6-1-2014

# The sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood: Islamic activism for better or for worse

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### MLA Citation
Elserafy, Amira. *The sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood: Islamic activism for better or for worse*. 2014. American University in Cairo, Master's thesis. *AUC Knowledge Fountain.*
https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/282

The American University in Cairo

School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

**The Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood:**
**Islamic Activism for Better or for Worse**

A thesis submitted to
the Middle East Studies Center

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (M.A.) in Middle East Studies

by Amira Elserafy

under the supervision of Dr. Helen Rizzo

May 2016

*School of Global Affairs and Public Policy*

*Middle East Studies Center*

THE SISTERS OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD: ISLAMIC ACTIVISM FOR BETTER
OR FOR WORSE

A Thesis Submitted by

Amira Elserafy

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In memory of my grandmother,
Salma Al Bakli

## Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to Sara Amr, who opened the door to the world of the Sisters for me and eased my entry into the field.

I am indebted to all the Sisters who have graciously welcomed me into their circles and have taken time from their activism, jobs and families to answer my seemingly endless questions. I have chosen a critical time to conduct this study, and yet they have continued to be nothing less than open and helpful. Appreciation goes out to the Sisters who went through distressing times midway through this project and rather than withdrawing, have persistently demonstrated generosity and unshakable optimism. I hope this work is faithful to their voices and any omissions or errors are mine alone.

This study would not have been possible without the valuable guidance of my thesis committee. My utmost thanks goes to: Dr. Helen Rizzo, my supervisor, whose constant encouragement, attention to detail, insightful comments and questions have helped me immensely and have shaped the direction of this project. Dr. Reem Saad and Dr. Sandrine Gamblin, whose academic support and enthusiasm have greatly contributed to this thesis.

I would also like to thank Dr. Amy Motlagh. The readings and discussions in her Gender and Representation seminar have inspired the basis of this project.

I must also acknowledge Dr. Emad Shahin for patiently introducing me to the field of Middle East Studies.

Ms. Radwa Wassim and Mr. Hany Luke, at the Middle East Studies Department, are two people I have consistently relied on their assistance and flexibility. You have made this project smoother, thank you.

My family, for everything, love you.

# Abstract

*The Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood:*
*Islamic Activism for Better or for Worse*

Amira Elserafy

The American University in Cairo

under the supervision of Dr. Helen Rizzo

This study is meant to tell the story of the Muslim Brotherhood Sisters (*Al-Akhawat Al-Muslimat*) in urban Cairo, Egypt. It mainly attempts to answer two questions: (1) what motivates the Sisters' Islamic activism within the Brotherhood and within the Egyptian society at large despite its huge risks? (2) how do they (re)construct, contest and relate to the gender ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood?

Relying on ethnographic fieldwork, this study explores the ways through which the Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood conceptualize their engagement in Islamist politics amid the crackdown of 2013. Through examining the Muslim Brotherhood's contexts, contention repertoires and cultural framing, this project discusses how the movement seeks to recruit and engage young university educated and career accomplished women who set out to change the political and the societal scene. It also argues that the gender ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood is not static, nor is it a discourse in vacuum, but rather a reflection of wider societal views on gender roles and gender dynamics.

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## Chapter Two:  The Sister's Activism: Politics, Piety and Pragmatism

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**Chapter Four: Conclusion**

## Note on Translation and Transliteration

All translations throughout this study, and any errors, are my own. I have relied on the help of dictionaries in print and online to help me convey the meaning that I believe my interlocutors wanted to convey. When quoting Egyptian spoken Arabic, I provide the English translation followed by the original Arabic in between parenthesis. Translations of the meanings of Qur'anic verses were used from two translations I have chosen for their simplicity and their faithfulness to the original Arabic text. I alternate between both translations according to what I think is closer to the meaning the Sisters tried to deliver when they referred to these verses. Arabic transliteration follows the style of the International Journal of Middle East Studies, although diacritical marks have been removed for simplicity.

## Note on Pseudonyms

At the time I conducted this study, the Muslim Brotherhood had been declared a terrorist organization and thus outlawed by Egyptian law. Consequently, in order to protect the confidentiality of my interlocutors, all names have been changed. Minor details about the participants were also changed or concealed all together in effort to disguise their identity.

## Chapter One

## Introduction

**Introduction, Scope and Aim**

This study intends to investigate the ways in which women affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (thereafter referred to as MB) in urban Cairo, Egypt tend to view themselves within the framework of Islamism in general and, more specifically, within the political activism of the MB amid the crackdown of 2013.

According to Kandiyoti[1] and Moghadam,[2] both Islamists and nationalists seek to establish an "ideal" society that depends upon a particular conception of the "ideal" woman. This study intends to investigate this notion of the "ideal" woman or the MB Sister (*Al Ukht Al Muslima*) as the women of the MB understand it. In addition, it will discuss what motivates their Islamic activism and how they relate it to their own personal piety and/or to engagement with the society. The debate between secularists and Islamists in the MENA region reinforces the dichotomy between the "traditional" Islamist ideal woman as opposed to the "modern" ideal woman constructed in the nationalist secularist discourse. I intend to problematize this dichotomy. By focusing on the MB Sisters organization, I will examine the formal gender ideology of the MB within the Islamic movement and show how this formal ideology is (re)constructed, practiced and/or challenged by women within the society of the movement.

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[1] Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, 1st ed, Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996) p. 1–28.

[2] Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994) p. 3–26.

**Thesis Overview**

Chapter one introduces the study. It provides a description of the topic, the scope and the aim of the thesis and how it is organized. It briefly tells the story of the history of the women's division of the MB and their activism. This is followed by a description of the theoretical framework utilized to interpret the data collected for this study and gives reasons for the choice of particular conceptual tools. Next is an overview of the key studies addressing women's Islamic activism in the region. A discussion of the research questions and the contribution this study adds to the literature is included. Finally, the chapter gives a concise explanation of the methodology utilized for data collection as well as describing the field and its challenges.

Chapter two mainly explores how the MB motivates collective action, recruits new members and retains currents ones in an unreceptive environment. It explains how the women of the MB frame their own activism and what motivates it despite its risks. This chapter mainly focuses on how the MB acts in its medium and how it responds to opportunities and challenges. Data collected for this investigation is interpreted through one of the main social movement frameworks, Political Process Theory (PPT).

Chapter three attempts to provide a picture of what it means to be a MB Sister. It mainly analyzes gender dynamics after the crackdown of 2013. It seeks to investigate how the MB women and men are interacting with that gender ideology. Through briefly discussing the main trends of theorizing gender, the chapter attempts to adequately understand and contextualize the gender ideology of the MB. It aims at answering the questions of: What does a MB Sister think of the gender ideology of the MB? How does she react to it? How does she conceptualize of

gender roles within her society of fellow Sisters and within the society as a whole? How does their socioeconomic background affect their stance on gender roles, if at all?

Last is a summary of key findings of the study and the contributions of this project to the larger literatures of gender ideology, Islamist politics and social movements. It elaborates on how the study addressed the major research questions. It touches upon the essence of arguments I made throughout the thesis and ends with a short briefing on the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

## A Brief Historical Background

The MB's first women's division: *Al Akhawat Al Muslimat*, the Muslim Sisters Group, was established in Ismailia on April, 26, 1933. With the movement of the activities of the Brotherhood to Cairo, Labiba Ahmad, founder of the Association for Women's Advancement in 1923 and editor of a magazine by the same name, was the first sister chosen by Hassan Al Banna to lead the group with Mahmoud el Gohary as secretary general of the Sisters Division. Since then, women activists have been involved in the social and political struggle of the MB movement in Egypt.[3]

Historically, women's activism within the MB was hurt by the period of hibernation following the 1960s amid the crackdown of the Nasserite regime on the movement. Continuing to lack a defined organizational entity, the women's division organized a campaign led by the

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[3] The MB Sisters| the Historical Encyclopedia of the Muslim Brotherhood
http://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA.

daughters and wives of detained Brothers that helped create public awareness of the suffering of those Brothers in jail. They organized street protests against military trials, ran media campaigns, secured funds to pay lawyers and support the families of detainees, and organized visits in prison.[4] In her memoir, Fatimah Abdelhadi, one of the first women to join the MB, mentions a highly organized effort amongst the Sisters during the 1960s –despite the regime's harassment- to support the families of the detained brothers both financially and morally.[5]

While the 1970s marked the height of the Sisters activism in charitable organizations and universities, the 1980s and 1990s until 2013 were the years when women took their political activism to the next level and have been generally active in running for parliament and professional syndicates as independents until 2011, and later as Justice and Freedom Party (FJP) members. The period from July 2013 onwards marked a significant rise in women's activism that was often subject to state violence.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Political Islam: What is in a name?**

To adequately understand the members of a movement who identify themselves as Islamists, one must first define what Islamism is. Islamism or political Islam is widely understood as the belief that governing and the polity should be based on the teachings of Islam. Graham Fuller argues that Islamists believe that "Islam as a body of faith has something

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[4] Omayma Abdel-Latif, "In the Shadow of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=22347.

[5] Fāṭimah ʻAbd al-Hādī, *Riḥlatī Maʻa Al-Akhawāt Al-Muslimāt : Min Ḥasan Al-Bannā Ilá Sujūn Nāṣir.* (Cairo: Dar El Shorouk, 2011).

important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashion."[6] Ayoob, however, thinks that is too broad of a definition.[7] He prefers Denoeux's definition which identifies Islamism as a belief system that offers political answers to modern-day problems by "imagining a future, the foundations of which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition".[8] Denoeux was careful to highlight a "characteristic" feature of current Islamism, which is its relationship to the West. He argued that Islamists have a distinctive love-hate relationship with the West, in the sense that they will condemn its encroachment into the Middle East but at the same time adopt some of its modern institutions and structures.[9]

Islamists are likely to engage in Islamic activism, which Wiktorowicz defines as "the mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes."[10] Many scholars tend to date the term Political Islam back to the 1970s. It was a time of strong sentiments to regain authenticity by returning to Islamic teachings after a failed postcolonial modernizing project and a bitter defeat by Israel. Ayoob, on the other hand, argues that it is a much older concept. To be precise, he dates it back to similar bitter sentiments, but those that were triggered by "the nineteenth-century

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[6] Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave, 2003). p. xi

[7] Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 2

[8] Guilain Denoeux, "The Forgotten Swamp: Navigating Political Islam," *Middle East Policy* 9, no. 2 (June 1, 2002): 56–81

[9] *Ibid*

[10] Quintan Wiktorowicz, Introduction: Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory in *Islamic Activism : A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 2003), p.2

Muslim encounter with European domination and in Muslim reactions to subjugation by infidel powers."[11]

In any case, Political Islam as we know it today, at least in Egypt, manifests itself in the shape of political activism that seeks to establish itself as a more legitimate alternative to a state that is seen as lacking both legitimacy and good governance (either is a minimum requirement for indisputable ruling in classical *Sunni fiqh*).[12]  Also Political Islam bases its activism on its own interpretations of Islamic tradition and wishes to see these interpretations reflected in public life, albeit in various forms and degrees according to which Islamist group we are considering.

For the Egyptian context, in particular, the MB has been moving away from an insistence on applying *shari'a* (Islamic Law) towards advocating for *marje'yya islamyya* (Islamic reference) for legislation. MB leaders stress that the result is a democratic modern state with a greater role for Islam in public life.

**Social Movement Theory**

In explaining and understanding collective action, research has made great strides in the last forty years. Before the 1960s scholars had not developed a clear understanding of groups who acted collectively. They were viewed as irrational "angry mobs".[13] Until the late 1950s, it was thought that collective action could not be explained rationally because the masses were acting based on emotions and "following the crowd" without much agency. Later in the 1960s, the

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[11] Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p.9

[12] Bernard Lewis, The Political Language of Islam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 99

[13] Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, eds., *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*, 2nd ed, Blackwell Readers in Sociology 12 (Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p.5

unrest and protest movements around the world facilitated a change in the direction of social movement scholarship.[14] The civil rights movement in US universities attracted many followers and earned the sympathy of privileged college students and professors. Since it was difficult to dismiss the grievances of the southern Blacks, it was impossible to label those who participated in the civil rights movement as "misguided" or "irrational".[15]

The result was a fresh take on collective action outside institutionalized channels. The beginning was with the book *The Logic of Collective Action* by Mancur Olson.[16] An economist by training, Olson provided an explanation of collective action based on the careful calculation of benefits and costs done by individuals. It was progress because he recognized the rationality of protestors. However, he was unable to recognize that individuals are capable of altruistic behavior as well, and they will engage in activities that benefit the group as a whole even if it is not directly beneficial on the personal level. McCarthy and Zald challenged this overtly individualistic portrayal and preferred a model of looking at groups as units of collective action.[17]

Later scholars would add a political dimension to social movement organizations. It was the first time that factors external to the movement would be recognized as influencing engagement in collective action. But it was not until the late 1980s that the "cultural" or factors framing grievances was taken into consideration when studying motivation for collective action.

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[14] *Ibid*

[15] *ibid*

[16] Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Harvard Economic Studies, v. 124 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[17] Goodwin and Jasper, eds., *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*.

Political Process Theory (PPT) eventually emerged as a way to understand collective action in social movements through three main concepts: 1) Political Opportunity Structures, 2) Mobilizing Structures, and 3) Framing Processes. PPT scholars argue that a social movement is intelligible through these three elements.[18]

I will be using political process theory to help me explain the appeal of social and political activism that is based on Islamist values. I chose this theory because it moves from an Orientalist approach and irrational and/or false conscious explanation of Islamist activism to an approach that emphasizes the rationality of participants. It is also a tool that adopts a balanced view in explaining collective action, since it does not heavily focus on external factors and thus disarm individuals of agency, nor does it portray people as overtly individualistic. In addition, it takes into account cultural frames through which individuals express their grievances.

This study acknowledges the work that has been done in the field of classical PPT but also moves away from it. In particular, it aims at moving away from its structural bias[19] by carefully examining the internal dynamics within the MB between 2013 and 2015, while taking into account the opportunities and constraints that shape the contestation strategies of the MB members. I will be investigating how these internal dynamics help shape the direction of the movement and how the MB responds to pressure for change from one of its indispensable constituencies: women.

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[18] Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, eds., *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*, 2nd ed, Blackwell Readers in Sociology 12 (Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[19] Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Jaswinder Khattra, "Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory," *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 1 (1999): 27–54.

By analyzing the way MB women understand their own activism, I aim to add to the literature that expands on the notion of the "political". Because the women's division has been badly hit by the state's violence, MB women have directed their activism to more "innovative" contention practices. I will be arguing that by expanding the notion of political activism to include traditionally less political activities, we can better understand the Sisters' activism after 2013.

**Literature Review**

While mainstream scholarship stresses that Islamist groups and movements are not monolithic, the work of Winter, [20] Moghadam,[21] Bayes and Tohidi[22] tends to label them as "fundamentalists"[23] and thus oppressive to women. There is a focus on how Islamists work against women's empowerment using a rhetoric that highlights Islamic values as being in contradiction with feminist ideals that are western, therefore "inauthentic" and threatening to family values. Abdel-Latif[24] and Tadros[25] have criticized the MB's literature and gender

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[20] Bronwyn Winter, "Fundamental Misunderstandings: Issues in Feminist Approaches to Islamism," http://muse.jhu.edu/article/17369.

[21] Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 2nd ed (Boulder, Colo: L. Rienner, 2003).

[22] Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Esfahlani Tohidi, eds., *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts* (Basingstoke, Hampshire [England] ; New York: Palgrave, 2001).

[23] Winter defines Religious fundamentalism as "a return to this basis: the reaffirmation of religion as a—the—primary tool of social control." p.13

[24] Omayma Abdel-Latif, "In the Shadow of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=22347.

[25] Mariz Tadros, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Gender Agenda: Reformed or Reframed?," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (January 2011): 88–98, doi:10.1111/j.1759-5436.2011.00204.x.

ideology, in particular, for its repression of women's rights and activism for empowerment and equality.

Nonetheless, this repressiveness does not seem to lessen the appeal of Islamic movements to women. Women are estimated to constitute around one third of the MB members and about the same proportion among sympathizers.[26] Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza are not short of women in the rank and file who not only affiliate themselves with both movements, but also work actively to promote their movements' political and gender ideology. Before its closure, the Refah Islamist party in Turkey seemed as appealing to women, if not more so, as men. Yesim Arat's fieldwork in Turkey in 1989 revealed the "unprecedented phenomenon" of increasing women's membership and affiliation to the Refah party which rightly boasted that no other party in Turkey could attract the same number of women members.[27] With more than a million women members, none of the liberal-feminist criticism on the restrictions and impediments of Islamists and Islam to women's claim of power, including seclusion and the stressing of maternal roles, seems to matter. The fact that the Sisters are excluded from the Guidance Bureau or that their Sisterhood is a subdivision of the Egyptian MB does not deter them from dedicating their lives to the movement. How then can we explain these women's enthusiasm for Islamic activism?

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[26] Abdel-Latif, "In the Shadow of the Brothers."

[27] Yeşim Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy: Islamist Women in Turkish Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

Much of the literature on Islamic activism tends to explain it using a socio-psychological approach.[28] Proponents of this approach, such as Ibrahim,[29] Ansari,[30] Munson[31] and Waltz,[32] agree that Islamic activism is a response to the psychological discomfort produced by the socioeconomic strain that Islamic activists tend to work under and they highlight the socioeconomic backgrounds of Islamic activists. Ibrahim, for one, attributed the responsiveness to the Islamist movement in Egypt in the late 1970s to:

> [a] national defeat (1967), followed by an increasing foreign presence (Russians, then Americans), hardening of the social and political arteries of the country (as upward mobility and political participation significantly diminished), soaring inflation and dim future prospects for the youngest and the brightest members of the middle and lower middle class."[33]

The underlying assumption of such an approach is that the socioeconomic conditions that Islamic activists work under tell us something about their grievances and therefore why they join an Islamic movement. It also assumes that Islamist movements tend to only attract socio-economically or psychologically frustrated individuals and therefore highlights a "necessity" versus a choice to Islamic activism and puts a blame on exterior factors and local/international structures.

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[28] Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism*, p. 6

[29] Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Anatomy of Egypt's Militant Islamic Groups: Methodological Note and Preliminary Findings," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 4 (1980): 423–53.

[30] Hamied N. Ansari, "The Islamic Militants in Egyptian Politics", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar., 1984), pp. 123-144

[31] Ziad Munson, "Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *The Sociological Quarterly* 42, no.4 (2001): 487-510.

[32] Susan Waltz, "Islamist Appeal in Tunisia," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 651-670

[33] Ibrahim, "Anatomy of Egypt's Militant Islamic Groups: Methodological Note and Preliminary Findings"

The literature on women's Islamic activism does not seem to deviate much from the socioeconomic approach, with an element of piety that was later added. Scholars such as Mahmoud,[34] Deeb[35] and Hafez[36] who investigated women's Islamic activism, especially in the Mashreq, tended to highlight the element of piety in women's Islamic activism and base it on a psychological distress experienced by the women who were challenged by modernity and thus resorted to Islamic beliefs and practices and found refuge in Islamic movements. Therefore for Islamist women, Islamic activism helped them learn how to construct their lives according to "authentic" Islamic standards in a world that they view as becoming increasingly secular, i.e. "inauthentic".

In addition to the socio-psychological approach, Moghadam used an economic explanation to account for the social bases for Islamist movements. She referred to three processes in which the Islamist appeal tends to play out: 1- social and economic crisis, 2- a crisis of political legitimacy, 3- changes in the patriarchal system with the growing visibility and public participation of women.

> In the absence of fully developed and articulated movements, institutions, and discourses of liberalism or socialism, Islam became the discursive universe, and Islamist movements spread the message that "Islam is the solution". For some Muslims, the "new" Islamic ideology reduces anxiety because it is able to offer a

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[34] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, With a New preface by the author edition (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[35] Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[36] Sherine Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

new form of assurance, and the movement provides new forms of collective solidarity and support.[37]

While Moghadam's argument offers a comprehensive look at the circumstances that Islamist movements tend to work within, it does not explain why women are not as enthusiastic about socialist/Marxist or liberal movements who happen to be working under the same economic and political crisis. Moreover, one could argue that changes in the patriarchal system and the increasing visibility of women in public space should have made conservative patriarchal Islamist movements less attractive to women but yet that is not the case.

Carrie Wickham moved away from the socio-economic approach in explaining Islamic activism while examining the Islamist outreach to middle and lower class Egyptian university graduates.[38] Her study indicated that in explaining the attractiveness of Islamic activism to educated Egyptian youth in the late 1990s and early 2000s, ideology is important. Wickham found that while rational individual interests were the initial attraction to the movement, it was the ability of the movement to frame its activism as a "moral obligation" that helped it retain its members. This moral obligation was reinforced by moral credibility and group solidarity within the rank and file of the movement.

Although the MB Sisters' political activism and engagement in the Egyptian parliament elections in the 1990s until 2005 and from 2011 onwards is recognized, it tends to be labeled as a tool for political manipulation by the MB (as part of the Islamist opposition movements) that

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[37] Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 2nd ed (Boulder, Colo: L. Rienner, 2003), p. 49

[38] Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)

does not exclude women but does not empower them either.  Consequently, while the political activism of Islamist women is acknowledged; it is, however, dismissed as invalid because it does not conform to western notions of feminist resistance and activism. To quote Bayes and Tohidi on the Islamists: "While the men mean to use the mobilized women as auxiliary forces in their campaigns to seize state power, they do not know what to do with them after taking power and consolidating an Islamist state."[39] Bayes and Tohidi attribute the appeal of Islamist movements to an "ambivalence" Muslim women feel towards modernity. They explain that Muslim women express a "psychological" contradiction by resenting modernity (for its postcolonial baggage) and seeking refuge in neo-patriarchal Islamist movements.[40]

 I find this explanation problematic in two ways. First, it disregards any gains that these women have made through aligning themselves to Islamist groups, be it tangible or intangible and therefore eliminates the possibility of a deliberate rational choice made by these women. Second, it fails to acknowledge that patriarchy is not exclusive to Islamist movements. Several liberal, leftist and secular movements in the region have exerted little to no effort to challenge patriarchal understandings of gender roles entrenched in their own organizations and the larger society. Thus, this explanation does not help us understand the preference that women exhibit for Islamist movements.

 Contrary to mainstream scholarship on women's activism in Islamist social groups, Ezzat and Rizzo tend to have a different explanation. Quantitative data collected by Rizzo has shown that Islamist women who tend to maintain a "complementary" stance on gender roles advocating for a society that does not necessarily treat men and women identically but rather justly, have

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[39] Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Esfahlani Tohidi, eds., *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts* (Basingstoke, Hampshire [England] ; New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 40

[40] *Ibid*, p.41

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been successful in lobbying for women's political rights and greater participation in the public spheres dominated by men.[41] On the other hand, Ezzat has argued that in an atmosphere that is consistently hostile to the Islamists in Egypt, women were still able to find a respectable space for their public visibility and political activism through their engagement with the Islamists.[42] Karam has also referred to a tendency for women active in the Islamist movement to be mostly amongst the highly educated and career-oriented,[43] an observation that Ezzat interprets as a tendency for Islamists groups to be more progressive on gender roles in practice than they are in their rhetoric.[44] Furthermore, Stacey Yadav's fieldwork in Yemen has demonstrated that more than any other group, Islamist women are able to redefine gender roles and set the terms of the debate within gender-segmented spaces in ways that have implications for both Islamist and non-Islamist women.[45]

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[41] Helen Mary Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy, and the Status of Women: The Case of Kuwait*, Middle East Studies (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[42] Heba Raouf Ezzat. "The Silent Ayesha: An Egyptian Narrative." in Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Esfahlani Tohidi, eds., *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts* (Basingstoke, Hampshire [England] ; New York: Palgrave, 2001).

[43] Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamisms, and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

[44] Ezzat, "The Silent Ayesha: An Egyptian Narrative"

[45] Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "Segmented Publics and Islamist Women in Yemen: Rethinking Space and Activism," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6, no. 2 (2010): 1–30.

**Contribution, Significance and Research Questions**

Currently, the MB is subjected to a similar crackdown (if not even more grave) than the one in the 1960s and yet the Muslim Sisters do not seem to be abandoning activism, although not all are as openly active as before. I wish to depart from the explanation of women's activism that is based on piety as a reaction to bewildering modernity. I would like to challenge the socio-psychological approach that attributes the appeal of Islamist movements in general, and more specifically the MB, to highly educated career-accomplished women to a psychological discomfort with globalization and modernization that triggers them to seek refuge in more "authentic" movements.

I also wish to investigate how the MB Sisters conceptualize and understand their own activism. My thesis intends to investigate why liberal parties and feminist rhetoric are apparently unattractive to those women and possibly ineffective for their political goals despite the seemingly egalitarian and empowering gender agenda. On the other hand, I wish to explore how and why the MB's activism has been more attractive to women in spite of the apparent marginalizing rhetoric. In addition, I will be analyzing the gender ideology of the MB in relation to a larger gendered environment that is often hostile to the movement and to women's activism in general. To my knowledge, this is the only ethnography about the MB women in Cairo between 2013 and 2015.

**Methodology**

This project is an ethnography that attempts to tell the story of the Muslim Brotherhood Sisters in contemporary Egypt, more specifically after the crackdown of 2013. I used participant observation and interviews, both structured and unstructured, to engage the MB Sisters within a discussion to get their own input on their Islamic activism and their conceptualization of the gender ideology of the MB. In an attempt to contextualize the input I got from the Sisters, I examine some of the key literature of the MB to explore and analyze how the Sisters understand and relate to it.

Because not all of my interlocutors were comfortable with recording, I would usually prepare a few questions and take notes while letting the interviewees take the lead. Often times, I would scribble a few key points during a natural conversation or while observing. I would then write detailed notes from memory when I returned home. The next step was to try and classify this data into categories and translate them. Often times, I would revisit my notes and go back and ask one of my informants what she/he meant by a certain expression or ask them to elaborate on their ideas.

**Entering the Field**

Between March and October 2015, I attended two study groups with MB women and men. Access to both classes was facilitated by a friend of mine who helped ease my entry into the field and introduced me to the Sisters. Occasionally, I was also invited to spend time with the Sisters in recreational-spiritual activities where they engage in both spiritual study groups and fun-natured activities in a day-use place during the weekends. After classes in the first study group, sometimes I would be invited to stay for dinner with the family of the host, Salma, and

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this has offered me a more extensive interaction with the whole family. Later in October 2015, both classes were cancelled and -at the time of writing- have not been resumed since.

**Challenges**

Convincing some of the Sisters to be part of this study has been a constant challenge and quite understandably so. They have been understandably skeptical of my motives and how will I use the data I collect. I tried to be extra sensitive and careful with my approach and data collection and tried to explain to the best that I could the purpose of the study. Eventually, the women and men I interviewed became more trusting.

Early in the summer of 2015, however, one of my contact persons who had arranged a future meeting with three of the daughters and wives of the key figures of the MB was detained. Shortly after that, the three women either did not return my calls or politely "postponed" the meeting until further notice. At the time of writing, this person was released on probation.

**Study Groups**

In an upper-middle class neighborhood of Cairo, twice a week, two different study groups/ classes would meet for almost two hours. The first was held in the apartment of a middle-class family. This was a mixed class led by a male Al-Azhar teacher. The second was a women's only class and was conducted in a mosque-school complex. A female MB member who has an advanced degree from Al-Azhar women's college would lead the discussions. They were both informally organized by members of the MB and attended by invitation only. New comers were

few and would have to already know one of the attendees and ask for invitation. Given the location of the second class, one could assume this was a walk-in class, but it was not. An invitation was needed and permission from the group leader had to be granted first. However, it would be safe to say that it was not held in complete secrecy or without the authorities' knowledge. It is widely known that in Egypt, preachers need a preaching license from the authorities to be able to work in mosques. I am tempted to speculate this was taken care of due to Al-Azhar background of the preacher provided that her MB affiliation was undisclosed of course.

On average there were 12 people in each class in addition to the group leader. The majority of participants were middle to upper class women in the age range of 25-35. A minority of women were in the range of 35-60 and/or were working class. During the summer, both classes attracted a few younger attendees aging between 16 and 25. In the mixed class, the husbands' and biological brothers' (unrelated men could not attend) percentage was always less than the women's: 25-30 percent.

Discussion topics were either centered around a Qur'anic verse or a prophetic narration (*hadith*). Occasionally they were chosen in relation to an Islamic occasion e.g. Ramadan or Eid (holiday).  Topics ranged from Islamic marital etiquette to how to better one's self and community. The books consulted were often ones written by MB theologians/scholars but not always. Anthologies of classical Sunni jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and exegesis (*tafsir*) were frequently referred to.

As the discussion in the following chapters will demonstrate, there are several features pertaining to the nature of these study groups. In general they are not one-way lectures on

nonnegotiable dictates delivered by an authoritative scholarly figure. But rather a discussion on matters that are open to negotiation and contestation by everyone present.

Preachers who are perceived as more knowledgeable and educated on matters of Islam, are nonetheless not immune to criticism or correction when the need calls for it. Their role can be more accurately described as a group leader who will begin a discussion by introducing the topic and then invites everyone to join the conversation.

More often than not, the preacher's insights are challenged by younger, non-specialist attendees. There seems to be neither an academic nor an age hierarchy in these study groups. Participants feel comfortable challenging each other's ideas as they see fit. In the mixed group for example, while the men were happy to sit quietly and nod their heads, the women were assertively -at times even a little aggressively- asking questions, challenging some of the classic jurists' opinions and bringing up other views or interpretations they heard on television or read in a book. The sheikh always patiently answered their questions or acknowledged their point of view. Difference and disagreement were not frowned upon, provided it was supported by evidence.

As the interaction in chapter three will show, participants are aware of the requirements of a strong argument. Apparently, their experience in various study groups has helped them develop a consciousness of constructing a winning argument. Both the Quran and prophetic tradition (*Sunna*) constitute valuable tools they rely upon to enhance their position in a debate. Additionally, more sophisticated participants would draw on the legacy of Sunni traditional *fiqh* and cite a jurisdiction (*hukm*) they know to be valid, although this was less common.

Personal experience is not excluded from the toolbox to cement arguments. Often times, the Sisters do not shy away from sharing details of their personal lives to make a point; it is not judged as private and thus irrelevant to the discussion, but rather welcomed as a valuable experience worthy of consideration.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have introduced and identified the scope and the aim of the study. This thesis is an ethnographic study that aims mainly at exploring two key questions 1) why do the Sisters find Islamic activism within the MB rewarding despite the latest crack down? And 2) how do they relate to the MB's gender ideology?

To introduce my study, I have provided a brief historical background of the Sisters' division, a concise overview of the literature on women's Islamic activism in the region and a brief introduction to the conceptual framework. I have argued that studies that focus on socio-economic grievances and psychological reactions to modernity do not adequately explain the appeal of Islamist movements to its activists. Rather, Islamic activism can be better understood when recognizing the agency of its enthusiasts without disregarding the external context they interact with.

Because meanings we attribute to terms are important, and because the participants in my study call themselves Islamists, I have included a short review of how literature defines Islamism and what it means in the current Egyptian context.

This study uses political process theory as a lens to examine the political activism of the Sisters. I argued that PPT, although a comprehensive theoretical framework, is not without its limitations. While acknowledging the findings of classical PPT, this study also attempts to expand them. In particular, it attempts to look at how movements, such as the MB, react to repression, how the internal dynamics within the movement shapes its decisions and how it expands the notion of the "political".

Since fieldwork is central to this type of study, I have explained how I was able to access the field and the methodology of data collection. Needless to say that the sensitivity of the situation of my interlocutors, has called for a cautious approach to data collection. I was careful to protect the safety of my interlocutors and my own. The next chapter will discuss the Muslim Sisters' Islamic activism using political process theory as the conceptual tool. It aims at exploring how the MB reacts to its environment, how it mobilizes its members and keeps their loyalty in the midst of an external crisis and internal organizational challenges.

**Chapter Two**

**The Sister's Activism: Politics, Piety and Pragmatism**

**Introduction**

The MB is a body that has long attracted women to its membership and has been relying on their contribution since its early beginnings. Estimates indicate a figure between 100,000 and 150,000 Sisters who engage in some form of political or social activism through the body of the MB while the exact number remains unknown.[46]

This chapter will look at how the Sisters conceptualize and explain their activism within the MB. It attempts to answer questions of: What motivated them to join the movement? What kind of meanings do they attach to their activism within the MB? How do they respond to the current crackdown on the movement? And why in an authoritarian regime, when Islamic political activism can pose many risks, it can still find enthusiast activists who are willing to put much on the line to achieve political and societal change. It will mainly discuss how and why the Sisters I interviewed find Islamic activism relevant to their lives and ultimately rewarding despite its hazards. To this end, it will discuss how the MB interacts with its context through a series of contention repertoires that are continually being modified and reframed by its own members as they seek to navigate and change an unreceptive environment.

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[46] Diaa Rashwan as quoted in Omayma Abdel-Latif, "In the Shadow of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=22347.

**Theorizing Collective Action**

**Challenging the Socioeconomic and Psychological Explanation**

As shown in the previous chapter, a considerable amount of scholarship explaining Islamic activism relies on explanations of socio-economic grievances or reaction to modernity. This chapter aims to problematize both approaches. For this purpose, I find it useful to engage with Political Process Theory (PPT) albeit not without caution. This chapter examines the type of contentious practices that MB women engage in when responding to perceived openings and threats and how they constantly (re)frame their activism in ways that are relevant to them. By doing so, I add to the literature that argues that the MB can be better understood through the same conceptual tools applied to many other social movements; however, without disregarding the specific historical and social context of the Egyptian MB, especially after 2013.

PPT, one of the main theoretical perspectives in the social movement literature, uses three major concepts to discern how groups engage in collective action in order to express grievances and protest certain societal conditions. These concepts are: (1) Political Opportunities: external factors (to a movement) that shape and constrain a movement's ability to strategize and use tactics effectively; (2) Mobilizing Structures: the tools used by the movement in order to encourage recruitment and motivate collective action; (3) Framing Processes: how the movement describes its grievances and their goals in a "social construction" that the members can understand, relate to and eventually act upon collectively.[47]

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[47] Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, *Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2

Before the emergence of PPT as a tool to explain the dynamics of collective action, scholars have tended to either focus on the international system or the local political system that the social movements are working within while overlooking the agency of the group members. Alternatively, they have tended to ignore the political constraints and opportunities available for a movement while heavily focusing on the individual rational choice of actors. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a connection between factors was finally formed.[48] Consequently, PPT emerged as a "methodological middle ground" of understanding collective action that provided a better conceptualization of the mechanics of social movements.[49]  The main goal was to include both the rational choice of individuals and the effects of local/international institutionalized politics.

Later on, PPT scholars argued that without the inclusion of the role the meanings that individuals attach to a certain action, collective action remains inadequately understood. This is where Framing Processes come into play. Framing acts as the means through which collective action becomes meaningful to its actors and mobilizing structures of the social movements become relevant to its members. If individuals do not believe that a certain mobilizing strategy resonates with meanings and values they have, or if they do not believe that it is going to help them articulate their grievances meaningfully, they are unlikely going to engage in collective action. To quote McAdam, McCarthy and Zald:

> At a minimum people need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their daily
> lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem.
> Lacking either one or both of these perceptions, it is highly unlikely that people
> will mobilize even when afforded opportunity to do so. Conditioning the presence

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[48] *Ibid*

[49] Glenn E. Robinson. "Hamas as a Social Movement." *In Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach, edited by Quintan Wiktorowicz, p. 113,  Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 2003.*

of these perceptions is that complex of social psychological dynamics that – collective attribution, social construction- that David Snow and various of his colleagues (Snow et al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1980) have referred to as *framing processes*.[50]

In that sense, ideas, sentiments and values are framed in a way that strikes a chord with the people of a certain society because it is relevant to their own experiences, which is then used to mobilize and motivate collective action. Conversely, a cultural framing that is irrelevant to a particular group is unlikely to trigger collective action, let alone sustain it.

**Moving Away From Classical PPT**

Although it is substantial progress from the irrational explanation of collective action, classical PPT is not without its criticism. In general, it was criticized for 1) its heavy focus on structuralism, 2) the portrayal of mobilizing structures as fixed rather than being "dynamically created and appropriated", and 3) the suggestion that framing was created by the leaders of a movement instead of being negotiated by all members.[51] The discussion in this chapter seeks to use PPT while being careful to avoid the "pitfalls" of the classical approach. It will explore the Sisters' activism by focusing on a) the "cycles of contention"[52] and innovative repertoires they deploy when faced with hostility from the incumbent environment and b) how they interact with the MB framing process and constantly push for change by reshaping its mobilizing strategies.

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[50] Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, *Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 5

[51] Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel, eds., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[52] Cycles of Contention was a term first used by Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965-1975* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

**Pragmatism: Contexts and Cycles of Contention**

The context that the MB has had to operate within has always shaped its capacity and strategies to mobilize and/or demobilize. Generally the group has tended to retreat when crushed and later regain ground when allowed to operate even if not openly so. Thus, MB's mobilization has tended to go into cycles of open and clandestine activism. For the scope and purpose of this chapter, I will focus on the cycles between 2011 and 2016.

**Opportunities**

The uprising of 2011 marked a new beginning for the MB to reorganize its cadres, openly address its constituency and recruit new members. It was not long before the new opening in the political scene was seized by the MB to form the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) that participated legally in the political arena for the very first time. The peak of that participation was the securing of 47.2 percent of the lower parliament seats in 2012.[53]

When the state finally opened the door for legal political participation for the Islamists under their own banners, the MB did not waste much time before it was openly targeting youth in universities and youth conferences. Reham was in her early 20's when she first attended a youth conference organized by the MB in her middle-class neighborhood in Cairo:

> My parents are very simple people. They want no trouble and never had anything to do with politics. In 2011, I told them I wanted to attend one of the Brotherhood youth conferences that one of my college friends had invited me to. They were not exactly happy about it but finally agreed to let me. It was a different Egypt back then, everyone did whatever they wanted and no one bothered them. My parents later became sympathetic because they could see that they [MB] were good people and could see how I was involved in many activities and started becoming a better person overall. I started doing many positive things whereas

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[53] "Egypt's Islamist Parties Win Elections to Parliament," BBC News, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16665748. 21 January 2012.

before television was my whole life. We used to visit elderly homes or orphanages and bring them some presents. We used to design activities to educate children in Islamic manners and Quran or plan for how we want to improve our municipality and our country in general. Much of this has ended now, unfortunately.

The university is an ideal space that is strategically used by the MB to reach out to young potential members due to its relative autonomy. A hotbed for recruitment for all kinds of political groups, the university, in addition to family ties, is the most common "point of entry for Islamic activism".[54] Mona, 27, web developer, tells the story of how she was recruited:

They [MB Sisters] were my friends in college. I liked them because they had good manners and were close to God. I have known them for four years and realized they were the best people I had ever known. In my senior year, one of them asked me if I would like to join them and I said I would and that is how I became a Sister.

The downfall of the Mubarak regime allowed for a return of competitive politics and student representation in Egyptian universities. This was an opportunity for MB youth to participate and win 54 percent of student union seats despite only running for 50 percent of them in order to maintain "diversity".[55] MB youth work to engage their peers in various kinds of political and social activities which I will later discuss in further detail.

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[54] Muntasir al-Zayyat, *Al-Gama'at al-Islamiyah: Ru' iah min al-Dakhil, [The Islamic Groups: An Inside Perspective]*, El-Mahrosa Publishing and Distribution, 2005; and Geneive Abdo, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 as quoted in Jeffrey Martini, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Erin York, "*The Muslim Brotherhood, Its Youth, and Implications for U.S. Engagement*," Rand Corporation, (2012) http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1247.html.

[55] "Muslim Brotherhood Students Win 54% of Contested Seats in Egypt University Elections", *Ikhwanweb*, http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30712.

The weakness of the newly formed parties that did not have the MB's history in mobilizing and organization offered another opportunity that the MB benefited from. In addition, the already existing parties' reputation of affiliation with Mubarak's regime helped as well. When asked why other political parties seemed unattractive to her compared to the MB, Salma, 28, programmer in a multinational company asked:

> What other parties? You mean those cartoonish parties? These are useless. The most they could do is be on CBC.[56] They were puppets that Mubarak used to complete his play and make his regime look democratic. There was nobody that could stand up to the old regime except the Brotherhood. No one else dared challenge their authority and threaten their interests. No one had the people's support the way the Brotherhood did. Look at the 6th of April for example; they were not able to get much votes in the parliament; no one shows up when they call for demonstrations. The big numbers are within the Brotherhood.

Salma's view of the ineffectiveness of these parties is telling in terms of their reputation as weak opposition that was not as effective as the MB in confronting the regime. In fact, the state's long history of suppressing real opposition combined with its own disputed legitimacy was efficiently used by the MB to discredit its competitors during the brief democratic episode from 2011-2013. The result was a sweeping victory in the lower parliament that the MB employed to attract even more followers.

Faced by a struggling economy and pressure from the IMF to reform the subsidy system, the MB government gladly accepted all financial aid it could receive. In its attempt to carve an independent foreign policy away from its Gulf neighbors, the state of Qatar has consistently

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[56]Cairo Broad Casting Corporation (CBC) is a private satellite TV channel owned by, Mohamed Al-Amin, a business man with links to Mubarak's regime. "Egypt's Revolution Media: A Question of Credibility", *Emaj Magazine*, http://emajmagazine.com/2011/09/13/egypts-revolution-media-a-question-of-credibility/.

backed Islamist groups in Egypt and Syria. [57]  The previous emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin

Khalifa al Thani, is reported to have offered "generous" financial assistance to the government of

Morsi.[58] Other Gulf States were not as generous, though. Some, like the UAE for example, not

only withheld assistance, but also put pressure on the MB through the SCAF. [59]  And although

the MB was still able to maneuver by capitalizing on the opportunities mentioned earlier, it still

had far graver threats to attend to.

### Threats

Even though the MB has generally retreated when threatened and settled for working

underground in order to survive, the ouster of Morsi in 2013 triggered a different response. The

first phase of this response was characterized by unprecedented levels of mobilization that

included daily rallies, human chains, and the sit-ins of Rab'a and Al Nahda squares of which

both are in densely populated areas in greater Cairo, and near the Republican Guards' Club

(where protestors believed Morsi was being detained) and Cairo University respectively. Fueled

by the belief that peaceful protesting will lead to a situation analogous of early 2011, (whereby

under pressure from the international community, the army would back down and please the

angry protestors), the MB was able to sustain an unusually prolonged period of mobilization.

This was the first reason the MB broke away from its history of short-term mobilization followed

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[57] Sigurd Neubauer, "Qatar's Changing Foreign Policy," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=55278.

[58] *ibid*

[59] Mostafa Mohie and Hossam Bahgat, "Exclusive WikiLeaks Cables Trace Ebb and Flow of Egypt-UAE Relations," *Mada Masr*, http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/exclusive-wikileaks-cables-trace-ebb-and-flow-egypt-uae-relations.

by focusing on parliamentary gains. The second reason was that protestors had learned strategies and techniques of contention from their experience with the uprising of 2011 that later proved useful.

Yet when peaceful street protesting did not get the same reaction from the international community, and the state used unprecedented levels of violence, MB members felt the need to change their repertoire of contention. Even though it did not totally subside, street protesting declined and was supplemented by more "innovative" strategies marking the second phase of the MB's survival mechanism.

**Politics: Changing Contention Repertoires**

At the time I met my interlocutors, they were predominantly engaged in charitable work and playing the classical role MB women play every time there is a crackdown on the movement: supporting families of detained men. Nonetheless, there were other women who were breaking away from this traditional role and choosing another path for their activism, although their activism is not less restrained. The following discussion will highlight the contention repertoires developed by these women and how they changed the internal dynamics of the MB allowing for more prominent roles for women.

**Women against the Coup**

The repression of MB men offered a new opportunity for MB women. In 2013, the Women against the Coup Coalition, led by Hoda Abdel Monem,[60] was formed by nine Egyptian Islamist

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[60] Lawyer and former FJP women's secretariat

women's groups and aimed at reinstating Morsi. The coalition is part of the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy (NASL) that still maintains underground activism despite being outlawed in 2014.

The women's coalition is a significant development in the MB women's activism because it shed light on the price women are paying for being at the forefront and allowed them more autonomy. Noonan notes that "under conditions of repression when male political opportunities are limited, women's realm for maneuver can open".[61] Similarities with the MB women's experience after 2013 can be observed.

By tracking the activism of the women's coalition, three trends emerge: 1) street activism, 2) cyber activism, and 3) using the human rights discourse. To better understand these trends, it is important not to look at them in isolation or in sequence, but rather as three simultaneous strategies whose ratios change over time. For example, when considering cyber activism, that does not mean that the coalition totally abandoned its street activism, but rather kept it to a bare minimum.

The coalition organized the "Seven A.M. Movement" which marked a new beginning for the activism of MB women. Shortly after the dispersal of the two MB sit-ins, the movement organized peaceful protests and human chains in various places in Cairo, Giza and Alexandria. The early timing was carefully chosen to avoid potential harassment from the state and to attract the attention of students and employees on their way to work. They focused their campaign on calling for the release of detained young women and carefully named it "Our Girls Are a Red

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[61] Noonan (1995) as quoted in Beinin and Vairel, Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa.

Line" signaling that a number of the detainees were minors. It was not long before the state's violence had forced a sharp decline of the movement's activism.

Consequently, it was swiftly supplemented by a safer alternative. Through social media posts, the women's coalition organized awareness campaigns about enforced disappearances, the illegal detainment of activists (especially women) without charge, and the inhumane conditions of those in state custody. Most prominent is the series of posts about Al-Aqrab inmates' abuse. The posts were remarkable for their focus on the plight of the detainees' women relatives. They vividly describe the extreme difficulties they go through to be allowed to visit and the violations they face while being searched at check points before and after visits.[62] The posts are usually translated to English to attract a wider readership and use vocabulary that human rights activists worldwide can identify with. For instance, on International Women's Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Women against the Coup Coalition made sure to release a statement that addressed women's rights defenders worldwide to "to stop the unprecedented persecution, degrading treatment and violence against women by military rule in Egypt."[63]

Using the human rights discourse is one of the most significant changes in the MB's contention strategies post 2013. MB members learned that addressing an international audience and articulating grievances that international NGO's can relate to can get them further than street

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[62] See for example "My Visit to My Husband in Aqrab Prison - *Ikhwanweb*," http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=32494.

[63] "Women Against the Coup Urges Rights Organizations to Help Stop Coup Violence, Atrocities: Freedom & Justice Party FJP," http://www.fjponline.com/article.php?id=3034 ; "Egypt Women Against the Coup Marks Women's Day Highlighting Suffering Under Repressive Regime - Ikhwanweb," http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=32470.

protesting at this point. Scholars note that in the MENA region, the human rights discourse has been adopted by political activists of different ideological backgrounds because it is often perceived as less of a threat by the state and thus results in a lower risk of repression.[64] And while this is true for detainees with dual citizenship or affiliation to international news agencies, for other detainees this has backfired. Some detainees who attracted human rights' NGO's attention were subject to more abuse.

### Mobilizing through Informal Networks

Much of the success of the contention strategies by MB women is owed to informal networks. As demonstrated earlier by the Sisters' input, networks of friends represent a strong factor in recruiting new members, especially young ones. And while family ties also play an inevitable role in recruitment, this was not the pattern I encountered during my fieldwork. Most of the Sisters I met were recruited in college as young adults beginning to shape their own worldviews independently from their families and were later able to convince some family members and friends to join them. Some, nonetheless, were not successful in that regard and have to deal with their families' lukewarm attitude towards their activism. Sawsan, who has a degree in pharmacy and is a stay-at-home mother, is an example:

> I met my husband for the first time when I was a senior in college. I had not
> joined the Brotherhood back then, although I did participate in many of the social
> activities and study groups they organized. We met in a family setting and spoke
> for a while but he never proposed. Two years later, he asked my family for
> permission to meet again. He had seen many girls but realized that there was no
> one that he really liked, so he contacted my father and asked if he could see me
> again.[65] By that time, I had already joined the Brotherhood and had started

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[64] Beinin and Vairel (2011) p. 14

[65] Meetings between men and women looking for marriage are arranged through a network of friends and family members who recommend them.

wearing *al-niqab* (full face veil), I asked him if he was OK with it and he said he was. My mother-in-law was not, though. She keeps nagging me about it till now, three years later! She always says, "But, sweetheart, how are you going to eat with us with that thing on?"[66] I do not know what her problem is. She does not even have to baby-sit my son, I take him with me to the study groups. I wish she could just leave me alone. My husband is fine with it and, unlike my mother-in-law, is supportive of what I do with the Brotherhood as long as it does not interfere with my obligations at home.

Sawsan is not the only Sister I met who faces criticism for her activism and lifestyle from family members. Often the Sisters I met who were recruited in college would come from religious families who were wary of political activism although sympathetic to the Brotherhood's and the Islamist message as a whole. As demonstrated earlier, Reham is another example of how a newly recruited Sister was approached through college friends and eventually made it to the MB's youth conference despite her family's initial reluctance.

These networks of friends are cemented by adding a familial feel to them. The family (*usra*) tradition that was started by Hassan Al Banna is a small group of members who meet regularly to study a designated curriculum of Islamic studies. Each *usra* is led by an older member who engages the Sisters/Brothers (separately) in spiritual, political and social activities. The simulation of family dynamics creates an incentive that is hard to ignore. Moreover, the *usra* acts as a means for accountability; if a Sister is falling behind on her activism, she is likely to be pushed forward by her fellow Sisters. The way the system of the *usra* nourishes Sisterhood and Brotherhood among MB members is crucial for its survival despite major setbacks. And whereas it acts as an intended buffer against schisms based on socioeconomic status; it does, however, reinforce a generational and a gender gap since the family system as constructed in traditional

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[66] Sawsan wears her full face veil when her male in-laws are around.

patriarchal societies tends to have older males as the head of the household, and therefore having higher levels of power. Older women also have some decision making power, especially over younger women.

Suhayla, 28, is one of the Sisters who is responsible for seeing to the needs of detainees' families in her *usra*. She described her feelings for her *usra* as follows:

> One really misses her Sisters when she does not see them. I feel bad when I don't see my Auntie (*Khalto*)[67] or Sisters for a long time. We support each other and share all kinds of things together. We motivate each other to do pious deeds (*ta'at)* and help each other come closer to God. We compete in benevolence (*kheir*) whereas alone, one loses momentum, dips into the society and cannot resist temptation. There is solidarity (*takafol)* in our small society, if any one needs help with anything, we do our best to help her.

As clear from Suhayla's input, the motivation the Sisters get from their small *usras* is vital in maintaining their activism and securing a source of solidarity when things get rough for the MB. There is a sense of belonging and support in these tightly knit networks which acts to maintain the membership of the Sisters even if they are no longer active. This is consistent with Taylor's findings on the American women's movement between 1945 and 1960s. Taylor observed that movements which "cultivate and sustain rich symbolic lives enhance the abeyance function by helping to hold members." [68]

Furthermore, in her explanation of Islamist outreach, Carrie Wickham attributed the positive reception of the Islamist message among educated youth in low-income (*sha'bi*) neighborhoods of Cairo to "reinforcement through intensive, small-group solidarity at the grass-roots level"

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[67] A leading Sister who is usually the oldest member in an *usra.*

[68] Taylor, Verta. 1989. "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance". American Sociological Review 54 (5). [American Sociological Association, Sage Publications, Inc.]: p.770. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2117752.

among other factors. [69] MB members I interviewed also reported being socialized in their own small societies and subdivisions to plan both political and –more so now- charitable activities. In fact, the MB has a vast network of charitable services that includes hospitals, after-school educational centers and orphanages. These facilities are embedded in a society that suffers from an inadequate welfare system.

In many ways, the Sisters find these activities rewarding since it helps them contribute to their own communities while simultaneously changing them. Change is meant to be comprehensive: cognitive, spiritual, and social (it is by no means a solitary self-perfecting endeavor). It is also meant to be gradual and bottom-up. Suhayla explains:

> What I like about the Brotherhood is their comprehensive program. There are four areas that we work on for self-development: The cognitive area: the mind i.e. learning about Allah and then learning any other discipline; The faith area: the heart i.e. loving Allah and cementing your belief (*aqeedah*); The spiritual area: planting sincerity (*ikhlas*) and resisting desires of the ego (*hawa al-nafs*); and the activism area: the body i.e. doing good deeds and *da'wa* and that is when you reach out to other people in your community and take their hands, step by step, to fix the effect of years of corruption.

### Rethinking the Bottom-Up Approach

To say that change from below is the only thing that the Sisters aspire to would be a mistake. Historically, the MB has promoted a gradual change of the society before calling for the application of the *shari'a*, thus allowing for building societal momentum and minimizing resistance. Apparently years of the change-from-below approach alone has resulted in frustrating results that the Sisters are determined to overhaul. Salma elaborates:

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[69] Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 151

Every time we change something from below, someone comes from above and sabotages it. We are tired of working for years to fix things and then someone comes and cancels it simply with the stroke of a pen. There must be someone [from the MB] in authority who would protect what we do, or else all our efforts will be in vain.

Realizing that the state is ready at any time to hijack their efforts to improve their communities, the Sisters' are keen to see their movement in power. Their experience in 2013 has taught them that if they are to preserve the fruits of their hard work, they have to make sure the MB has enough resilience to resist one more crackdown. In fact, the freezing of the assets of several NGOs linked to the MB[70] is a pattern the MB is so used to that it confirms their newly formed convictions that gradual bottom-up change may not be the best method.

In essence, questioning the change-from-below method manifests itself through asking for more involvement in decision making. Several of the Sisters I encountered are questioning the reconciliatory approach the MB adopted with figures of the previous regime, especially from the military[71] and the Ministry of Interior.[72]  But more than anything, they are generally critical of the inner organization of the MB and the way the younger members are excluded from positions of power. The MB leadership usually responds with reassuring statements that helps retain the younger, less patient members. To quote a recent statement:

We admit the existence of a disagreement that some –knowingly or unknowingly- limit to the question of peacefulness vs. rebellion, but the truth is that it is more

[70] "Judges to Release New List of MB Names Targeted for Asset Freeze," *Mada Masr*, http://www.madamasr.com/news/judges-release-new-list-mb-names-targeted-asset-freeze.

[71] "Egypt's Morsi Honours Retired Military Brass Tantawi and Anan - Politics - Egypt - Ahram Online," http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/50395/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-Morsi-honours-retired-military-brass-Tantaw.aspx

[72] (Morsi in a public speech referring to the Egyptian Police as "in the heart of the Jan 25th revolution"), March, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUDQo9SxwcE.

than that. It is a disagreement on the methodology of management and the decision-making style.[73]

By admitting the need to reconsider the way decisions are made within the MB, it acts to contain the less satisfied members who push for more transparency in decision making and the need to see a change in leadership that reflects the growing younger population within the MB. In its effort to appease the angry voices calling for a serious change, the statement reminded the audience of the grave situation the MB is currently going through and the need for unity and "to heal the rift" until the members of the Guidance Bureau are able to hold a meeting.[74] Earlier last year, the "young revolutionary" Mohamad Muntasser was named a spokesperson, signaling a willingness to include the younger members and emphasizing "that all its [MB] internal structures and mechanisms of action are now in a revolutionary mode."[75] More recently, the resignation of the Guidance Bureau member, Muhammad Kamal, his call for internal elections and for fellow Bureau members to follow his lead, in order to handover their responsibilities to

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[73] Statement of the Supreme Administrative Committee on the internal crisis of the MB https://www.ikhwanonline.com/BrotherhoodStatements/103/Default.aspx.

[74] *Ibid*

[75] "Mohamed Montasser New Muslim Brotherhood Spokesman Ikhwanweb," http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=31980.

younger cadres,[76] are all signs that the MB leadership is ready to include its younger members in the decision making mechanism.

**Piety: Reframing Grievances**

In its effort to mobilize, the MB has historically framed its political ideology in an all-encompassing concise slogan that the masses can easily relate to: "*Al-Islam howa al-Hal*" (Islam is the Solution).[77] With the opening of 2011 and in an attempt to reassure the liberal block that it was not "seeking to create a theocratic state", the MB abandoned its slogan and adopted "elections are the solution" instead.[78]

For the Sisters who have studied the literature of the MB, however, things are a bit more complex. The MB uses three concepts that are meaningful to its members: 1) *Istikhlaf* (succession in authority/power) is promised to Muslims granted they apply Islam. Thus the MB, provided its members implement Islam, will be eventually able to bring back its glory days; 2) A state of a majority of Muslims must be ruled based on a *marje'yya islamyya* (Islamic reference) to be legitimate; 3) The *marje'yya* stems from *hakimyya* (God's sovereignty) which both the ruler and the population have to submit to. This, in the point view of the MB enthusiasts, is the antidote to authoritarianism.

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[76] http://ikhwanonline.info/446-2/

[77] In 2005, The Court of Administrative Justice issued a final verdict judging the slogan constitutional. It was first used by the "Islamic Coalition" which consisted of the MB, Al-Ahrar Party and Al-Amal Party in the parliamentary elections of 1987. Hassan Mahmoud, ("Islam is the Solution" is Constitutional) – *IkhwanWiki*

[78] "FJP Abandons the Motto 'Islam Is the Solution' - Ikhwanweb," http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28604.

It is important to mention here that addressing an audience that already has a value system that resonates with the political ideology of the MB, at least in its simplest form, is crucial for the ability of the MB to motivate collective action. This value system helps create a sense of a moral commitment that is shaped by the Sisters' own worldviews and their personal understanding of Islam as a comprehensive way of living. It is also nurtured through socialization in MB networks. Therefore, I argue, that without this initial compatibility of the values of the audience addressed and the framing of the MB, it is unlikely that the MB would be able to mobilize or recruit new members.

Doaa, 26, programmer, is an example:

> I was not raised a Sister. I come from a different background. For me, professional success should serve religion. My career should serve Islam. I make it a point to be a successful person because that will, in the end, serve the Islamic nation. I believe Allah will ask me what I did to leave the world a better place. He will ask me if I was silent when there was injustice. Did I do something about it or did I turn a blind eye? It is not about Morsi or the MB, it is about right (*haqq*) and falsehood (*batil*). I used to go to demonstrations after the coup because what happened was *batil* and I had to stand up to it.

Even though Doaa was not educated in the literature of the MB, her worldview resonates with the MB framing and consequently, she was able to respond positively to the MB's call for action. On the other hand, the Sisters who are more experienced in the literature of the MB are more articulate in their expression of values and they use the terms endorsed by the MB.

Shaymaa', 28, communications engineer, explains:

> There must be a reference (*marje'yya*). Otherwise what are we going to base our legislation on? If someone runs a person over with his car, how are we going to decide how we punish him? Do we run him over with a car as well? Do we throw him in jail for say 10-20 years? Who decides that? Custom? Man-made law like in the West? The majority? What if the majority is wrong? We have to base it on something that we know is right for mankind, which is why the Islamic reference

is important here because Allah has created mankind and He knows what is best for them.

The need to base legislation on an Islamic reference is an argument that the MB utilizes to both challenge the legitimacy of the ruling "secular" authoritarian regime and to legitimize its own political ideology. After all, if the state's legislation is neither reflective of the will of the people nor of "Islamic values", why should it be sustained? The ideal situation, of course, would be a state that bases its legislative mechanism on Islam. Central to this point of view is that Islam is inherently political i.e. it has something to say about how public life should be organized and more specifically, especially for Islamists, how the state should rule. This is where *hakimyya* comes into play.

*Hakimyya* is a concept that Sayyid Qutb borrowed from the writings of Al- Mawdudi and subsequently refined.[79] To put it simply, the argument is: by rebelling against God's sovereignty i.e. taking Islam out of public life, a society is in a state of *jahililyyah* (ignorance of the Divine guidance). By professing itself as a legislator, and giving itself the right "to create values, to legislate rules […] and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what God has prescribed", a state is an oppressive and exploitive one.[80] At the heart of Qutb's and many other Islamists writings, the state/ruler should be no more than an executive and/or protector of Islamic law. Thus, by labelling the state as an encroacher of God's sovereignty, MB members are respond positively to the call for engaging in opposition Islamist politics.

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[79] Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008),

[80] Sayyid Quṭb, *Milestones* (Damascus: Dar al-Ilm, n.d.), p.11

Samar, mid 40's, expressed this concept as follows:

> Islam is a comprehensive approach to life. You cannot cherry-pick. You have to take the whole package. We were created to establish the law of God in land (*'iiqamat shar'a Allah fi al'ard)* and that is how we worship Him. You cannot separate religion from politics in Islam. That is not how it was meant to be. Shall I just sit in the mosque and worship God and forget about whatever happens outside the mosque's door step? Whoever wants to oppress other people shall do it? Is that it? Give what is Caesar's to Caesar and to God what is God's?[81] That is not our religion. Our religion says the ruler should rule by what Allah has revealed. "[…] *and whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed - then it is those who are the disbelievers."[82]*

Asking her to elaborate on her ideas, Samar clarified:

> We should read the Quran like it was meant to be; a message to all of us. I say we should be sincere about this religion. Either we let it work the way it was meant to be, or stop calling ourselves Muslims. It is this hypocrisy that has led us to our current suffering. This defeat that all Muslims live in and our subjugation to other nations is because of turning away from the divinely way (*al-manhaj al-rabany*). "*Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth just as He granted it to those before them and that He will surely establish for them [therein] their religion which He has preferred for them and that He will surely substitute for them, after their fear, security, [for] they worship Me, not associating anything with Me*." [83]
> This is a clear promise from Allah that if we follow His path, He gives us authority. "*But if they turn away, [say], "I have already conveyed that with which I was sent to you. My Lord will give succession to a people other than you, and you will not harm Him at all. Indeed my Lord is, over all things, Guardian."*"[84]

To motivate collective action when threatened, the MB advocates that Muslims were given a

promise to be successors in divine authority i.e. in a leading position of all nations if they apply

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[81] "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at Him.", Mark [12:17], *New American Standard Bible Updated Edition*, (Anaheim, Calif.: Foundation Publications, 1997).

[82] Quran [5:44], *The Quran: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings* (Saheeh International, 1997).

[83] *Ibid* [24:55]

[84] *Ibid* [11:57]

Islam. Turning their backs to the "divine way" and disabling Islamic law or pushing Islam aside in public life and substituting it with man-made legislation results in the deterioration of the nation and the subjugation of Muslims to other nations. Conversely, if Muslims "let Islam work" and enable it to function in their public as well as private lives, they will be able to recreate their golden age. But what does "letting Islam work" really mean?

Letting Islam work is a theory that Qutb introduced in one of his earlier works: *Ma'rakat al-Islam wal-Ra's Maliyya (The Battle between Islam and Capitalism)*. A manifesto of his views of an Islamic solution to poverty and inequality in Egypt first published in 1951, it was a piece of writing that stood the test of time in the hearts of the MB affiliates who were dissatisfied with the cautious gradual approach of change that the MB leaders started advocating after the assassination of Hassan al Banna.

To put it in Qutb's words: "If Islam is meant to work, it should rule."[85] As simplistic as it may seem, it was an idea that I heard in various forms among the Sisters and Brothers I spoke to. And while Qutb does not tell us what kind of Islam in particular should rule, let alone, how exactly it should rule; nonetheless, some of the Sisters like Hala, 31, kindergarten teacher, seemed to know:

> What kind of Islam should rule? The kind we always had. We have been ruled by Islam for centuries and suddenly we are colonized and now we do not know what kind of Islam we want to rule? Well, it is Allah and his messenger's Islam. The Islam of the Companions. It is that Islam that should rule.

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[85] Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'rakat Al-Islam Wa'l-Ra's Maliyya (The Battle between Islam and Capitalism)* (Cairo: Dar El Shorouk, 2006) p. 55

In essence, it is an Islam that has been decontextualized. That is, it has been taken out of its historical and geographical context and is used to stimulate opposition political action. A process rightly called by Ayoob "going back in the future" in which the history of Islam is imagined through a rereading of the scriptural text. This reading usually weeds out the "economic", "social" and "political" contexts when this history happened.[86] But why do the Sisters still find it relevant?

### Framing Accountability

The constant reframing of collective action should be read within the MB's changing context. When crushed in an environment where there is no mechanism of accountability, it seems plausible to fall back on a historical context that is perceived to have been more just. Given that state violence and corruption usually go unchecked, and the inability of the MB leaders to address these grievances, the rank and file are pushing to reframe their call for accountability. Considering that so far no one was held accountable for the mass killings between 2013 and 2015 and that the only instrument for monitoring corruption, the Central Auditing Organization (CAO), is under direct control of the president,[87] it is important for MB women and men to highlight how the current legislative apparatus is ineffective in achieving justice and thus should be replaced by an Islamic and therefore, to them, a more lawful one.

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[86] Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p.2

[87] In March, 2016, CAO head was sacked over statements he made on the value of money lost due to state corruption, in which he reportedly estimated that it exceeded EGP 600 billion. "Geneina under Fire after Corruption Accusations," Daily News Egypt, January 13, 2016, http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2016/01/13/geneina-under-fire-after-corruption-accusations/.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this chapter was to examine why and how MB women engage in Islamic activism. For this purpose, the discussion used political process theory as a point of departure but was also careful to move away from the limitations of classical PPT.

The chapter demonstrated how MB members react to perceived opportunities and threats and how it affects the internal dynamics of the movement. In particular, the women were able to carve out more autonomy by seizing the "opportunity" of the last crackdown. Because they were not spared by the state, they were able to push the boundaries and expand the scope of their activism beyond the traditional roles by highlighting their sacrifices for the movement. They also added some "innovative" techniques to the repertoire of contention of the MB which often helped protect them from state violence.

The chapter then highlighted how the MB responds to internal pressure from its members to change its contention practices in response to new challenges. MB younger members in particular are expressing increased dissatisfaction with the movement's reconciliatory bottom-up approach and exclusion from leadership. Finally, I discussed how MB women reframe their grievances in the absence of a mechanism for accountability.

The findings of this chapter challenge the conventional wisdom on Islamist movements in several ways. Although family remains an important point of entry, the discussion in this chapter has shown that young members make the decision to join Islamist movements despite their families' disdain. Contrary to the belief that threats often trigger withdrawal, examining the contention cycle of the MB in 2013 has demonstrated that collective action can feed off a perceived threat provided that protestors believe their demands can be met. It has also showed

that protestors are continuously building on their previously learned experiences, and are learning to update their contention repertoires to adapt to changing contexts. Moreover it demonstrated how in response to internal and external pressure, movements can constantly reframe their call for collective action.  The discussion also adds to our understanding of the "political" beyond the traditional sense of open contestations, especially in authoritarian states. Beinin and Vairel note that in the global south "politics often takes place below the radar screen of the formal terrain that political science usually studies." [88] By taking their activism online and at times restraining their activism altogether or focusing on "non-political" charitable work, MB women are challenging the rigid boundaries of what constitutes resistance.

The next chapter will discuss how the gender ideology of the MB is being negotiated and shaped by the Sisters. It will give an explanation of how the Sisters conceptualize their gender roles and gender dynamics within the household and how that affects their activism.

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[88] Beinin and Vairel, *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, p. 11

**Chapter Three**


**Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus: On Being a Sister in the Muslim Brotherhood**


**Introduction**


The Muslim Brotherhood has been criticized for being an Islamist movement which endorses a gendered construction of roles that does not fully empower the women in their rank and file despite their invaluable contribution in supporting the movement, especially in times of crises.

This chapter examines the "formal" gender ideology of the MB and how the Sisters understand, react, (re)construct, and perpetuate this ideology while under extreme repression. By gender ideology, I mean the group of beliefs and attitudes that the MB use to imagine an "ideal" Sister and the proper roles of men and women in the society as promoted in MB literature, the FJP platform, and in study groups. The chapter aims at exploring the ways in which the MB women create their own gender identity which, I argue, is closely tied to their socioeconomic class. Furthermore, in an attempt to contextualize the MB's ideology on gender, I will compare it to other non-Islamist socio-political groups as part of the general societal fabric's perception of notions like gender roles, family and motherhood.

In order to understand the gender dynamics within the MB, I will be looking at how various feminist scholarship trends theorize the concept of gender and how they use it to understand dynamics between women and men in a given society. This chapter also draws on Bourdieu's work on culture and class; however, it is careful not to reduce the multi-dimensional factors

affecting the gender dynamics within the movement to class analysis only. It seeks to look at the interaction of both gender and class in an inhospitable environment.

The chapter attempts to answer questions of: How does the last crackdown affect the gender dynamics within the movement, if at all? How do the Sisters see their roles as members of the Brotherhood? How do they relate to the roles that are prescribed to them by, say, older Sisters and/or men? Do they (re)create these roles? This chapter is mainly about the meaning that the women I have observed, interviewed and interacted with, attach to being part of the MB community, and ultimately about being a Sister.

**Theorizing Gender**

Feminists have coined the term "gender" in order to refer to the various expectations of the sex roles that are embedded within the societal structure. The feminist literature is rampant with examples of how women have come to learn their expected roles through socialization versus "biology". Indeed, Simone Beauvoir's famous dictum "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" is one of the most widely quoted feminist observations on gender roles as a social construction rather than a biological one.[89] Stress has been made on the various ways in which men and women learn the skills and the "natural" ways by which to act through conforming to societal norms of "masculinity" or "femininity". The result, feminists emphasize, is a social structure that promotes inequality, normalization of heterosexuality, oppression, and patriarchal systems.

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[89] Simone de Beauvoir and H. M Parshley, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.295

Recently, however, the term has been used to refer to the concept and the study of the relational dynamics between men and women in order to avoid focusing too narrowly on women alone and excluding men, which wastes the opportunity of understanding men and women in relation to one another. At the core of this approach is the idea that we cannot possibly understand either women or men through separate studies that fail to recognize the dynamics between them. [90]

To expand our understanding of gender, scholars have made the case of not limiting themselves to studying gender in terms of women-men dynamics alone, but to further include the intricate network of societal relationships and conventions. For that matter, Connel argued that:

> Sexuality, child development, the family, 'sex role' conventions and kinship are part of a whole. That whole is a social structure not a biological one. It is among other things a structure of power, inequality, and oppression; a structure of great scope, complexity and consequence in our affairs as well as those of tribal societies. In these respects it is fully comprehensible with the structure of class relations […].[91]

Some feminist scholars have also pointed out the importance of not excluding the effects of class based and racial hierarchal systems from our study of gender relations. Spelman, for one, argued that gender identity is incomprehensible if we separate it from other elements of identity such as race and class.[92] In fact, unlike early feminist scholars who insisted that gender dynamics alone are sufficient to explain the hierarchal systems of inequality that are constructed in societies, Spelman would go so far as to say that:

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[90] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91 (5) (1986): 1054.

[91] R.W. Coleman, "R. W. Connell, "Theorizing Gender," *Sociology* 19, no. 2 (May 1, 1985): 260.

[92] Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Beacon Press, 1988), p.101

> We thus ought to be skeptical about any account of gender relations that fails to mention race and class or to consider the possible effects of race and class differences on gender: for in a world where in which there is racism and classism, obscuring the workings of race and class is likely to involve-whether intentionally or not-obscuring the workings of racism and classism.[93]

Following Spelman's argument, gender identities and relationships are a part of the social structure that affects and is affected by the dynamics already entrenched in a given society, such as class and race. For scholars like Mervat Hatem, however, Marxian explanations of gender roles in the study of Middle Eastern women are inadequate.[94] She insists that explanations of gender roles, heterosexuality and mothering cannot be explained by Marxian explanations of social and economic class which are "blind" to the workings of an independent system of patriarchy in family relations and men's control over women's sexuality that need to be addressed in separation from explanations that focus on the accumulation of capital and reproduction of class. Hatem's argument is based on "the analysis of the changing cultural definitions of gender roles and sexuality in specific patriarchal systems." She advocates the use of the notion of patriarchy "to refer to historical systems of institutionalized male control of female sexuality." [95]

Hatem's argument is important in acknowledging patriarchal systems that women in the Middle East have to contend with; nonetheless, it fails to pinpoint how these systems of patriarchy are sustained and/or challenged by social class identity dynamics.

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[93] *Ibid*, p. 112

[94] Mervat Hatem, "Class and Patriarchy as Competing Paradigms for the Study of Middle Eastern Women," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 4 (October 1, 1987): 811–18.

[95] *ibid*

Consequently, for the purpose of this chapter, I will be focusing on how the gender ideology of the MB was shaped by societal conventions regarding gender roles and dynamics; conventions which have been affected by the workings of the entrenched economic and social class systems. Moreover, I will also examine how the role of the social and economic backgrounds of the Sisters influence their reaction to and (re)construction of that ideology. And while I am aware that class cannot explain everything, especially in a community where socioeconomic privilege is meant to be downplayed in pursuit of modesty and sisterhood (recall the *usra* egalitarian mechanism mentioned in the previous chapter for example), I believe it does play a role in these women's views of gender and gender roles; thus, I will be exploring how gender and socio-economic class interact to produce the construction of "model" gender roles.

## A Message to the Muslim Woman: MB's Gender Ideology

Known for his articles, *Rasa'el* (Messages), in the *Da'wa* magazine that were later compiled in the book *The Messages of Hasan al-Banna* (Majmuʿat rasa'il al-Imam al-shahid Ḥasan al-Banna)[96], Hassan Al Banna, founder of the MB, wrote the article *The Muslim Woman* (*Al-Mar'ah Al-Muslimah*).[97] The article that is now being circulated as a separate booklet, has three main arguments that Al Banna bases on his views of Islam: First, that Islam acknowledges a Muslim woman's independent identity as an individual and has granted women all of their civil, political and legal rights. Second, women are inherently different from men, and thus the reason

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[96] Ḥasan Bannā, Majmūʿat Rasā'il Al-Īmām Al-Shahīd Ḥasan Al-Bannā (Cairo: Dār al-Shihāb, 1992).

[97] Hassan Al Banna, *Al-Mar'ah Al-Muslimah (The Muslim Woman)*
http://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title=%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81:%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A9_%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7.pdf.

for the different rights and responsibilities that Islam has prescribed for both. In that sense, women's main role is homemaking and raising the *umma*'s future leaders and exemplary Muslims.

Third, there is a natural attraction between men and women and thus Islam promotes sex segregation as a necessary buffer against the "danger" of mingling between the two.

A man of his own time, Hassan Al Banna did not deviate much from the gender ideology prescribed in the much hailed book *Tahrir Al-Mar'ah* by Qasim Amin.[98] In his advocacy for women's liberation and education, Amin used an argument based on Islam to demand for formal governmental primary education for girls and asserted that any education beyond that would be unnecessary since her main job is to be a housewife and a mother. [99] Just like Al Banna, Amin stressed on the familial and domestic duties of women as wives and mothers as their first and foremost roles.[100] In fact, except for its condemnation of emulating the West, Al Banna's gender ideology would be strikingly similar to Amin's which hailed the West, at the time, as being the model for modernization and forwardness. Unlike Al Banna, however, Amin did not mention any of the women's political rights as prescribed by Islam.

Later prominent MB figure and theologian, Sayyid Qutb, had a less flexible stance on women's roles. He insisted that women's sole job is being a wife and a mother and that taking a job without an economic need is strongly undesirable.[101]

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[98] Qāsim Amīn, *Tahrīr Al-Mar'ah* (al-Qahirah: Maktabat al-Taraqqī, 1899).

[99] *Ibid*, p. 32

[100] *Ibid*, p.27

[101] Sayyid Qutb, Al-Salam Al-'Alami Wa'l-Islam (World Peace and Islam) (Cairo: Dar El Shorouk, 1993). P.70.

However on the ground, things were different for the MB women. It is well known that since the late thirties, the women within the MB were involved in organized *da'wa* work outside of the home. They were especially encouraged in fields of charity and education, at least before the first crackdown on the Brotherhood in the 1940s when women were openly active in coordinating means to financially support the families who lost their male breadwinners, and a few even took jobs against the will of their own husbands.[102] And while socializing between women and men was kept to a minimum, Hassan Al Banna did give regular lessons to women and sought coordination with Zainab al Ghazali[103] on matters of *da'wa* and Islamic activism.[104]

**Traditional Islamic Discourse on Gender Roles**

Compared to the discourse on women's role within the MB, the stance of traditional, mainstream religious leaders is by no means different. Al Azhar scholar and former Minister of Endowments, Muhammad Mutawalli Ash-Sha'raawi, is recorded on television interviews and in public sermons insisting that the Quran stipulates that women should not leave the house (for work) unless there is no man to support her financially.[105] He based his argument on the

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[102] See for example the correspondence between Fatimah Abd al-Hadi and her husband, Youssef Hawash, in Appendix I in Fāṭimah ʻAbd al-Hādī, Riḥlatī Maʻa Al-Akhawāt Al-Muslimāt : Min Ḥasan Al-Bannā Ilá Sujūn Nāṣir. (Cairo: Dar El Shorouk, 2011).

[103] Zainab al Ghazali (1917-2005), founder of the Muslim Women's Association (*Jam'iyyat al-Sayyidaat al-Muslimaat*), is frequently referred to as an iconic actor of the Islamist women's movement and the MB, although, according to ʻAbd al-Hadi, Al Ghazali's Islamic activism was independent of the MB until later in 1956 when she finally joined the MB.

[104] *Ibid*, p.23.

[105] "hokm 'mal almar'a  fyl al-islam - alshykh alsh'rawy"- (Woman Working in Islam - Sheikh al-Sha'rawi)- YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqRzy7quBH8.

Qur'anic story of the two women of *Madyan* who normally refrained from watering their sheep with the shepherds and only took it upon themselves to water the sheep because their father was incapable of this job due to his old age.[106] This argument is common among some of the Sisters I have spoken with –especially older, upper-class ones who use it to demonstrate that it is dictated by Islam that a woman must refrain from public life unless there is an absolute necessity.

Over the years, however, the stance of the MB on women taking a job in addition to her main role as a wife and mother relaxed to a considerable extent, and judging by the number of working women in the MB in the rank and file, it would be safe to say that now higher education and taking a job outside of the house sphere is no longer a question of whether Islam allows it, but rather how it regulates it. Al Qaradawi, chairman of International Union of Muslim Scholars and close to the MB,[107] issued a *fatwa* that approves of women's taking a job outside home so long as it does not interfere with her responsibilities as a wife and mother. [108] There seems to be a consensus on this more relaxed stance among the Sisters that I have met and interviewed. Nevertheless, the picture is a bit more complex.

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[106] *And when he [Moses] came to the well of Madyan, he found there a crowd of people watering [their flocks], and he found aside from them two women driving back [their flocks]. He said, "What is your circumstance?" They said, "We do not water until the shepherds dispatch [their flocks]; and our father is an old man." So he watered [their flocks] for them; then he went back to the shade and said, "My Lord, indeed I am, for whatever good You would send down to me, in need."* Quran [28:23-24]. The Quran: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings (Saheeh International, 1997).

[107]"Controversial Preacher with 'Star Status,'" BBC, July 7, 2004, sec. UK, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3874893.stm.

[108] http://qaradawi.net/new/Articles-2686.

**Negotiating the Gender Ideology**

**Mother above Everything Else: The Old Guard and the New in the Sisterhood**

Asking Hajja Su'ad, late 40's, the affluent preacher who led the weekly study groups I attended, about what women's roles meant to her, she said:

> A woman's role is to raise (*trabi*) her children. This is what Allah has created her for; to raise the future leaders who will serve this Islamic nation (*umma*). Salahu Alddin was this great leader because of his mother. This is her true place. The Prophet himself could not do without the consultation of his wife Um Salama. [109] This is her mission. That does not mean that she is in any way less than a man who goes outside the house to earn a living. On the contrary, a woman's role is more valuable because she is the one who raises this man and shapes what he turns out to be. His mission is to provide for her so that she is freed up for this important mission.

Asking her about the possibility of having both a career and being a mother, she explained:

> We have created a world that looks down on stay-at-home mothers and housewives. We have belittled their tasks just because they do not earn a paycheck at the end of the month. This world we live in puts pressure on mothers to take up more than they should and in result free the men from their responsibilities. Islam prevents that. Islam appreciates a woman's job even though it is not financially remunerated. It puts the burden on the man to provide for her and for his family. Islam prevents a housewife or a stay-at-home mother from feeling ashamed because she is not an employee or does not have a full time job. Islam bestows respect on her role as a wife and mother.

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[109] *"When the writing of the peace treaty [hudaybiya] was concluded, Allah's Apostle said to his companions, "Get up and slaughter your sacrifices and get your head shaved." By Allah none of them got up, and the Prophet repeated his order thrice. When none of them got up, he left them and went to Um Salama and told her of the people's attitudes towards him. Um Salama said, "O the Prophet of Allah! Do you want your order to be carried out? Go out and don't say a word to anybody till you have slaughtered your sacrifice and call your barber to shave your head." So, the Prophet went out and did not talk to anyone of them till he did that, i.e. slaughtered the sacrifice and called his barber who shaved his head. Seeing that, the companions of the Prophet got up, slaughtered their sacrifices, and started shaving the heads of one another, and there was so much rush that there was a danger of killing each other…" [Sahih Bukhari, Vol 3, Book 50, Hadith #891]  "Sahih Bukhari : Book of 'Conditions,'" http://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_3_50.php.*

Pointing out to her that being a stay-at-home mother could mean losing her economic independence, she asked:

> If she has no provider or wants to be economically independent, does she have to mingle with men in order to accomplish that? Why can't she work from home? Can she not cook something or sew something and sell it from home? Or work through the internet? Why does she have to be stressed by an eight-hour job outside her house and stress her children meanwhile? The story of the two women of *Madyan* tells us that it is not the job of a woman to mingle with men. *One of the women said, "O my father, hire him. Indeed, the best one you can hire is the strong and the trustworthy."*[110]

Shaymaa', 28, a communications engineer, had a different point of view:

> If a woman wants to be a stay-at-home mother or wife that is not bad. Islam looks highly on that. However, if she likes to broaden the circle of her influence, that would be much better. If she can help educate other children as a teacher or help other people as a physician, for example, that would be great. As long as she does not fall short on her responsibilities to her own children then, she should do it. That is even more highly looked upon by Islam. If she is not a mother or a wife yet, she should educate herself in the best possible way to prepare for that mission.

The focus on the role of motherhood for women is something I have consistently encountered among both younger and older Sisters. Motherhood and child rearing appear to be the most idealized part of a Sister's life. It is the most vital task that her efforts should be dedicated to – even if she does not have her own children yet.  Younger Sisters appear to be more open to participating in the paid labor force, especially if it has to do with education and medicine, in addition to their current and future responsibilities as mothers.

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[110] Qura'n [28:26] *The Quran: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings* (Saheeh International, 1997).

## Mothers in Capitalist Egypt

The notion of the mother as an ideal woman, in the MB circles, is often coupled with a critique of modern day capitalist lifestyle in Egypt. High levels of unemployment, absence of job security, poor working conditions and an inadequate transportation system are all challenges that women and men have to face daily. The older Sisters are especially critical of the way women feel pressured to prove themselves professionally in a corporate world that is often hostile to parents with small children. They assert their unpaid mothering jobs as equally valuable to that of the working women whose contribution is more visible in the economic system and thus better rewarded both financially and socially.

Yet the younger Sisters seem to be more accepting of that pressure and willing to play by the rules of the capitalist game. They appear to be able to sense that it would be harder for them to fit in their society, especially as single women, if they do not contribute to the means of production just as men do. On the other hand, the older Sisters voice their critique in modern terms while relying on Qur'anic texts to build Islamic-sound arguments to support their views. Of course, the societal and the historical context of Qur'anic texts are pushed aside in order to demonstrate relevance to today's problems. Therefore, the story of the two women of *Madyan* is no longer a reflection of their own time or societal norms, but rather a universal timeless dictation of Islam on how a woman's role should be. Interestingly enough, this very same argument is not exclusive to the MB women. It is rather, as previously mentioned, common in mainstream religious discourse on women in Egypt.

### The Islamist vs the Secularist Discourse on Gender

In fact, it is not only religious discourse that promotes gendered relations, motherhood and

the priority of family life. Consider, for example, this section from the platform of the secular El

Masryeen Al-Ahrar party in preparation of the 2015 parliamentary elections:

> […] the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled
> to protection by society and the state […] and motherhood and childhood are
> entitled to special care and assistance.[111]

Furthermore, the Egyptian constitution of 2013 echoes similar views:[112]

> The family is the nucleus of society, and is founded on religion, morality, and
> patriotism. The State shall ensure its cohesion, stability and the establishment of
> its values. (Article 10)

> The State shall protect women against all forms of violence and ensure
> enabling women to strike a balance between family duties and work requirements.
> (Article 11)

> The State shall provide care to and protection of motherhood and childhood,
> female heads of families, and elderly and neediest women. (Article 11)

Comparing the discourse endorsed by the MB with that of non-Islamist parties and the state,

one can see striking similarities on the "natural" role and duties bestowed on women.

Heterosexual family life is held sacred. Celibacy and, especially, homosexuality are out of the

question. And while the MB is happy with the Sisters being the mothers or wives of future

leaders, the state and "secular" and/or "liberal" parties are not satisfied unless women fulfil their

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[111]"Al-Masryeen Al-Ahrar Platform," Section 1.
http://almasreyeenalahrrar.com/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AC-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8.html.

[112] Egyptian Constitution Draft 2013 http://www.sis.gov.eg/Newvr/Dustor-en001.pdf

citizenship duties by striking a "balance" between both motherhood and contribution to the economy.

Mervat Hatem was one to note various similarities between the secularist and the Islamist discourse on gender roles and women in Egypt in the 1990s.[113] She argued that both the "secularist"[114] state and Islamist discourses are similar in the ways they emphasize domesticity as a requirement for femininity. Although Hatem concluded that the options offered by the secular state and the Islamists to women are not drastically different; however, I do think the options offered by some of the Islamists, as in the case of the MB, are different.

Through my encounter with the Sisters, I wish to stress here that the women I have spoken to and spent time with are by no means helpless victims who receive top down ideologies prescribed by men and apply them blindly. I think it would be more useful for our understanding of the Sisters of the MB to look at them as rational agents who consciously or unconsciously calculate the costs and benefits of reproducing the ideology of gender difference for reasons that serve at least some, if not all of, their interests. The Sisters I have met are actively interacting with this gender ideology and reconstructing it in a society that insists on a "balance" between contributing to the economy and motherhood while not asking the same balance of men. It is thus understandable to choose not to combine motherhood and paid labor in order to free themselves for other rewarding activities. Many of the women who are wholeheartedly supporting the gender difference ideology are well educated and have had careers that they have willingly set aside in pursuit of an active social life under the umbrella of *d'awa*. For the Sisters

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[113] Mervat F. Hatem, "Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?", *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 4 (October 1, 1994): 661–76.

[114] I do not think it is accurate to call the state secular because the constitution upholds Islam as the state religion.

who can afford it, designating themselves as stay-at-home mothers and/or housewives has given them the time and energy to construct other rewarding identities and pursue other activities such as being prestigious *da'yat* in women's societies and charitable foundations. By stressing the "difference" in gender roles and responsibilities, the MB might be limiting women in ascending to roles of power, but in return offers to free them from the social "stigma" of being a burden in a capitalist economy. Conversely, that does not mean that it is impossible for women to change the rules of the game if they so wish. In fact, one of them actually tried.

### Claiming Leadership Roles

In 2009, Rasha Ahmed, an academic at the School of Medicine in Cairo University, and an active Sister, tried rocking the boat a little. Upset with the exclusion of women from the serious decision making mechanisms within the MB, she tried addressing her subdivision with her grievances. When her requests were consistently ignored, she wrote an open letter to the *Murshid* (Supreme Guide) online that circulated on social media before it finally made its way to an online newspaper:

> If the Sisters play just as challenging roles as played by men, so why not the treatment of women be equal to men in the right to choose the officials of the MB? Why are the internal elections limited to men? Did the Prophet, peace be upon him, not seek an oath of allegiance from women? Did he not listen to a speech given by a woman? If the selection of the divisions' or subdivisions' officials affects my *d'awa* work and how it is shaped inside the MB, then why don't we [women] have the right to select him?
> I am not demanding leadership for women, but rather our right to the selection and the election of those who lead the *da'wa* that affects us, and I do not see any transgression in that, it only takes effort and bold decisions; and as for the how-to,

it is possible to discuss that after the subject is on the table.[115]

Ahmed was determined in referring to Islamic prophetic tradition when negotiating the gender ideology that restricted women to domestic roles. She was adamant that she was not going to allow the argument of "a woman's natural place is the home" exclude her from the contribution to the MB on higher levels. Basing her argument on the tradition of early Muslims including women in the political arena has allowed her to legitimize questioning the MB's gender ideology and demanding a reconstruction of women's roles and bringing their contribution to a whole new level. Ahmed was, however, careful to maneuver her dissent by not turning everything upside down hence, stressing that she is not asking for leadership roles for women. Abdel Latif remarks that it is unclear whether she did so based on her own convictions or for strategic reasons.[116] Even though her call for change did not result in a major shift in women's status within the MB, it was still a move that other Sisters and Brothers can use in future deliberations.

The Sisters I have spoken to are divided on this subject. The older Sisters, both stay-at-home mothers and professionally accomplished ones, are more conservative on the issue. They do believe it is best for them, the MB and the whole society if women are not in leading roles. Their arguments are mainly based on "natural" explanations of women's roles and nature. The younger ones are mostly reluctant to take a divisive stance on the issue, especially for the time being.

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[115] Mustafa Soliman, "MB Sisters Demand Joining the Guidance Bureau and Participating in the Selection of the Supreme Guide." http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/12/17/43077.html.

[116] Omayma Abdel-Latif, "In the Shadow of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=22347.

When I asked Zubayda, 28, a teacher, why there were no women in the Guidance Bureau or other leading roles within the MB, she said:

> I never thought about it before. I think it is because this is how things have always been and the situation now is not ideal for any change. I know Islam allows a woman to lead. She may not be a *Khalifa,*[117] but other than that I think it is fine. You know, in Gaza they are ahead of us on that issue. The women of Hamas are actually taking leading roles in senior levels. May be the situation here needs to change, it is just not the right time now for these issues.

What is remarkable here, is that some of the Sisters are aware that being excluded from decision making is not something prescribed by Islam. In times of crisis, of course, and in the name of solidarity, this is not something the Sisters want to struggle with now. Nonetheless, they seem to be open to the idea of change especially that they were not spared by the government for their political involvement during the last crackdown. Other MB groups, in similar critical situations such as Hamas in Gaza are an inspiration. However, it does not seem like the Sisters I met are willing to take a step forward on this issue right at this moment given the current circumstances, although my speculation is that they are already taking some matters in their own hands by necessity. As evident by the discussion above, a generational gap is reflected in the different attitudes and/or beliefs toward gender roles among the group of Sisters interviewed. This is perhaps an indication of a more serious tension between several generations and/or currents within the movement, an idea that needs further investigation.

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[117] There is a consensus in classic Sunni *fiqh* that maleness and the Islamic faith are the minimum requirements for a potential Caliph, see for example ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad Māwardī and Wafaa H. Wahba, *The Ordinances of Government (Al-Ahkaam-us-Sultaaniyyah)*, 1st ed, The Great Books of Islamic Civilization (Reading, UK: Garnet Pub, 1996).

**Too Fragile for the Presidency?**

In 2007, following the constitutional amendments and the subsequent elections of the Shura Council, the upper house of the Egyptian parliament, the MB circulated the first platform draft of its then planned political party. The platform incited a wide debate that was specifically criticized for barring women and non-Muslims from being head of state.

Based on classic Sunni jurisdiction of excluding women and non-Muslims from assuming the position of a Caliph, the MB's position is not terribly dissimilar from that of some of the prominent religious figures in contemporary Egypt. In 2005 when the Egyptian feminist writer and activist, Nawal El Sadaawi, ran for the presidency (she later withdrew), the Ex-Mufti of Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah,[118] Nasr Farid Wasil, stated that women are not eligible for the presidency.[119] The statement received much attention in the media and was confused with a later *fatwa* (religious verdict) that reasoned that women cannot fulfill the rule of a Caliph.[120] Later the Grand Mufti of Egypt at the time, Ali Goma'a, clarified that the traditional jurisdiction of prohibiting non-Muslims and women from positions of power does not apply to the context of the national modern state.[121] [122]

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[118] Dar al-Ifta, a state-run body describes itself as "The premier institute to represent Islam and the International flagship for Islamic legal research."  http://www.dar-alifta.gov.eg/Foreign/Module.aspx?Name=aboutdar

[119] http://www.arabnews.com/node/263478

[120] Dar al-Ifta Fatwa # 4335, 2/26/2006

[121] http://www.albawaba.com/news/egypt%E2%80%99s-grand-mufti-says-women-can-lead-modern-islamic-nations

[122] Mariz Tadros confused the ex-Mufti with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al Tayeb, both can express personal opinions as scholars of jurisdiction but their opinions do not amount to the status of an "official fatwa"

In any case, the MB's position should not be read out of its political context. Brown and Hamzawy remark that the platform was careful not to alienate MB's biggest supporting block: the conservatives who want to see "Islam play a bigger role in public life."[123] But it was not only its most loyal constituency that the MB was trying to please. The MB seems to have been prudent enough to appeal to an even wider spectrum of Egyptians as evident by a survey done by the UNDP in 2010. The sample surveyed showed that only 45.9 percent of Egyptians believed women should have the right to become prime minister, and a mere 25.7 percent thought women should have the right to become head of state.[124] Given such results, one could argue that the MB's stance, more than an ideological one, is a strategic attempt to present itself as a plausible option for the average Egyptian.

But not all MB members agreed on the tactic. For MB leaders, the disagreement was loud and clear. Some were keen to reassure other political currents and liberal intellectuals that the MB is moving toward a more modern view of governance. Abu al Futuh (before defecting) and Gamal Heshmat, two leading figures in the MB, openly dismissed the prohibition and repeatedly voiced their critique in the media stressing that they did not see the platform before its circulation.

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"The Muslim Brotherhood's Gender Agenda: Reformed or Reframed?," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (January 2011): 88–98.

[123] Nathan Brown and Amr Hamzawy, "The Draft Party Platform of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Foray Into Political Integration or Retreat Into Old Positions?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 14, 2008, http://carnegieendowment.org/2008/01/14/draft-party-platform-of-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-foray-into-political-integration-or-retreat-into-old-positions.

[124] Egypt Human Development Report 2010. http://www.eg.undp.org/content/dam/egypt/docs/Publications/Docs%20HDRs/02_NHDR%202010%20english.pdf

Even though the subject was debatable amongst the MB leadership, there was a consensus within the MB Sisters and Brothers I have spoken to. Although, for the Brothers, things might be a little more open to negotiation. Consider, for example, this exchange with Hossam, 32, electronic engineer, and Salma's husband:

> Me: How do you feel about women running for presidency? Would you vote for a female presidential candidate?
> Hossam: No.
> Me: Why not?
> Hossam: Because a woman would not be able to do it; it's too hard.
> Me: What if you had two presidential runners: Heba Rauf Ezzat[125] and any other non-Islamist male runner, who would you vote for?
> Hossam: Heba Rauf because she's an Islamist.
> Me: What if Khairat el-Shatter[126] and Heba Rauf both run for presidency, who would you vote for?
> Hossam: Khairat el-Shatter.
> Me: Why?
> Hossam: Because he's a man. Look, a woman is emotional. There will be tough decisions that she will have to make as president, like declaring war for example. A woman is not up for that. It is against her nature. There is a time every month when she is not really herself. Besides, she will have to deal with the *Mokhabarat*[127] and these are the dirtiest of all people. Did you know that there has never been a female president in the U.S.? I know that in Germany they have a female chancellor but Egypt is not like Germany. The system is totally different. Look at what happened to Morsi; he is behind the sun (*wara eshams*).[128] I would not want that to happen to my wife or my sister.
> Me: What if the system changes?
> Hossam: If you run, I'll vote for you! [Laughter]
> Me: No, seriously.
> Hossam: If the whole system changes, I will consider it.

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[125]Heba Rauf Ezzat teaches political science at Cairo University, writes on issues of Islam, modernity and human rights and is co-founder of IslamOnline.com. "Meeting Heba Ezzat," *openDemocracy*, http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/article_2497.jsp

[126] Deputy Supreme Guide of the MB in Egypt and the initial candidate of FJP during the 2012 presidential election before being disqualified by the election commission. He currently faces a death sentence among other MB figures.

[127] Gihaz al-Mukhabarat al-Amma, The General Intelligence Directorate (GID)

[128] An expression in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic meaning in deep trouble that is likely irrevocable.

Salma, however, was less diplomatic for that matter.

> Salma: I would choose the man. If they both have the same qualifications and the man is capable of achieving justice and tolerance for the Islamists, then I will choose him.
> Me: Because he's a male?
> Salma: I will not choose someone just because she is a female or an Islamist. I want to choose the person who is best fit for the position and who will achieve justice and development. If the woman has better qualifications for that, then I am choosing her. If they both are the same –qualifications wise, then I am choosing the man. Look at the world around you. Is it a coincidence that most countries (democratic ones included) have a male head of state? That is because they know it is for the best.

Hossam seems to attribute the prohibition on women taking office for protective reasons. This is an argument that has been consistently used by the MB to explain excluding women from leading roles. Blaming the repressively socio-political external context surrounding the MB has been an argument that is hard to dismiss given the state's hostility and the recent crackdown on all prominent figures and activists. Pragmatically though, the tactic has allowed the MB to survive similar crises by relying on the women's contribution without giving them administrative leading roles that could make them an easier target for the state; thus, giving the MB more options to maneuver.

Given a choice between an Islamist candidate and a non-Islamist, the Brothers seem to be more opened to the idea of a woman candidate but would still ideally prefer an Islamist male candidate. The argument is multi-faceted and is based on various explanations. In addition to the "emotional nature" of a woman, there is the biological nature which is used to bring women's judgment into question. Linking the historical role of a Caliph to a modern day head of a national state is also common. Because of the public nature and combined role of a Caliph as a spiritual

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and political leader, classic Sunni jurists have tended to prefer a Muslim male to lead the Caliphate (being a religious-political body that united the whole Muslim community).[129]

The comparison with Western democracies and the implication that they are not fairing much better has also been common in the input of the Sisters who use it to suggest that things are the way they are because that is how they should be. Obviously, the last crackdown on MB activists (both men and women) has not been a catalyst for change in the MB's stance on the issue. In the face of a hostile environment, the MB members strategize by holding on to rigid understandings of gender as a survival mechanism. However, given the reliance of the movement on the efforts of women, they are able to reconstruct these gender roles.

### Negotiating Gender Dynamics in the Household

In one study group meeting the preacher, Hajja Amaal, late 40s, asked:

> Now, your husband is your ship to heaven (*Jannah*). Sometimes, your ship can be a little rusty; are you going to get aboard or not? Are you willing to miss out on heaven because your ship is a little rusty? Also, bear in mind that Allah is testing you; are you going to cover (*tasturi*) on your husband? Or are you going to go around telling everyone you know, especially your parents? *"They [your wives] are a garment (i.e. vestment, mutual protection) for you, and you [husbands] are a garment for them"* (*hunna libasun lakum wa'antum libasun lahun*).[130] Nowadays, we see many problems among wives and husbands because of a rivalry (*niddeya*) between them. The wife wants to be a rival[131] (*nid*) to her husband and that is not how things should be. Imagine that in the workplace, the boss has decided that one employee should be in charge of (*mas'ul*) the other. The boss ordered the employee in charge to be compassionate toward the other employee who is supposed to obey. Now, imagine that this boss is Allah; are you going to obey Him or not?

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[129] *Kadi, Wadad; Shahin, Aram A. 2013. "Caliph, caliphate". The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought: 81–86.*

[130] Quran [2:187] Muhammad Mahmoud Ghali, *Towards Understanding the Ever Glorious Quran*, (Dar An-Nashr Liljami'at, 2008).

[131] (*Nid*) can also mean opponent, antagonist, or adversary. Rohi Ba'Albaki, Al-Mawrid: A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary, 19th edition (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Ilm Lil Malayin, 2002), p.1163.

Needless to say, everyone present understood the analogy as the employee in charge being the husband and the employee who is supposed to obey being the wife. That analogy, however, did not pass without contestation from the younger Sisters. Salma, 28, programmer in a multinational corporate, interrupted:

> But there has to be some kind of justice. Things have to be clear in terms of who is responsible for what exactly. A man cannot just wrong his wife and expect her to obey him just because Allah said so. She cannot just cover up on whatever he does. There must be some boundaries; there must be justice, and it has to be known who exactly did what.

Hajja Amaal retaliated:

> Bear in mind that your strength lies within your weakness. The more you show your weakness and your submissiveness to your husband, the stronger you are and the greater you gain. He does not need another man (*ragil*) with him at home; someone to constantly challenge whatever he has to say, that is not why he married you. This rivalry and competitiveness he can find elsewhere. He needs solace (*sakan*) and mercy (*rahma*) that only you can give.

Manal, 27, graphic designer, voiced her objection:

> What about the man who does not carry out his responsibilities? I know men who neglect their families and do not even provide for their wives and children. Some men just don't care no matter how much lenience or weakness you show them. They just don't care even if you cry your heart out in front of them!

Hajja Amaal continued to defend her strategy despite the younger Sisters' interventions. She was later joined by one of the attendee Sisters who is slightly older than the rest of the group:

> Sometimes you use the wrong key to open a door; the door does not open and yet you insist on using the same key. Maybe it is time you used another key. If he does not seem to care about your crying, well, then, maybe try something else. It is not smart to keep it depressing all the time at home. Remember that he can go out and spend time in cafes with his friends while you are spending most of your time at home with the kids. Do not make a fuss over every little thing; not taking out the garbage is not like not providing for the household. I used to be very picky over every little thing and it did not work. Later, I learned to be cheerful, and when I am upset, I just do not look at him; he cannot stand it and it makes all the difference.

At this point, Yosra, 25, financial accountant, who has just finished her internship in Sydney, Australia mentioned that Australian Muslim couples share all the chores together and thus there was no need for a submissive strategy. When Hajja Amaal argued that this was certain "people's traditions" (*'adat sha'b*) that could not be emulated by other Muslims, Yosra referred to a narration by Aisha, Prophet Muhammad's wife, which describes him as "in the service of his family" (*fi mihnat ahlih*),[132] strong evidence indeed given its perceived authenticity. Equally valid is the use of personal experience, perhaps to communicate a kind of "offer your experience as your truth",[133] as a way of reflecting on those experiences and learning from them.

### A Transnational Timeless Muslim Community

Remarkably, Cairene MB women see themselves as part of a greater global Islamic *umma;* Islam in Australia, or elsewhere for that matter, seems to be relevant. Gender roles as understood and practiced by any Muslim community, no matter how culturally different, are worthy of inspection as long as it serves as a "model" for the gender roles that the younger Sisters aspire to. The Sisters in Cairo are able to imagine themselves as individuals of a transnational Muslim community that is not restricted to the nation state. It is interesting that the gender dynamics between Australian couples were the ones looked up to and not, say, gender dynamics in another Arab and/or Muslim majority country. The cultural difference does not seem to matter much; in

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[132] Sahih Bukhari Volume 1, Book 11, Number 644. Narrated by Al-Aswad, that he asked 'Aisha "What did the Prophet use to do in his house?" She replied, "He used to keep himself busy serving his family and when it was the time for prayer he would go do it." Grade: Sahih (authentic) according to Al-Bukhari. http://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_1_11.php

[133] For a discussion on personal experience as methodology in feminist scholarship see for example Foss, Karen A., and Sonja K. Foss. 1994. Personal experience as evidence in feminist scholarship. *Western Journal of Communication.* 58 (1): 39.

the end, what really counts is the link to a greater *umma* where Islam is a common ground. The key here is justice, so stressed upon by the younger Sisters. If the relationship exhibits notions of justice, it is therefore the "true" Islamic one worthy of emulation.

This global *umma* is timeless as well; gender dynamics between Muhammad and his wife, Aisha, from the seventh century proved to be hard to dismiss as dated and were called upon as proof for timeless notions of equality, accountability and cooperation between husbands and wives. While traditional gender roles are staunchly upheld by the older Sisters, it is impossible to ignore the trend among the younger ones, especially the employed among them, to call for a more egalitarian dynamic based on Islamic tradition as much as on a "universally" accepted concept of justice.

But not all the Sisters look back in time in search for egalitarian gender dynamics. Older ones who enthusiastically endorse traditional gender roles seem to have internalized some of the classic MB literature addressed to women in the 1980s. Consider, for example, this paragraph by Al Jawhary and Khayyal from the section on the husband's rights:

> And obeying is part of good companionship (*husn al-'ishra*) […] it is an art and a sign of classiness and good upbringing. It is the reason why love, affinity and mercy [between a husband and wife] last. Often, difficult [domestic] problems are solved through a tender smile, a friendly look, a flattering compliment, good manners and lenient submissiveness. [134]

Notions of femininity that are intertwined with submissiveness and leniency in the discourse of the MB literature addressed to women astonishingly resemble the discourse of other religious

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[134] Maḥmūd Muḥammad Jawharī and Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Khayyāl, *Al-Akhawāt Al-Muslimāt Wa-Binā' Al-Usrah Al-Qur'ānīyah*, al-Tahrīrah 1 (al-Iskandarīyah: Dār al-Da'wah lil-Ṭab' wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1980).p. 393

conservative literature addressed to wives. Western Christian conservative literature, even as recent as 2010, based on biblical views of how an ideal wife should be, echo similar passages:

> The Bible does not give a lot of specifics about how a wife is to show respect to her husband. But we do have one clear example 1 Peter 3: 1-2 , where the apostle wrote: "In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they maybe won without a word by the behavior of their wives as they observe your chest and respectful behavior."[135]

Based on the previously noted similarity and discussion, it can be argued that: First, the gender discourse within the MB is not unique and certainly not drastically different from that of other religious conservative groups. Second, the discourse is not static nor is it unquestioned. It is, however, maintained by certain Sisters who not only can afford it but are also able to enjoy its perks.

**Gender Roles and Class**

**In the Upper Class, Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus**

Sherifa, Salma's mother, was in her early 50s when I met her. She graduated medical school in the early 1980s and took a job in a governmental hospital. The pay was modest but she accepted because the job offer guaranteed a two-year maternal leave for each of the three children she had, an advantage that no private hospital could offer. After six years, she picked up where she left off and later opened her own clinic in a middle class neighborhood in Cairo. She often attributed the success of her three daughters to those years she exclusively dedicated for

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[135] Tony Evans, The Skill of Submission in *For Married Women Only: Three Principles for Honoring Your Husband* (Moody Publishers, 2010), p. 11.

her role as a mother. She proudly described how she was the one who followed their school work

closely, attended every parents' meeting, and drove them to swimming sessions four times a

week. Their father, who had long irregular shifts in a private hospital where he worked as a

surgeon, and in accordance with traditional gender roles, felt that raising children was the

mother's realm. Sherifa seemed to agree:

> Men are incapable of raising children; they do not have the patience it takes to
> raise a child. That is not to say that they should not be there for their children. I
> remember my father always used to be there when I came home from school. He
> always asked me how my school day was and that is important, but the majority
> of the responsibility of raising children should be the women's. Have you read
> *Women are from Venus and Men are from Mars*?[136] Women have a different
> nature than men. They are more nurturing, compassionate and patient versus men.
> Their emotional nature allows them to fulfill their children's needs more than men
> can. Why do you think Allah has created us [men and women] different? We have
> different missions that are equally valuable. *Everyone will find it easy to do such*
> *deeds that will lead him [them] to what he [they] was [were] created for.*[137]

Safa, mid 30s, housekeeper, disagreed:

> I do not think that raising kids is the wife's job alone. Most women do it on their
> own because the husbands are too lazy or just unavailable to carry out their
> responsibilities as fathers. He is either working or spending his free time in cafes.
> I do everything, women do everything… I make money to provide for whatever
> he cannot provide without having to ask. I take care of the house because he is not
> there. I fulfill all of my children's needs because he does not. It is the woman who
> does everything.

Faten, mid 30s, hairdresser, also had similar views to Safa's:

> Raising kids does not mean you stay at home. A woman is just like a man in that
> regard. You raise them and you work, that's how you feed them. Otherwise, how

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[136] John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: The Classic Guide to Understanding the Opposite Sex* (HarperCollins, 2004).

[137] *"Imam Ahmad recorded from Abu Bakr that he said to the Messenger of Allah, "O Messenger of Allah! Do we act according to what has already been decided, or is the matter just beginning (i.e., still undecided)" He replied, Indeed it is according to what has already been decided. Then Abu Bakr said, "Then what (good) are deeds, O Messenger of Allah" He replied, "Everyone will find it easy to do such deeds that will lead him to what he was created for."* Abdul-Rahman, Tafsir Ibn Kathir Juz' 30 (Part 30).

are you going to raise them? Take a leave for years like governmental employees? That means the kids are going to starve, that is for sure. If your husband's money does not suffice to buy everything, you have to work, what else are you going to do?

Safa and Faten were regular attendees at the study group that took place on Fridays at Sherifa's place. Safa would usually finish cleaning the house and cooking a meal before the sheikh arrived shortly after Friday prayers. She often praised her husband's efforts to supplement the family's income by securing seasonal jobs in addition to his main job as a janitor in a nearby block. Yet she would also highlight that if it was not for her financial contribution, they would never have been able to move out of the room the family of seven used to live in. In addition to improving her family's finances, Safa's financial contribution also earned her the autonomy and power to intervene when serious family decisions had to be made. Safa insisted that her eldest daughter must go to college before accepting a marriage proposal from a potential suitor. She reasoned that her daughter's getting a higher education will increase her likelihood of securing a better livelihood and possibly moving into a higher class. The decision strained Safa's relationship with her husband who did not appreciate wasting the opportunity of an early marriage that could have taken a considerable part of the economic burden off his shoulders.

Faten was a hairdresser/beautician who could not afford to open her own shop. She would carry around a small suitcase full of various cosmetics and offer her services to women who preferred a beauty treatment in the privacy of their own home. Her business depended on the network of the study groups' attendees who were looking for someone pious and therefore trustworthy (*betra'y rabena*). Her customers were middle class women who would phone her to schedule a visit in and around downtown Cairo. However, she was unable to expand her business beyond that niche because of her reliance on the public transportation system. As a result, she

had to turn down upper-class customers who lived in gated communities on the outskirts of Cairo –inaccessible to her without a car. Faten's husband was a painter who struggled to work steadily for one contractor. According to Faten, he was too proud (*'ando karama*) to tolerate being bossed around and did not mix well with other painters who wanted to turn on music or smoke while working. His inability to secure a stable income for the family necessitated that Faten step in and help. She felt that, in return, she should be able to have a bigger role in decision making within the family.  She also believed that her husband's complaining of having to stay with their children while she went out to secure the lion's share of the family's income was unjustified.

### Paradoxes of Class

In order to understand MB women from different classes, I find it useful to draw on Bourdieu's social critique of the French society. [138] He argued that individuals of different social positions are socialized differently. Their socialization teach them to develop preference for certain values and experiences. These experiences shape the amount and forms of resources they inherit and draw upon as they confront various challenges in the social world.[139]  In line with Bourdieu's model, whereas Safa and Faten share many of the values and practices with the middle-class MB women they socialize with, they seem to have developed distinctive values and expectations that are unique to their socioeconomic status.

What Bourdieu's argument does not account for, however, is how social position can be empowering/disempowering in terms of gender dynamics. Faten's and Safa's experience as part

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[138] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

[139] *Ibid.*

of the working class has offered them a different perspective on gender roles from that of the middle class Sisters. In general, they are more critical of traditional gender roles advocated by middle and upper-class women. They are willing to challenge the argument of the "natural" mission bestowed by God on women because they are biologically different than men. An argument more often promoted by privileged MB women who have access to various sources of income that can free them up for mothering roles and, thus, justifies the less egalitarian gender roles within the family.

In his discussion of the division of labor within families of different classes, Wright noted that: "The specific properties of class positions transform the constraints within which people struggle over gender relations in their lives, and under certain conditions this facilitates forging more egalitarian gender relations."[140] Following Wright's argument, Safa's and Faten's families dependency on their contribution to the family income has allowed them to challenge the traditional division of labor and gendered relations which in turn has led to more egalitarian dynamics within the family. Paradoxically, the less privileged women are the ones who have more leverage and bargaining power to challenge and reconstruct the traditional gender ideology. The economically and socially privileged women who have access to gendered American literature such as John Gray's *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* use it to explain the division of labor within the family and to reproduce gendered dynamics that prevail within the middle-class households. Without access to such discourse, the working class women are

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[140]Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis, Studies in Marxism and Social Theory* (Cambridge ; New York : Paris: Cambridge University Press ; Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1997), p. 121

less likely to accept an argument of women and men being inherently different, and therefore must have different roles.

### Root of All Evil

A valid question to ask here is: If the MB is specifically sensitive to the imperial interests of the West, then why do these women endorse Western values? Clearly the MB gender ideology as understood by the women I met is not "purified" of "non-Islamic" concepts. Often times values will be borrowed from other cultures and societies as long as it fits with the Sisters' own perception of the "model" gender dynamics that happen to be encouraged through socialization in MB circles and the society as a whole. And as much as it shatters the image of cultural authenticity that the MB advocates, it is also an indication that MB members, like members of other Islamist and secular groups, are not dismissive of everything "Western" (assuming the existence of a pure Western culture). Instead, the Sisters are selective about the Western values they embrace. While being aware of the colonial legacy and the economic and cultural hegemony of the West, the MB women are capable of distinguishing between the values they are willing to emulate and those they dismiss as threatening to family life they cherish deeply.

This selectivity is not exclusive to MB women. Women of the Islamist Hizbullah, as Anne Marie Baylouny observed, exhibited similar tendencies. In her analysis of the programs addressed to women on al-Manar official satellite channel, she concluded that certain "American norms and research findings are presented as authoritative, to be admired and imitated."[141] Similar to Hizbullah women, MB women are able to reconcile opposing foreign policies of the

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[141] Anne Marie Baylouny, "Hizbullah's Women: Internal Transformation in a Social Movement and Militia" in Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel, eds., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011).

West with embracing some of its solutions to everyday problems. The same rings true for the sample of Muslim women surveyed by Gallup in several majority Muslim countries. Results showed that a significant majority of women surveyed "while admiring much about the West, the majority do not yearn to become more like their Western counterparts. While they favor gender parity, they likely want it on their terms and within their own cultural context."[142]

## MB and Feminism

### The Egyptian Feminist Movement

Given the tendency of the MB members to dispute its gender ideology, it is tempting to ask: Is there room for feminism within the MB? A simple yes or no would do a disservice to the efforts of these women and men for gender and social justice. The MB women and men I met were careful to distance themselves from the feminist movement in Egypt. They are critical of feminist values, especially in its Egyptian context. Considering the colonial legacy of feminism in Egypt,[143] the complicity of some Arab feminist scholars with orientalism,[144] and their reputation of producing portrayals of Arab women for the consumption of their western audience,[145] the criticism is understandable.

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[142] John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks For Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2008). p.107

[143] For a detailed discussion on this, see Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1993); for a similar discussion on Algeria see Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*, (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[144] Carine Bourget, "Complicity with Orientalism in Third-World Women's Writing: Fatima Mernissi's Fictive Memoirs," Research in African Literatures 44, no. 3 (2013): 30–49, doi:10.2979/reseafrilite.44.3.30.

[145] Amal Amireh, "Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World," Signs 26, no. 1 (2000): 215–49.

Conscious of the shaming propaganda waged by secular feminists against Islamists in Egypt[146] and the history of state feminism,[147] MB women and men are suspicious of the goals of several well-meaning callers for women's rights in Egypt. Several women I spoke to questioned the motives of some of the "independent" bodies engaged in advocating for women's rights in Egypt. They suggested these bodies are co-opted by the state and thus work to discredit the Islamists.

Their suggestion is not without reason. In September 2013, The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) (a body that stresses its autonomy verses state-run feminist entities such as the National Council for Women) issued a statement that claimed the MB "used violence and hate speech against women and Copts" and urged it "to stop using women and children as human shields in non-peaceful demonstrations". It also alleged that "women had filed reports for being kidnapped and assaulted in the Raba'a sit-in and were used for sex jihad".[148] The statement was signed by key Egyptian feminist organizations and figures, including Shahenda Maklad[149] and Fathiah Al-Assal.[150]

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[146] Nawal El Saadawi, for one, consistently undermines and dehumanizes Islamists in her memoirs as well as in the media. *Mudhakkirati fi sijn al-nisa' (My Memoirs in the Women's Prison)*. Cairo: Dar al-Mustakbal al-Arabi 1983; Rachel Cooke, "*Nawal El Saadawi: 'Do You Feel You Are Liberated? I Feel I Am Not*" The Guardian, October 11, 2015, sec. Books, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/11/nawal-el-saadawi-interview-do-you-feel-you-are-liberated-not.

[147] For an argument on how state feminism is used to eliminate the Islamists in Egypt, see Roxanne D. Marcotte "Egyptian Islamists and the Status of Muslim Women Question," http://www.jsri.ro/old/html%20version/index/no_11/roxannedmarcotte-articol.htm.

[148] (The Egyptian Woman and the Muslim Brotherhood: Overuse and Wholesale Violations) September 1, 2013, http://ecwronline.org/arabic/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b1%d8%a3%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b5%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d9%88%d8%ac%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%b9%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%ae%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b3%d9%84%d9%85/.

[149] Leftist activist, best known for her activism against feudalism in the village of Kamshish in the 1960s and dubbed "Mother of the Farmers".

[150] Feminist playwright, activist and late chair of the Progressive Women's Federation of the leftist Tagamoa Party

Known for its activism against sexual harassment in Egypt, the ECWR has successfully promoted its "Making Our Streets Safe for Everyone" campaign to mobilize against sexual harassment in public space. For all of its work on various gender-related issues, ECWR is arguably able to maintain its activism by avoiding addressing sexual violence by the state. Sexual violence that women face by state officials in public and in state custody usually receives little to no attention.[151]  Rizzo, Meyer, Price insightfully note that "like all registered and approved NGOs, [ECWR] demonstrated that its work was nonthreatening to the ruling regime."[152]  For instance, ECWR was careful not to campaign against virginity tests conducted by military forces on female activists in 2011 and defended by Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. The General was even praised for his "deep respect for women" by ECWR head.[153] MB members are careful to disengage with feminism, in part, because of the inconsistency and partiality within the Egyptian feminist movement. And also because the Egyptian feminist movement is not willing to acknowledge the efforts of Islamist women in achieving gender justice in Egypt. The result, I argue, is hurting the Egyptian feminist movement as a whole.

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[151] "Egypt: New Report Reveals Huge Extent of Violence against Women in the Country," https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/egypt-new-report-reveals-huge-extent-violence-against-women-country.

[152] Helen Rizzo, Anne Price, and Katherine Meyer, "Anti-Sexual Harassment Campaign in Egypt," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 457–75, doi:10.17813/maiq.17.4.q756724v461359m2.

[153] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGWj4S2GIBU&nohtml5=False.

**Islamic Feminism**

Margot Badran predicted that the lines between secular and Islamic feminisms will be blurred.[154] So far, this has only happened in the literature of both feminisms. For example, the work of secular feminists like Nawal El Sadaawi, Hoda Shara'wi, and Qasim Amin systematically uses arguments based on Qur'anic texts to argue for more egalitarian gender roles and freedoms for women. On the other hand, the work of Islamist women like Safinaz Kazem and Heba Rauf Ezzat also insists on women's rights using an Islamic framework. Yet on the ground, the activism of both camps remain largely separate, which weakens the Egyptian women's movement. By highlighting their differences, both are less able to reach a wider audience and less successful to mobilize. This makes them easy targets for state repression. The MB Sisters' efforts to achieve gender justice within the MB can be interpreted as Islamic feminist in the sense that they use an Islamic framework to argue for more egalitarian gender roles within the hierarchy of the MB, recall Rasha Ahmed for instance. These efforts should be read in conjunction with their goals of resisting a coercive state and seeing Islam play a bigger role in public life. By accommodating these goals, and abandoning the demonizing propaganda of the Islamists, the Egyptian feminist movement can enrich its repertoire of resistance and expand its influence to a greater audience and thus gain more resilience.

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[154] Badran, Margot. 2005. "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond". *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. Duke University Press: 6–28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40326847.

**Conclusion**

This chapter attempted to answer the second main question of my thesis: How do MB women relate to the gender ideology of the MB? The chapter analyzed MB gender roles and dynamics in a time of crisis. I started by a short discussion of the concept of gender as a social construction and how it is instrumented to understand roles and dynamics between women and men in a given society. Followed was an analysis of gender dynamics between the Sisters and Brothers within the group of the MB members interviewed.

The discussion showed that the gender ideology of the MB is not static, nor is it a discourse in isolation from a whole society's views on gender. It has been modified and is continually brought into question. It also mirrors prevalent traditional mainstream Islamic and secularist discourse on gender in Egypt and does not shy away from borrowing from non-Islamic but similarly religious conservative groups.

In general, the MB's gender ideology is best understood when contextualized within the surrounding hostile environment. Through a long history of working underground to mitigate suppression, the MB has developed a repertoire of maneuvering that excludes women from leadership roles. The tactic that has successfully helped the MB survive so far is defended through several arguments and remains hard to dismiss given the regular crackdowns on the movement.

Nonetheless, different currents within the MB are actively disputing its traditional gender ideology. Because of the MB's dependency on its indispensable constituency of women, openings for negotiation arise. The younger professionally accomplished Sisters capitalize on

this opportunity to express their political exclusion grievances; yet, in a time of crisis, they are not willing to sacrifice the movement's unity.

For the working class Sisters, traditional gender roles are non-affordable as well as practically unattainable, and although it is the older upper/middle class women who will voice critique to capitalist mechanisms in Egypt, it is the working class women who are obviously more affected by it. Paradoxically, this has made the less privileged women more open to less traditional gender roles, and while they have not disregarded the whole of society's patriarchy, they have been able to use their economic contribution to the family to achieve more egalitarian gender dynamics within the household.

Finally, I argued that the Sisters' constant interaction with the MB gender ideology can be interpreted as Islamic feminism which, if accommodated, can enrich the Egyptian feminist movement.

The next section will provide a brief conclusion of the key issues discussed in this study and a summary of findings, in addition to an examination of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

## Conclusion and Final Thoughts

The literature on Islamist movements tends to describe them as fundamentalist and thus oppressive to women. Islamic activism is often explained through a socio-psychological approach which downplays the rationality and agency of individuals who take a huge risk (in the MENA context) to engage in political activism based on their personal values and worldviews. This research argues that adopting the socio-psychological approach does not help us adequately understand Islamist social movements such as the MB. After all, how do we go about explaining the growing popularity of these Islamist movements amongst women despite its "oppressive" reputation?

The analysis in this project has challenged much of the conventional wisdom about the attractiveness of Islamist movements. In general, it has demonstrated that individuals do not have to be economically or psychologically frustrated to find Islamic activism relevant. Through the discussion of the contexts, contention cycles, repertoires and the ongoing cultural reframing process of the MB between the period of 2011 and 2015, this project has shown how and why women of various social and educational backgrounds find Islamic activism a rewarding experience despite its potential risk. In addition to resisting an oppressive state with a disputed legitimacy, it helps them contribute to their communities while changing them. MB women's contribution to their society helps them express their deeply held values that both initially resonates with the framing process of the MB and also gets crystallized and reshaped through socialization within the MB society. Thus, they find Islamic activism within the MB both personally and collectively rewarding, especially given the *usra* system which creates kinship-like dynamics to sustain engagement and promote solidarity. The lack of similar experiences

within the circles of other political groups and their reputation of complicity with a repressive regime are all factors that make them less attractive options.

Fieldwork findings from this study can make PPT approaches more accommodating to collective action under repressive regimes. As the analysis in chapter two has demonstrated, MB women are actively shaping the internal dynamics within the movement -as opposed to being passively mobilized, constantly reframing their grievances and innovating non-traditional repertoires of contestation. In particular, it challenges our perception of opportunities and/or threats and to what extent they hinder or trigger protesting. As seen in chapter two, rather than withdrawing, MB women responded with open contestation to the crackdown of 2013, at first at least, and capitalized on that "opportunity" by claiming prominent roles within the movement.

This research attempted to expand the notion of "politics" in authoritarian states that often goes unnoticed. By merging the lines between charitable and political work, shifting their activism to cyberspace, using internationally "approved" human rights discourse, or withholding their activism altogether, MB women are challenging much of our conception about protesting and resistance that is often reduced to a rigid binary of collaboration/apathy.

By exploring the gender ideology of the MB and contrasting it against the Sister's own view of appropriate gender roles, the study findings show that the MB's gender ideology is fluid, open to negotiation, and selectively adapts notions of the "ideal" woman from other cultures. If anything, it is consistent with wider Egyptian societal attitudes toward gender roles. The debate over what constitutes the "ideal" woman in secularist and Islamist discourses fails to capture the overlapping between both discourses. In attempting to reconcile the seemingly contradicting notions of both, MB women have resisted the burden of being both the sole care givers of their

families and contributors to the economy. For those who could not afford it, they have actively sought gender parity and openly challenged non egalitarian gender dynamics.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study is by no means a way to make sweeping generalizations about all members of the MB. The findings of this study are determined by the limitations of time, and type of field I had access to, and consequently, the participants I was able to observe and interview. It can be assumed that the MB as a movement is by no means monolithic, nor does it act in vacuum. The group of Sisters I have met during my brief fieldwork, are a reflection of this observation. There is an array of views within the MB based on the point of entry, hierarchal rank, age, sex, social or economic background among other factors. Further investigation yet needs to be done as to what extent these factors shape the dynamics of the movement. Perhaps access to a more varied sample; possibly a larger and a more geographically diverse one and input from women in the higher level of the organization's hierarchy

Nonetheless, the findings of this study are in many ways an indicator of certain patterns within the MB. If anything, it is an indicator of the pattern of voices of middle and working class women in urban Cairo. It adds to the literature that tries to portray the activism of Islamists from their own point of view, which is important in understanding the Islamist movement as a whole and ultimately opens a discussion over what fieldwork can bring to Middle East Studies and social theories.

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