priest who combined Platonism and Christianity. He considered the revival of Plato in the 15th century to be (in Sedgwick's words) a 'gift from God to provide philosophical arguments to support Christianity'. (Sedgwick, p. 23)

Like a number of contemporary thinkers, including Saba Mahmood, whose work we have reviewed in this journal, Guénon, according to Sedgwick, used the concept of 'inversion' to describe aspects of what he saw as the decline of the modern world. He critiqued the 'illusions' of reason, progress, and change. He wanted to avert what he saw as the 'extinction' of the west. The 'extinction' was to be avoided by 'receiving traditional teaching by the restoration of oriental doctrines so as to push

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the west towards the restoration of traditional civilisations'. (Sedgwick, p. 26)

Sedgwick's book discusses various attempts, over the course of the twentieth century, to put Guénon's project into action – to restore "traditional civilisation" to the west. Sedgwick traces the influence of 'traditionalist' ideas on European fascism and on the Islamic revolution in Iran, amongst other areas. He is careful to note that the influences of these various thinkers on particular political movements were not direct. However, he points to a number of connections between traditionalist thinkers and fascism. One such is a comment from Evola, an Italian follower of Guénon[1] and an admirer of a crude re-reading of Nietzsche's superman which he called the 'absolute individual'. (ibid. p. 99) Evola wrote, in 1929, 'to the extent that Fascism follows and defends these traditional principles, in that measure we may consider ourselves Fascists. That is all'. Later he wrote suggesting a 'more radical, more intrepid Fascism, a really absolute Fascism, made of pure force inaccessible to compromise' (see Sedgwick, p.101). Although, according to Sedgwick, Evola was not well received either in Mussolini's or in Hitler's circles, nonetheless, a version of his ideas appeared in a speech delivered by Chancellor von Papen in 1934. Von Papen was subsequently forced to resign and his speech -writer was killed. Yet Evola continued to attempt to influence fascist thinking and Himmler at one point commissioned an investigation of his ideas. Furthermore, in 1942 Mussolini called Evola to a meeting, following a reading of his book Sinetesi *di dottrina della razza*. The latter, Mussolini believed, offered a way of aligning Italian and German racialisms. Moreover, in his text *Revolt against the Modern World,* Evola argued for a connection between 'jihad' in the sense of an 'inner' holy war and external 'jihad'. The latter is waging war against the 'infidel' and he suggests that the latter is linked to the former as the body is to the soul. (see, Evola, 1934, pp.118-120)

Evola has been recently cited by Steve Bannon, who is a major intellectual influence on Donald Trump[2]. Aaron Gillette, in his book *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy (*Gillette, 2003*)*, described Evola as 'one of the most influential fascist racists in Italian history'.

In his chapter on the Islamic world, Sedgwick notes the popularity of traditionalist work in Algeria and Morocco, amongst those opposed to the socialist 'ethos' of the Algerian regime in the 1960's. In post revolutionary Iran, although Sedgwick argues that 'traditionalist' thinking played no part in the early years of the revolution, he suggests that there were many traditionalists in the universities, and one was close to the supreme leader. They played an active role in the purging of Iran's universities in the 1980's, through the council for Cultural Revolution.

In the final chapter of his carefully researched book, Sedgwick notes that Guénon's ideas, while not original, synthesise a number of elements in a somewhat unusual way. One of the themes for which he became known is the view that 'wisdom' originates somewhere in the east, as opposed to the west. Hinduism and Perennialism (represented by Ficino) were the specific ingredients of Guénon's philosophical outlook, but other traditionalists deployed elements from Sufism and Taoism. Sedgwick argues that 'traditionalism' has something in common with 'Orientalism' as developed by Said. It is, Sedgwick suggests, the other side of the coin of Orientalism. Said showed how much western understanding of 'the east' owed more to the self-understanding of the west than to anything that actually existed. Traditionalism, Sedgwick argues, is the counterpoint of Orientalism. It is the inverse of Orientalism in that while Orientalism downplays the east, traditionalism, drawing on the same somewhat mythical idea of the East, applauds the latter but in a crude and simple way. He writes: 'Traditionalism contrasts a West characterised by modernity, materialism and mere technical skills to a Middle East of tradition, spirituality and wisdom. This understanding of the East is

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arguably no more accurate than that of the classic Orientalist'. (Sedgwick, p.266) As we have argued elsewhere in *Feminist Dissent*, crude dualisms like this undermine both east and west.

Guénon's final years were spent in Egypt where he developed his ideas, through practising as a Muslim, on the need to put theory into practice. Evola, as we have seen, saw practice in a rather different way.

Sedgwick suggests that there were many who might be described as 'traditionalists' who did not adopt any of the dubious political ideas outlined above. But, he notes: 'the entire field of contemporary religious studies (of which he himself is part) bears the imprint of Eliade's (another follower of some of the aspects of the above thought) 'soft traditionalism' and 'many leading scholars have been traditionalists'. (ibid. p.271) Sedgwick also suggests that many of the critics of traditionalism, including the original referee of Guénon's PhD, who failed it, have not treated them as serious scholars. He suggests, also, that their work has much in common with post-modernism, in their respective rejections of modernist ideas of 'science, rationalism and objectivity'. (ibid. p.264) However, maybe we need to take the ideas seriously if we are to understand something of the increasing influence of far-right thinking in today's world. We have drawn attention, in *Feminist Dissent*, to the post-modern rejection of these ideals. This book provides useful reading for those interested in these topics.

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Notes

[1] Some commentators have challenged the link between Guenon and Evola. But he himself, in an interview in 2007, accepted the influence of the former on his work (see, http://www.gornahoor.net/?p=21).
[2] See: https://qz.com/909323/bannons-interest-for-julius-evola-unveils-the-sexism-at-the-core-of-trump/

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Review of Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilising against Equality

By Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Eds.) Rowman & Littlefield, 2017

Review by Ulrike M. Vieten*

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Linkages between the Christian Far Right, anti-gender conservatism as well as anti-queer discourses have been made beforehand, for example by Angelia Wilson (2000, 2013; see also Wilson & Burack, 2012) when looking at the emergence of the US Tea party, and far-right discourses in media and at private Christian universities. In that regard a close ideological link between far right discourse and the establishment of a far right elite was noticed, years ahead of Trump's election. By now, in 2018, we have to admit the mainstreaming of far right extremist views, anti-gender resentments and the renaissance of far right parties in governance has gone global though with regional differences.

As far as Europe is concerned we also might remember the 2011 mass murder in Norway: the fascist Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people, in Oslo and on the island Utøya. He had circulated texts with anti- Islamic, but also anti-feminist and misogynist views on the day of his attacks. Certainly, anti-feminism and far–right extremist worldviews have been intertwined, and are around for some time. But there are not that many studies looking more closely at the connections between populist extremism, anti-gender discourses and the role of Christianity in Europe.

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Kuhar's & Paternotte's co-edited collection responds to a need to look more in-depth into the role of the Christian Right in Europe, and here more specifically at the role of the Catholic Church in pushing back emancipatory *Zeitgeist* and generating anti-gender debates in varies EU countries. Case studies discussed in their book include material from Austria, France, Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Spain and Poland, all very much shaped and dominated by Catholicism; but also from Germany, where Protestant Christianity is influential, too, and Russia, the latter, somehow at the border next to Europe. The collection intends to fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge of how the Catholic Church institutionally, culturally and politically (!) encompasses societal trends cheering far right populist ideology and having joined transnational forces in political anti-liberal discourses.

With far-right parties in power (e.g. Hungary and Poland) or in coalition (e.g. Austria), and otherwise far right parties and far right populist movements expanding (e.g. France; Italy or Germany) it seems this topic needs more attention, indeed. Keeping in mind that it is not possible to do justice to all the complex issues raised by the range of authors and the variety of discussed countries, I will concentrate on the argument and analytical scope of the editors' introduction and conclusion, and bring in arguments of the chapters on Hungary, Poland and Austria, where electoral success of far-right populist parties points alarmingly into the direction of linkages between institutional Catholic conservatism, far-right populist views and anti-gender discourses.

At the core of Paternotte's & Kuhar's argument is the observation that similar forms of street protest in different countries and a shared repertoire of texts, the latter referring to historical non-violent resistance, is used systematically to express the will of the *ordinary* man and woman

against gender mainstreaming, feminism and attempts to deconstruct social roles of women and men. What is more, this opposition to a critical gender discourse is evolving transnationally, and indicates a new stage of anti-gender mobilisation.

For the journal readers, and more widely for us as feminists the use of the term 'anti-gender ideology' in the context of the far right might be astonishing here: however, it tries to capture a recent trend by the populist far right and the Christian right targeting emancipatory policy (e.g. pushed by grassroots feminist movements; EU anti-discrimination directives and EUGH jurisdiction; United Nation's gender mainstreaming goals) and taking over for their purpose the term 'anti-gender ideology'. According to Kuhar & Paternotte (p.7) ' "Gender Ideology" is often presented (in a far right discourse, UMV) as new leftist (sic!) ideology, emerging from the ashes of communism'. According to the far right mind 'gender ideology' is responsible for taking away the 'cultural' autonomy of people in different societies, undermining the right of men and women to live their ordinary lives as they know it.

This is troubling, indeed, as it co-opts 'gender ideology' and uses this as an empty signifier. The feminist deconstruction of gender power (e.g. what we call 'gender ideology') is converted to an anti-anti-ideology. This emerging anti-gender discourse dismisses all knowledge archives and distinctive intellectual critical interventions that de-construct biological essentialism and power structures. The readers might also want to turn to this blog https://thedisorderofthings.com/2018/01/09/dear-hurt-male-egos/ to engage with some of the problematics of this misogynist irrationalism linking it with the erosion of male privileges in different countries.

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It does not come as a surprise though that the Roman Catholic Church, for example, and their Popes, developed a strategy to counter the liberalisation of sexual freedom and independence of women since the Beijing conference in 1995: 'The coining of the negative term "gender ideology" came both as an answer to the interrogation of the Vatican and as a means of action which should be understood in the frame of a global Catholic strategy. Relying on the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony (Brustler, 2014; Peeters, 2011: p.221), it aims at propagating alternative ideas by using and subverting the notions it repudiates and to contest the supposed cultural and political hegemony of "postmodern gender" in the context of a global battle of ideas' (p.10).

But how come that European Christian secular societies fell for extremely hardcore institutional Church views though they seemed more moderate and emancipated since the 1970s? In what ways do national and 'local' state of minds indicating the success of far-right politics also combine anti-gender phobia with stern Catholic conservatism, in recent years? Kováts & Pető highlight in their chapter on the 'Anti-gender discourse in Hungary' that there is an effective anti-genderism without an active street movement. Despite a visiting researcher appointment of Gabriele Kuby, who also is cited by the co-editors as one of the most renowned anti-Gender ideologists across Europe, and with the far right leader Victor Orban in charge, there is not that much scope to oppose a yet established anti-liberal and anti-EU discourse that is articulated in positions of the Hungarian far right government. However, Kováts & Pető warn that the post-World II consensus that subscribed to a 'progressive politics' and conveyed, for example, in the claims of 'the rooting of identity politics in neo-liberalism'... the language of equality as for example in human rights and statistical equality', and the 'EU as norm owner of gender equality' and 'the language of politics (technocratic, policy-based)' are challenged (p.127). They are challenged by 'fundamentalism represented in the Far-Right and now by anti-gender movements' (*ibid*).

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This is a more generic observation reflecting processes that have fed into the electoral success of far right parties, for some time. The authors stress that the Hungarian situation is very different to the one in Poland. And when reading Graff's and Korolczuk's chapter '"Worse than communism and Nazism put together": War on gender in Poland' we understand the different stages of anti-gender discourses and anti-gender mobilization, immediately. Graff and Korcolczuk identify an inaugural moment of the anti-gender movement in Poland: 'the Pastoral Letter of the Bishops' Conference read in Poland's parishes, on 29 December 2013' (p.175). Though mobilization might have started the year before, either way conservative family oriented politicians, journalists, grassroots activists and priests pushed the anti-gender agenda in a country that is dominated religiously and culturally by the Catholic Church. The authors stress the transnational element, and argue convincingly for a wider entanglement of an anti-gender, anti-liberal, but also anti-Western (e.g. EU anti-discrimination regulations) discourse in post-communist settings. Remarkably, also the connection between a Polish self-perception of being colonialized by the West (and to the East by Russia) and the renaissance of far-right nationalist sentiments are problematised in the conclusion of the chapter. My favourite sentence is, 'The anti-genderism provided a "symbolic glue" (Pető, 2015) facilitating an alliance between "the altar" and "the stadium" that is between the Catholic Clergy, anti-choice organisations and right-wing extremists, including football fans' (p. 189).

Some of these findings also came up in a *European Research Council* funded project on 'Living with difference' (see also Vieten, http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/law-and-justice-polands-return-to-catholic-morality-and-a-homogenous-society) underscoring the structural dynamics of cultural Catholicism when rooted in misogynist, and anti-foreigner world views of a predominantly homogenous society.

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The last country case study I am going to mention is the one on Austria, where recently[1] a central right wing and far right government was greeted. Mayer & Sauer in their contribution '"Gender Ideology" in Austria' pinpoint how anti-gender ideology ties into contemporary anti-Muslim racism; e.g. a culturalist and gendered imagination of the 'oriental' Other (See pp. 34-35). Tellingly, the anti-gender discourse triggers paradox positions as Islam is blamed for being inherently sexist whereas European ('post 1970's) liberalisation is attacked equally for being responsible for the *'Untergang des Abendlandes'* ('decline of the occident'). 'Discourses on anti-Muslim racism and on "gender ideology" - contradictory as they may appear – are interlinked to form a broader picture of decay and ultimate danger' (p. 35).

What is relevant to keep in mind here, and as similarly expressed by the authors of the Hungarian case study, a broader 'anti-hegemonic approach against the equality and emancipation of women and LGBTIQ people as well as against the liberalisation and pluralisation of Austrian society since the 1970s' (p. 37) has developed rapidly in the last five to ten years. It is parochial, unashamed nationalistic and post--post-cosmopolitan: it presents itself close to authoritarianism, hailing nativism and performs a hybrid form of mono-cultural totalitarianism. This message comes across in several chapters and should be alarming even to cynics (like me).

Paternotte & Kuhar argue in their conclusion that 'It ('gender', UMV) squeezes different discourse into one big threat that different actors can connect to, and appears as unifying ground because it is constructed as an attack on at least one of the three Ns defended by these actors: nature, the nation and normality' (pp. 259-260).

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The Roman Catholic Church, however, is a transnational actor though sitting comfortably in the Vatican, and as is illustrated in all the chapters flexible and adaptive to national(ist) histories and discourse. Commonality exists where the themes of heteronormativity, the 'natural' role of women and men, patriarchal family values, anti-abortion and broader issues of anti-hedonism and anti- individual sexual choice come into sight.

The co-edited collection makes a valuable contribution to understand the ways the Christian right in Europe operates, and how the Catholic Church ideologically pushed an anti-gender discourse in different countries. It has to be said that some of the consideration in the conclusion of the co-editors might have been better placed in their introduction to make an easier read, and help to comprehend the patterns evolving across the different and differing country case studies.

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Notes

[1] Writing in December 2017.

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Review of Mount Olympus: to Glorify the Cult of Tragedy

Play directed by Jan Fabre, performed in Belgrade
September 18 2017

Review by Sandra Dančetović*

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Breathe freely and imagine something new – Mount Olympus

To understand Belgrade you do not need to live here. It is difficult for ourselves, its inhabitants, to make ourselves out in its numerous contrasts. You will notice the contradictions at every step: from the city's appearance, its architecture which is a fusion of the old and the new, the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian, the European and the Balkan, the Western and the Eastern, to the profound divisions in society and inconceivable contrasts, such as a pronounced nationalism on the one hand and unwavering cosmopolitanism on the other.

With these contrasts and divisions in mind, we can more easily - but never completely - understand the city which gave birth to BITEF (an international festival of theatre, which has existed for half a century and was founded by Mira Trailović, one of the greatest women in the history of Yugoslav culture) and the city which met one of the best theatre performances of 2017, with extreme hostility.

This is what happened to 'Mount Olympus' by the Belgian director Jan Fabre, which opened the 51stBITEF in September 2017. This European

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theatrical hit, a performance which was created 'to glorify the Cult of Tragedy', as its subtitle suggests, caused waves of disapproval, indignation and even disgust in Belgrade and Serbia.

The script for 'Mount Olympus' (by Jeroen Olyslaegers and Fabre himself) combines and develops dozens of texts from ancient Greece, including Homer's epics, Greek tragedies and myths. This new, composite script offers a fresh reading of ancient and well known texts. The play features thirty actors who dance, speak, perform acrobatics, repeat a single action endlessly. Given that the play runs for 24 hours continuously, the performers also sleep and suffer from sleep deprivation, examining their outer physical and mental limits. On the stage we saw performers suffer, weep, laugh hysterically, make celebrations, despair, fall into trances, dance wildly, make love, strip, pour oil, paint and glitter over each other... The sight of a naked body tested to the extremes, caused shock in many spectators; even though none of the staged actions were performed gratuitously, but were filled with layers of meaning, which evaded those whose gaze remained only on the surface.

The performance was featured on TV, in a live broadcast and on a public service station. Thus, a much wider audience could access a twenty-four-hour spectacle, otherwise limited to the 2,000 people attending the 'Sava Centre' hall. According to official data from the Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS), more than 220,000 people tuned in for the finale of the broadcast. Afterwards, television viewers moved onto social media, where a war of words erupted about the show and a public service provider that broadcasts 'obscene nudity' and 'pornography'. The Twitterati were horrified by the naked actors, and saw the Dionysian festivities on the stage as mere 'rope skipping', comparing the show with reality TV programmes.

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According to ratings, 'Mount Olympus' actually overshadowed reality programmes, at least for 24 hours. Art occupied a space reserved for the basic instincts of Serbian, (dare I say) pop 'un-culture', since the reality TV format, in its lowest and basest form, is currently the most popular in Serbia.

'Mount Olympus' achieved what, according to Kafka, is the task of art - to be the axe for the frozen lake in our souls. It wore out both the performers and the spectators, throwing both into a trance.

Together they breathed, collapsed, slept. It fulfilled the main task of ancient tragedy – catharsis.

While some were affronted by the 'obscene nudity' of the human body and symbols which they misunderstood as pornography, it seemed that in the end, the experience of that other part of the audience seemed to prevail: the show left the nearly 2,000 people in the hall and a large section of those in front of the TV screen exhilarated. When the dust settled, favourable impressions prevailed, and 'Mount Olympus' was justly awarded the BITEF Grand Prix. The polarisation of the audience however, was evident and expressed in extremes typical for Belgrade and Serbia.

It seems that many spirits were calmed by the Facebook post of a church official, who, to widespread surprise and breaking with the traditions of the Serbian Orthodox Church, was reasonable. On his Facebook profile, deacon Nenad Ilić, himself a trained theatre director, wrote that he had not seen 'a product of contemporary art that could command such respect' in a long time, adding that 'a heroic effort was made not to recognise the death of art'. What surprised and silenced those who

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criticised'Mount Olympus' without foundation was Ilić's statement that the recording of the performance should be screened 'if not in seminaries, then definitely at theological faculties, in order that future priests and theologians could in time find the real answer to the scream of our times: Give us something truly new!'

Ilić saw the play as a call to dialogue, a sincere and authentic look at modern society, which is not without humour and vitality although at its core is tragedy and wo/man as a tragic hero. The direct and explicit message of the play is: 'Breathe freely and imagine something new!' So simple, clear to understand and yet difficult to apply. Especially in a society in which church officials have the last word - even if they are right, which rarely happens. The example of deacon Ilić is only an exception that proves the rule.

Blinkered faux moralists were calmed only by the words of a church official, regardless of the fact that prominent theatre experts, such as the playwright Biljana Srbljanović, interpreted the show along similar lines.

It is therefore unsurprising that just a few weeks later there was widespread support for another church official, this time in making disgusting misogynist remarks. Bishop Amfilohije, otherwise known for his nationalistic, homophobic, misogynist and generally discriminatory outbursts, stated thatSerbian women who undergo abortion 'kill more children in a year than Hitler and Mussolini'; thereby comparing abortion with infanticide, and women who decide on their bodily integrity and reproductive health with Nazis and fascists.

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As a rule, those facing the worst discrimination (women, the LGBT+ community, anti-nationalists, members of minority peoples and religious groups) are at the receiving end of church officials.

The words of Amfilohije were taken up and expanded upon by the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, who said that women must bear children. 'We are duty-bound to renew our people and to recommend to our mothers that they are obliged to bear children according to God's blessing; in that way we will remain a part of history, even though we have perished greatly.' said the Patriarch.

Such shameless statements did provoke negative public reactions, even from a female minister in the government Zorana Mihajlović. She responded to the Patriarch that women decide on their own lives and that his advice is unnecessary. However, it seems that Serbian society is not mature or bold enough to uncompromisingly oppose hate speech, especially when it comes from church officials.

Hence, we are not surprised by the reactions of many viewers to the show 'Mount Olympus'. When people intimidated by the church, the state, their neighbours and their surroundings, suddenly see before themselves (on the stage or on television) a demonstration of freedom, honesty, authenticity, true art, and joie de vivre, it is difficult for them to cast away the shackles imposed by fear of authority.

Artist Spotlight

Laila El Sadda*

* https://www.instagram.com/lailaelsadda/

Gossip Gossip (2018) by Laila El Sadda

Laila El Sadda, born in 1988 is an Egyptian mixed media artist based in Cairo. Obsessed with patterns and textures, her figurative paintings and bold lines are inspired by her architectural background. Laila holds a bachelor degree in architecture engineering, and is currently working as an architect and interior designer. Her paintings depict strong women who stand up for themselves in a man's world. She's inspired and fascinated by them.

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Illustrations for Issue 3

Image References

Cover Image: Gossip Gossip

Woman Portrait

I would rather walk with a friend in the dark than walk alone in the light

Fish for Dinner

Acrylics on Canvas

Best Friends

Bedouin Costume

Mixed Media

The Boom

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Call for Papers

Feminist Dissent is an online peer-reviewed journal hosted at the University of Warwick, UK and edited by an Editorial Collective consisting of academics, writers, artists and activists. It invites submissions of original and unpublished work that reflect the aims and principles of the journal. We publish full-length academic articles, shorter Voices of Dissent pieces and book and film reviews in each issue. We also invite proposals for special issues from potential editors.

Feminist Dissent looks to open up new ways of thinking about secularism, religious freedom, civil liberties and human rights, nationalism and identity politics, anti-racism and multiculturalism, neo-liberalism, feminist theory and feminist resistance. In particular, we are interested in essays, reviews, reports and creative work that interrogate the multiple connections between religious fundamentalism and gender.

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Reviews:
If you would like to review a book, film, exhibition or event or request that *Feminist Dissent* carries a review of your book, film, exhibition or event please contact:
Georgie Wemyss at G.Wemyss@UEL.ac.uk
Rebecca Durand at rbdurand@hotmail.com

Artwork:
Feminist Dissent is keen to feature artists' work. If you would like your artwork or photographs featured in one of our issues, please contact our Arts Editor Sonia Mehta at
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Issue 3, 2018

Special Issue on **Challenging Binaries to Promote Women's Equality**

Co-edited by Mariz Tadros, Ayesha Khan and Jenny Edwards

Featured Artist Laila El Sadda

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