# A Revolution of Their Own

## The activism of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood and its evolution since the Arab Spring (1928-2014)

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**Declaration of Work**

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## Table of Contents


**A REVOLUTION OF THEIR OWN** ..... **I**
**Declaration of Work** ..... **i**
**Table of Contents** ..... **ii**
**Acknowledgments** ..... **i**
**List of Abbreviations** ..... **iii**
**List of Tables** ..... **v**
**Notes on Transliteration** ..... **vi**
**Abstract** ..... **vii**
**CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION** ..... **1**
**1.1 The Project** ..... **5**
**1.2 Contributions of the Study** ..... **7**
**1.3 Description of Contents** ..... **12**
**CHAPTER 2 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK** ..... **17**
**2.1 The Arab Spring, the Rise of Islamist Movements, and Mainstream Perspectives on the 'Woman Question'** ..... **17**
**2.2 The Inclusion of Women in Islamist Movements and Parties: Ideological Moderation vs. Strategic Arguments** ..... **22**
2.2.1 The Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis ..... 23
2.2.2 Rational Choice and Structural Arguments ..... 25
2.2.3 Summary ..... 28
**2.3 Structure, Agency, and Opportunities: contributions from the 'relational' turn in SMT** ..... **28**
2.3.1 The Classic Social Movement Research Agenda ..... 29
2.3.2 The 'Relational' Turn in SMT ..... 30
2.3.3 Activism and Social Movements in MENA post the 2010 Uprisings ..... 32
2.3.4 Summary ..... 35
**2.4 Gender, Empowerment and the Development of Feminist Identities among Islamist Women.** ..... **36**
2.4.1 Women-only Spaces as a way to Women's Empowerment. ..... 37
2.4.2 Women Playing Men's Roles: 'Exceptional Circumstances' and the issues of Legitimization, Reversal of Gender Roles, and Survival of Feminist Identities ..... 40
2.4.3 Advocating for Multiple Agencies, Subjectivities, and Identities in Islamist Women ..... 42
2.4.4 Summary ..... 46
**CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS, AND METHODOLOGY** ..... **48**
**3.1 Research Design** ..... **48**
3.1.1 Research Purpose ..... 48
3.1.2 The Case Study of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood ..... 48
3.1.3 The Longitudinal Single-Case Study Design ..... 50
3.1.4 Context and Time Intervals ..... 51
**3.2 Methods and Methodology** ..... **54**
3.2.1 Participant Observation: conducting research in Egypt in 2013 and 2014 ..... 55
3.2.2 Interviews and Informal Conversations ..... 58
3.2.3 Language: dealing with issues related to translation, third party presence, and interpretation ..... 61
3.2.4 Access ..... 62
3.2.5 Politically active Sisters ..... 62
3.2.6 Protection: the ethical challenges of doing fieldwork in highly polarised political settings ..... 63
3.2.7 Video Sources ..... 66
3.2.8 Primary Textual Material ..... 67
**3.3 Data Analysis** ..... **67**
3.3.1 Engaging with the Self ..... 68
3.3.2 The Mechanics of Data Analysis ..... 72
**3.4 Conclusions** ..... **75**
**CHAPTER 4 –MUSLIM SISTERHOOD ACTIVISM IN THE EARLY YEARS** ..... **76**
**Introduction** ..... **76**
**4.1 The Emergence of Egyptian Religious Nationalisms in the 1930s** ..... **76**
4.1.1 Al-Banna's Nationalism ..... 78

4.1.2 The Role and Position of Women in al-Banna's Nationalist Project ..... 79
4.1.3 Al-Banna's Legacy and the Role of Context ..... 81
**4.2 The Activism of the Muslim Sisterhood in the Early Years ..... 81**
4.2.1 The MB Repression of the 1950s and 1960s and the Muslim Sisterhood's Role ..... 84
4.2.2 Qutb's Influence on the Brotherhood Movement ..... 86
4.2.3 The MB and the Sisters under President Sadat ..... 87
**4.3 Developing Islamist Women's 'Feminism' ..... 90**
4.3.1 The Social Activism of Labibah Ahmad ..... 90
4.3.2 Al-Ghazali and the Political Sisterhood ..... 92
**4.4 Conclusion: Making sense of Muslim Sisterhood Activism in the Early Years ..... 95**
**CHAPTER 5 – POLITICAL BROTHERHOOD, STRATEGIC SISTERHOOD: SEARCHING FOR THE ORIGINS OF A MODERATE TREND AMONG WOMEN ..... 99**
**Introduction ..... 99**
**5.1 Mubarak's Presidency ..... 100**
5.1.2 Mubarak-MB Relationship ..... 101
5.1.3 The MB Struggle for Parliament ..... 103
5.1.4 The MB in the Professional Syndicates ..... 105
5.1.5 The MB in the Universities ..... 105
**5.2 Tracing the Effect of the Middle-Generation Leaders on Women ..... 107**
5.2.1 The Middle-Generation *Ikhwan* and the call for MB Reforms ..... 108
5.2.2 Tracing the Evolution of the MB's Official Position on Women: from the 1994 position paper to the 2007 party platform ..... 109
5.2.3 Coexisting Moderate and Conservative Trends among Women ..... 112
**5.3 Conservative Sisters in Conservatives' Spaces ..... 113**
5.3.1 The Sisters in Institutional Politics since the mid-2000s ..... 113
5.3.2 Sisterhood Activism in Islamic Institutions ..... 116
5.3.3 Defending *Qawama* as a way to Political Empowerment ..... 118
**5.4 Locating Progressive Gender Worldviews among the Sisters ..... 120**
5.4.1 The Gender Leadership Structure of the MB University Movement ..... 121
5.4.2 'The Liberation of Women at the Age of the Message': engaging the Sisterhood in political activism through *usra* meetings ..... 124
**5.5 Conclusions ..... 126**
**CHAPTER 6 – THE 25TH OF JANUARY REVOLUTION AND THE INCLUSION OF THE SISTERHOOD IN INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS ..... 129**
**Introduction ..... 129**
**6.1 The 25th of January Revolution and the Opening Up of the Opportunity Structure ..... 130**
**6.2 The FJP Party Platform ..... 133**
6.2.1 The FJP, its Youth, and Missed Pluralism ..... 134
6.2.2 The JFP and the Inclusion of Women ..... 136
**6.3 The Muslim Sisterhood in the 2011-2012 Parliamentary Election: joining arms with the Brothers in the FJP ..... 137**
6.3.1 The Role of the Young Sisters in Elections ..... 139
6.3.2 The 2011-2012 Parliamentary Election Results ..... 140
6.3.3 Muslim Sisterhood Representation in Parliament ..... 141
6.3.4 Muslim Sisterhood's Responses to the low Female Representation in Parliament ..... 144
6.3.5 The Muslim Sisterhood's Activism in Parliament ..... 145
**6.4 The Muslim Sisterhood during the Presidential Elections ..... 149**
6.4.1 The Presidential 'Initiative to Support the Rights and Freedoms of Egyptian Women' ..... 151
6.4.2 Muslim Sisterhood Activism from within the FJP ..... 154
6.4.3 Muslim Sisterhood's Relationship with the Egyptian Feminist Movement and the Revolutionary Movement ..... 156
**6.5 Conclusions ..... 157**
**CHAPTER 7 – MUSLIM SISTERHOOD'S ACTIVISM AT THE MARGINS OF INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS ..... 159**
**Introduction ..... 159**
**7.1 The Muslim Brotherhood Generational Structure: the generational divide explained ..... 160**
**7.2 Morsi...'Not Revolutionary Enough'! ..... 164**

**7.3 The Muslim Sisterhood's Internal Elections: planting the seeds for women's leadership post the 2013 coup. ..... 171**
**7.4 Informal Avenues of Change ..... 177**
7.4.1 Female *Usra* Camps ..... 178
7.4.2 Changing the *Usra* Dress-Code ..... 180
**7.5 Conclusions ..... 183**
**CHAPTER 8 - MUSLIM SISTERHOOD'S ACTIVISM POST THE 2013 COUP: WOMEN IN CHARGE OF REVOLUTIONARY RESISTANCE ..... 186**
**Introduction ..... 186**
**8.2 The Fall of the MB from Power and the Establishment of the Women's Resistance Movement ... 187**
**8.3 Sustaining Female Mobilisation in a Repressive Environment: Muslim Sisterhood's politicisation of regime violence against women ..... 194**
8.3.1 Exposing the 'Double Standards' of Women's Rights in Egypt ..... 196
8.3.2 Explaining the Silence of the Egyptian Secular-Liberal Feminist Movement: Islamists and secular women's competition over the public sphere ..... 199
**8.4 Youth Mobilisation post the Coup: united we stand, divided we fall. ..... 200**
**8.5 Coordinating the 'Ground' with the 'Political': The Committee of the Pragmatic Women Leaders ..... 203**
8.5.1 Developing Female Leadership ..... 205
**8.6 Rescuing the MB Movement: Islamist-Leftist cooperation against human rights abuses in Egypt 207**
**8.7 Conclusions ..... 211**
**CHAPTER 9 - EXPLAINING CHANGES IN ACTIVISM, PRACTICES OF ENGAGEMENT, AND IDENTITIES AMONG ISLAMIST WOMEN ..... 214**
**9.1 Long-Term and Short-Term Factors, and Changes in Islamist Women's Activism and Identities 216**
**9.2 The Value of Observing Islamist Women's Activism in both Formal and Informal Activist Spaces ..... 223**
**9.3 Areas for further Research ..... 226**
**BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 229**

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## List of Abbreviations

**AUC -** American University in Cairo

**BUE -** British University in Egypt

**CA -** 2012 Egyptian Constituent Assembly

**CAF -** Collective Action Frame

**CEDAW** - Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women

**ECRF** - Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms

**EFU** - Egyptian Feminist Union

**ESU** - Egyptian Student Union

**FJP** - Freedom and Justice Party

**FUB -** Freie Universität Berlin

**HCC** - High Constitutional Court

**HMLC** - Hisham Mubarak Law Center

**IAF** - Islamic Action Front

**ICPD** - International Conference on Population and Development

**IDO** - Institution for the Defense of the Oppressed

**IICDR** - International Islamic Council for Da'wa and Relief

**IICWC** - International Islamic Council for Women and Children

**IMO** - Islamic Movement Organization

**JCP** - Justice and Construction Party

**JDP** - Justice and Development Party

**LGNC** - Libyan General National Congress

**MBSC** - Muslim Brotherhood Students' Committee

**MBUN** - Muslim Brotherhood University Network

**MENA -** Middle East and North Africa

**NATO** - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

**NASEL** - National Alliance in Support of the Electoral Legitimacy

**NCCM** - National Council for Childhood and Motherhood

**NCF** - National Council for the Family

**NCW** - National Council for Women

**NDP** - National Democratic Party

**NGO** - Non-governmental Organization

**NSA** - National Security Agency

**NSM** - New Social Movements

**PEL -** Parliament Election Law

**POS -** Political Opportunity Structure

**PPM -** Political Process Model

**PSFL -** Personal Status and Family Law

**RCEW -** Revolutionary Coalition of Egyptian Women

**RMT -** Resource Mobilisation Theory

**SA -** Secret Apparatus

**SCAF -** Security Council of the Armed Forces

**SELA -** Society of Egyptian Ladies' Awakening

**SM(s) -** Social movement(s)

**SMT -** Social Movement Theory

**SMW -** Society of the Muslim Woman

**SSIS -** State Security Investigation Service

**SU -** Student Union

**TA -** Thematic Analysis

**TFC -** Teachers' Faculty Club

**WAC -** Women against the Coup

**WMF -** Women and Memory Forum

## List of Tables


| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Table** | **1** | A summary of the MB electoral gains from 1984 to 2010…….. | 103 |
| **Table** | **2** | Author's elaboration of the gender leadership's structure of the MB's University Network…….. | 122 |
| **Table** | **3** | Female Representation in the 2012 Egyptian People's Assembly…….. | 142 |
| **Table** | **4** | Female Representation in the 2012 Egyptian Shura Council…….. | 143 |

## Notes on Transliteration

Throughout the thesis, I adopted a simplified transliteration scheme. The spellings of names of individuals and places that are commonly used in English, particularly as used in reference to Egypt, are adopted here, for example Badie (not *Badi'*) and Ismailia (not *Isma'iliyya*). An abbreviated phonetic system has also been employed. I have designated *'ayn* (e.g. *da'wa*, *shari'a*, *jama'a*), except for names beginning with *Abd al-*. The medial Hamza has been used (e.g. *Qur'an*) but not the final Hamza (e.g. *'ulama* not *'ulama'*). All other diacriticals are omitted. Double consonants are indicated with two English consonants (e.g. *Muhammad, Gazzar*, *tayyar*) except when this leads to awkward spellings (*muwadhaf, not muwadhdhaf*). The short vowels *a*, *i*, and *u* are preferred over *e* and *o*. The long vowel *ou* is used (e.g. *Mahmoud*) but not the long *aa* and *ii* (e.g. *tayyar* not *tayyaar*). The definite article is spelled *al-* regardless of its pronunciation (e.g. *al-turath not at-turath*).

# Abstract

## A Revolution of their Own

*The activism of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood and its evolution since the Arab Spring (1928-2014)*

**Erika Biagini, Dublin City University**

This study employs studies on gender and nationalism, and social movement theory, to understand how the activism and roles that the Egyptian Muslim Sisters have played in the Muslim Brotherhood movement have evolved throughout history, and in light of the changing political circumstances that followed the 2011 uprisings. In doing so, this study pays particular attention to women's ideological and strategic assessments, the MB male leaders' cooperation and/or co-optation of women, the generational divide in place in the Brotherhood movement and how this played out among women, the role that both formal and informal venues for activism play in processes of women's political empowerment, and the effect of marginalisation, regime repression, and violence, on women's feminist identities. Empirical research for this study was conducted in Egypt in the years 2013 and 2014, and consists of interviews with Muslim Sisterhood activists and leaders, as well as participant observation of activities and meetings of the Sisterhood in Cairo.

The research findings indicate that the Sisters maintained an active and crucial role in the Brotherhood movement under all historical circumstances, but it was during times of MB repression that they managed to exercise greater political influence over the MB movement overall. Findings also indicate that the protracted exclusion of women from the political decision-making offices of the movement, amid women's continued activism and support for the MB, led to the development of more radical feminist identities among some of the women involved. These were manifested in women's growing demands for greater equal opportunities and roles *vis-à-vis* their male counterparts, and their involvement in the political decision-making process of the movement. Finally, the study finds that generation is not always an indication of different feminist attitudes among women, and that informal activist circles, as well as women-only spaces, continue to be important venues for female empowerment and leadership in Islamist movements.

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

The second time I visited Egypt for fieldwork in 2014, I spent nearly six months trying to get in contact with members of the Muslim Sisterhood, without any tangible success. Since the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) affiliated President Mohammad Morsi from power by the Egyptian military on July 3, 2013, the state security apparatus initiated a wave of repression of unprecedented scale against all political opposition in the country. The MB paid the highest price of this latest crackdown. Thousands of its members were killed in several separate attempts of the regime to quell MB-protests, over a thousand in the dispersal of Rabaa al-Adaweya and Al-Nahda sit-ins alone.[1] While many more thousands ended up languishing in the notorious al-Tora and al-Aqrab prisons,[2] those who managed to avoid arrest remained constantly on the run. This situation made it difficult to ask any questions about the group and its members.

This is why I was both terrified and thrilled when travelling to the Cairo district of the 6th of October that June Saturday morning. There, I was supposed to meet Lamia, one of the official spokesperson of the Women against the Coup (WAC) movement – *Nisa' did al-Inqilab* - the first women-only movement established and led by the Muslim Sisterhood after the ousting of the MB. Since July 14, 2013, the day of its establishment, the WAC had been extremely active in organising street protests and mobilising women in various forms of resistance against a restoring authoritarian military regime in Egypt. The movement counted branches all over the country, and its central leadership remained in Cairo.

Lamia had set our appointment at the local al-Hosary mosque. Once arrived, I could not help but notice its massive brown walls, and the coming and going of faithful who reached the building for the Morning Prayer. I was early. I grabbed a coffee from one of the kiosks located around the mosque's courtyard, and I sat down on the stairs leading to the female prayer's room. After a long time waiting, I received a text message from Lamia. It read: 'Meet me at the petrol station; I am in a red car.' I initially worried about this sudden change of plan, but then I realised that between the two, she was the one taking a higher risk in meeting an entirely unknown stranger. Her outspoken denunciation of the regime's repressive practices against Islamists had brought Lamia at the top of Egyptian security forces' blacklist as an activist to be silenced.

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[1] Human Rights Watch, *All according to plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt* (USA: Human Rights Watch, 2014). Available at https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt

[2] Joe, Stork, 'Egypt's Political Prisoners,' *Open Democracy*, March 6, 2015. Available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/joe-stork/egypt%E2%80%99s-political-prisoners

I ventured into crossing the main junction that gave onto the petrol station. Once on the other side, I noticed a young lady hiding behind a large pair of black sunglasses. 'Get in the car,' she waved. I approached the dusty vehicle and entered it quickly, failing to notice the little plastic giraffe and the several wax colours leaning on the passenger's seat. I sat over them, eventually breaking some of the colours. To my embarrassment, Lamia smiled: 'Oh don't worry!' she said, 'it happens when you have kids. But we don't need to worry today. They are at home with their father. We have plenty of time for our meeting! I know a nice coffee place; you will like it!'

This sentence goes nearly unnoticed when spoken by a majority of women, but carries extreme significance when stated by a member of the Muslim Sisterhood. Islamists' conservative gender views stirred acute debate in Egyptian society during the brief period of MB government (January 2012 - July 2013). The official position of the MB remained that women had a public role to play, but that their primary duty was that of caregiving towards their families, husbands, and children. It was to the disappointment of a large part of the Egyptian feminist movement, in fact, that the Islamist-Salafi majority committee tasked to draft the new 2012 constitution removed the promotion of gender equality from the top priorities of the post-revolutionary Egyptian state.[3]

Gender relations within the MB movement spurred no less controversy. There, the discussion did not focus on gender equality, but concerned the degree of political influence in the affairs of the movement that the MB was willing to extend to its female members, and women's political autonomy. As Lamia recalled:

> 'The Muslim Brotherhood comprises of men and women, all what is supposed to be there for Muslim Brotherhood men, should be there for Muslim Brotherhood women as well. This includes the qualities that every member should have, as well as the roles that every member can cover. All the sections are parallel sections for men and women. But then there is something; there is like a hierarchy. […] Why the leader of the Muslim Sisterhood section is a man? I personally want to change this. It should be a woman. And we do have excellent and well-educated women. Why should this leader be a man?' [4]

Since the 1990s, the MB adopted increasingly progressive attitudes towards its female members, supporting a greater public and political role for women. Nevertheless, in 2014 many Sisters still perceived that the leaders had yet to sufficiently recognise women's contributions towards the organisation. Those Sisters holding more progressive views on women's roles suffered exclusion and marginalisation as a consequence. As Lamia explained:

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[3] Nathan J. Brown and Michelle Dunne, 'Egypt's Draft Constitution Rewards the Military and Judiciary,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (December 2013). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/12/04/egypt-s-draft-constitution-rewards-military-and-judiciary

[4] Lamia, interview by author, Cairo, 2014 [Henceforth: Lamia, interview]

> ‘I was one of those girls who used to raise many questions and if there was something I didn’t like I used to oppose it. I was the ‘outspoken girl.’ They [the MB] didn’t actually like me a lot. You know, they want someone that says ‘yes’ all the time somehow so... they did not like me and would just keep me apart thinking ‘Oh! This girl will make a lot of problems’. They considered me part of the group but they would not give me a big or an important task at the time [in her youth] because you know... they thought I could influence other girls if I had been given a team to work with…‘Just keep her aside, she can be with us, give her some tasks but not a big task, or a leader’s task’, they’d think.’[5]

As progressing into fieldwork made more evident, this was a shared feeling among several of the younger Sisters I interviewed and who became actively involved in the several women-only movements established and led by the Muslim Sisterhood after Morsi’s ouster. Many perceived that their opinions had not been sufficiently listened by the MB leadership who held political offices after uprisings. MB decisions while in government, several Sisters contended, did not represent them. This situation led some of the women to voice their criticism against those actions and decisions that the MB took while power and which, according to them, contributed to its ousting. Among their primary claims was that they remained largely excluded from the political decision-making process of the movement notwithstanding their contribution and support was crucial to the ability of the MB to gain power. They contended that it was thanks to the youth who took to the streets in the 2011 uprisings, and to the votes of women, that the MB was able to win the parliamentary (2011/2012) and the presidential elections (2012). ‘The youth is the working force in this country! We are the group that can change and make changes’,[6] Lamia remarked.

It is also out of this sentiment of marginalisation and exclusion that a younger generation of Sisterhood activists saw in the repression that followed the July 2013 coup an opportunity to step up and demonstrate their ability as capable political actors and leaders. Lamia was one of them. Besides being a mother of two, Lamia was first and foremost an activist, a motivator, and a leader of one of the most active all-female Muslim Sisterhood-led oppositional movement, counting a considerable following.[7] This is not to say that women cheered to the repression that followed. This brought to them incommensurable suffering. Their entire lives had changed since that day and were never going to be the same again. But it was precisely the gravity of this renewed phase of repression and violence, brought about by a restoring military authoritarian regime in Egypt that

[5] Lamia, interview.
[6] Lamia, interview.
[7] There is no official data with regard to the number of women activists affiliated to the WAC movement. The number of followers of the WAC Facebook page may provide an indication of the appeal of the group. On June 4, 2016, this counted 36,733 followers, https://www.facebook.com/WomenAntiCoup/

propelled women into action for resisting this new state of affairs. This expanded the parameters of women's participation, activism, and roles as never before. As clarified by Lamia:

> 'You know when something bad happens to you, but it is not all bad because it has a positive effect on you? This is what happened to us women. Before the coup, you could consider our participation in political life to be at 40%. Now our participation can be said to be at 80%. We became deeply involved in political life. We have our women's movements emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood group now. […] Even Muslim Brotherhood men start changing their opinions about the women. They start calling this a 'women's revolution.' With this I do not want to say that we were oppressed and now we are open because this is not exactly right, but we cannot deny that three-quarters of the rallies are led by women […] Women take the streets and fight as men fight, and this is because the military does not deserve any preferential treatment to us, but treats women the same way as men. […] Sometimes people say 'just sit home and resist from there.' No! Sometimes you have to take to the streets and face everything. You are like an arm in this country. You have to build this country like men. There is nothing like 'You are a woman, therefore your place is at home.' Nobody can say this! Neither Islam says this! That's why the more we go through this process, and the more we face the coup, the stronger we get.[8]

Women's involvement in the events that shaped the MB movement since the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, and even more so these following the ousting of the group from power in 2013, had a significant impact on how the Muslim Sisterhood started to engage politically within the ranks of the movement. While it can be said that the 2011 uprisings opened up the Pandora's Box of Muslim Sisterhood's participation in institutional politics, the repression that ensued from 2013 had a reinvigorating effect on women's activism outside institutional political channels. The latest events in particular, have caused the Sisters to engage in forms of activism that led to a strengthening of their identity *vis-à-vis* that of a highly hierarchical MB organisation, which normally supports older before younger members, and men before women. This marginalisation touched all the Muslim Sisters involved, but even more so those belonging to a younger generation of activists, and who holds rather progressive views in matters of women's roles. These women had indeed been largely marginalised under the MB government, mainly because their views did not entirely reflect those of the older MB leadership. MB elders preferred to give greater public visibility to conservative women, who tended to comply with the MB official position on gender as well political issues. After the coup, because of the dramatic reversal of fortune, the generational divides and confrontational views that already permeated the movement, intensified.

[8] Lamia, interview.

## 1.1 The Project

The mass wave of uprisings that began in late 2010 in Tunisia, and which came to be known as the 'Arab Spring,' occurred with an unprecedented participation of women. Women were a large part, if not the majority, of those citizens who took to the streets across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) demanding bread, freedom, dignity, and regime change. This extensive female participation led to a renewed interest in the role of Arab women among those who failed to anticipate their role as active political actors. It also profoundly challenged popular misconceptions for which Arab women are perceived as aloof to politics and confined to the private domains of their societies.

The majority of the scholarship on women's movements and their political participation during and after the Arab uprisings remained concerned with feminist engagements in secular-liberal political projects aimed at the achievement of greater gender equality.[9] Less attention has instead been given to the activism, roles, and contributions of those women who took part to the uprisings, but did so from the ranks of conservative Islamist movements.[10] This occurred notwithstanding the fact that Islamist movements were the largest beneficiaries of the opening up of the political space that followed the Arab revolts, and that women played a vital role in guaranteeing these successes.

This neglect of Islamist women's agency is mainly due to the fact that Islamist women are perceived as counterforces to feminist struggles for gender equality in the region. Islamist women, like their male counterparts, promote a conservative gender ideology and engage in forms of activism that aim to perpetuate a patriarchal gender order. Also, Islamist movements are highly hierarchical organisations, promoting the advancement of elder members before that of the youth, and of men before women. Because women remain excluded from the decision-making offices of Islamist organisations, Islamist women activists are largely perceived as mere targets and foot soldiers of Islamist male leaders' political projects, rather than active political agents in their own

[9] The only edited volume providing a collection of essays dealing specifically with women's movements in the North African region post the uprisings, fails to dedicate one single chapter of the twenty it contains to Islamist women's movements. See Fatima Sadiqi, ed., *Women's Movements in Post-"Arab Spring" North Africa* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

[10] For those scholars who have specifically investigated the activism, roles, and contributions of Islamist women, during and after the uprisings, see Merieme Yafout, 'Islamist Women and the Arab Spring: Discourses, Projects, and Conceptions', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35, no. 3 (December 2015): 588-604; Rola el-Husseini, 'Is Gender a Barrier to Democracy? Women, Islamism, and the "Arab Spring", *Contemporary Islam* 10, no. 1 (January 2016): 53-66; Mona Farag, 'The Muslim Sisters and the January 25th Revolution', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 13, no. 5 (October 2012): 228-237; Erika Biagini, 'The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood, between Activism, Violence and Leadership', *Mediterranean Politics* 22, no. 1 (January 2017): 35-53.

right. Most importantly, because Islamist women promote conservative gender roles, assumptions for which Islamist women are believed to be contented with the functions and positions attributed to them in Islamist movements, tend to subsist.[11] One of the consequences is that little attention is paid to how women activists attempt to expand their roles and influence in Islamist movements or, when confronted with widespread resistance, how women direct their efforts to achieve greater political empowerment.

This study investigates the activism of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood with the objective of identifying how Islamist women respond to changes in the broader political context for the purpose of gaining, preserving, and growing their roles and political influence *vis-à-vis* male-dominated Islamist movements. This study aims to ascertain how women's agency intersects with changes in the political system, and with the internal dynamics of Islamist movements, with the goal of expanding their roles and activism to new spaces, and grow their political influence *vis-à-vis* their male counterparts throughout time. The study adopts gender as an analytical tool. It traces how Islamist women make use of gender identities/difference for the purpose of political empowerment, and how identities are transformed as a result of their protracted engagement with activism.

The study adopts a longitudinal perspective. It begins by interrogating the genesis of Muslim Sisterhood activism in 1932, to assess how aspects of Muslim Sisterhood gender and identity politics, as well as activism, consolidated as part of their resistance to repression, neo-colonialism, and authoritarianism. It then moves to analyse Muslim Sisterhood's attempt at political participation under President Hosny Mubarak, with the purpose of highlighting how women's fortunes began to be linked to the support/co-optation of different male subgroups of the MB movement. Then, prominence is then given to the period of the opening up of the political system following the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, which gave way to the Brotherhood and Sisterhood unrestricted political participation. During the years 2011-2013, the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood is observed with regard to their involvement in formal offices as well as in informal activist circles linked to the Islamist movement. The assumption is that while formal political positions came to be occupied by those women activist who best reflected the MB party line, those Sisters who espoused more progressive views in matters of women's role continued to suffer marginalisation, finding in informal activist circles a preferred venue for bringing about change.

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[11] For scholars whose work challenges these assumptions see: Omayma Abdellatif and Marina Ottaway, 'Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism,' *Carnegie Papers* n. 2 (June 2007). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec2_women_in_islam_final1.pdf; Omaima Abdellatif, 'In the Shadows of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood,' *Carnegie Papers* n. 13 (October 2008). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/women_egypt_muslim_brotherhood.pdf

Lastly, the study looks at Muslim Sisterhood activism and mobilisation at the time of MB repression (July 2013 - September 2014), with the purpose of determining the effects of the MB renewed political marginalisation, repression, and violence, on women's activism, identity, and their political influence in the MB movement.

This study complicates deterministic models and theories for explaining women's activism in Islamist movements, and proposes a constructivist approach that emphasises bottom-up processes of women's political participation and empowerment. It also recognises that Islamist women, like men, are not a monolithic bloc. Different subgroups of women exist within the same Islamist movement, each one with their own desires, ideologies, and perspectives. Women as well can be defined as more or less conservatives, and while age remains a good indicator of women's personal position, conservative as well as progressive views on women's roles can be found across different generational cohorts of Muslim Sisterhood activists.

## 1.2 Contributions of the Study

### *1.2.1 Empirical Contributions*

This thesis provides the first comprehensive study of the activism, roles, and contributions of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood, the female wing of the Muslim Brotherhood movement - the oldest Islamist movement in the region - before, during, and after the Arab Spring. It is part of a fast growing scholarship on Arab women's activism post the 'Arab Spring', but provides an original contribution by dealing with the understudied subject of Islamist women. Studies that have dealt with Islamist women's activism and the Muslim Sisterhood in particular, are few and far apart. To my knowledge, this is the first study that examines Muslim Sisterhood's activism since its inception, and how it developed before, during, and after the uprisings.

The uprisings, and even more the wave of repression that followed the ousting of the MB from power on July 3, 2013, led to profound transformations on the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood. This study enriches our understanding of Islamist women's activism in Middle East and North African (MENA) region, by observing how these transformations took place in the midst of radical political changes, and by adding new data collected while the events of the Egyptian transition were still unfolding.

The longitudinal approach adopted in the study provides additional empirical advantages. Examining Muslim Sisterhood activism at a given point on time may shed light on the practices of these women under the particular circumstances of the time observed. The examination of Islamist

women's activism over a longer time-span allows instead understanding how practices of activism change with changes in contexts, and therefore to investigate how women's identities are transformed in relations to their continuous engagement in activism. It also allows appreciating how women's agency is directed to expand and maintain their influence in the Islamist movement and the Egyptian political system throughout time, and notwithstanding the constraints that both gender and authoritarianism impose on women. Although women have not always occupied formal political offices in the MB movement, their presence and efforts shifted between social, religious, informal, and formal activist spaces.

### *1.2.2 Theoretical Contributions*

Conceptually, this study bridges theoretical insights from the fields of Social Movement Theory (SMT), gender studies, and nationalism, to analyse women's activism in Islamist socio-political movements, while hoping to contribute theoretically to those fields in return.

Since the rise of Islamism as a dominant social and political force in the MENA in the 1980s, scholars have paid increasing attention to the role that women played in Islamist movements. Academics that applied SMT to the study of Islamist movements aimed to uncover how changes in Political Opportunity Structures (POS) led to the growth of visibility of women in Islamist parties,[12] or prompted Islamists to increase (or decrease) women's participation to maximise their success and survival in the political system.[13] These studies attempted to elucidate the ways in which women 'made themselves useful' to Islamist movements to advance their political projects. Less attention has been given to the ways in which women's agency was directed at growing women's roles and influence in Islamist movements.

This study builds on critiques raised by the 'relational' turn in SMT, this pointing to the necessity to pay increasing attention to how agency shapes opportunity structures in authoritarian contexts.[14] The study, therefore, investigates how Islamist women activists interact with changes in contexts to increase their participation. It looks at how women make use of gender identity to carve out additional spaces for their activism, and grow their influence *vis-à-vis* male dominated Islamist movements. In doing so, this study shift the traditional perspective used to observe women's

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[12] Janine A. Clark and Jillian Schwedler, 'Who Opened the Window? Women's activism in Islamist Parties,' *Comparative Politics* 35, no. 3 (April 2003): 293-312.
[13] Marion Bauer, *When Sisters Become Brothers: The Inclusion of Women in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood 1952-2005* (Master's Thesis, University of Montreal, 2014).
[14] Joel Beinin and Frederic Vairel, eds., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Doug McAdam, Sydney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

increasing activism and visibility in Islamist movements, by looking at how women take benefit of their status as 'useful actors' for Islamist movements, to grow their roles and political influence within them, and society as a whole.

With regard to gender theory, this study recognises Islamist women's gender identities as resolutely political, although not necessarily bounded to Western-normative and liberal-feminist understandings of women's agency. In so doing, this study contributes to a growing scholarly literature that attempts to theorise non-secular and non-liberal women's political subjectivities in MENA societies and/or Muslim contexts.[15] This study understands the Egyptian social context as a fluid one, influenced by both religious and secular discourses. Accordingly, it recognises Islamist women's agency as not bounded to either secular or religious normative practices.[16] Rather, this study brings attention to the necessity to acknowledge Islamist women's multiple subjectivities, and to recognise Islamist women's agency in all actions, whether they display women's desires to perpetuate existing social, religious, and gender structures (e.g. a patriarchal gender order), or to change existing gender norms dictated by religious believes and/or tradition (e.g. increasing women leadership in formal political offices of Islamist movements).

Finally, this thesis contributes to studies of women and nationalism in the post-colonial Arab world, shedding light on how Islamist women's engagement in nationalist and/or revolutionary struggles my lead to the development of feminist identities also among those women who do not define themselves as feminists.[17] Mainstream theories of gender and nationalism tend to emphasise the downsides of women's engagement in nationalist projects. Scholars tend to highlight the fact that nationalist movements act as perpetual reproducers of patriarchal gender orders, to portray women as uniquely victims of nationalist violence, and to emphasise the practice of nationalist movements to exclude women from the public and political spheres upon the end of the

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[15]Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Sherine Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movement*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Lihi Ben Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions: Women's Activism on the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[16] Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own*.

[17] Theresa O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development and Activism in Revolutionary Movements*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1994); Vickers, Jill, 'Feminism and Nationalism,' in *Gender, Race, and Nation: A Global Perspective*, edited by Vanaja Dhruvarajan and Jill Vickers, 247-272, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2002); Maxine Molyneux, 'Mobilization Without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua', *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 227-254; Maria Holt and Haifaa Jawad, *Women, Islam and Resistance in the Arab World*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013); Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions.*

struggle.[18] Yet, this study recognises that feminist engagements in nationalist movements do not always originate from women's desire to attain greater gender equality and/or emancipation.[19] Also, the idea that women's experience with exclusion, marginalization, and violence can be potentially transformative and empowering for women, is sustained herein.[20]

As a result, the observation of processes of women's empowerment in this study is not limited to the exceptional time of the national/revolutionary struggle. Rather, it also continues during times of national/revolutionary disengagement, with the objective to ascertain how women's experiences with renewed marginalization, exclusion, and possibly violence, nurtures women's awareness of their position as gendered, prompting women to revert their efforts in alternative venues for achieving greater empowerment. Ultimately, because the study understand feminist identity formation as a process that takes place during both times of women's engagement and disengagement with nationalist/revolutionary struggles, it contends that women's efforts to better their status in Islamist movements can be observed over a continuum, and therefore across cycles of contentions of Islamist movements with their respective governments.

The definition of Islamist movements as nationalist remains contested because of Islamists' reference to a supra-territorial national identity. Yet, this study recognises that the MB was established at a time of nationalist fervour in Egypt, it espoused a religious-nationalist ideology and, since then, continued to be engaged in a struggle for political, social, economic, and religious freedom against authoritarianism and neo-colonialism.[21] In addition, although the movement still conceptualises the Islamic nation as an imagined community of Muslims around the world (*ummah*), its activism remains bounded to the Egyptian territorial nation state.[22] Therefore, this study theorises the MB movement as a nationalist-religious movement whose primary focus of activism is directed against an internal enemy, the Egyptian military dictatorship, which the

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[18] Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Colour of Gender: Reimaging Democracy*, (California: University of California Press, 1994); Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us. Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, (London: Zed Books, 1998); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000); Jan J. Pettman, *Worlding Women: A Feminist International Politics* (New York and Sidney, 1996).

[19] Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*; O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*; Vickers, *Feminism and Nationalism*; Molyneux, *Mobilization Without Emancipation?*; Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam and Resistance*; Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*.

[20] Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam and Resistance*; Maria Holt, 'Violence Against Women in the Context of War: Experiences of Shi'i Women and Palestinian Refugee Women in Lebanon', *Violence Against Women* 19, no. 13 (March 2013): 316-337; O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*.

[21]Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation: 1930-1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[22] Sami Zubaida, 'Islam and Nationalism: Continuities and Contradictions,' *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 4 (October 2004): 407-420.

movement perceives as the main agent and cause of its oppression.[23] Accordingly, the study conceptualises the Sisterhood as also engaged in a nationalist struggle. Also, it understands the Sisterhood's appeal to traditional gender roles as part and parcel of the movement nationalist character, and women's reference to religion as part of the identity politics that the movement embraced in resistance to neo-colonialism and authoritarianism, and not as a lack of the Sisterhood's desires to improve the gender relations in place within the movement.

### *1.2.3 Analytical Contributions*

Formal/Informal Spaces for Activism

One of the reasons why the political agency of women in Islamist movements remains largely overlooked is because Islamist women tend to remain excluded from the formal political offices of Islamist movements. In authoritarian contexts, much of Islamist movement's activism takes place in informal circles, which remain privileged areas of activism among women.[24] But because it is difficult for scholars to access such spaces, less attention is given to the activities carried out by women within them. These circumstances reinforce ideas for which Islamist women are believed to be only marginal political actors in Islamist movements. A benefit of this thesis is that it investigates Islamist women's' activism in both formal political offices as well as informal activist circles of Islamist movements. This allows examining how women's contributions shift from one area to the other in relation to changes in the broader political context, and also how women redirect their efforts to informal spaces when their objective to expand their political roles encounter the resistance of Islamist male leaders. By taking into consideration both formal and informal spheres, this study allows to investigate Islamist women activism as a continuum, and not only in those instances in which women acquire visibility in formal political offices of Islamist movements, or the state.

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[23] In Nikki Keddy's view, the target of Islamist movements' activism is what allows categorising Islamist movements as either religious or religious-nationalist. When the main objective is the state, Islamist movements are classified as religious-nationalists (or communalists). See Nikki Keddy, 'The New Religious Politics: Where, When, and Why Do "Fundamentalisms" Appear?' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10, no. 4 (October 1998): 696-723.

[24] Janine A. Clark, 'Islamist Women in Yemen: Informal Nodes of Activism,' in *Islamic Activism: A social Movement Theory Approach,* edited by Quintan Wiktorowicz, 164-184, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Biagini, *The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood*.

Generational Divides

The process of ideological-moderation that underpinned the evolution of the MB political thought since the 1990s has been attributed to the growing role played by new generations of activists who entered the MB throughout the decades of its existence as a movement. These new leaders have been responsible of imbuing the movement with new worldviews, including the acceptance of greater political pluralism.[25] As testified by the Brotherhood's increasing support for women's political role in the movement since then, the Sisters benefited from the input of these new generations of male leaders in terms of their political participation. What remains understudied is the effect of generational change inside the Sisterhood, and therefore how the inroad of new generations of women in the Sisterhood movement contributed to alter women's worldview in matters concerning the roles, leadership, and degree of political influence that women desired to play in the Brotherhood movement. Therefore, this study employs 'generation' as an analytical tool not only to investigate changes in male leaders' worldviews about Islamist women's political role in the movement, and how this benefited the Sisters. Rather, the study pays attention to generational divides to examine how differences in activism, worldviews, and desires developed among the women's activists themselves.

## 1.3 Description of Contents

**Chapter 2** outlines the theoretical framework guiding this study. The chapter begins by considering how Islamist electoral victories following the uprisings raised concerns among the international community and policy makers with regard to women and their rights. It takes this as a starting point to expose the mainstream liberal approach that continues to underpin the way we look at Islamist women, their activism, and the knowledge that is produced about them. Then, the chapter continues by highlighting how similar standpoints underspin theoretical discussions on Islamist women and their political participation among political scientists too. After that, the chapter build on the recent critiques raised by social movement scholars to argue for the necessity to observe Islamist women's activism from their own perspective, by placing women's agency at the centre of analysis. A final section combines theoretical insights from social movement theory,

[25] Mona El-Ghobashy, 'The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (August 2005): 373-395; Carrie R. Wickham, 'The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt's Wasat Party', *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (January 2004): 205-228, and *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

gender, and nationalism, to build a theoretical framework for examining women's activism in Islamist movements in transitional societies. Key to this framework, is the necessity to investigate changes in Islamist women's activism along a continuum, and therefore during both times of Islamist women's increased political engagement (visibility) and disengagement (lack of visibility), and to recognise Islamist women's agency as not essentially bounded to either Western-normative or liberal-feminist understandings of agency.

**Chapter 3** sets out the research design, methods, and methodology in light of the primary objective of this project. It provides justifications for adopting a qualitative single-case study, and it outlines the reasons behind the case selected, and the research design. It then discusses the methods employed for the collection of data, concluding by reflecting on issues related to methodology and data analysis.

**Chapter 4** contextualises the establishment of the Brotherhood and Sisterhood movements within the wave of nationalism that affected Egypt since the early 19$^{th}$ century. It exposes the religious-nationalist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist character of the gender ideology of the Brotherhood, as well as its religious framing. This was conservative, emphasising women's primary role as biological and cultural reproducers of Muslim society, and therefore confined women's participation in the movement to religious outreach and social activism. It then provides an overview of Muslim Sisterhood activism at its inception in the 1930s, how this evolved during the years of MB repression under President Nasser, and those of MB reconstruction under President Sadat. It singles out how the 'exceptional circumstances' of repression provided the Sisters with the opportunity to re-draw the lines of gender roles set by the Brotherhood, and how al-Ghazali provided the ideological foundation necessary to legitimise Islamist women's political activism at that time, and for the years to come. The conclusion places these findings in the broader context of the existing literature of women and nationalism, with the objective of highlighting how these acted as formative years for the Sisters, paving the way for their greater role in the movement in the future.

**Chapter 5** provides a discussion of the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood at the time of limited political liberalisation under the presidency of Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011), with the objective of demonstrating how this was a period of renewed expansion of women's participation and activism in the MB movement. The increasing involvement of the MB in the Egyptian political system had the consequence of turning the women into a strategic asset of the movement as voters and recruiters of voters. In turn, the Sisters took advantage of their increased leverage to bargain for a greater political role *vis-à-vis* the movement. The gains made by women at this time remained

strongly linked to the fortunes of the different factions – more or less conservative - populating the Islamist movement, their views on women's political role, and the degree of support these were willing to extend to the Sisters. While the backing of MB-moderates was instrumental to the ability of women to run enter electoral politics, the growing political influence of the Sisters continued to encounter resistance by the part of the MB-conservatives, who never allowed the women to play an effective decision-making role, or enter the leadership offices of the MB organization. Because the MB-conservatives continued to dominate the leadership offices of the movement, those Sisters who managed to acquire greater visibility at the time were inevitably women who also supported the conservative party line, and who advanced their political role by stressing gender difference, complementary gender roles, and women's central position within the family. Conversely, those women who espoused more progressive views, like the MB–moderates, tended to suffer increasing marginalisation, leading women to redirect their efforts to informal Islamist circles and university campuses for playing a greater leadership role and promoting their ideas.

**Chapter 6** investigates Muslim Sisterhood's activism as it unfolded following the Egyptian uprisings and the opening up of the opportunity structure to MB unrestrained political participation. It provides an overview of women's contributions to the electoral victories of the Brotherhood movement, their expansion in the formal political offices associated with the MB-led Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the Egyptian parliament, and government, discussing the activism and the initiatives carried out by women within such spaces. Concurrently, the chapter pays attention to generational divides among women, and how these influenced the roles and modes of participation of the Sisters. The chapter demonstrates that the Sisters benefited considerably from the opening up of the political opportunity structure, expanding their presence, roles, and activism to political offices and spaces previously denied to them, but also how opportunities and visibility differed among women as a consequence of their ideological inclinations. The continued hegemony of a salafi-leaning faction within the MB signified that the older and more conservative Sisters were those who continued to benefit the most in terms of participation, leadership, public visibility, leading to the persistent marginalisation of the demands of a younger and more progressive generation of Sisters for their greater decision-making role in the movement. As a consequence, the activities and discourses carried out by the Sisters in the newly acquired political spaces at the time underwent no significant change when compared to those of the past. Conservative gender views continued to prevail.

**Chapter 7** looks at the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood during the same period of political opening, but as it unfolded outside the space of institutional politics. It therefore discusses the activism of those Sisters who did not assume formal political positions in the MB, the FJP, or

the Egyptian parliament, but who nevertheless continued to push for change from within the informal Islamist circles affiliated to the Brotherhood movement. The chapter highlights the benefits of investigating informal spaces as venues for Islamist women's activism, as well as employing 'generation' as an analytical tool. It is in fact in the informal activist spaces of the movement that the most significant changes for the Sisterhood took place. In there, an alliance between the youth and a number of progressive Sisterhood cadres was forged on the basis of common grievances towards the MB elder leadership and its political performance. The Sisterhood cadres fostered the aspirations and desires of the youth and these, in return, promoted them to leadership when the Brotherhood introduced elections in the Muslim Sisterhood section for the first time. These women, together with the youth, would be at the heart of women's resistance when the opportunity closed for the MB, and the movement fell under a new wave of repression from July 3, 2013.

**Chapter 8** examines the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood after the July 3, 2013, military coup that ousted Morsi from power, and signalled the start of a new wave of MB repression. It investigates how, following the closing up of the political opportunity structure, the Sisters mobilised those resources and networks under their control in resistance to the restoring Egyptian authoritarian regime. The ousting of the MB signals a moment of profound transformation for the Sisters in terms of the roles and repertoires of activism embraced by women, but also their feminist identities. Women returned to their traditional roles as 'rescuers' of the MB movement, but also expanded their roles to new areas. Under the initiatives of both elder and younger Sisters, women established new 'infrastructures' for resistance, including women-only movements independent of the MB, groups of lawyers and human rights defenders, and political committees with the objective of building solidarity and political alliances with other movements involved in anti-regime resistance. By taking part in the front lines of the struggle, women have inevitably fallen as direct targets of state violence. Violence, however, did not entirely demobilise women. Rather, it had the effect of propelling the Sisters into further mobilization, leading to the strengthening of their identities as independent political actors *vis-à-vis* both the regime and the male dominated Brotherhood. The influence that the Sisters came to enjoy over the on-the-ground youth activists at this time, allowed them to play an important political role aimed at maintaining the cohesiveness of the MB movement, necessary to survive repression. This role of women, when added to the one they already enjoyed in their women-only movements, increased the political influence that the Sisters enjoyed over the MB movement.

**Chapter 9** provides an analytical discussion of the overall findings in light of the main research question, and put these into a dialogue with the existing literature. The effect of both

positive and negative political circumstances on women's participation, their roles, and leadership is analysed in relation to (1) the variations of the MB status in the political system (2) the variations of state's approach to the MB – accommodation or repression (3) generational change (4) the coexistence of moderate and conservative factions in the movement, and their shifting influence on the movement's decision-making and areas of activism across time and (5) Islamist women's changes in worldviews and identities. Particular attention is given also to the role of informal spaces for activism as important venues for women to challenge dominant gender regimes in their movements. The chapter contends that women are able to emerge as leaders of a nearly centenary, conservative political movement of the stand of the Muslim Brotherhood not only because are needed at a particular time. In fact women leaders do not materialise 'out of thin air'. Rather, they are already there, even though their leadership remains confined to women-only spaces and outside the realm of institutional politics. A final part of the chapter sets out venues for further research.

# Chapter 2 - Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 The Arab Spring, the Rise of Islamist Movements, and Mainstream Perspectives on the 'Woman Question'

The wave of mass protests that swept across the MENA region since late 2010, and which remain known as the 'Arab Spring,' occurred with an unprecedented participation of women. Women from all walks of life joined the streets in their respective countries demanding economic reforms, social justice, and regime change. From Tunisia to Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Syria and Yemen, women were prominent actors, leaders, and mobilizers of popular protests. Their participation was not limited to non-violent anti-government activities. In Syria, for example, where peaceful demonstrations culminated into a devastating civil war still protracting today, women joined their male counterparts in conflict as combatants.[1] Arab women's participation in the uprisings was met with considerable surprise by those who failed to anticipate their roles as pro-active political actors.[2] Images of revolutionary heroines flooded the headlines of major newspapers around the world in what was portrayed as an Arab feminist revolution in the making,[3] leading to the growing of hopes that greater equal rights and freedoms for women could be achieved in the post-revolutionary MENA.

Under protracted popular unrests, Arab leaders felt eventually compelled to take action. Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali stepped down and left the country on January 17, 2011. In Egypt president Hosny Mubarak attempted to retain power by promising democratic reforms, but when these proved insufficient to appease the millions of protesters in Tahrir Square, the army intervened deposing the President on February 18, 2011. On March 9 of the same year, Moroccan King Mohammad VI vowed for comprehensive constitutional and democratic reforms, successfully managing to retain power. President Muammar Gadhafi, instead, met a more punitive end, being

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[1] Razan Ghazzawi, 'Seeing the Women in Revolutionary Syria,' *Open Democracy*, April 8, 2014. Available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/razan-ghazzawi/seeing-women-in-revolutionary-syria

[2] Soumaya Ghannoushi, 'Perceptions of Arab Women have been Revolutionised,' *The Guardian*, March 11, 2011. Available at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/11/arab-women-revolutionised-egypt-tunisia-yemen

[3] Elisa Pierandrei, 'This Revolution Challenges Patriarchy: an Interview with Margot Badran,' *Quantara.de*, January 4, 2012. Available at https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-margot-badran-this-revolution-challenges-patriarchy; Naomi Wolf, 'The Middle East Feminist Revolution,' *al-Jazeera*, March 4, 2011. Available at http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/03/201134111445686926.html

initially deposed and then killed on October 20, 2011, by the Libyan National Liberation Army in joint operation with NATO forces.

One of the immediate effects of these new political arrangements was a renewed backlash on the millions of women who made these events possible. As it usually occurs in the midst of nationalist upheavals, women's participation was welcomed and the current gender order temporarily suspended. At the outset of the revolutionary waves, however, Arab women were asked to abandon the public sphere once again, at times violently.[4] What in the eyes of the international community seemed to aggravate the situation even further was the emergence of Islamist movements as the dominant actors of the post-revolutionary transitions.

Where free and fair elections occurred, Islamist movements made considerable political gains. In 2011 in Tunisia, the Ennahda movement emerged as the largest group in parliament, winning over 41 percent of the votes; its secretary-general and spokesman Hamadi Jebali was then appointed as Prime Minister. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), won over 46 percent of parliamentary seats and on June 30, 2012, its former party chairman Mohammad Morsi became the first democratically elected and civilian President in the history of the country. Islamist movements made gains also in the absence of regime change. In Morocco, for example, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) emerged as the largest political block with 107 out of 395 seats in parliament; its leader Abdelilah Benkirane was then elected Prime Minister. Islamists counted considerable representation also in the Libyan General National Congress (LGNC). Although the Justice and Construction Party (JCP) gained only 8 percent of the seats contested through national lists, more candidates obtained offices as independents. As MENA academics had therefore predicted for quite some time, Islamists, the oldest and best organised oppositional movements in the region, benefited greatly from the removal of authoritarian constraints.[5]

If not an absolute defeat, Islamists' takeover was perceived as a further setback for Arab women. Like other contemporary religious-political movements across the world,[6] Islamists support a conservative gender ideology which attributes men and women different social roles based on what are believed to be natural differences between the sexes. Gender roles are understood in a framework of complementarity to one another, rather than equality, with women's

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[4] Althea M. Middleton-Detzner et al., 'Women and the Egyptian Revolution: A Dream Deferred?' *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* 17, no. 3-4 (July 2011): 106-115.

[5] Michelle Dunne, 'The Rise of Islamist Parties in Tunisia and Egypt,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (May 2011). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/05/31/rise%C2%ADof%C2%ADislamist%C2%ADparties%C2%ADin%C2%ADtunisia%C2%ADand%C2%ADegypt/37d8

[6] For the role of women in conservative and right-wing movements outside the MENA see Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power, eds. *Right Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World*, (NY and London: Routledge, 2002).

primary duties being that of caregiving towards their families and communities. The practical implication of Islamists' position on women translates into a politics of gender which endorses women's subordinated position to men in the private sphere of society, limiting women's public and political participation to areas that reflect such a gender complementarity, and are considered non-threatening to men status and leadership. Besides that, Islamists have often supported conservative law reforms, particularly in matters of reproductive, personal, and family rights, which inevitably discriminated against women.[7] It is therefore no surprise that Islamists' electoral victories were met with considerable skepticism by international and local secular-oriented sectors of society, who feared for the future of Arab women's rights in the region.[8]

Notwithstanding reasonable concerns, the events of the uprisings shed light on the several assumptions that continued to underpin Western-liberal approaches to Arab women in general, and Islamist women in particular. The surprise with which the public reacted when acknowledging of the massive involvement of women in the revolutions, confirmed the persistence of Orientalist ideas for which Arab women continued to be perceived as aloof to politics and confined to the privacy of their homes. In reality, Arab women boast a long legacy of activism dating back to the emergence of the anti-colonial Arab resistance movements in the nineteenth century,[9] and never downplayed their role in the region's socio-political struggles since then. In the Egyptian context in particular, women's mass mobilization re-emerged at the outset of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, persisted in occasion of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and was central to the Mahalla labour strikes that plagued Egypt since 2006. Also, women have been a resolute force of the Egyptian student movement since the 1980s, and continue to be a large majority of those activists involved in denouncing practices of human rights abuses in Egypt.[10]

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[7] Laurie A. Brand, *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences*, (USA: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[8] For an overview of such positions see, among others, Sarah J. Feuer, 'Islam and Democracy in Practice: Tunisia's Ennahda Nine Months In,' *Brandeis University Crown Centre for Middle East Studies*, no. 66. (September 2012). Available at http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB66.pdf; Heidi Basch-Harod, 'Uncertainty for the future of the Moroccan women's movement,' *Open Democracy*, March 1, 2012. Available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/heidi-basch-harod/uncertainty-for-future-of-moroccan-women%E2%80%99s-movement; Nathan J. Brown, 'Egypt and Islamic Sharia: a Guide for the Perplexed.' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (May 2012). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/15/egypt-and-islamic-sharia-guide-for-perplexed#women

[9] Mary Ann Fay, ed. 'Early Twentieth-Century Middle Eastern Feminisms, Nationalisms, and Transnationalisms,' special issue, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2008); Margot Badran, *Feminist, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[10] Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab el-Mahdi, 'Beyond the "Women Question" in the Egyptian Revolution,' *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3, (Fall 2011): 683-691.

A second assumption underlying Western liberal approaches to women's involvement in the uprisings concerns the widespread idea that women's rights, and the achievement of gender equality in particular, was a primary concern guiding Arab women's mobilization. Such a view, for example, was epitomised in a speech given on May 14, 2012, by Haleh Esfandiari, the Director of the Middle East Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, for inaugurating a series of lectures on women and the 'Arab Awakening.' Esfandiari opened the discussion with these exact words:

> 'We basked in the glory of the women and men who made possible these historic turning points, but we came to mourn the ugly scenes that followed. Once the *anciens régimes* fell, the old barriers of segregation went up. […] A gray cloud hangs over the future of women's rights in the countries of the Arab Awakening. The Islamists feel emboldened and will try to use their newly gained votes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Kuwait to limit women's rights and push for the implementation of the *shari'a*. Tribal customs not hospitable to gender equality might re-emerge. But women in the region do not accept that all is lost; nor will they allow the rights earned during decades of struggle to be taken away from them. Islamist women may initially go along with restrictions on women's rights. But, as in Iran, they will soon realize that they, too, are beneficiaries of gender equality, access to education, and empowerment, as well as laws protecting them in marriage, divorce and child custody.'[11]

Among the major claims voiced by Arab protestors across the region were poor living conditions caused by decades of aggressive neo-liberal economic reforms, low pay employment, and lack of proper health services, clean water, infrastructures, and education. Government's corruption, the persistence of a police state, Arab regime's absolute disregard for human and citizenship rights, and lack of personal and political freedom, also stood out among the slogans raised by demonstrators from Tunisia to Egypt's Tahrir Square. As also pointed by Abu-Lughod and el-Mahdi, Western approaches to women's issue during and post the revolts 'reveal[s] a very limited –white, liberal-understanding of feminism,'[12] which prevents recognising social class dynamics, and the plurality of motivations, as well as ideologies, which underpinned the mobilization of women.

One additional persisting bias in the literature on gender and the MENA region is the belief that Islam is the first cause of women's oppression. Religion continues to be flagged as the specific cultural baggage for understanding women's subordinated and disadvantaged status in their own societies. As a consequence, there is a widespread - and almost unchallenged - belief that

[11] Haleh Esfandiari, *Is the Arab Awakening Marginalizing Women?* (USA: Wilson Centre, 2012):3-4. Available at https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Arab%20Awakening%20Marginalizing%20Women_0.pdf

[12] Abu-Lughod and El-Mahdi, *Beyond the Women Question*, 684.

transitions led by secular actors are necessarily more beneficial to Arab women. In reality, conservative gender views dominate both sides of the Islamist-secular political spectrum.[13] Although secular groups may initially appear more women-friendly, in fact, male-dominated liberal forces are also equally likely to support women's political participation and rights only as far as these do not challenge their interests.

In post-uprising Egypt, liberal and secular parties made no more efforts than Islamists to support women's political participation. On the contrary, when compared to other groups, Islamist women enjoyed considerable backing in their movements. They not only contributed to the success of Islamist parties as voters and recruiters of voters, but they also participated as candidates in elections, several of them obtaining office. In Tunisia, female affiliates of the Ennahda party secured 39 seats, the equivalent of over 67 percent of the total representation of women in parliament. In Morocco, 19 JDP female candidates gained office, comprising of over 27 percent of the total number of female MPs. Similarly in Libya, 17 of the JCP members elected to the LGNC were women, leading JCP female members to seize over 21 percent of female representation in that body. In Egypt, where only nine women were elected into parliament, four belonged to the FJP.

Similarly, there is little recognition of the fact that secular (military) governments in the Arab world have been equally less supportive of women rights' and their causes, and that when considering the several forms of oppression women remain subjected to, authoritarian regimes remain those mainly responsible.[14] While the role of religion in the persistence of conservative gender norms and traditions cannot be denied, it must be also recognised that gender conservatism is not unique to Islamist movements, Muslim societies, or the Arab world more broadly. Most importantly, it must also be acknowledged that women's oppression in the MENA region comes in many forms. Not least, this is caused by protracted occupation, foreign military interventions, neo-colonialism, imperialism, the persistence of authoritarianism, and absence of basic human rights standards, among others.[15] Narratives that reduce women's issues to lack of gender equality and/or religious oppression are therefore extremely damaging to Arab women. They not only propagate a problematic message by which achieving legal gender equality is considered all that is necessary to solve Arab women's issues in their entirety, but also lend strength to explanations grounded in essentialist cultural understandings for explaining the dynamics taking place in the region.

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[13] Mervat F. Hatem, 'Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularists and Islamists Views Really Differ?' *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 661-676.
[14] For an overview of the state feminism promoted by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, see Hind Ahmed Zaki, 'El-Sissi's Women? Shifting Gender Discourses and the Limits of State Feminism', *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 3, (2015). Available at http://ema.revues.org/3503
[15] Nicola Pratt and Nadja al-Ali, ed. *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives.* (London: Zed Books, 2009).

Following this logic, it is easily understandable how Islamist women's contributions, claims, and struggles, continue to be overlooked alongside those of many other Arab women just because these fail to be expressed within a liberal normative framework. This practice continues to persist, and notwithstanding the fact that those women engaged in liberal-feminist projects remain a minority in the region.[16] With the above points of reflection in mind, the next section engages with the debate concerning the inclusion of women in Islamist movements and parties, as presented by the political science scholarship up to the eve of the uprisings. The objective is that of challenging old perspectives, to the benefit of greater attention to Islamist women as actors of social and political change.

## 2.2 The Inclusion of Women in Islamist Movements and Parties: Ideological Moderation vs. Strategic Arguments

For a long time, scholars have given only scant attention to women in Islamist movements. Precisely because of Islamist movements' conservative gender ideology, women were not considered to be important constituencies for these groups. Things changed since the introduction of partial liberalisation reforms by Arab states in the 1990s, which prompted Islamists to seek political gains by engaging in institutional politics.[17] Since then, women acquired increasing visibility in Islamist movements and parties, attracting the attention of scholars as a result. Researchers began to investigate women's motivations for supporting Islamist movements which - theoretically - would have curtailed women's rights if in power. Others gave attention to the way Islamists managed to mobilise women in their political projects, to the extent of women's contributions to Islamist movements in times of elections, to how women managed to reconcile an active political role amid the conservative gender ideology espoused by their movements, or the roles and positions assumed by women in Islamist movements more broadly.[18] In providing such

[16] Abu-Lughod and El-Mahdi, *Beyond the Women Question*, 2011.
[17] These were predominantly ad-hoc reforms. In most cases, Arab regimes retained full control and political power, often supported by the very same international actors who had advocated for greater liberalization in the region. See, Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'The Limits of Democracy in the Middle East: the Case of Jordan,' *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 4 (1999): 606-620. For a discussion of the role played by international actors in Arab states' transitions see Francesco Cavatorta, *The International Dimension of the Failed Algerian Transition: Democracy Betrayed?*, (Manchester University Press, 2009).
[18] Jody Natchtwey and Mark Tessler 'Explaining Women's Support for Political Islam: Contributions from Feminist Theory,' in *Area Studies and Social Sciences: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics*, edited by Mark Tessler and Jody Natchtwey, 48-69 (Indiana: Indiana University Press 1999); Ghada H. Talhami. *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt.* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); Lisa Blaydes and Safinaz El-Tarouty, 'Women's

accounts, scholars grounded their explanations - implicitly or explicitly - in either side of two main paradigms: that of ideological-moderation or rational choice explanations. Disentangling the value of these two positions is important because these models continue to underpin scholarly interpretations of women's inclusion and/or political participation in Islamist movements, but not only. They also bear theoretical implications for our ability to look at Islamist women activists as agents of Islamist movements' change, rather than mere recipient of Islamist movements' political projects.

### 2.2.1 The Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis

Among scholars, are those who sustain that Islamist movements are capable of ideological-moderation,[19] and therefore that the increasing presence of women in Islamist parties can be considered a direct consequence of this process. These scholars base their argument on the inclusion-moderation hypothesis. This posits that the inclusion of Islamist movements into pluralist political systems leads Islamists to moderate their ideology towards the acceptance of greater pluralist and liberal values, including a more equal treatment of women.[20] Those who maintain this position place emphasis on processes of political learning as a result of which groups of different ideological background are able to moderate their views because of structural constraints and/or by way of socialization with political actors of different ideological persuasion. This approach was initially adopted to analyse communist parties in Europe, and it has then been applied to Islamist movements with the hope to shed lights on whether political participation could serve as a mean to tame Islamist's political projects.

Explanations that rely on this sort of argument are extremely persuasive and are certainly correct in directing our attention to how religious ideologies are subjected to continuous

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Electoral Participation in Egypt: the Implications of Gender for Voter Recruitment and Mobilization,' *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 364-380; Jeffry R. Halverson and Amy K. Way, 'Islamist Feminism: Constructing Gender Identities in Postcolonial Muslim Societies,' *Politics and Religion* 4, no. 3 (December 2011): 503-525; Abdellatif and Ottaway, *Women in Islamist Movements*, 2007.

[19] Chris Harnish and Quinn Mecham, 'Democratic Ideology in Islamist Opposition? The Muslim Brotherhood's Civil State,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 2 (2009): 189-205; Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*: *Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Wickham, *The Path to Moderation*; Eva Wegner and Miquel Pellicer, 'Islamist Moderation Without Democratization: the Coming of Age of the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development,' *Democratization* 16, no. 1 (2009): 157-175.

[20] El-Ghobashy, *The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers*; Gamze Cavdar, 'Islamist New Thinking in Turkey: A Model for Political Learning?' *Political Science Quarterly* 121, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 477-497.

reinterpretation and re-contextualization.[21] Nevertheless, ideological moderation arguments have demonstrated to be underproductive when it comes to explaining processes of women's inclusion in Islamist movements. In fact, gender complementarity (rather than equality) remains one of the most uncompromising pillars of Islamist movements' ideology, and one that constitutes the foundation of Islamists' identity politics.[22] As a consequence, Islamists' position on the 'woman issue' has become one of the most important aspects of Islamists' ideology that scholars appeal to in order to provide counterarguments to the ability of Islamists to moderate.

This stalemate is also a consequence of the normative-liberal values that underpin the sort of change sought in Islamist movements, as well as the terms in which moderation is understood. As pointed out by Schwedler, analyses of moderation are never value-free, but remain grounded on Western-liberal values. Moderation is tested against the full acceptance of such values, and middle-ground positions are usually discarded as failed moderation.[23] When applied to Islamist movements and their position on gender issues, Islamists' moderation is assessed against their unconditional acceptance of gender equality between the sexes, the normative discourse that underpins this view, and the whole corollary of the liberal value-system that supports it.[24] This, however, is never the case, precisely for reasons highlighted above. It follows that judging Islamist movements' ideological moderation on such premises, therefore, only raises questions for which the answer is already known: Islamists will most likely remain 'fundamentally illiberal'.[25]

Such generalizing conclusions, however, are underproductive for other several reasons. Chiefly, they promote an understanding of Islamist movements as monolithic entities, and homogeneous groups, while in reality Islamists movements comprise of several sub-groups, factions, and individuals, holding dissimilar positions on similar matters, including women. For instance, Clark and Schwedler demonstrated this point clearly in their study of the MB in Jordan and Yemen. By comparing Islamists' ideological position with regard to the extent of the influence that religious texts must bear on practical political life, the scholars could identify four different

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[21] On this point see, for example, the work of Cavatorta and Merone on the Tunisian Ennahda movement post the uprisings: Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, 'Post-Islamism, ideological evolution and 'la *Tunisianite*' of the Tunisian Islamist party al-Nahda,' *Journal of Political Ideologies* 20, no. 1 (2015): 27-42.

[22] Gamze Cavdar, 'Islamist Moderation and the Resilience of Gender: Turkey Persisting Paradox,' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11, no. 3-4 (November 2010): 341-357.

[23] Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*, 8-11.

[24] See how following the release of the MB 2007 Party Platform, gender continued to be a crucial element for testing the movement's moderation: John Natan Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway, 'Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab world: Exploring the Grey Zones,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Herbert-Quandt-Stiftung Foundation* 67 (March 2006). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP67.Brown.FINAL.pdf

[25] See for example Mariz Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt: Democracy Redefined or Confined?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

sub-groups within each party, corresponding to four main different positions existing among Islamist members.[26] Secondly, analyses grounded in such practice fail to account for other important factors that may prevent Islamist movements' moderation which are not necessarily ideological - such as intra movement competition for leadership, and Islamist movement's decision-making structures for example - which have obvious implications for the ability of moderate members to bring about change, and certain ideas to prevail over others. Also, Islamist movements' discourses are framed in opposition to that of the regimes they challenge. Their moderation, therefore, also depends on the external environment in which Islamist movements operate, and the dominant gender discourse that prevail in the public sphere.[27] Finally, the outward manifestation of moderation does not necessarily mean that a movement has effectively undergone moderation. Political participation can lead moderate members to gain greater visibility, in which case the movement has not undergone moderation but a reconfiguration of its public image.[28] Moderation, therefore, is better defined narrowly, as Schwedler does, and understood as a 'movement from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives', regardless of the starting and end point of reference.[29]

### 2.2.2 Rational Choice and Structural Arguments

Another majority of scholars, instead, maintain that Islamist movements, like any other socio-political movement, are rational actors, and that their actions are a response to the external environment in which they operate. For these scholars, the inclusion of women in the ranks of Islamist movements is thus primarily dictated by Islamist movements' strategic choices aimed at maximizing their interests and survival in the political system. Islamist movements are more likely to include women within their ranks when they need to (a) counter the competition of other movements and parties,[30] (b) maximize Islamists' support in times of elections,[31] or (c) guarantee the survival of the movement in times of repression.[32] As these scholars argue, although female inclusion within the ranks of Islamist movements has increased over time, Islamists remain

[26] Clark and Schwedler, *Who Opened the Window?* 297.
[27] Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*, 22.
[28] Ibid., 13
[29] Ibid., 3.
[30] Lisa Taraki, 'Jordanian Islamists and the Agenda for Women: Between Discourse and Practice,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 1996): 140-158; Isla Jad, 'Islamist women of Hamas: Between Feminism and Nationalism,' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (June 2011): 176-201.
[31] Blaydes and el-Tarouty, *Women's Electoral Participation in Egypt*.
[32] Bauer, *When Sisters Become Brothers*.

fundamentally illiberal towards women. For them, Islamists 'reframe' rather than 'reform' their position on women, prioritizing strategic calculations over genuine ideological change.[33]

Explanations based on Islamists' rational behavior are plausible and reflect a reality typical of many movements and political parties around the world, where women's inclusion occurred first out of strategic necessity but women made further gains primarily as a result of their own efforts.[34] While such arguments remain therefore extremely valid, when applied to Islamist movements they often lead to the denial of women's agency in the process of their inclusion, contributing therefore to reinforce ideas for which women remain mere objects of Islamist movements' activism, rather than activists in their own right.[35] As summed up by Clark and Schwedler, whether the emphasis is on processes of ideological-moderation or strategic-adaptation, mainstream explanations maintain that women 'see gains [only] because party moderates hold more progressive views toward women or because they recognise the utility of promoting women's participation to gain votes and/or appease domestic and international critics'.[36] Whatever the reason for the gain is, it is always 'male-led' or 'male-approved.' If this position holds true, we should therefore expect that in those instances where women are no longer needed they will see no gain to their positions, and will take no action to change the status quo.

In the attempt to overcome this theoretical stalemate, Clark and Schwedler proposed a third possible explanation for the growing presence of women in Islamist parties. The innovative bit of the scholars' approach rested on the fact that they borrowed elements of Social Movement Theory (SMT) - the idea of opportunity structures in the specific - and attributed agency to Islamist women.[37] By taking the case of the Jordanian Islamic Action Front (IAF) and the Yemenite Islah parties, Clark and Schwedler argued that women entered those parties for reasons that were independent of changes in Islamist male leaders' strategy and/or ideology. As they put it: '[w]hile shifts in party ideology and/or strategy may indeed be at play, gains made by Islamist women have come as they [women] have taken advantage of structural openings created by shifting divisions within each party.'[38] 'Structural openings', they continue, take place as tensions between different factions within the same party – moderates and hardliners – emerge, 'preoccupy the male leadership and consequently create space for increased activities that *women themselves seize.*'[39]

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[33] Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt*.
[34] Jane S. Jaquette, *The women's movement in Latin America: participation and democracy*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).
[35] Stacey Philbrick-Yadav, 'Segmented Publics and Islamic Women in Yemen: Rethinking Space and Activism,' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6, no. 2 (April 2010): 1-30.
[36] Clark and Schwedler, *Who Opened the Window?* 293.
[37] More on the application of SMT for the study of Islamic activism in the MENA region will be said in the next section.
[38] Clark and Schwedler, *Who Opened the Window?* 293.
[39] Ibid., 294, *emphasis added.*

Clark and Schwedler's study is therefore essential because it is one of the few existing studies grounded in the political science literature that attempts to break with what appears to remain a polarized debate between ideological-moderation and strategic arguments, while also recognizing the necessity to address a persisting agency-bias when discussing female activists in Islamist movements. The scholars understood women as able to emerge as political actors in Islamist movements despite presumed ideological constraints of gender nature remaining in place, and not inescapably out of Islamist male leaders' opportunistic attitudes.

Several issues in the study remain however unaddressed. For example, even though it is women who, in Clark and Schwedler's views, recognize and seize windows of opportunity for increased participation, the scholars do not explain how women have come to perceive of such opportunities, or how women mobilized to capture these newly emerged spaces for activism. Also, given that mobilization was a voluntary choice of women, the scholars fail to address the motivations that compelled women to mobilize, or how (and if) their experience with activism and increased mobilization changed women's worldviews with regard to the political roles they should have in Islamist movements and parties.

The scholars put considerable effort to expose how the idea of a moderate-hardliner continuum assumed in the transitology literature limited our understanding of Islamist movements' ideological change, and women's participation in Islamist parties as a result. Their argument is that new opportunities for women are created precisely by the existence of intra-party ideological differences, which are impossible to grasp when Islamist movements are conceived as monolithic blocs and their ideological position tested exclusively against either side of such a continuum, while ignoring middle-ground positions.[40] But their primary subject of inquiry is not women. Women are thought as active agents, but there is no explanation or description of how this agency is exercised. In a way this renders Clark and Schwedler's study open to critiques recently raised against SMT by scholars of what has been termed the 'relational' turn. These scholars criticise the rigidity implicitly at play in traditional SMT - and the classic notion of political opportunity structure in particular – as a result of which the role of structure in processes of social change assume prominence to the detriment of that of agency.[41] Following this critique, for instance, we could ask if those women who managed to enter the Islah and IAF studied by Clark and Schwedler have not seized the windows of opportunity, but created them.

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[40] Ibid., 295.

[41] Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper, *Contention in Context. Political Opportunities and the Emergence of Protest*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); 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 (March 1999): 36-39.

### 2.2.3 Summary

Decades of structure and agency debate have not led to any clear cut answer about which of the two should be attributed greater explanatory power in socio-political processes. The answer rests primarily on what is to be explained, and on scholars' ontological and epistemological perspectives. This study maintains that to reach a better understanding of *how* and *when* women's participation and activism in Islamist movements and parties is likely to expand to new roles and spaces, greater emphasis must be given to women's agency. In particular, this study aims to give attention to:

1. How women in Islamist movements navigate gender and political constraints to acquire greater presence, roles, and influence in Islamist movements and/or male-dominated Islamist organizations;

2. How women may take advantage of particular circumstances to make this possible;

3. How women's worldviews and identities are transformed as a consequence of protracted activism.

The next section provides an overview of the latest theoretical developments in STM, and suggests ways in which these may provide a better understanding of how Islamist women's subjectivities intersect with structural constraints, and of women's strategic assessments to overcome them.

## 2.3 Structure, Agency, and Opportunities: contributions from the 'relational' turn in SMT

The increasing application of SMT to non-Western contexts, together with the emergence of new social movements (SMs) in Western democracies, paved the way for several criticisms of the old paradigms that characterized part of SMT. The new perspectives that emerged from such critiques offer MENA scholars opportunities to refine some of the ideas that guided the study of Islamic activism, and also contribute to further developments in SMT. This section provides an overview of how SMT developed across time, how it contributed to the understanding of MENA activism, and how MENA scholars claim SMT should be revised following the events of the Arab uprisings. From this critical discussion, a useful theoretical toolkit emerges to investigate the activism of women in Islamist movements.

### 2.3.1 The Classic Social Movement Research Agenda

The 'classic SMT agenda', as defined by its three major exponents Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly,[42] developed out of a combination of various critiques raised against prior research traditions which remained focused on elites and the state as the primary locus of politics. The scholarly work that developed as a reaction to this prevailing school of thought, led since the 1960s primarily by American and European historians and social scientists, preoccupied itself with narrating how political struggles unfolded instead 'from below', rather than 'from above'. As a consequence, scholars started to pose greater attention 'to reconstruct political experiences of ordinary people, ground those experiences in routine social life, and challenge the dismissal of popular politics as irrational reactions to stress or temporary hardship.'[43]

Rational choice scholars who joined the debate pointed out to the necessity to identify processes and formulate theories that could explain how people managed to organize collective action on the basis of common interests.[44] Their chief contention was that while most people held grievances of some kind, not all of them were capable of mobilization. The result was the development of Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT). This focused on activists' organizational skills and the accumulation of resources crucial to the ability of actors to mobilize in collective action. By emphasising the rational aspect of mass mobilization, RMT's strongest contribution was that of challenging prevailing ideas that considered SMs as mere 'impulsive, irresponsible outbursts of self-indulgence.'[45]

RMT scholars paved the way for those who came to be associated with the Political Process Model (PPM). The objective of those researchers was to add dynamism to episodes of contentious politics by accentuating SMs strategic interaction in relation to the external environment.[46] With this scope in mind, PPM scholars placed greater emphasis on the role of exogenous factors responsible for enhancing or inhibiting SMs mobilization, claim making, strategies, and their ability to bring about change within various areas of mainstream institutional politics.[47] In a nutshell, PPM contended that shifts or changes in the broader political structure

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[42] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*.
[43] Ibid., 14.
[44] For the work of rational choice theorists see Mancur Olson, *The logic of collective action*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, 'Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,' *The American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (May 1977):1212-1241.
[45] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 5.
[46] Major exponent of this model include Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and David S. Mayer.
[47] David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff, 'Conceptualizing Political Opportunity,' *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (June 2004):1458-1458.

rendered the system more vulnerable to challenges, created openings - or Political Opportunities Structures (POS) – which enabled movements to mobilize and push forward their agenda.

Since the 1990s, the structuralism of the PPM has been partially challenged by scholars of the 'cultural turn,' who gave prominence to the role of culture and identity in processes of mobilization.[48] Core to these researchers' claim was that structural change and the availability of resources were insufficient to explain processes of contentious politics. While most people held grievances, SMs had to engage in the production of shared meanings and values to be able to motivate people into collective action, a process that came to be known as framing.[49] The main contribution of Collective Action Frames (CAF) theories was pointing out that 'framing is not simply an expression of pre-existing group claims but an active, creative, constitutive process'.[50] With their claims, therefore, CAF theorists adding further weight to the general quest for greater dynamism to the classic SMT paradigm.

The model that resulted from these collective efforts was therefore one relying significantly on POS, resources for mobilization (both formal and informal), framing processes, and repertoires of contention (the practices of claim-making used by participants in social protests). Rational choice and structural paradigms provided the guiding theoretical framework of this model.

### 2.3.2 The 'Relational' Turn in SMT

The classic SMT model enjoyed considerable fortunes,[51] but in the course of time became subjected to a growing number of critiques. These were facilitated by the emergence of new forms of social protests and movements, also known as new social movements (NSM), and which did not adequately reflect many elements of the classic social-class struggle that characterised much of the

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[48] Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans, eds., *Social Movements and Culture* (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

[49] David A. Snow et al., 'Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,' American *Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 464-481.

[50] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 16.

[51] Movements that lent themselves the most to empirical test for the development of the PPM were the Civil Rights Movement, and students and feminist movements. For studies looking at the Civil Rights Movement see Dough McAdam, *The political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Belinda Robnett. *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); for studies looking at student movements see Roberto M. Fernandez and Dough McAdam, 'Networks and Social Movements: Multiorganizational Fields and Recruitment to Mississippi Freedom Summer,' *Sociological Forum* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 357-382; for scholars who have adopted such an approach to study feminist movements see Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Anne N. Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

contentious politics of earlier times. [52] Rather than material benefits, NSM mobilised for issues related to moral codes, norms of social conducts, and ethical principles. This sort of claims cut across class divides, therefore generating collectives that transcended the boundaries of 'status politics' drew upon by the classic SMT polity model. With time, in fact, the narrow political focus of the classic polity model gradually subsumed to the increasing role played by cultural, emotional, and other social factors, leading scholars to expand the notion of POS to include, among others, cultural, organizational, translational, discursive, emotional, and gendered opportunities.[53]

This practice added strength to the critics of the PPM, who took it as a further demonstration that the rigid structural underpinnings of the PPM had become increasingly unsuited to explain the current nature of contentious politics. According to James M. Jasper, one of the most vocal critics of the model, the structuralism of the PPM was too static to allow for the identification of the open-ended nature of social interactions. Pointing to a time bias in the model, Jasper contended that the PPM conflated long-term structural changes with short-term opportunities. While structures were resilient to change and somehow constrained agency, he argued, opportunities resulted from sudden changes and relied strictly on social actors' agency. As he stated:

> 'The concept of window of opportunity complies with the accepted definition of something timely and favourable to some end or purpose. Opportunities are special because they are temporary. Structures, in contrast, are relatively stable and difficult to change. People must adapt to structures much as the structure of a house forces us to walk through doors rather than walls.'[54]

According to Jasper, the ability to seize opportunities rested primarily on social actors' agency and strategic thinking, because it depended on the activists' ability to be alerted to changes that could provide them with new advantages towards their opponents. According to this view, opportunities are therefore not limited to structural changes. Rather, they also consist of opponent's mistakes, of changes in circumstances bringing favour to the actors in question given the resources under their control, and of activists' skills in relation to the other players populating the socio-

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[52] Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: an Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 60-61.

[53] Among those studies that emphasise the gender nature of POS see Holly J. McCammon et al., 'How Movements Win: Gendered Opportunity Structures and U.S. Women's Suffrage Movements, 1866 to 1919,' *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 1 (2001): 49-70; Lori M. Poloni-Staudinger and Candice D. Ortbals, 'Gendered Political Opportunities? Elite Alliances, Electoral Cleavages, and Activity Choice among Women's Groups in the UK, France, and Germany,' *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011): 55-79.

[54] James M. Jasper, 'From Political Opportunity Structures to Strategic Interaction,' in *Contention in Context: Political Opportunities and the Emergence of Protest*, edited by Jeff Godwin and James M. Jasper (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012):12.

political arena at the time in which the change in circumstances take place.[55] What Jasper proposed, therefore, was to think of opportunities as something timely, emerging from daily strategic interactions between social actors, and not uniquely from changes in broader social/political structures. As the scholars contended, in fact, by constraining agency into pre-existing models, the PPM forced agency into structures failing to recognise that most of the opportunities for social change emerged out of struggles, challenges, and interactions that occurred in a much more continuous manner that the PPM implied.[56] Opportunities, he claimed, are created *by* and *through* agency.

The PPM, Jasper agreed, remained useful to identify social and political changes over extended periods of time, and which are likely to result from historical cumulative process. However, the PPM was unable to grasp those opportunities that arose from minor variations in the socio-political context, or even how structures changed as a consequence of daily activist's practices.[57] The PPM was therefore of greater value when applied to socio-political contexts in which structures remained rigid, and where citizens lacked the necessary access to politics and basic citizenship rights that would have allowed them greater political influence. As he stated, 'opportunities matter more in repressive [authoritarian] context than democratic ones. In repressive context, it is almost tautological that protest movements can benefit from some lessening of repression'.[58]

In what constitute much of a self-critique, Tilly, McAdam and Tarrow embraced many of these assessments in their book *Dynamics of Contention*. In a nutshell, what they proposed was to place greater emphasis on 'activists' attribution of threats and opportunities,' 'appropriation of sites for activism and contentious action,' 'social constructions of events,' and 'innovative collective action.' This intellectual shifts place activists and their networks at the centre of SMT analysis, therefore downplaying the role of structure to the benefit of a greater emphasis on agency.

### 2.3.3 Activism and Social Movements in MENA post the 2010 Uprisings

Since the turn of the century, MENA scholars have increasingly borrowed elements of SMT to explain dynamics of activism of modern Islamic movements.[59] This practice helped

[55] Ibid., 2.
[56] Ibid., 9.
[57] Ibid., 10.
[58] Ibid., 28.
[59] For the work that signals the establishment of this new tradition among MENA scholars see Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed. *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Approach* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004).

significantly to revive the field of study at a time when this tended to be subsumed to simplistic explanations based largely on cultural exceptionalism and, even more since the 9/11 attacks, on religious fanaticism. Scholars who did so, widely challenged commonly held assumption for which Islamic activism was considered *sui generis,* and emphasised the rational character of Islamist actors by demonstrating that their actions could instead be explained using the rational and structural approaches of SMT. For example, MENA scholars employed framing theories to explain how Islamist movements made use of religious discourses for mobilizing activists in high-risk settings;[60] combined POS with regime repressions to determine under which conditions Islamist movements were more likely to engage in violent, rather than peaceful, forms of contention;[61] and used networks' analysis for investigating how Islamist movements managed to extend their support to middle-class circles,[62] or sustaining recruitment in repressive environments.[63] By merging their expertise in political sciences and the MENA region to SMT, more recently MENA scholars have also provided more nuanced explanations of how changes internal to Islamist movements are brought about by the interplay of both structural and ideological factors.[64]

Since the 2010 Arab uprisings, however, scholars started to critically re-evaluate the way they applied SMT also to the MENA context. The outburst of the mass revolts occurred in fact in the absence of structural openings, demonstrating that even authoritarian settings, which leave little windows of structural opportunities, can lead to the emergence of powerful SMs. Also, mass mobilization did not necessarily result in successful experiences of democratization, yet neither reproduced older forms of authoritarianism in place before that.[65] These events profoundly challenged the classic paradigms of democratization and that of authoritarian-resilience that characterised the study of the region up until 2010.[66] What the uprisings suggested, was that although mobilization in the region remained irregular, fragmented, seemingly unpredictable, and

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[60] Carrie R. Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (USA: Columbia University Press, 2002).
[61] Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).
[62] Janine A. Clark. *Islam, Charity and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen*. (Bloomington & Minneapolis: Indiana University Press: 2004)
[63] Clark, *Informal Nodes of Activism*.
[64] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement.*
[65] On this point see Francesco Cavatorta, 'No Democratic Change… and Yet No Authoritarian Continuity: The inter-Paradigm Debate and North Africa After the Uprisings,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 1 (2015): 135-145.
[66] On this point see Paola Rivetti, ed. 'Continuity and change before and after the Arab uprisings in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt,' special issue, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 1 (December 2015).

rarely successful, SMs were nevertheless resilient.[67] New forms of engagement and trajectories of activism had emerged, and SMT tools had demonstrated to be unable to capture this variation.

Like their Western colleagues, MENA scholars also started to question the implicit structuralism of the classic PPM as conducive to mobilization and political change in authoritarian contexts. Quoting Goodwin, Jasper, and Khattra's critique of the PPM, for example, Beinin and Vairel also contended that the study of activism in the MENA region required a more flexible and dynamic understanding of context to recognise how opportunities for mobilization came about.[68] The scholars also advocated for the necessity to attribute a bigger role to activists' subjectivities to understand how new spaces for activism were created as a result of agency rather than openings in opportunity structures. By re-evaluating Kurzman's earlier work on the 1979 Iranian Revolution, for example, Beinin and Vairel contended that a constructivist approach was best suited for making sense of how mobilisation takes place in authoritarian settings, where state regimes allow for very little signs of opening or weakness. Kurzman's contended that the Iranian Revolution did not spark as a consequence of structural openings. Rather, it was a change in the Iranian activists' perception of their strength that 'altered the structure of opportunities' leading to mass mobilization.[69] Similarly to critics of the PPM, therefore, Beinin and Vairel also maintained that agency had a crucial role in creating opportunities, and that context could not be observed in a mere objectivistic manner.

Similar considerations were echoed by other MENA scholars sharing analogous concerns with regard to the structuralism of the PPM. For example, Pearlman's work re-valued the role of emotion in processes of mobilization, contending that emotions can lead to social mobilization when strategic calculations would suggests activists not to do so.[70] Processes of framing also fell under increased scholarly revision. Fillieule, for example, argued that given that individuals hold unique identities, it is misleading to expect that framing processes affect people equally. Rather, it is more likely that people act on the basis of different motivations also when engaging collectively. As a result, Fillieule proposed to focus on individual trajectories of activism, and to investigate how activists' values and beliefs changed according to their personal experiences with activism,

[67] Beinin and Vairel, *Social Movements in the Middle East and North Africa*, 5.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Charles Kurzman, 'Structural Opportunity and Perceived Opportunity in Social-Movement Theory: the Iranian Revolution of 1979,' *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 1 (February 1996): 153-170.
[70] Wendy Pearlman, 'Emotions and the Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings,' *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 2 (June 2013): 387.

leading towards different activist careers, and phases of engagement and/or disengagement of individuals.[71]

MENA scholars who first employed SMT to the study of the region took upon themselves the very important challenge to 'normalize' activism in a region previously considered exceptional. As argued by Beinin and Vairel, however, this was no longer enough. Precisely because of its richness, the region could more critically contribute to the development of SMT to demonstrate where this did not hold, and to expand and enrich SMT by considering such cases. Welcoming much of the critiques introduced by scholars of the 'relational' turn in SMT, Beinin and Vairel invited MENA scholars to shift the focus of attention on 'interpersonal activists' networks', the 'perception of opportunities and threats', 'active appropriation of sites for activism', 'dynamic constructions of frames', and 'new repertoires of contention'. By shifting the focus on those factors, Beinin and Vairel contended that MENA scholars could provide better explanations of how SMs survive and operate in 'between the interstices of persisting authoritarianism.'[72]

### 2.3.4 Summary

The critical dialogue initiated by social and political sciences' scholars in both the Western and the MENA regions, highlighted differences but also the emerging of a common agenda for the study of activism in the MENA. This agenda strongly focuses on the role of subjectivities, activists' perceptions of opportunities, emotions, interpersonal networks of activism, individual activists' trajectories, strategic practices for the appropriation of new spaces for activism, and innovative forms of contentious action. Emphasis is given to such elements claiming that placing activists at the centre of analysis allows for a better understanding of how socio-political change is brought about in both Western democracies and MENA authoritarian contexts. This analytical toolkit offers innovative perspectives for investigating how Islamist women activists interact with the gender and political constraints they face to increase their presence, roles, and leverage in Islamist movements. The chief advantage of this approach rests on placing women's actions, desires, and practices at the centre of the analysis, and to elevate the position of women to that of primary agents of change.

For example, by embracing Jasper's critique of structuralism and his views on social actors' strategic assessments of opportunities, it is possible to understand Islamist movement's

[71] Olivier Fillieule, 'Proposition pour une Analyse Processuelle de l'Engagement Individuel. Post Scriptum,' *Revue Française de Sciences Politique* 51, (2001): 99-215.
[72] Ibid., 7.

times of need (or crisis) as leading to the emergence of opportunities for women to play greater roles and political leadership in Islamist movements. A review of the rational choice and structural arguments provided above has already highlighted how women's participation and visibility in Islamist movements is more likely to occur when these are in *need* of extra resources for accomplishing their objectives. Scholars identified (a) countering the competition of other movements and parties (b) maximizing support in times of elections (c) and guaranteeing movement's survival in times of repression, as the major circumstantial factors leading to greater inclusion of women. The fact that women are granted greater inclusion under these circumstances may lead one to think of them as mere foot-soldiers.[73] As contended by Jasper, however, situations that put strain on a social actor may lend strength to his/her opponents (as well as allies) who can, in turn, take advantage to strengthen their position and/or leverage *vis-à-vis* the former.[74]

By emphasizing women's strategic use of such opportunities to increase their leverage *vis-à-vis* Islamist movements, this study does not suggest that women perceive their male counterparts as opponents. What is suggested is that situations that lead to the greater inclusion of women in Islamist movements, and which spur from moments of crisis and/or need, can be read from a different perspective rather than exclusively as instances in which male leaders act opportunistically towards women. In fact, they may also present themselves as opportunities to those women who desire greater presence, roles, and leverage in Islamist movements, but who continue to be marginalised politically in 'ordinary' times.

## 2.4 Gender, Empowerment and the Development of Feminist Identities among Islamist Women.

Feminist scholars who grounded their studies in SMT have already pointed out how a 'fuller integration of the scholarship on gender and social movements is the key to understanding processes of gender resistance and change.'[75] This section investigates possible gender dynamics at play within spaces of Islamist women activism, and which can enable women to expand their influence *vis-à-vis* male-dominated Islamist movements under both normal and 'exceptional' circumstances. It concludes by reflecting on women's agency in religious-political movements, and

[73] Mervat Hatem describes Muslim Sisterhood's activism post-2013 by using such a term. See Mervat F. Hatem, 'Gender and Counter Revolution in Egypt,' *Middle East Report* 268 (Fall 2013):12.
[74] Jasper, *From Political Opportunity Structures to Strategic Interaction,* 2.
[75] Verta Taylor, 'Gender and Social Movements. Gender Processes in Women's Self-Help Movements,' *Gender & Society* 13, no. 1 (1999): 10; Verta Taylor and Nancy Wittier, 'Guest Editors' Introduction: Special Issue on Gender and Social Movements: Part 1,' *Gender & Society* 12, no. 6 (1998): 622-623.

by advocating for the need to consider multiple manifestations of subjectivity, identity, and agency among Islamist women.

### 2.4.1 Women-only Spaces as a way to Women's Empowerment.

Because of the gender structure in place in Islamist movements, women tend to operate in parallel spheres from that of men. These are predominantly informal circles associated with the Islamist movement, and are largely religious/charity-oriented, local-focused, and women-centred. The leadership of formal political offices of Islamist organizations, on the other hand, remains chiefly a prerogative of men. In authoritarian contexts, this practice is also reinforced by the fact that political activism carries additional risks for Islamist movements' members, providing the male leadership with further justifications for failing to support a greater involvement of women in political affairs.[76] Women's 'confinement' to women-only spaces, their absence from leadership positions in Islamist organizations, and the little support they enjoy for public political roles, is often pointed at as an example of Islamists' attempts to marginalize the political role of women, and disempower them. Less attention is given to the way in which women-only spaces can instead favour women's empowerment in areas which remain women-only domains, and how women can use the roles they acquire within these spaces to bargain their access to what are traditionally considered male spheres.

The idea that women-only spaces are disempowering for women rests on an extensive feminist literature that since the 1970s identified the separation of society into the public and private sphere as the precondition for the perpetuation of patriarchy.[77] According to these scholars, women's association with the private realm of the family, and men's connection to the public, created an asymmetry in the value attributed to the work that the two sexes carried out, with the consequence that the public-political role played by men acquired gretaer worth when compared to that of women in the home.[78] Freedman, for example, summed up the thesis at the basis of the public/private dichotomy stating that 'the greater the social distance between women in the home and men in the public sphere, the greater the devaluation of women.'[79] The strategy proposed by

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[76] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*; Abdellatif and Ottaway, *Women in Islamist Movements*.
[77] Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).
[78] Michelle Z. Rosaldo, 'Women, Culture and Society: a Theoretical Overview', In *Women, Culture and Society*, edited by Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, 17-42 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).
[79] Estelle Freedman, 'Separatism as a Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930,' *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 512.

feminist scholars to end women's oppression was, therefore, clear. Women could form separate all-female public spheres, or work to blur the boundaries between the public/private realms, working for the entrance of men into the private sphere. The second choice remains the preferred one for a majority of feminist scholars because it is believed to carry greater potential for establishing a more egalitarian society.[80]

Yet, the effect of female-only spaces on women's empowerment is also well established in the feminist literature. Feminist historians, for example, argued that the existence of women-only spaces remain necessary to the development of that feminist consciousness which set the precondition for the birth of women's liberation movements. Cott observed this process in eighteenth century England, where middle-class women used female-only spaces to promote a cult of domesticity that elevated their roles as custodians of family sanctuaries, and the moral character of the nation.[81] According to Cott, it was precisely women's association to the private sphere, and their exclusion from the public realm, which fostered women's awareness of their status as gendered and, progressively, feminism. This, for example, manifested in the emergence of women's claims for greater access to education and work on the basis that better educated and emancipated women could be better educators for the future generations. Similar reflections reverberate in historical accounts of women in Arab countries, who developed several strategies for circumnavigating gender constraints and empower themselves *vis-à-vis* men in the private sphere.[82]

Although Rosaldo, for example, remained committed to the idea that merging the private/public sphere was the best solution to adopt, her anthropological research on tribal societies in Africa led the scholar to recognize that women-only spaces remained nevertheless incubators of women's bonds of solidarity as well as empowerment. As she stated:

> '[T]he very symbolic and social conceptions that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities may be used by women as a basis for female solidarity and worth. When men live apart from women, they in fact cannot control them, and unwittingly they may provide them with the symbols and social resources on which to build a society of their own.'[83]

Following this logic, Freedman demonstrated how it was precisely women's access to the public sphere of men's politics that led to the decline of the US women's liberation movement at the turn of the twentieth century. The entrance of women into male domains, Freedman contended,

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[80] Rosaldo, *Women, Culture and Society: a Theoretical Overview*.
[81] Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
[82] Nahid Yeganeh and Nikki R. Keddy, 'Sexuality and Shi'i Social Protest in Iran,' in *Shi'is and Social Protest*, edited by Juan Ricardo I. Cole and Nikki Keddie (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).
[83] Rosaldo, *Women, Culture and Society: a Theoretical Overview*.

broke the bonds of solidarity typical of female-only environments that contributed to the development of a shared feminist identity among women before that. It diluted women's efforts into other areas, consequently weakening the leverage that women's leaders enjoyed over a unified women's movement, and diminishing their ability to extract gains as a result.[84]

Research in the MENA region confirms the thesis that Islamists' gender segregation practices have the potential to lead to the political empowerment of women. In her study of the Hamas student movement of *al-Kutla al-Islamia* at Berzeit University, for example, Ababneh observed that the gender segregation supported by Hamas compelled the movement to organize male and female students in separate organizations which remained nevertheless equal in structure and leadership positions. Contrary to what occurs in gender mixed spaces, where women are left to compete with men for similar positions, the gender structure of the Hamas movement, Ababneh argued, led women to enjoy equal political and leadership opportunities that saw very few parallels around the world. [85]

Further research also demonstrated that women are able to strategically employ the weight they acquire in women-only spaces to bargain gains *vis-à-vis* Islamist movements, and increase their influence in the political decisions these movements take. Philbrick-Yadav's research on the Yemeni Islah movement, for example, led the scholar to conclude that, in the long term, the segregation of men and women into separate spheres of activism 'allowed Islahi women to develop a powerful set of leadership skills which they are now leveraging for increased influence in the party.'[86] Women did so, Philbrick-Yadav noticed, by appealing to their right to exercise equal roles with men in women-only spaces.[87]

Therefore, the organization of men and women into separate spheres of activism in Islamist movements is not necessarily disempowering for women. On the contrary, it can lead to increasing advantages. When parallel sections exist for both genders, women can grow similar organizations which replicate that of men in structure and leadership positions. Also, in movements and parties that place great emphasis on motherhood and notions of femininity, women can make claims to representation on the basis that their inclusion would be of benefit, protection, and promotion of the institution of the family, women, and children.[88] This strategy proves often successful because by claiming access to separate spheres of interest, women manage to appear less threatening to men,

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[84] Freedman, *Separatism as a Strategy*.
[85] Sara Ababneh, 'Islamic Political Activism as a Means of Women's Empowerment? The Case of the Female Islamic Action Front Activists,' *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 9, no. 1 (April 2009): 47.
[86] Philbrick-Yadav, *Segmented Publics*.
[87] Ibid., 20.
[88] On this point see Karen Celis and Sarah Childs, eds. *Gender, Conservatism and Political Representation* (UK: ECPR Press, 2014); Bacchetta and Power, *Right Wing Women*.

who feel that they do not have to share their roles and authority with the women activists. In fact, women represent an expert addition to political life on matters 'they know best,' and are central to their existence as women as well as the gender order the movement supports. Finally, women can raise such claims precisely on the basis that strong female sections would benefit the movement's objectives, appeal, and legitimacy. These practices are what allowed women to expand their participation and influence in Islamist movements without necessarily leading to their entrance in male spaces and offices.[89]

### 2.4.2 Women Playing Men's Roles: 'Exceptional Circumstances' and the issues of Legitimization, Reversal of Gender Roles, and Survival of Feminist Identities

In times of nationalist/revolutionary upheavals, war and, in the case of Islamist movements in particular, during times of repression, women are observed playing roles that are usually reserved to men, and/or perform tasks that openly transgress the gender order in place, leading them to gain greater access to those public/political spheres of society generally considered male domains.[90] Scholars remain however skeptical of the long-term benefits of the gender role reversal that takes place in such circumstances. The major critique raised is that women may even be able to transgress traditional gender roles, but that their ability to do so remains linked to the existence of 'exceptional circumstances' and, therefore, that such transgression is only temporary. This is also Shitrit's claim when she stated that although women in Islamist movements supporting a nationalist agenda enjoy greater possibilities to expand the boundaries of their activism, theirs 'remains a strategy for exceptional times that would and *should* be relinquished once normality is achieved.'[91]

This skepticism is not without reasons. The literature on gender and nationalism has extensively documented the downsides of nationalist/revolutionary struggles for women, including the reversal of gender roles at their outset.[92] A similar situation was also more recently observed in Egypt, where during the 18 days of the revolution women were welcomed to the squares, but

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[89] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 2008; Philbrick-Yadav, *Segmented Publics*; Francesco Cavatorta and Emanuela Dalmasso, 'Islamist women's leadership in Morocco,' in *Gender, Conservatism, and Political Participation*, edited by Karen Celis and Sarah Childs, 287-301 (UK: ECPR Press, 2014).

[90] For the case of Islamist movements see Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*; Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*; Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*; Abdellatif and Ottaway, *Women in Islamist Movements*, Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*; Bauer, *When Sisters Become Brothers*, Biagini, *The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood*.

[91] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*, 14; *emphasis in original*.

[92] Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; Pettman, *Worlding Women*; Joyce P. Kaufman, and Kristen P. Williams. *Women and War: Gender Identity and Activism in Times of Conflict* (Sterling: Kumarian Press, 2010); Nira Yuval-Davis. *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

pushed once again from the public sphere at the outset of the uprisings. The narrative goes, therefore, that nationalist and revolutionary movements are as much beneficial as they are damaging to women.[93] Nationalist movements remain patriarchal in nature, and consequently tend to reproduce the gender order in place before that, leading to little or no tangible gains for the women who extend their efforts to the cause.[94] Although women may play more equal roles during times of upheaval, the result of such processes is almost never a more egalitarian society. Women continue to be excluded from the political table and, at times, their situation would have been even better off if these events never happened.

This study, however, does not exclude the possibility that the participation of women in nationalist projects bears the potential for permanently altering the gender relations in place. In Islamist movements supporting a nationalist agenda, the nationalist objective has proven fundamental to the ability of women to transgress gender boundaries also in absence of situations of imminent threat or active conflict.[95] In addition, the fact that a majority of Islamist movements play the role of the opposition leaves them constantly vulnerable to threats of repression and violence by the part of authoritarian governments. Under these circumstances, the 'exceptional circumstances' necessary for women to transgress traditional gender roles are always present, bearing the potential for women to routinize such practices with the passing of time.[96]

In addition, albeit scholars are right to point out to the several damaging effects resulting from female participation in nationalist struggles, one must also recognize that nationalist and revolutionary movements continue to be fertile ground for the development of feminist identities.[97] In the MENA region in particular, the emergence of feminist movements has coincided with that of movements of national liberation struggles, [98] similarly to what occurred in other post-colonial countries.[99] Today, where MENA states remain in a situation of occupation and war, Islamist movements continue to provide fertile ground for women to engage in practices that lead to their empowerment as a way of resisting protracted occupation, conflict, and violence.[100] Women's

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[93] Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; Pettman, *Worlding Women*;
[94] Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation.*
[95] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*.
[96] Think of the case of Hamas in Palestine, or Hizbullah in Lebanon, for example, but also the Egyptian MB that for over 80 years strove to realise its Islamic project, in the midst of several waves of repression.
[97] O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*; Vickers, *Feminism and Nationalism.*
[98] Margot Badran, 'Creative Disobedience: Feminism, Islam, and Revolution in Egypt,' in *Women's Movements in Post-"Arab Spring" North Africa*, edited by Fatima Sadiqi, 45-60 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics.* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005).
[99] Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*.
[100] Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*; Holt, *Violence Against Women*.

identities are inevitably transformed as a result of their engagement, sometimes in ways that suggests the adoption of feminist practice,[101] albeit not always in the liberal sense of the term.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the fact that feminist claims are, in the majority of cases, not what spur revolutionary waves, although feminist identities precede, accompany, and protract well beyond revolutionary struggles. As put it by Badran, in fact, 'political revolutions, as militant insurrections, can be put down through force by authorities in ways that culture and feminist/gender revolutions cannot'.[102] Feminist and new gendered subjectivities may survive in practices that are not necessarily outwardly political, and in spaces that are not essentially visible. In this sense, revolutions constitute moments of new beginnings, where identities and subjectivities are permanently transformed.[103] As also contended by O'Keefe, in fact, the achievement of gender equality and/or women's greater political inclusion at the outset of the revolutionary struggle is not conditional to the development of feminist identities.[104] In other words, feminist identities do not only exist in contexts where gender equality and greater female participation in institutional politics are in place. On the contrary, it is often women's experiences with the renewed marginalization following the outset of the struggle that increases women's awareness of their status as gendered, inducing women to reverse their efforts in more feminist activities.[105] Islamist women's are no different. Therefore, their efforts to acquire greater roles and influences in Islamist movements are therefore best observed over a continuum, and judgements with regard to their achievements should not to be based exclusively on the immediate outset of post-revolutionary or repression waves.

### 2.4.3 Advocating for Multiple Agencies, Subjectivities, and Identities in Islamist Women

Agency is more broadly defined as 'people's ability to make choices and take action in the world.'[106] Islamists' reference to religion as a blueprint for moral, social, economic, and political norms, poses several limitations to notions of agency as understood from within a liberal western paradigm. Religion is believed to limit the possibility for individuals to act freely because it imposes unquestionable and unmodifiable sets of rules upon believers, believed to be God-given.[107]

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[101] Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*.
[102] Badran, *Creative Disobedience*, 47.
[103] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990)
[104] O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*.
[105] Ibid.; See also Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*.
[106] Rachel Rinaldo, 'Pious and Critical: Muslim Women Activists and the Question of Agency', Gender & Society 28, no. 6 (December 2014): 826.
[107] Sarah Bracke, 'Author(iz)ing Agency: Feminist Scholars Making Sense of Women's Involvement in Religious 'Fundamentalist' Movements,' *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 10, no. 3 (2003): 335-346.

Also, conservative religious interpretations have often been used to legitimize patriarchal structures of domination of men over women.[108] It is therefore not surprising that the recent revival of religious movements around the world - and the extensive involvement of women within them - led to a reinvigoration of the scholarly debates concerning issues of agency in pious women.

Feminist scholars of the 1960s used to perceive religious women primarily as victims of patriarchy, and duped those active in religious-conservative movements of false feminist consciousness.[109] This understanding prompted some researchers to challenge such views and demonstrate how women embraced religion as a practice of resistance, or as a way to subvert conservative gender norms in place.[110] More recently, scholars of religion criticised such approaches for extending excessive praise to practices of resistance while failing to acknowledge the constraints that religion continues to pose on women's possibility to choose freely.[111] Echoing such critiques, Mahmoud provided a more nuanced appraisal of the issue of agency in religious women. Following her fieldwork with Egyptian women activists in the mosque circles, Mahmoud concluded that the puzzle that for long occupied the minds of scholars was, in fact, illusive.[112] As the scholar contended, this illusion was created by the normative liberal underpinnings of the same feminist project. This, inevitably, led researchers to identify instances of agency as necessarily linked to women's practices that seemed to subvert traditional, religious, and social norms of conduct and that, therefore, aligned agency inextricably with normative western liberal understandings of feminism and progressive politics. As Mahmoud stated:

> 'What is seldom problematized in such an analysis is the universality of the desire-central for liberal and progressive thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes-to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination. This positing of women's agency as consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination, and its concomitant naturalization of freedom as a social ideal, I would argue is a product of feminism as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project. Despite the many strands and differences within feminism […] as in the case of liberalism, freedom is normative to feminism: critical scrutiny is applied to

[108] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1992).
[109] Tania Zion-Waldox, 'Politics of Devoted Resistance: Agency, Feminism, and Religion among Orhodox Agunah Activists in Israel,' *Gender & Society* 29, no. 1(February 2015): 75.
[110] Sondra Hale, 'The Wing of the Patriarch: Sudanese Women and Revolutionary Parties,' *Middle East Report* 16, no. 1 (1986): 25-30; Zakia Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Holt and Jawad 2013, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*.
[111] Bracke, *Author(iz)ing Agency*.
[112] Saba Mahmoud, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,' *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (May 2001): 202-236.

> those who want to limit women's freedom rather than those who want to extend it.'[113]

In her later influential book *Politics of Piety,* Mahmoud extended further criticism to ideas of agency as understood from a predominant liberal paradigm and provided a first attempt to conceive of agency within practices of women's submission to existing religious, gender, and power structures. Grounding her work in post-structural theory, Mahmoud contended that Muslim societies are non-liberal and, as a consequence, agency should not necessarily be identified in practices of resistance to social, religious, and cultural norms. Rather, agency could reside precisely in those actions that aimed at reproducing such norms, like, for example, women's cultivation of Islamic traits of female docility, piety, and modesty. [114]

Mahmoud invaluable contribution resided on the fact that she reconceptualised agency in practices that do not necessarily aim at women's liberation from religious and gender power structures, and which are normally considered oppressive to women in non-Western context. Nevertheless, her theory remains open to some critiques. By relying on notions of 'non-liberal agency' in 'non-liberal societies,' Mahmoud's theory eventually reproduced a false binary between a 'liberal secularised West' and a 'non-liberal religious East,' seemingly attributing to Islamic societies an exclusivity on patriarchy. Her theory appears to be grounded in the idea that patriarchal Western and Eastern attitudes towards women are the product of fundamental cultural differences, whereby the West represents the 'good guy' supporting women's freedom and liberation, while Middle Eastern societies remain the 'bad-guys,' privileging structures of women's oppression. In reality, accounts of female docility, as well as liberal notions of femininity, can be found in both areas of the world. Ultimately, it is this false binary between West and East over which Mahmoud's theory rests that appears as counterproductive to notions of women's agency in religious-political movements because it reproduces views of Muslim women as uniform and uniquely docile subjects.[115]

While within Mahmoud's understanding of non-liberal agency, piety and progressive gender claims appears, in fact, irreconcilable, in reality pious and feminist agencies are not necessarily mutually exclusive.[116] In her study, for example, Shitrit demonstrates how religious

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[113] Ibid., 206-207.
[114] Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety*, 16.
[115] I want to thank Lihi Ben Shitrit for suggesting such an insightful critique of Mahmoud's theory of agency; author personal conversation with the scholar, June 2015.
[116] I use the term 'feminism' and 'feminist identities' cognisant of the fact that in the Middle East and North African region these terms are highly contested, challenged, and at times wholeheartedly refused by the women's activists. In this study, I do not associate these terms strictly with a liberal understanding of feminism. Rather, I employ them to refer more broadly to women's desires to better their status within the various gender regimes they inhabit, and in ways that do not

women are able to engage in practices that openly challenge notions of femininity, docility, and modesty as upheld by their movements, and employ religion to offer compelling liberatory narratives.[117] To this end, Rinaldo introduced the notion of 'pious critical agency' precisely to accommodate emerging feminist practices among religious women; this refers to the ability of pious women to reinterpret religious ideas critically and re-contextualise these to different circumstances.[118] Within Islamist movements, such a practice is better known as a process of framing.[119]

In her work on women's activism in the Egyptian Islamic movement more recently, Hafez posed further challenge to scholarly approaches that continued to rest on dichotomous notions of the religious and the secular to explain Islamist women's agency, subjectivities, desires, and practices.[120] As she argued, Islamist women's manifestations of piety and activism are informed by complex and long-term historical nation-building processes drawing on both secular and religious cultural projects. The coexistence of both religious and secular nation-building processes in contemporary Egypt, and arguably the broader Middle East as well, creates tensions within which the lives, identities, and experiences of women are caught. As a consequence, manifestations of feminist subjectivities and identities are continuously discussed and renegotiated among women, leading to expressions of identities, practices, and desires, which transcend singular boundaries of liberal and religious normative understandings of agency. As Hafez stated:

> 'As modern subjects of a so-called secularising state, activist Islamic women experience and reproduce these projects of modernization, which in Egypt have been particularly interested in reordering female minds and bodies. […] Their desires and subjectivities embody the mutual embedded ideals of historically produced Islamic traditions and secular liberal projects of modernity. Each of their lives is a rich and multidimensional terrain on which their desires flow, merge, conflict, and follow no particular geography. More significantly, [women's identities] can neither be understood in Islamic terms alone nor can be effectively captured though a normative liberal secular lens that assumes a demarcation between religion and secularism.'[121]

Therefore, Hafez, warned against the practice of categorising women's agency neatly within either a religious or a liberal framework. Such claim resonates more widely with those of scholars who demonstrated how the practices and discourses of Islamist women have become

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necessarily aim at the establishment of gender equality, or women's equal role with men in similar spaces.

[117] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*.
[118] Rinaldo, *Pious and Critical*, 892.
[119] Wickham *Mobilizing Islam*; Clark, *Informal nodes of activism*.
[120] Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own*.
[121] Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own*,155.

increasingly linked to those of secular feminist movements, from which Islamist women gradually borrow claims, ideals, practices, and broader feminist narratives.[122] As also Holt and Jawad contended, Islamist women may 'not articulate their concerns in terms of feminism, yet their actions often appeared to be informed by feminist practice'.[123]

This study, therefore, attributes agency to Islamist women activists, this to be intended as the full capacity of Islamist women to take conscious choices, including political ones, which are not inextricably bounded to either religious or secular normative understandings. This should not, of course, obscure the fact that the worldviews of Islamist women are powerfully shaped by Islamist ideology and Islamic religion in a way that may pose a series of limitation to what Islamist women may perceive as the choices and actions available to them. The study, however, recognises that over a protracted period of time, and under the influences of both religious and secular political projects, Islamist women have adopted, and potentially normalised, new feminist practices that are nowadays an integral part of their activism, agency, identity, and consciousness. In most cases, it is precisely the political purpose guiding their actions that allows women to challenge the boundaries of the permissible and non-permissible norms of conduct they are expected to uphold.[124] Although such practices may not aim directly at undermining traditional gender norms in place, they have a tangible effect on the gender structures that dominate both Muslim societies and Islamist movements.

### 2.4.4 Summary

This section sought to identify possible gender processes at play in Islamist movements that could provide women with opportunities to expand their roles and influence *vis-à-vis* their male counterparts. Women-only spaces, usually understood as detrimental to women, remain instead important venues for the development of equal opportunities and empowerment for Islamist women. They also provide the very same basis for the growth of feminist claims among Islamist female activists, as epitomized in growing Islamist women's demands for opportunity to exercise equal roles with men within their own spaces. Therefore, Islamists' conservative gender ideology with an emphasis on complementarian gender roles is responsible for both women's marginalization as well as their empowerment.

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[122] Jad, *Islamist Women of Hamas*; Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).
[123] Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*, 154.
[124] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*.

Times of repressions, like those of revolution and resistance, also bring about ‘exceptional circumstances’ providing women with compelling justificatory narratives for transgressing gender roles in place in their movements and entering male dominated spaces. While scholars remain divided on the long-lasting effects of such processes with reagrd to their potential to permanently transformation gender roles in Islamist movements, this section highlighted the importance of recognizing how feminist identities are nevertheless born out as a consequence of violent struggles, revolutions, women’s participation in nationalist movements, and resistance. Although gender equality seldom manifests at the outset of these processes and, on the contrary, gender roles suffer a reversal, feminist subjectivities born out of those experiences more than often survive. It is only by observing the cumulative effect of cycles of engagement and disengagement on women and their identities, that can lead to better appreciations of how feminist subjectivities among Islamist women develops and survive amid continuous political and gender constraints.

Lastly, the section reflected on issues of Islamist women agency. This study recognized that religion bears important influence on Islamist women’s agency, potentially limiting the array of actions that Islamist women perceive as available to them. This may contrast with the idea of liberal agency and freedom as more commonly understood in the West. Nevertheless, patriarchal tendencies and notions of female docility are present in both Western and Eastern context. Also, religion, as it applies to Islamist movements, should be understood as similar to other ideologies that also inform the actions and worldviews of actors of various political inclinations. In fact, a review of the literature has shown how the contextualization of religious texts and narratives continue to be a widespread practice among Islamist women, therefore invalidating the claim that religion poses unquestionable God-given rules on Islamist, men, and women. Therefore, this study advocates for the need to consider Islamist women’s agency and subjectivities in all its various manifestations, and not as necessarily bounded to either religious or secular normative understandings.

# Chapter 3 – Research Design, Methods, and Methodology

This chapter explains the reasons behind the case study selected, the research design, methods, and methodology employed to investigate changes in the activism of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood over time. The study adopts a longitudinal single-case study design, multiple qualitative methods, including participant observation, interviews, video and textual analysis, and inquires the data from a critical feminist perspective.

## 3.1 Research Design

### 3.1.1 Research Purpose

This study investigates how Islamist women respond to changes in political opportunity structure (POS) for the purpose of gaining, preserving, and growing their roles and political influence *vis-à-vis* male-dominated Islamist movements. It explores how women's agency intersects with changes in the political system with the objective of overcoming political, social, and gender constraints to expand their roles into new spaces and grow their influence *vis-à-vis* their male counterparts throughout time. By considering how women respond to both external and internal constraints to the movement across time, this study also seeks to determine whether women's protracted engagement in activism contributed to the development of feminist identities among the women activists. I am particularly interested in assessing how women's worldviews developed as a consequence of their activism in different political settings, and specifically with regard to their take on 'ideal women's role', 'political participation', 'self-management of women's activities', and 'leadership'.

### 3.1.2 The Case Study of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood

The case study of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood is particularly well-suited given the purpose of this research. Boasting over 80 years of activism in the MB movement, the oldest Islamist movement in the MENA region, the Sisters had to adapt to several shifting political contexts to maintain an active and significant presence in the MB, and had to adopt a variety of strategies to overcome the gender conservatism dominant in the MB organization. The Egyptian

Muslim Sisterhood, therefore, is an excellent case to trace dynamics of women's activism, the effect of external and internal constraints on women's strategies, generational change, and the development of feminist identities.

Since the establishment of the MB in 1928, the movement lived almost all its existence as an oppositional political group. During the decades, the Egyptian regime shifted considerably, and often, its approach towards the movement. This varied from limited accommodation to more or less violent repression. Only recently, following the 2011 uprisings, Egypt witnessed a mass opening of the political opportunity structure, allowing the MB to constitute itself into a political party for the first time - the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) - and to compete in what have largely been defined free and fair elections, from which the MB emerged as the largest beneficiary acquiring a majoritarian presence in parliament and seizing the presidency. The situation completely reversed once again 28 months later, when a military intervention led to the ousting of the MB from power and to a new wave of mass repression that severely threatens the movement's possibility to survive.

Since 1928, the Sisters have remained permanently active within the ranks of the MB. The intensity of their activism, the level of their visibility, the forms of their engagement (religious/social/political), and the degree of influence they enjoyed within the movement, have also considerably transformed across time. These transformations can be largely attributed to the different strategies that the MB adopted throughout time to gain presence and power in the Egyptian political system, privileging religious outreach, social expansion, and political participation, depending on broader conditions. These shifts in strategies demanded women too adopting different forms of activism to conform to the movement's political objectives. In periods of Egyptian regime's accommodation towards Islamists, the Sisters have been observed fostering the expansion of the MB in the religious, social, and political spaces. In 'exceptional' times of repression, instead, women mobilized with the purpose of guaranteeing the survival of the movement, embracing roles that are traditionally denied to them in normal circumstances, including leadership in male domains.

Because of the long history of MS engagement in the MB, the case of the Sisterhood also allows tracing the development of a feminist identity among women. During its existence as movement, several generations entered the MB following one another. As different generations experienced different periods of the history of Egypt and the region, they have developed diverging ideological positions on, and strategical preferences towards, similar issues, including the role and position of women. It follows that, contrary to views that perceive the Sisters as being a homogeneous group, women too had diverse opinions with regard to their role in the movement.

While of course the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood is not necessarily representative of all women activists in Islamist movements, the case represents an interesting example with comparative value that may help making sense of the activism of women in other conservative

religious political movements and parties, as well as movements engaged in nationalist struggles in the region. Both the Egyptian authoritarian context and the gender conservatism espoused by the MB are, in fact, by no means unique to the case of the Sisterhood.

### 3.1.3 The Longitudinal Single-Case Study Design

The necessity to observe how changes take place within a particular case at two or more points in time sets an important rationale for adopting a longitudinal single case study design.[1] A longitudinal single case study design allows investigating the same case (the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood) at different time-intervals (contexts) with the purpose of ascertaining how changes in the political system have prompted the Sisters to respond with diverse forms of activism for gaining, maintaining, and expanding their roles and influence *vis-à-vis* the male dominated Islamist movement.

The nature of this study attributes particular significance to changes in broader POS for the purpose of investigating changes in Muslim Sisterhood's activism throughout time. The existence of the MB as an oppositional and repressed movement for most of its history, poses several constraints to its political participation and its ability to exercise its activities openly in Egyptian society. Changes in POS are therefore extremely significant for understanding how Sisterhood's activism has changed as a consequence of the movement adapting to new political circumstances.

The study, however, recognises that authoritarianism is not the only constraint imposed on women who aim to expand their influence in the movement. The Sisterhood, like many other women active in religious political movements around the world, also face gender constraints. Because of the conservative gender ideology dominant in Islamist movements, one can in fact expect that even in a context of full political liberalization, women would not be granted equal access to, and leadership positions in, men's political spaces. Therefore, this study employs gender as an analytical tool, with the purpose of tracing how Islamist women make use of gender identities/difference for the purpose of political empowerment.

In addition, although changes in POS set the basis against which changes in Muslim Sisterhood's activism is analysed, this study understands context in much broader terms than comprising only changes in wider political structures. In this study, context also includes changes internal to the MB movement, like for example the emergence and development of moderate factions within the MB. These are believed to be significant for the promotion of more progressive ideas about women's roles in the movement, therefore providing additional opportunities for

[1] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2003): 42.

women to increase their activism, roles, and influence. The study therefore seeks also to assess the contribution of younger generations of MB activists, men and women, in challenging the dogmatic and conservative character of the MB organization. In the context of broader conditions dictated by the predominant POS, the study understands internal dynamics to Islamist movements as providing different sets of opportunities and/or constraints to women's empowerment.

### 3.1.4 Context and Time Intervals

In longitudinal case studies 'the theory of interest would likely specify how certain conditions change over time, and the desired time intervals to be selected would reflect the presumed stages at which the changes should reveal themselves'.[2] In this study, different time-intervals (cases) are identified in relation to changes in the broader Egyptian political system (POS), leading to the emergence of new constraints and/or opportunities for MB social expansion and political participation likely to have prompted different strategic responses by the MB. These are in fact moments in which MB realignment to changed POS presumably demanded also the Sisters to respond to new situations by modifying their activism and practices. These could lead the Sisters to gain and/or maintain their active role in the movement, and/or expand their presence and influence to new spaces. This study identifies four main different political contexts for investigating changes among women. What follow is an outline and description of these four context, and a brief summary of the expectations with regard to the Sisterhood's roles and activism within each one of them. The chapters in this study follow the same organization and time period illustrated herein.

***Period I***

***The Genesis of the MB and Muslim Sisterhood's Activism in the Early Years***

***(Chapter 4)***

**Timeframe:** From the establishment of the MB (1928) until the Sadat era (1928-1980).

**Context:** During this time the MB established itself as a religious-political movement; it consolidated its structure and organization, and attempted a first expansion in the Egyptian political system. It then underwent and survived a heavy state repression under President Nasser (1954-

[2] Ibid.

1970), followed by a brief period of social and political reconstruction under President Sadat (1970-1979), before facing renewed repression.

**Expectations:** Such time-interval is used to contextualise the historical circumstances which led to the emergence of the MB, sets out the main traits of the MB gender ideology adopted at the time of its inception, the terms under which the Sisters were included in the movement, and some aspects of women's activism that consolidated in the early years. The at-the-time Egyptian strong emphasis on nationalism is strongly felt in the gender ideology supported by the movement, as well as the roles embraced by the Sisters. The ideas explored in this chapter serve as a term of comparison for the subsequent periods.

***Period II***

***Participation under Limited Political Liberalization***

***(Chapter 5)***

**Timeframe:** Mubarak's presidency (1980-2011).

**Context:** The three decades of the Mubarak regime are characterised by a period of limited political liberalization whereby oppositional forces, the MB included, enjoyed increasing opportunities to engage in the political system. Under Mubarak, the MB advanced its presence and political influence in university campuses, the syndicates, and professional associations, and also the parliament. However, repressive measures continued to be in place, and the relationship between the group and Mubarak continued to be characterised by intervals of greater accommodation and repression towards the group.

**Expectations:** It is known that women played an increasing role in the movement, including that of voters and recruiters of voters in times of elections. However, it is also expected that those women who had greater desires of expanding their political roles in the movement took advantage of their newfound status as important constituencies to bargain a greater role for themselves, and which surpassed that of mere supporters to include direct political participation.

### *Period III*

### *The January 25 Revolution and the Opening up of the Political Opportunity Structure*

**Timeframe:** From the January 25, 2011, revolution to the July 3, 2013, military coup.

**Context:** The January 25 Revolution signals the opening up of the opportunity to MB unrestricted political participation. After attempting to do so for a long time, the MB maximised all its resources to grow its presence and share of power in the political institutions of the Egyptian state, gaining a parliamentary majority and the presidency, and emerging as a leading actor of the Egyptian transition. Under these circumstances it is expected that the MB relied extensively on women to maximise its chances to obtain greater political gains. It is therefore expected that women played an important role throughout the entire period of transition, leading to an expansion of their roles, activities, and influence in the MB movement.

#### *Muslim Sisterhood's Activism in Formal Political Offices (Chapter 6)*

**Expectations:** Considering the hierarchical character of the MB organization, this reserving leadership positions to males before females, and to older before younger members, and privileging a to a top-down decision-making process, it is however expected that (a) women advanced their positions into formal political offices which were considered non-threatening to male leadership, (b) that a majority of the women who managed to do so supported views similar to those of the MB male leadership, and that (c) women's efforts continued to be directed into separate all-female spheres of activism.

#### *Muslim Sisterhood's activism in Informal Activist Spaces (Chapter 7)*

**Expectations:** Under a hierarchical and conservative organisational structure, it is also expected that those (most likely younger) women who held more progressive views concerning their roles, suffered increasing marginalization. In such a context, it is anticipated that these women sought to redirect their efforts into informal activist circles of the MB movement to bring about their desired changes, where the pressure to conform to the principles of the organization, and MB leadership's control over its members, are less intense. Therefore the study dedicates a separate chapter to investigate Muslim Sisterhood's activism in informal activist circles of the MB.

***Period IV***

***The Closing up of the Opportunity Structure: Muslim Sisterhood's Activism under Regime Repression and Violence***

***(Chapter 8)***

**Timeframe:** From the July 3, 2013, military coup to September 2014.[3]

**Context:** During this period the authoritarian military Egyptian regime re-emerges stronger and re-establishes its undiscussed power and leadership in the country. The MB is ousted from power through a military coup and a new wave of repression unfolds on the movement. Civil liberties and human rights are severely curtailed, political parties and movements banned, and heavily repressed. The media and the press also fall under the strict control of the military.

**Expectations:** Under a new wave of heavy repression and violence, it is expected that women mobilised to resist such changes, and that many of the activities they carried out openly challenged the gender regime in place in the movement. In addition, it is expected that under the forced absence of men, women played a greater leadership and political role in the MB. Finally, it is also expected that those women who held more progressive views with regard to their roles, made use of the 'exceptional circumstances' of the time to increase their leadership, and leading the MB resistance.

## 3.2 Methods and Methodology

I chose a combination of multiple research methods to gain a better understanding of how both *practices* and *ideas* changed among women activists in relation to changes in contexts across time. These included participant observation, interviewing, textual, and video analysis. All these methodologies were crucial in gaining a better understanding of Muslim Sisterhood's activist practices, and their own interpretation of the political, social, and material reality that informed their lives and activism.

[3] The end date of this period is largely arbitrary and derives from both PhD and fieldwork constraints.

### 3.2.1 Participant Observation: conducting research in Egypt in 2013 and 2014

> '[P]articipant observation [requires] subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation […] so that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them. I feel that the way this is done is not, of course, just listen to what they talk about, but to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond to their situation. When you do that, it seems to me, the standard technique is to try to subject yourself, hopefully, to their life circumstances, which means that although, in fact, you can leave at any time, you act as if you can't and you try to accept all of the desirable and undesirable things that are a feature of their life. [Then] you are empathetic enough-because you have been taking the same crap they've been taking-to sense what it is that they're responding to. To me, that's the core of observation'.[4]

I spent a total of nine months in Egypt, spread over three separate visits between 2013 and 2014. Throughout the entire period, Egypt remained engulfed in widespread factionalism, continuous mobilization, violence, and political turmoil. As a consequence, I encountered serious difficulties in conducting my research. At the time of my first visit (14 July – 9 September 2013), the Egyptian military had just ousted the MB from power. In Cairo, the MB occupied Rab'a al-Adaweya and al-Nahda squares, and both pro and anti-MB protests took place regularly, at times paralysing the city for entire days. Protests were met with unrestrained state violence. Police and security forces often responded to demonstrations by opening fire. Since mid-August, when the military evacuated the MB sit-ins leading to the killing of over a thousand people, a curfew was put in place throughout the country, lasting for the entire period of my stay. The curfew served to facilitate police raiding on MB members attempting to leave Egypt. To carry out the mass arrest campaign, the Egyptian state availed of plainclothes police officers, known as *baltagyia*, to surveil local neighbourhoods. Being stopped and questioned by complete strangers around your apartment building was common practice. When crossing these informal checkpoints by car, sticking a poster of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on the back window might have spared you questioning. Any suspicion of being a member, affiliated to, or in contact with MB members, warranted arrest. This new political situation seriously hampered my ability to travel for research purposes, and to access the group for interviewing. Attempting to enter into contact with MB members amid the massive wave of repression posed serious risks to my person. In addition, MB members were, rightly, extremely suspicious of any unacquainted foreign researcher.

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[4] Erving Goffman, 'On Fieldwork,' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 18, no. 2 (July 1989): 125-126.

At that time I was based predominantly in Alexandria, Egypt's second largest city, where I could count on the support of friends and family members to familiarise myself with the new political situation, and develop a new strategy for conducting fieldwork. There, the circumstances were not different. Mass protests took place daily, and were met with similar police brutality. During that time, I took the opportunity to grasp the sense of the social and political divisions that the ousting of the MB had provoked among Egyptians, and acquaint myself with the several political narratives that populated the public sphere. Cautiously, I 'immersed myself' into this new reality, paying close attention to practices of mobilization, narratives of protests, and characteristics of protesters. Until prior to their dismantling, I watched daily news covering the Rab'a and al-Nahda MB camps. Despite arguments pointing to the contrary, al-Jazeera managed continuous media coverage of the MB sit-ins. Women were among the finest public speakers in both squares. I also managed to conduct some preliminary interviews with both higher and lower ranking Brotherhood and Sisterhood members. These were work colleagues of friends I knew well, and who accepted to meet me notwithstanding the precarious circumstances. At that time, MB members were still trying to make sense themselves of what had happened and, most of them, particularly high-ranking members, lived in fear of being arrested at any time. Under the particular circumstances of the time, I preferred maintaining an informal setting during such meetings. I was also more flexible with regard to the subjects of our talks. Back then, I believed that there was much more to be gained by just attempting to be part of MB members' conversations as they developed among themselves, rather than working according to pre-determined sets of questions. I therefore took advantage of the time in Alexandria to train myself on how to deal with the group, establish contacts, and build trust, hoping that this could prove useful for fieldwork in a second moment.

I returned to Cairo in the early days of January 2014. Then, protracted regime repression had managed to marginalise protesters to the suburbs of the city. These were led mainly by the Sisterhood, MB students, and youth revolutionaries' movements. This was largely the result of the regime mass-arrest campaign that had led to over 44,000 political prisoners, the largest majority of whom were MB members. In 2014 in Cairo, the political situation continued therefore to be tense, and the risks associated with entering into contact with the MB movement still in place.

While attempting to gain access to the Sisterhood I volunteered for a few weeks at the Women and Memory Forum (WMF),[5] contributing to a project which aimed at reconstructing the history of the Egyptian women's movement between 2011 and 2013. My role in the project was to

[5] The WMF was established in 1995 by Egyptian academics and researchers, among which are Hoda Elsadda, Omaima Abou-Bakr, and Mervat F. Hatem. The objective of the WMF is challenging negative representations and perceptions of Arab women in the cultural sphere. For more information on the WMF see http://www.wmf.org.eg/en/

analyse international media's reactions to issues such as 'women's rights', 'women's violence', and the 'Egyptian constitution' (both that of 2012 and 2014). I benefited enormously from the time I spent at the WMF. The informal discussions I had with the research team allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of Egyptian women's issues, and the ideological divides at the heart of the several women's movements, as they developed throughout the time of the uprisings and after. I also attended daily Arabic classes to improve my spoken and reading language skills, which were crucial to the analysis of both video and written material about the Sisterhood which I collected throughout the period of fieldwork. In addition, I expanded my academic network and held fruitful discussion with Egyptian specialists on the MB movement. I also attended several research seminars and workshops organized by the American University in Cairo (AUC), the British University in Egypt (BUE), and the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB). Some of the workshops organised by the FUB focussed on Egyptian civil society and student movements' mobilization. Following the 2013 coup, such subjects were considered controversial and therefore rarely discussed in academic circles in Egypt. Thus, I found these seminars extremely useful. I also took the chance to interview human rights activists, and members of other oppositional forces, to grasp the main effects of the new authoritarian regime on civil society's activism.

Access to the Sisterhood in Cairo was gained only in early June 2014. Then, an independent Egyptian activist in contact with the Sisters offered me the opportunity to interview a senior Sisterhood cadre and leader of the Revolutionary Coalition of Egyptian Women (RCEW), a revolutionary movement established by the Sisters after the MB ousting. As it occurs when dealing with closed groups, gaining access to the Sisterhood was extremely difficult and time consuming, but once this was gained, and trust established, then meeting more members was facilitated by the same Sisters. Also, by 2014 the Sisters were more eager to meet foreign researchers and express their political views because they came to perceive sharing their worldviews and getting involved in the research process as part and parcel of their active resistance against the regime. a small group of Sisters, including senior and young members, became my key informants and major gatekeepers in the field, demonstrating to be incredibly generous with their time and support. Not only they opened their house and world to me, but they took care of setting interviews with other Sisters, provided access to the Sisterhood's official meetings, informal gatherings, and *usra* meetings.[6] It was thanks to them that this research was realised, and for this reason I will always be grateful. After I left in July I returned for a third time in September 2014 to continue my research with the Sisters for another month.

[6] *Usra* meetings are religious gatherings. More information on the subject and their function in relation to the MB movement is provided in chapter 7.

Carrying research fieldwork in Egypt throughout 2013 and 2014 was difficult, but extremely rewarding. During my stay I tried to immerse myself as much as possible into the Egyptian community, and experience life as lived by Egyptians in this particular time of transition. By being in Egypt at that time, and witnessing the amount of violence and social division that permeated the country, gave me the opportunity to experience first-hand what it means to live under authoritarianism, where life is extremely fragile and uncertain. Visiting Egypt in the role of a researcher of a politically repressed movement, one of the most unfamiliar realities I had to customize myself to was to be wary of police forces, the same state institution that, in my own country, is bound to protect me. The time I spent in close contact with the Sisters, sharing their movements, joining them in street demonstrations, public campaigns, and meetings, I subjected myself to their life circumstances. This amplified in me a sensation of oppression, vulnerability, but also empowerment. It provided me with a broader sense of meaning of how important it was to offer a voice to those who are silenced by regime abuses. I therefore also believe that participant observation made me more capable 'to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond[ed] to their situation',[7] and as they circumvented the several constraints that dominated their lives.

### 3.2.2 Interviews and Informal Conversations

Although participant observation deepened my understanding of the material, social, and gender constraints dominating Sisterhood's lives, therefore allowing me to witness first hand forms of women's agency, interviews provided access to women's motivations and interpretations of their own actions. During interviews, the Sisters had the opportunity to voice their understanding of current and past events, express their motivations for persevering in political activism, as well as their concerns and aspirations. For many of the women it was also a chance to express their sorrows at the extent of human rights abuses, and release their resentment towards the regime, against those geopolitical dynamics they believed contributed to their oppression, and also their disappointment at MB political failures. I also learned considerably from women's group debates emerged in occasion of *usra* meetings, and even more in conversations that took place in Sisterhood's informal gatherings, which, at times, turned into heated discussions. In that case, women did not refrain from voicing diverging opinions with regard to the merits and failures of the MB movement, or the extent to which they believed women's engagement in street protests was righteous or to be avoided (as well as the justifications behind each claim). The insights I gained by

[7] Goffman, *On Fieldwork*, 125.

interviewing were therefore crucial to complement the kind of knowledge I had gained through participant observation, and provided a more balanced perspective, inclusive of the Sisterhood's own interpretation of the political, social, and cultural context that surrounded them.

### *Sampling*

I conducted a total of 35 interviews as part of my fieldwork in Egypt. Of these, 10 were with male respondents, 7 of whom were MB members. The remaining 25 were conducted with female respondents, 19 of whom were Sisterhood members active in various fields and occupying various positions within the movement.[8] Because one of the objectives of this research is that of observing the effects of generational change on MS personal worldviews about the role of women in the movement, I paid particular attention to diversify the interviews according to the age of the respondents. Of the 19 Sisters interviewed, 6 belonged to what can be defined as the middle-generation MB (between 35 to 50 years old), while 13 belonged to the MS youth members (younger than 35 years old).[9] A similar criterion has been adopted for the male members. Of the 7 interviewed, 4 belonged to the middle-generation MB, and 3 to the MB youth. Some of the respondents have been repeatedly interviewed over a period of time. Five of the interviews listed consist of informal conversations held with non-members, but that nevertheless provided useful insights into the subject of study and that for this reasons have been included. I also held several other informal conversations with colleagues, friends, and activists in various field throughout my stay. Although these have not been included herein, they also inform the findings of this research.

### *Interview Structure*

All interviews were conducted in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews. These included open ended questions, and pursued topics deemed more relevant and appropriate in accordance with the respondent's role in the organization, worldviews, political affiliation, and gender. During interviewing I relied on an 'interview-guide'.[10] An interview-guide is often used in grounded theory methodologies and serves the purpose of maintaining the interview in a seemingly

[8] For a detailed list of interviews and a brief description of my respondents see appendix A.
[9] For a classification of MB generations see Khalil al-Anani, 'The young Brotherhood in search of a new path', *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9 (October 2009): 96-109; or chapter 7 in this thesis.
[10] See for example Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014): 29.

informal style while also generating the sort of 'rich data' necessary to produce meanings and understandings in qualitative research. An interview-guide consists of a thematic map functioning as a reminder of important issues and discussions to be covered during interviews. Such an approach allows for a better flow of conversation while leaving the respondents free to go in depth into topics that are more relevant to their knowledge and/or expertise. I also considered this approach useful given the different array of activists I was dealing with, and their different position in the movement. While I could for example ask about personal opinions on a possible MB-regime reconciliation to all Sisterhood participants, I could only discuss strategies for cross movements' political alliances with leaders. An interview-guide has also the advantage of making easier adding extra thematic issues that emerge from interviews into the 'map', so to follow up new emerging themes in later interviews. Below is the interview-guide I had developed by the end of fieldwork.

***Interview Guide***

- **Involvement:** When? How? Why? (role);
- **Activities:** What? How? Why? (before 2011/post 2011/post 2013);
- **Personal perspectives on:** Revolution/Inclusion in the FJP/MB in Power/Repression;
- **Personal perspectives on:** women's contributions in Revolution/FJP/Movement/Street Protests;
- **Reflection on one's own role:** Do you think you have changed as a consequence of participation/repression/X?
- **Leadership:** Exercised? (Example) Desired? What areas?
- **Autonomy:** Exercised? (Example) Desired? What areas?
- **Consequences of the coup**: personal life/family/work/society;
- **MB-Youth Relationship**: Felt included/listened to? Desired change?
- **MB-Government:** Felt represented? Agree with? Do not agree with?
- **Third Parties relationships:** cooperation-challenge?
- **Aspirations for the future**.

The majority of the interviews were recorded, although for some I preferred proceeding by taking notes. This was mostly the case with lower rank Sisters and *da'yiat.*[11] While leaders had already been exposed to the regime, and therefore the regime knew of their names, roles, and

[11] (P. d*a'yat*, s. *da'yia*) literally means 'she who practices *da'wa*'; as a term it is used to refer to women who teach Islamic religion to other women in mosque circles.

views, lower rank members and religiously involved Sisters had more at stake from taking the risk of being recorded. Maintaining a more informal style in those instances was therefore necessary to make the respondent feel at ease and share information. The major difficulty while note-taking was maintaining eye contact throughout the interview. I tried to minimise this inconvenience by writing without necessarily looking at the paper. Another difficulty of this method was that at times I would 'lose' myself into the conversation and abandon writing. When this happened I paused and recapped on the points discussed, quickly noting down the main ideas. In all occasions, I would go back to the interview as soon as possible, taking advantage of the still vivid memories to recall additional details, note down personal impressions I had during the meeting, as well as important points of reflection. Although when taking notes I could not always recall all words with accuracy, the main ideas were almost always recollected.

### 3.2.3 Language: dealing with issues related to translation, third party presence, and interpretation

The majority of the interviews took place in English. Like the majority of urban middle-class Egyptians, the Sisters mastered English very well. This however did not prevent Arabic from entering the conversation. Some ideas and concepts are better expressed in their own language, and others have no English translation. When I used these words in the study, I reported them in Arabic and provided an explanation for them. In those occasions when the respondent preferred using her own language, interviews took place in Arabic with the support of a translator. Being with me during most interviews, my gatekeepers acted as translators.

Interviews are subjected to personal interpretations. Employing translators bears the potential to add an extra layer of subjective interpretation to the interview, whereby the translator, voluntarily or involuntarily, may provide his/her own interpretation to the ideas conveyed by the respondents. Also, simultaneous translation breaks the flow of conversation, and is therefore best avoided. In some occasions, however, I found using the support of a translator inevitable. Although I can manage simple and everyday conversation in Egyptian Arabic (*ammeya*) my difficulty consisted in understanding more abstract ideas and situations as conveyed by my interlocutors. In one instance, for example, I was invited to attend a Sisterhood's *usra* meeting which ended up into a lively focus group discussion. I appreciated the efforts of some of the Sisters to use English. Nonetheless, Arabic was the main language used throughout the meeting. Even though I could follow the main points and ideas of the discussion, my gatekeeper's presence was crucial for

understanding the more abstract ideas articulated by the Sisters, especially when these took the form of lengthy descriptions of their own experiences.

In addition, I feel comfortable stating that my gatekeepers strove to convey a most truthful translation of these interviews. Both of them were extremely familiar with the discussions at hands and the ideas conveyed by their fellow Sisters. In addition, all interviews and meetings where Arabic was the predominant language used were recorded, all have been transcribed in Arabic fully, and translated a second time for comparison. It is important to mention that when transcribing interviews I have allowed myself to edit words and/or sentences when this served conforming to a more correct linguistic English style. I however paid careful attention not to alter the meaning I believe my respondent wanted to deliver in all occasions.

### 3.2.4 Access

Notwithstanding the widespread belief that women encounter particular challenges in conducting fieldwork and interviews with Islamist members, as a female researcher in Egypt I didn't find that my access to interviewees, both Islamists and not, was limited. On the contrary, I think it was facilitated. While being a woman didn't prevent me from interviewing men, it provided me with the privilege to access the often informal and casual women's spaces that are not accessible for men given the gender codes in place. As previously described, the main challenge I encountered derived largely by the Egyptian authoritarian context rather than by hostile reactions from Islamists. I found that this is a shared opinion among female MENA scholars. As also noted by Schwedler, 'field research on politics in the Middle East poses far less problems for Western female researchers than many Westerners assume. […] Female researchers face many challenges, but most have less to do with gender than with examining sensitive political issues in highly repressive environments'.[12]

### 3.2.5 Politically active Sisters

There exists a very fine line of distinction between religious, social, and political activism in the MENA region.[13] This is due to the fact that in authoritarian contexts, where states prevent the

[12] Jillian Schwedler, 'The Third Gender: Western Female Researchers in the Middle East,' *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39, no. 3 (July 2006): 425.
[13] See Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety*; and also Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*.

largest majority of society from taking part in formal political activities, religious and cultural practices can assume political significance. This, for example, was what Mahmoud's observation when she claimed that the acts of piety embraced by the women of the mosque circles in Egypt had contributed to transform the political landscape of the country.[14] Among Muslim Sisterhood as well, for example, religious acts of *da'wa* (proselytization) are understood as part and parcel of women's contribution to the overall political success of the Brotherhood's project to establish an Islamic state. The existence of unclear boundaries between what constitute the social, the religious, and the political, not only makes more difficult distinguishing between the natures of the activism carried out by Islamist women, but also raises the question of the utility of such a distinction. As also recognised by Philbrick-Yadav, this overlapping between social and political, private and public, complicates classic notions of political and social activism, and the association of women with either one sphere or the other.[15]

Having said that, a common characteristic to all the women I interviewed, is that they were involved in some form of political activism, although this did not always include participation in formal political offices. Female participation in formal offices of political parties, parliament, or government, is in fact an activity entertained only by a minority of Muslim Sisters, while the majority remain engaged in activism outside formal political structures. Another characteristic common to all the Sisters I interviewed is their formal affiliation with the MB movement. One becomes a member of the MB when he/she is born out of MB families or, if this is not the case, when he/she is recruited (selected by the movement) to become a Brother or a Sister, and manage to successfully pass all the recruitment stages (tests) necessary to become a full member.[16] The majority of the Sisters I interviewed were born Sisters, and have been active in the MB their entire lives. Only a little minority of the younger Sisters interviewed engaged the movement only after the uprisings, but had obtained full membership before the time of the interview.

### 3.2.6 Protection: the ethical challenges of doing fieldwork in highly polarised political settings

During fieldwork, one of the most difficult challenge I incurred was ensuring the basic principle of 'doing no harm' towards the interviewees who accepted to participate in the study, those colleagues who assisted me in several aspects of the research, and more in general towards

[14] Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety*.
[15] Philbrick-Yadav, *Segmented Publics*.
[16] For more information on the MB recruitment process, and membership ranks see Hazem Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015): 5-47.

friends and family members who were close to me during my stay in Egypt. Given the heightened factionalism and the politically sensitive topic of my research, I was confronted between the two decisions of whether applying stricter academic research protocols, or being more flexible with regard to the standard academic procedures while collecting data. I opted for the latter.

In the Egyptian context, obtaining a signed consent form, for example, posed serious ethical challenges of a different nature, because it would have put participants at risk of being identified with Egyptian officials in case these documents were found in my possession at any police check point. Only few weeks into my second visit, I was kept in police custody for over four hours for carrying with me my Arabic class notebook containing notes related to a journal article dealing with police violence inside university campuses. If any material related to the Sisters would have been found in my possession then, this episode would have had much more serious consequences for both me and the Sisterhood. I also believed that asking participants to sign a written consent would have made them uncomfortable, with the probable result of the respondent abandoning the interview altogether. None of the participants has ever left an interview. On the contrary, most times I felt really overwhelmed by conversations that lasted for hours.

Consent procedures with all participants were taken in oral form. With all interviewees, I introduced myself, provided details of my identity, contacts information, university affiliation, and clearly stated the purpose of my study. Before beginning any interview I provided a general outline of the questions that were going to be asked, and let participants know that they could terminate the interview at any time were they not feeling comfortable, and freely refuse to answer my questions. I explicitly stated that the material collected was going to be used for academic publications only, and informed all participants that they had the freedom to limit the content of the material that was going to be published.[17] Only one time this option was used by a Sisterhood leader out of her concern to protect the women's movement. I strongly respected her will, and that particular information was not shared in this research or in any other publication. In all cases in which the interviews were recorded I asked permission beforehand. I also sent transcripts of the interviews to all the Sisterhood leaders. Although this was not their request, I believed this gesture fostered mutual trust. All names used in this research, and any other publications are pseudonyms unless participants specifically granted permission for their real names to be published.

***Data***

[17] During 2014 in particular, Muslim Sisterhood leaders were concerned with the presence of non-MB journalists at their meetings. One condition I had to accept to take part to their meetings was not to publish any of the information collected in newspapers. This had never been my intention, but I found telling the fact that I was explicitly asked not to do so.

Similar precautions were taken with regard to the data collected. If during the interviews I had used pen and paper, I never noted down the name of the respondent. Once I reached home I would transcribe the interview as soon as possible, and store it on a safe online depository. If the interview was recorded on my phone, I always saved the file under a false name, and if an internet connection was available, I uploaded the file on-line and deleted it from my phone. For daily contacts with the Sisters I used a separate telephone. Contact numbers were saved under false names, and messages deleted when no longer needed. Before travelling, I always made sure that the laptop did not contain any sensitive file. Notes were photographed and also stored online. Technology has certainly rendered safety procedures much easier for scholars to observe compared to even just twenty years ago.[18]

***Research assistant and key informants***

Special considerations should be made on how I acted to guarantee the safety of my research assistant and key informants. During my second visit to Egypt I availed of the support of a research assistant. Nagla was of incredible support throughout the first phase of internet data collection in 2014. I availed of her skilful knowledge about Egyptian media to identify reliable online sources, and key Muslim Sisterhood figures whose discourses, debates, and interventions helped shaping the Egyptian public gender discourse post the uprisings. I appreciate her endless patience in transcribing long hours of video debates to which the Sisters took part in 2011-2013, and their speeches. I protected Nagla by maintaining her uninvolved with my actual fieldwork research. I never talked to her about any other activity I was running parallel to the online research, she never knew of my appointments, interviews, or movements, and she never attended any of my meetings with the Sisters. In fact, when I managed to gain access to the Sisterhood's network, I cut myself off any other network I had established, and dedicate myself uniquely to the Sisters.

Fayrouz, has a special place in my heart. Born MB and Social Revolutionary by vocation, she was for few weeks my compass in navigating the complex Egyptian political field as it unfolded daily on the ground. Fayrouz was extremely active. With her I attended numerous meetings and protests on both sides of the political divides that Fayrouz was trying to bridge through her activism and endless efforts. Fayrouz was also deeply involved in the human rights circles established by the Sisters since late 2013, and was one of the key actors in maintaining the connections between the Sisterhood and leftist activists. Thanks to her, I was introduced to a wider

[18] See for example how scholars faced similar problems in post conflict zones in the 1990s: Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones,' *Qualitative Sociology* 29, no. 3 (September 2006): 373-386.

array of brave women activists who, while still holding different political views on how to solve the current crisis, remained united in a common struggle for making of Egypt a more 'humane place to live.' Fayrouz's help was also crucial during many interviews I conducted with Sisterhood youth members. Not only she acted as my gatekeeper, organizing many of those meetings, but she also took considerable time off her schedule to make these meetings possible. Thinking about it, I believe that more than me protecting her in the field, Fayrouz was protecting me, making sure I managed to gather as much information and perspective as possible while conducting my research without actually 'getting in trouble', and for this I will always be grateful.

One more ethical challenge that still accompanies me today is how to properly thank those people who made my research possible. Throughout fieldwork I always felt that I was never going to be able to reciprocate people's generosity in any meaningful way. This was particularly so with regard to the Sisters who had been severely affected by regime repression, like those who had lost family members or had them in prison, or even those who had been in prison themselves, but who still shared their stories with me. The same was felt towards the many women who, in order to dedicate their time to me, had to take it away from their families and activities. I tried to reciprocate by listening to them and, to some, by paying a casual visit once in a while, but in my heart it was never enough. I believe that writing about their story is the only way to properly say 'thank you'.

### 3.2.7 Video Sources

This study is also based on over 50 hours of video materials related to Muslim Sisterhood activism, and their formal and informal appearances, covering the years between 2005 and 2015. These were collected largely from You Tube, and were published by a variety of Egyptian TV and MB media channels. Although only a tiny portion of these videos ended up being part of the data used to support specific claims made about the Sisters in this research (particularly those related to Sisterhood's electoral campaign in 2010, 2011/2012, and their activism in formal political offices in 2012 and 2013 - chapter 5 and 6 respectively), the information gathered from these videos also inform the overall research findings. The videos collected cover a wide range of issues, and deepened my knowledge with regard to the following topics:

- MS electoral campaign practices and discourses;
- MS activism in religious and charity circles;
- MS personal views on the role of women in Egyptian society, the 2011 uprisings, social and political participation, and their role in the MB movement;

- MS views on Egyptian politics;
- MS views on the 2012 MB-led constitution;
- MS views on Personal Status and Family Law, as well as Citizenship Law;
- MS vision of an Islamic society;
- MS relationship with 'the Other', e.g. feminist movement, political opposition, and the regime;
- MS anti-regime activism and mobilization strategies post 2013;
- MS campaigns for human rights in Egypt post 2013.

### 3.2.8 Primary Textual Material

In order to gain a better understanding of the gender ideology that guides the MB movement and Muslim Sisterhood actions, I also relied on Muslim Brotherhood and Muslim Sisterhood original writings. While some are nowadays readily available, other writings were part of the Sisters' personal collections, and given to me by the women activists. Other MB-related primary textual material was collected through MB-led websites and online platforms such as ikhwanweb.com, ikhwanwiki.com, and alamatonline.com. Another online platform consulted for the acquisition of some of the official documents related to the FJP (the 2011 party platform and the FJP internal bylaws in the specific) has been slideshare.net. Although most of the online sources cited herein would never be categorised as 'proper' academic sources, in the context of the MENA region these remain at times the only reliable platforms. Official government sites would in fact not contain any information on opposition forces, and when they do, most of the information is propaganda aimed at discrediting the opposition. In order to collect information with regard to recent events, and also verify information acquired during fieldwork, I referred to Egyptian newspapers among which *al-Ahram*, *Daily News Egypt*, and *al-Shuruq*, as well as Western newspapers including *The Irish Times*, *The Guardian*, *BBC News*, and *Reuters*, among others. In most cases, I verified the same piece of information across all of them.

## 3.3 Data Analysis

In order to analyse the data collected, I employed a thematic analysis (TA) approach as presented by Braun and Clarke.[19] Braun and Clarke define TA as a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic'.[20] Although seldom recognised, TA has a long tradition in the humanities and social sciences.[21] One of the reasons for this is that TA is a method that remains independent from specific theoretical and epistemological positions. This renders such approach more flexible than others and therefore more widely used because applicable to a various array of theoretical and epistemological methodologies.[22] Precisely for this reason, however, scholars employing TA must pay particular attention to specify their own position in relation to epistemological and ontological views. This is crucial to maintain a rigorous interpretation and analysis of the data. Before providing a brief summary of how I proceeded to the data analysis, I therefore ought to reflect on those issues.

### 3.3.1 Engaging with the Self

My goal is to *understand*, *describe*, *analyse*, and explain *meanings* Islamist women ascribe to their activism, as well as interpreting possible strategies women employ for the purpose of remaining actively engaged in their movement despite adversities of both structural and gender nature. Such an endeavour requires that I pay particular attention to questions of *interpretation*, *reflexivity*, and *representation*. Such questions are not easily resolved, and continue to be at the centre of debates occupying sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists.[23] I therefore do not provide final conclusions in this study. Herein I offer my own perspective on those issues hoping to render more transparent the intellectual motivations that guided this study, and the political position adopted while interpreting and representing knowledge about Islamist women.

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[19] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,' *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (July 2008): 77-101.
[20] Ibid., 79.
[21] Kathryn Roulston, 'Data Analysis and "Theorizing as Ideology," *Qualitative Research* 1, no. 3, (December 2001): 280.
[22] Braun and Clarke, *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology*, 78.
[23] See for example the two special issues published by the journal *Forum: Qualitative Research*: Katja Mruck, Wolff-Michael Roth and Franz Breuer, eds., 'Subjectivity and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research I,' special issue, *Forum: Qualitative Research* 3, no. 3 (2002); Wolff-Michael Roth, Franz Breuer and Katja Mruck, eds., 'Subjectivity and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research II,' special issue, *Forum: Qualitative Research* 4, no. 2 (2003).

The views I present are strongly informed by my experience of conducting research with Islamist women in Egypt, but also by my own personal engagement with questions of East/West divisions, gender, culture, and geopolitical dynamics, derived from my being a Western woman married to an Arab Muslim man.

***Women researching about women in the neo-colonial Middle East***

There is an extensive body of literature that has attempted to disentangle whether gender affects ethnographic research and the interview process, so that being a woman may influence the interpretation and representation of the subject of study.[24] Issues of access have been discussed earlier.[25] Herein I would like to add that as well as perceiving that access to the interviewees was facilitated by my gender, I also noticed that being a woman allowed me to go beyond formal conversations more easily.[26] However, not for these reasons I feel comfortable stating that because of my gender I claim greater authority on interpreting Sisterhood's voices or representing their views. These assumptions rest on a homogenized understanding of women assuming that all women hold similar worldviews and predispositions just because of their gender, while in reality gender represent only one of the many identities women have.[27] There were other identity markers that I believe influenced my research to a greater extent. I turn to them after having considered class.

Although I did not perceive class difference between me and the Sisters to the extent that class might have created power imbalances between me and the women interviewed, class remained a crucial mark of identity of Sisterhood activists. The majority of Muslim Sisterhood members, particularly in the urban area of Cairo and Alexandria, are middle-higher class women; they are all highly educated, hold college degrees, masters, and many also a PhD. A large majority have longstanding professional careers, travelled or spent part of their lives abroad (not necessarily Western countries), and occupy important positions in their society and local communities. The fact that most women activists belong to the same social class provide therefore an indication that the Sisterhood's ambitions are also informed by their social status. Women with less economic

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[24] Andrew Herod, 'Gender Issues in the Use of Interviewing,' *The Professional Geographer* 45, no. 3 (August 1993): 305-317; Mary M. Fonow, and Judith A. Cook, eds. *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research* ( Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991)

[25] See section 3.2.4 in this thesis.

[26] On this point see also Sophie Ritcher-Devroe, *Gender and Conflict Transformation in Palestine: Women's Political Activism between Local and International Agendas*, (PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, 2010): 34; Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, 2nd ed. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000): 16.

[27] On this point see also Abu-Lughod and el-Mahdi, *Beyond the Women Question*, 2011.

possibilities and less education would find it more difficult to enter in 'competition' with men for social and political roles. The majority of the Sisters, instead, already enjoy an influential position in their societies, and this makes them more accustomed to the dynamics of power sharing with their male counterparts, as well as rendering them more ambitious and desirous of playing a greater political role also in the MB movement.

My being Western was the strongest identity marker I had to deal with at every step of this research. In the Middle East, dichotomous understandings and constructions of the world as divided between West/East, Self/Other, Insider/Outsider, have origins in the colonial encounter started in the 18th century. In his work *Orientalism*, Said challenged Western tendencies to homogenise and essentialise difference between the West and the East on the basis of culture and religion, demonstrating how these have been essential to the construction of a supposed Western superior identity through which the West justified processes of colonialism.[28] In his later work, Said demonstrated how imperialism superseded colonialism with the objective of maintaining in place existing power imbalances between West and East, and how essentialist cultural understandings of the East continued to have a crucial role in justifying these imperialist practices of domination.[29] Although Said's work led to major efforts from the part of academics to de-essentialise cultural understandings of the East, dichotomous constructions of West/East, Self/Other, Insider/Outsider, continue to survive among scholars, as well political actors engaged in the region.[30] This is almost inevitable given the extent of Western foreign intervention in the MENA, and the tangible effect of geopolitical (imperialist) dynamics on the lived realities of the majority of its people.

As a Western woman researching Islamist female activists in Egypt I was both an 'outsider' and an 'insider' in the country. My being Western associated me with being foreign to Egypt, but also rendered me part of the same geopolitical dynamics that contribute to constructions of West/East, Self/Oher, Insider/Outsider, as they develop inside the country. I cannot for example ignore how because of my nationality my worldviews and life-style were at times assumed. I am comfortable to state, for instance, that as a Western woman in an Arab Muslim society, my personal position on gender and other issues were often expected. Orientalist constructions of the East are in fact not unidirectional. Similar tendencies to construct and homogenize the West as essentially liberal (and therefore to think that Western women, only because Western, abide and support to liberal sexual and moral practices and worldviews) are also common in Arab and

[28] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003/1978)
[29] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993)
[30] On this point see Nadje al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004):19-50.

Eastern societies.[31] Managing these tensions during fieldwork has not always been easy, and prompted profound personal reflections during the collection, analysis/interpretation, and presentations of the findings.

Differences in gender views between the Sister and I, became salient at times when subjects such as women's equal rights to political participation and leadership, the role of Islam in politics, and equal rights of gay people and non-Muslims, surfaced during interviews and informal conversations. Although I do not define myself as a liberal feminist, I am against any form of discrimination between men and women based on sexual and/or gender difference. I support positive legal discrimination that serves the purpose of guaranteeing equal rights, access, and opportunities to all, women, gay people, and religious minorities included, in both the social and political spheres. I also firmly believe that religion should not bear any interference in politics, and I support equal rights of gay people and religious minorities in MENA societies.

When such differences emerged, I tried my best to maintain a neutral standpoint and to formulate, or respond to, questions by providing circumstantial examples rather than adopting any specific stance. I avoided raising a particular personal position which would have likely prompted defensive responses by the Sisters or even the opposite, leading therefore the women to adopt a more moderate standpoint only to appear less conservative before their interlocutor. In addition, while analysing and reporting on those data, I made efforts to contextualise Islamist women's positions in relation to time and context, and therefore to disentangle the extent to which their statements represented exclusively a practice of Sisterhood's resistance to political dynamics,[32] or originated predominantly from conservative religious and cultural values. Also, by contextualising women's claims, I hope that I avoided falling into the 'trap' of homogenizing Islamists and secular women's positions as necessarily opposed, different, or definite.[33]

While writing about Islamist women, I remained cognisant of the role of Western scholars of the past in reproducing false discourses and stereotypical images of women in neo-colonial contexts.[34] I instead decided to avail of the opportunity of writing about the Sisters to challenge some of the misconceptions and discourses I believe still permeate scholarly representation of Islamist men and women in the MENA region. I consider this particularly important in today's post 9/11 world, where Islamophobia and essentialist cultural understandings of the East have gained unprecedented prominence, lending to moral justifications of Western interventions in the region,

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[31] Ibid.
[32] For the role of Islam in women's resistance see Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*.
[33] Al-Ali raises such a critique to scholars of Islamist movements in her study of the Egyptian women's movement. See Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East*, 23-26.
[34] For a critical review of how feminist scholarship has dealt with the issue of women and colonization see Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,' *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1988): 61-88.

as well continuous human rights abuses in the name of promoting (a fault) democracy. Real democracy, in fact, would entail promoting the respect of human rights and political participation of all citizens in the region, Islamists included. I am also firmly convinced that secular authoritarian Arab governments, to which Western governments have lent and continue to lend their support, are far more damaging to democratization processes, human rights, and social justice in the region, than what is usually recognised.

Finally, while writing about the Sisters I do not claim to represent the views of all the Muslim Sisterhood movement. I am aware that by having conducted this research during a particular time of heightened repression, women's identities had been increasingly radicalised. Nevertheless, the same fact that under such a particular circumstance the overwhelming majority of the Sisters who was possible to meet embraced more progressive worldviews and were eager to carry on the resistance, is already telling in itself. It substantiates the claim that 'exceptional times' provide an opportunity for exceptional claims to make their inroad in the movement, and for more progressive women to play roles usually denied to them in normal circumstances because of gender constraints, tradition, and culture. Therefore, whit this research I aim to provide a different narrative with regard to who are the Muslim Sisterhood activists in Egypt, and challenge predominant views that tend to homogenise the Sisterhood under a single category. I also hope to contribute to a more sensitive approach to the study of Islamist women, as I believe that women are the crucial actors bearing the potential to bring about change in Islamist movements.

### 3.3.2 The Mechanics of Data Analysis

Herein I aim to provide a brief review of 'how I went about' sorting and mapping patterns in the data, and provide some examples of how I proceeded to ascertain values in the claims and desires of Islamist women.

#### *Organizing data*

Considering that one of the objectives of this research was to investigate change in Islamist women activism and their feminist identities across time, I sorted the data collected along the four time periods identified with changes in POS:

- Genesis (1928-1979);
- Participation under limited political liberalization (1980-2010);
- Activism post-uprisings/formal spaces (2011-2013);

- Activism post-uprisings/informal spaces (2011-2013);
- Activism post-coup (2013-2014).

***Establishing themes***

Data were then analysed in relation to three main themes, or sub-questions, I aimed at answering. These were so formulated: (a) what kind of practices, roles, and forms of engagement women assumed in the MB at each time of analysis, (b) what discourses Islamist women embraced and promoted in relation to their role in the movement and gender issues in Egyptian society in each period (I consider this a reflection as well as a determinant of Muslim Sisterhood's roles), and finally (c) what additional information/data provides further understanding of contextual elements and situations that might have contributed to expand/constrain/change practices of Islamist women activism and roles. The themes were therefore structured as follow:

- MS change in activisms and roles;
- MS discourses of the self and gender ;
- Change in POS (regime accommodation/repression/limited political opening/political opening);
- Changes internal to Islamist movements (inroad of new generations/moderate-conservative leadership).

***Developing patterns***

Changes in Muslim Sisterhood's roles and activism, as well as their discourses, were observed in relation to shifts in POS and MB internal dynamics. With this I am not suggesting that I interpreted the role the Sisters assumed, and the discourses they embraced, as an exclusive consequence of internal and external changes to the movement. I consider the Sisters agents of change, albeit I recognise that external and internal dynamics to the MB movement strongly influenced the array of actions the Sisters could embrace, as well as the ideological basis according to which women could claim a role for themselves in the movement and Egyptian society. To identify Sisterhood's gender discourses and claims for women's greater role in the movement, the existence of moderate and conservative factions internal to the movement, as well as external existential threats to the MB, were important.

Although I tried to analyse each period in separation of the other, it was clear that Muslim Sisterhood's activism and ideas, as I observed them in 2013 and 2014, where not only a product of the specific context and situation the Sisters lived at the time, but where informed by their longer legacy as members and activists in the MB movement. The next step in the data analysis was therefore that of establishing links between changes in activist practices, roles, and ideas as embraced by the Sisters across the different time periods. In order to do so, I relied on internal and external contextual dynamics within which the actions and claims of the Sisters were made.

***Identifying desires for leadership and greater roles among the Sisterhood***

Although many of the statements the Sisters made were self-evident, in analysing data I did not limit myself to consider the 'explicit value' of all the statements made. A great deal of interpretation helped to link personal MS's accounts with motivations, and contexts. Herein I provide only a brief example of how I valued one of Lamia's statements as indicating her desire for leadership in the MB movement prior to the 2013 ousting. Below is an extract from the interview:

> **Lamia:** […] they [MB] considered me one of them but they would not give me big or important tasks at that time because you know...
>
> **Erika:** were you too independent [smile]?
>
> **Lamia:** yeah exactly [laugh]! They thought *I could influence other girls* if I had been given a team to work with. 'Just keep her aside, she can be with us, give her some tasks but, you know, not a big task or a leader task'. *I had no problem with that, I don't look for leadership, and I don't have a problem if I am not told 'you are the head of something'.*

The fact that Lamia prompted immediately after her statement to 'confirm' that not having a leadership role 'didn't bother her', but knowing that she established a woman's movement of her own of which she is extremely proud, suggested to me that her being given a leadership task in the MB movement before the ousting, would have probably pleased her. In analysing women's activism and the gender discourses embraced by the Sisters, I therefore also tried to take into consideration the context and time in which these statements were made, the nature of the office held by the Sisters, their activist practices, and age, among others.

## 3.4 Conclusions

This chapter provided an outline of the research design, methods for data collection, and methodology. The purpose of investigating changes in Muslim Sisterhood's practices of activism, their roles in the MB movement, and the possible development of a feminist identity among some of the women across time, dictated the necessity to employ a longitudinal single-case study design. The attention to practices, motivations, and complex social, gender, and political dynamics that influenced the Muslim Sisterhood movement in history rendered the use of qualitative methodologies for the collection and analysis of data more suitable for the study. Participant observation and interviews added to my understanding of contextual dynamics as determinants of Sisterhood's changes in activist practices, desires, and motivations. In the final section of the chapter I attempted to clarify my personal political views and normative commitments in the hope to render more transparent the intellectual motivations guiding this study. I fundamentally believe that, although there is cultural difference between the Western and the Eastern world, the division between the two remains predominantly a geopolitical one. This study about the Muslim Sisterhood should also be read in that context. I sincerely hope I met such a challenge.

# Chapter 4 –Muslim Sisterhood Activism in the Early Years

## Introduction

> 'Father used to say that the woman is half of the society and she raises the other half. These days proved him right. If women 80 years ago weren't raised to be like that, they wouldn't have had the strength and confidence to stand up for themselves against the society the way they are doing right now! A society that kills her son and her husband… and she is still standing, defending her freedom! This is not happening only because of today, but because of those 80 years they have been taught to survive, and not in order to get a minister's chair, or for fame, but only for God's sake.'[1]

This chapter contextualises the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood and Sisterhood movements within the wave of nationalism that invested Egypt since the early 19th century. It exposes the nationalist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist character of the gender ideology of the Brotherhood, as well as its religious framing. This was conservative, it emphasised women's primary role as biological and cultural reproducers of Muslim societies, and confined the participation of women to religious outreach and social activism. It then provides an overview of the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood since its inception until the 1970s, the years of reconstruction of the Brotherhood movement which paved the way for its expansion in the Egyptian political system under Mubarak. It singles out how the 'exceptional circumstances' of repression under President Nasser allowed the Sisters to re-draw the boundaries of gender roles as set by the Brotherhood, and how its then leader al-Ghazali provided the ideological foundation necessary to legitimise Islamist women's political activism at that time, and for the years to come. The conclusion places these findings in the broader context of the literature on gender and nationalism, with the objective of highlighting how these were formative years for the Sisterhood, paving the way for their growing role in the future.

## 4.1 The Emergence of Egyptian Religious Nationalisms in the 1930s

The Society of the Muslim Brothers (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*), was established by Hassan al-Banna back in 1928 in the Egyptian city Ismailia. This was a period of heated nationalist fervour in Egypt. Egypt had not only just recently obtained nominal independence from Britain (1922) but,

[1] Sanaa al-Banna, interview by author, Cairo, 2014 [Henceforth: al-Banna, interview].

during the same decade, the Ottoman Empire had collapsed at the hands of European forces. Its dismantlement marked not only the end of a state, but also severely weakened the hope that 'a distinctly Islamic state could survive in a world of expansionist European powers'.[2] Egyptians, like its neighbours, were left wondering what political loyalties and identities could replace it. Competing nationalisms emerged.

An Egyptian upper middle-class, grown familiar to Western culture as a consequence of their proximity to colonial elites, found inspiration in the secular-territorial nationalism and modes of development espoused by the West. Such model of modernisation was closely associated with Westernisation, it involved 'not only the adoption of European material culture – its technology, economics, institutions, and political structures – but also the absorption of the spiritual aspects of Western civilization – the customs, values, and mentality of the West'.[3] An alternative nationalist model was instead envisaged by a growing middle-class, more traditional in values. This emphasised a shared Egyptian heritage, culture, tradition, and a religious Islamic identity from which the traditional middle-class had felt increasingly alienated as a consequence of protracted colonialism.[4] For their exponents, '[r]emaining authentically Egyptian was [therefore] just as important as becoming modern'.[5]

Throughout the 1920s, and more intensely throughout the 1930s, these competing nationalisms were projected on women, the symbol of national identity *par excellence*.[6] While both nationalist articulations emphasised women's motherhood role as crucial to the national struggle, the values that underpinned their image of the ideal Egyptian 'modern' woman varied. The Western-oriented Egyptian elites and upper classes had come to perceive religion and traditional Islamic values as a source of backwardness, and found therefore inspiration in the European working-woman, educated, modern, and secular in values, for their ideal model.[7] The Egyptian middle-classes, instead, criticised Egyptian elites' uncritical borrowing from the West as a

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[2] William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 2nd ed. (USA: Westview Press, 2000):165-166.
[3] Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 38.
[4] Social class was not always an indicator of individuals' different ideological position. However, at the time in Egypt such debates assumed a clear social class division. See for example Juan Ricardo Cole, 'Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13, no. 4 (November 1981): 387-407.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Debates about women and modernisation in Egyptian society date back to the 18th century, but it is only after Egyptian independence from Britain that these had become widely appropriated by the middle-classes, with the consequence of growingly permeating the public sphere. See Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminist, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011): 29; Margot Badran, 'Competing Agendas: Feminists, Islam and the State in 19th and 20th Century Egypt,' in *Women, Islam and the State*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti, 201-236 (London: MacMillan, 1991).
[7] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

simplistic approach to the issue of modernisation, and in conflict with the basic need to restore an authentic Egyptian identity. To counter this trend, they promoted a traditional and feminine Islamic image of women and social roles. The society of the Muslim Brotherhood, like many other religious societies established at that time, supported this second model.

### 4.1.1 Al-Banna's Nationalism

Al-Banna condemned colonialism, and later imperialism, both as a political and cultural project. He consequently associated Egyptians' struggle for independence not only to their ability to attain political and economic self-rule, but also to that of Muslims to retain their cultural and religious identity. Mirroring many other associations born in Egypt at that time, al-Banna sought to provide an indigenous inspired nationalist model whose focal point for cultural, moral, political, economic, and legal reform of society was resolutely anchored in Islam.[8] In his view, religion was in fact what was necessary to create individuals' bonds of love and loyalty to the nation. The fact that patriotism was established on faith meant that the boundaries of al-Banna's imagined Islamic community transcended those of the territorial nation state. In al-Banna's understanding, the Islamic nation (*ummah*) encompassed every state, territory, and region where Muslims lived.[9]

Al-Banna's message was a powerful one because it identified Egyptians' source of power for redressing Egypt's weakness in the socio-political system in individuals' personal change rather than in material conditions.[10] According to al-Banna, it was in fact the 'moral character of men rather than the impact of structural forces which determined the evolution of history'.[11] It was also encouraging because the tools to redress the failures of the Egyptian state were readily available, although 'the tale of human weakness and moral failure visible in Islamic history was discouraging on one level […] what men had done they could undo if they had sufficient resolve and dedication'.[12] Al-Banna's nationalism invited therefore Muslims to a lifetime of commitment to activism aimed at reversing the course of history and regaining the glory of an Islamic nation. This activism started with personal change, progressed through society and, eventually, the state. It combined 'deep faith', 'precise organisation,' and 'continuous work'.[13]

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[8] By the end of the 1940s Egypt counted over 135 Islamic associations. Ghershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 21.
[9] Ghershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 82.
[10] For a throughout examination of the religious deterministic character of the Brotherhood's ideology see Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, 81-87.
[11] Ghershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 88.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

### 4.1.2 The Role and Position of Women in al-Banna's Nationalist Project

According to al-Banna, therefore, the key for building an Islamic society resided in reforming individuals' morals and values. This had to take place through education (*tarbyia*) and the proselytization of society (*da'wa*). By virtue of their central position within the family and their primary role as transmitters of morals and values to the new generations, women were therefore not only important for succeeding in bringing an Islamic renaissance; they were the key to its accomplishment. Al-Banna envisaged since the start women's crucial role. In a letter titled 'The Muslim Woman' (*Al-Mara'a al-Muslima*) written in 1936, al-Banna laid out women's central position in the Brotherhood's project of building an Islamic society. Similarly to most nationalist ideologies, women's central role in nation-building rested in their positions as mothers and nurtures of the new nation. As al-Banna stated:

> 'I don't ignore the importance of writing on the subject of women, and neither to refer to their position in the nation. Women are half of the society, the half who exerts the strongest influence on society, because they are the first educators of the new generations. The teachings that mothers impart to their children guide their future, that of society, and that of the nation.'[14]

His position on women was however influenced by the Egyptian experience with colonialism, and which he rejected, culturally, because of the Orientalist views it carried towards women and Islamic religion, the change in gender relations it promoted, and the 'immoral' social customs it had stimulated in the Egyptian society. Women's observance of Islamic principles, image, and modes of behaviour, including piety and modesty, was therefore considered necessary to the Islamic resistance against foreign influence. In al-Banna's view, a just Islamic society rested on the ability to control men and women's relations according to Islamic teachings. What followed was the formulation of a conservative gender ideology that, in Badran's terms, privileged a 'patriarchal family, male authority over women, and clear-cut differentiation of gender roles'.[15]

***Equal but different***

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[14] Muhammad Badie, *Collections of letters of the Martyr Imam Hassan al-Banna. Commissioned by Doctor Muhammad Badie, the General Leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Group [Magmou'at rasa'il al-Imam al-Shahid Hassan al-Banna. Taqdim D. Muhammad Badie al-Murshid al-'am li jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin]* (Cairo: Islamic Printing and Publishing, 2011): 281 – 29, [Henceforth: al-Banna, *al-Mara'a al-Muslima*]

[15] Margot Badran, *Competing Agendas*, 209.

In line with his objective to elevate the values and merits of religion to all aspects of life, al-Banna conveyed Islam as a liberatory religion for women, one that 'raised the value and status of women' to that of 'equal to men in rights and duties'. According to al-Banna, 'Islam attributes to women full individual, civil, and political rights,' and raises their position to that of 'sisters of men and men's partners in life'. However, men's and women's rights and duties differed because of intrinsic natural characteristics of the two sexes, leading to a complementarian understanding of gender roles. One important consequence of this was that despite recognising women as individual legal subjects, their identity, as well as aspects of their rights and duties were defined in relation to men. Women were therefore first and foremost mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, and these identities superseded women's individual identities.

***The Education of Women***

In line with secular-nationalist ideologies developed in Egypt at that time, al-Banna also considered women's education imperative for the advancement of the nation. Women's education, however, was subsumed to the broader objective of developing better mothers and wives. And therefore women needed to be educated into Islamic values and principles, writing, reading, religion, history, the managing of the domestic home, hygiene, principles of children's education and child rearing, and 'all what is necessary for the role and function for which Allah created her, sustaining a home and taking care of her children'. Education in foreign languages, law, and technical subjects were unsuited for women because they took up unnecessary time and efforts and were of no use to women's primary tasks.

***The Separation of the Sexes***

In *al-Mara'a al-Muslima*, most of al-Banna's ink was spent on the subject of sexual segregation. This is in itself an indication of the importance he attributed to it, as well as of al-Banna's reactionary sentiments towards the spreading of European liberal costumes in Egypt. Al-Banna believed that a natural and inescapable attraction exists between the sexes, which served the continuation of the human kind. However, Islam bestowed a spiritual dimension to human's sexual desires, and protected them with the institution of marriage. This is why, he contended, 'an Islamic society is a non-mixed society'. In addition, while recognising both men and women's sexual desires, al-Banna attributed to women the burden of maintaining the Islamic order. Women were allowed to attend festivities and social gatherings, as well as travelling alone in case of extreme

necessity. But when doing so, they had to conceal their beauty by covering and dressing modestly, avoiding loud voice and movements that invited men's attention, and never isolating themselves with men unless these were immediate family members. Gender segregation had of course implications for women's access to work. In this regard, al-Banna maintained that women's place was in the house and, if work was necessary to them, then women had to attain to proper Islamic dress and behaviour. In sum, al-Banna saw in the segregation of the sexes and the complementarity of gender roles the base for a just and ordered Islamic order, elevating therefore ideals of female piety and modesty to that of core pillars of the Muslim Brotherhood's gender ideology.

### 4.1.3 Al-Banna's Legacy and the Role of Context

Al-Banna's gender vision remains influential among a large, if not the largest, number of Sisters and Brothers in Egypt today. This is partly because al-Banna's gender ideology was also a response to colonialism, forms of cultural imperialism, and Orientalism. The persistence of British presence on Egyptian soil until 1952, the subsequent emergence of authoritarian governments promoting a greater secularisation of the Egyptian state, and the further expansion of imperialism and wars in the region, they all contributed to reinforce aspects of the MB identity politics as a way of resistance,[16] including its gender ideology. Despite all this, however, the movement, and the Sisters themselves, have demonstrated to be flexible and pragmatic in the way they adapted to changes in the Egyptian socio-political context. While remaining faithful to its basic principles, women have in practice considerably stretched the boundaries set upon them by the MB, often assuming roles that transcended those imposed by its gender ideology. This took place since the very beginning, as the next section demonstrates.

## 4.2 The Activism of the Muslim Sisterhood in the Early Years

By virtue of their central role within the family, women had since the early start a crucial part to play in the Brotherhood's project. This is why al-Banna established since the beginning the

[16] For a throughout explanation of how authoritarianism and repression have contributed to strengthen the identity of the MB movement in history see Khalil al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood: Religion, Identity and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Institute of the Mothers of the Believers (*Madrasat Umahat al-Mu'mineen*), a school to introduce the female family members of the Brothers to Islamic values and way of life, so that they could become in turn educators of their families, local communities, and other women. In 1933, this 'school' became the first branch of the Muslim Sisterhood.[17]

Religion was not the only thing that attracted women to the Brotherhood. Religion was the means through which female mobilisation was enacted and their efforts channelled into the movement, but it was also the far reaching nation-building project of the Brotherhood, and the social justice discourse it promoted, that attracted those women who joined.[18] The Sisters, in fact, also had a fundamental role in the managing of social and charity projects run under the auspices of the Brotherhood, the purpose of which was developing and supporting Egyptian underprivileged communities, orphans, and women, while disseminating the principles of the Islamic faith.[19]

In 1932 al-Banna moved to Cairo, and with him the headquarters of the Brotherhood moved as well. The capital provided the opportunity to expand both the male and female section of the movement, as well as their activities. In Cairo, however, several other women's associations of different political orientations existed. At that time 'women's societies' constituted in fact one of the few 'acceptable way[s] for affluent women to contribute to the national cause,' allowing them 'to disseminate a founder's ideology and to win adherents for a political position'. [20] In order for the Sisters to compete with these societies, the women's section necessitated capable and experienced leadership.

At first, Hassan al-Banna called upon Zeinab al-Ghazali for this task. Al-Ghazali was an Islamic activist with a past involvement in the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) led by Huda Sharawy. The EFU was also a nationalist women's organization but, like the nationalist party al-Wafd, promoted a secular-nationalist rhetoric that largely drew on European values more familiar to Egyptian urban higher classes. According to al-Ghazali, this class element of the EFU prevented the organisation from mobilising a majority of the middle-class women in nationalist resistance. By 1936, therefore, al-Ghazali had decided to leave the EFU to establish her own Society of the Muslim Women - *al-Sayidat al-Muslimat* - (SMW), where she attempted to engage women in national resistance by tapping into traditional Islamic values and language. As recounted by Sanaa al-Banna:

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[17] Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993/1969): 175.
[18] Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*.
[19] Al-Banna, interview.
[20] Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 196.

> '*Hajja*[21] Zainab was working alongside Hoda Sharawy, the pioneer of the women's renaissance movement in Egypt. When she started she felt that people were not responding to their call. They were inviting people to progress – *taqadum* – on the model of Western costumes, but people were not enthusiastic about that. *Hajja* Zainab felt that if they had to involve ordinary people they had to do something Islamic, so she established the Society of the Muslim Ladies, like the Muslim Sisters. Zainab al-Ghazali used to be with them [Seculars-EFU], they supported the al-Wafd Party, went to mosques, prayed, and encouraged women to do the same, they run clinics, charities, but they didn't have a correct understanding of true Islam [*al-Islam al-sahyih*]. They did it because they wanted to be Ladies, to be part of a higher class. They wanted to be accepted within the circles of al-Wafd'.[22]

When Hassan al-Banna proposed her to merge her Society with the Brotherhood and assume the leadership of the Sisters, al-Ghazali refused to retain her independence from that of al-Banna. Yet, she maintained close links to the Brotherhood since then, and often delivered Islamic classes to both Sisters and Brothers at their headquarters in Cairo.[23] An honorary leadership position of the Sisterhood was then given to Labibah Ahmad.[24]

According to Abdellatif, the lack of capable female cadres penalised the expansion of the Sisterhood until 1943, when 'a group of 120 young women […] mostly family relatives of the Brothers, university graduates, and mosque-goers', imbued new life into the Sisterhood's organisation.[25] Since then, the number of women branches expanded to reach a period of maximum growth in 1948, when the Sisters counted over 50 branches and no less than 5,000 members.[26] This might appear as a small number, but it is not when compared to other feminist organisations such as the EFU, for example, which counted a similar membership despite being older and better established.[27]

Under such circumstances, women had the opportunity to exercise independent leadership to some extent. Al-Banna had created the Muslim Sisterhood group as of one of the nine committees that operated under the umbrella of the MB organisation.[28] As a consequence, the women movement remained separate from that of the Brothers. Women were never integrated in the hierarchical structure of the Brotherhood, and the liaison between the women and the MB was facilitated by an old man, Sheikh el-Ghoary. Within the MB Women's Section, the Sisters

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[21] Literally 'a woman who performed hajj', the pilgrimage to Mecca considered mandatory for all practicing Muslims, at least once in their lifetime. As an adjective it is also used for people who performed several of these pilgrimages, and/or to indicate the high degree of religiosity of a person.
[22] Al-Banna, interview.
[23] Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*, 52.
[24] Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 210.
[25] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 3.
[26] Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 210.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*,175.

managed their own activities through the Committee of General Guidance. This was composed of a female president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer, and twelve women elected by secret ballot, and whose task was to advise the president on matters related to the Sisterhood's activities, and propose new initiatives. The purpose of the Committee was to set the guidelines for the Sisterhood's charitable projects, which were then revised and validated by the MB Society's Guidance Office. Although the Brotherhood retained therefore the final say on women's activities, upon validation women had full responsibility to enact, implement, and monitor these projects across the several women's branches.[29] Under such circumstances, it is therefore plausible to argue that women enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, and had the opportunity to exercise leadership in their own affairs, albeit to a limited extent. In addition, even though al-Banna took a conservative stand on women's political activism, he occasionally included women in political affairs. One of such episodes took place shortly after the government dissolved the Muslim Brotherhood in 1948. At that time al-Banna formed 'a delegation of Muslim Sisters to submit to the palace, the cabinet, and a number of ministers a memo to protest the move'.[30] The political involvement of women was to see an expansion in the period that followed, when the Brotherhood fell under increasing state repression.

### 4.2.1 The MB Repression of the 1950s and 1960s and the Muslim Sisterhood's Role

In 1948, the year of maximum expansion of the Sisterhood, the Society of the Muslim Brothers fell under the repression of the Egyptian monarchy for the first time in history. MB repression followed a growing politicised role played by the Society in Palestine, and several violent attacks on British targets that the monarchy attributed to the Society's Secret Apparatus (SA),[31] including the killing of the Egyptian Prime Minister al-Nuqrashi.[32] It was following this

[29] Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*, 48.
[30] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 3.
[31] The SA was the paramilitary unit established by al-Banna between the First and Second World War with the objective to prepare the Brothers for armed resistance. The SA's role expanded with the MB participation it the first Palestine-Israeli war, and the Yemeni war. In Egypt, the relationship between the MB and the SA has always been ambiguous. Al-Banna denied its existence not to attract the attention of the authorities. Nonetheless, the role of the SA in carrying out attacks against Egyptian and British targets is well documented and, since the 1940s, the radical ideology espoused by the members of the SA rendered increasingly difficult for the MB leadership to keep the SA under control. Al-Hudeiby worked to dismantle it, but it remains unclear whether the SA has ever been dissolved, or the terms at which this has taken place. For more information see Mitchell, *The society of the Muslim Brothers*, 87-89; and Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: the Burden of Tradition* (London: Saqi Books, 2010).
[32] Although Egypt had obtained nominal independence from Britain in 1922, the British army maintained its presence and power over Egyptian territory until 1954.

incident that the monarchy froze all the assets of the Society and arrested over 4,000 Brothers. Al-Banna was then killed on February 12, 1949. [33]

Although al-Ghazali had originally refused the leadership of the Sisterhood, she pledged alliance to al-Banna in 1948, when the Brotherhood was first dissolved.[34] As recounted by al-Ghazali in her prison memoirs, at that time al-Banna accepted al-Ghazali's offer, but insisted that her affiliation to the Sisters remained secret and that the SMW stayed separate from the Brotherhood.[35] This separation proved soon to have a strategic advantage, and for this it remains in place to this day.[36] In fact, when in 1951 the MB introduced a new internal statute, whereby it modified some of its internal organizational structure, the Sisters continued to enjoy separate status from the movement, and were not incorporated under its structure.[37] When in 1948 the monarchy seized Brotherhood's assets, al-Ghazali's SMW was in fact spared the same fate, and the Sisters, enjoying some degree of freedom of movement under the SMW, could then continue to carry out their activities, this time in support of the Brotherhood.[38]

After a brief period of return to legality (1950-1951), a new wave of MB repression began in 1954, under President Gamal Abd al-Nasser. The Brothers, who previously supported Nasser and the 1952 Free Officers' Revolution against the monarchy, had grown increasingly frustrated with their political marginalisation under Nasser's social-nationalist project. This state of affairs brought to the emergence of frictions between the Society and members of the SA, who disagreed on the actions to take towards the President. While the Brotherhood continued to embrace political persuasion as the way forward, the SA supported a more radical and violent approach to Nasser and the Egyptian military in power. It was then that internal frictions led the SA to lead an attempt assassination against Nasser in 1954, and after which the Society was severely repressed. Between October and December of that year some of the most important Brotherhood leaders were arrested, condemned to the death penalty, and sentenced.[39]

It was at that time of repression that the Sisterhood emerged as the Brotherhood's safety net, maintaining its social and political networks intact. Al-Ghazali had a leading role in this phase. She personally took care of setting up a group of women, mostly the female family members of those arrested, and coordinating charity and humanitarian activities in support of those Brothers in

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[33] For a detailed history of the MB between 1945 and 1948 see Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 35-79.
[34] Al-Ghazali, *Days From My Life*, (Delhi: Hindustan Publications, 1989): 30.
[35] Al-Ghazali, *Days From My Life*, 29-30.
[36] Nour, interview with the author, Cairo, 2014 [henceforth: Nour, interview(a)];
[37] See Abdel-Latif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 3.
[38] Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*, 50.
[39] Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 96-104.

prison and their families.[40] At that time, the Sisters also emerged as the only point of contact between the Brothers in jail and the outside world, leading the women to play an increasingly organisational and political role for the movement as a consequence. Women were the ones conveying information between leaders in jail, facilitating therefore the continuation of the Brotherhood's activities outside prison.[41] During this period, the women's network grew therefore in political value to the Brothers, who extended their support for women's increasing political role once repression relaxed.[42]

Between 1957 and 1958, Nasser's repressive policies on the Brotherhood partially eased. The Brotherhood used this time to re-build the organisation. In 1957 the same al-Ghazali, by then a well-established leader, was called upon by al-Hudaybi, then succeeded to the death of al-Banna, to cooperate with the MB leadership in reorganising and training the movement's rank-and-files.[43] In a first moment, reorganisation simply meant re-grouping members willing to resume activities, but, since 1965, it expanded to include the Brotherhood's ideological reconstruction. For that purpose, the Brothers relied heavily on the prison writings of Sayyid Qutb, smuggled out of jail by his female family members and the same al-Ghazali.[44]

### 4.2.2 Qutb's Influence on the Brotherhood Movement

Qutb's ideas had been influential among the Brothers since the 1950s, but their impact accelerated as a consequence of the Brotherhood's use of Qutb's writings for re-building the organization since the 1960s. Among the aspects of his ideology, Qutb was known for his revolutionary and militant thought.[45] He promoted ideas that legitimised resistance and opposition to rulers who did not live according to the principles of Islamic Sharia (*kafir*-disbelievers). He also endorsed political power and state control as means for establishing an Islamic state.[46] Ultimately, therefore, Qutb's core ideology promoted a reversal of the classic Brotherhood's bottom-up approach to state reform. While according to al-Banna an Islamic state was to be achieved through gradual bottom-up transformation of society, Qutb promoted a radical top-down approach where

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[40] Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamist and the State: Contemporary Feminism in Egypt* (UK: MacMillan, 1998): 61.
[41] Barbara Zollner, 'Prison Talks: the Muslim Brotherhood Internal Struggle,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 3 (August 2007): 417.
[42] Ibid., 416-417.
[43] Al-Ghazali, *Days From My Life*, 37.
[44] Zollner, *Prison Talks*, 417.
[45] Yvonne Y. Haddad, 'The Qur'anic Justification for an Islamic Revolution: the View of Sayyd Qutb,' *Middle East Journal* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 14-29.
[46] Abdullah al-Arian, *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat's Egypt* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2014): 31.

the establishment of an Islamic state preceded society's conversion to Islamic values.[47] For those Brothers who started re-grouping outside prison, Qutb's ideas provided therefore a fresh ideological perspective for embarking into a new course of action *vis-à-vis* the regime, and boosted resistance.[48]

Despite the fact that little of Qutb's ink was spent on articulating his gender views, scholars who have analysed his teachings define Qutb's ideas on women as ultra-conservative, or even regressive, when compared to his progressive political ideology. Women, in Qutb's system, maintained a primary role as carers and nurturers of the 'to-be-built' Islamic nation, while no reference was made to their political role.[49] Nevertheless, the Sisterhood did not downgrade their social and political participation during this period as yet. The opposite in fact happened, and it was precisely the framework of the national revolutionary struggle that allowed women to expand their participation. While the Brotherhood continued to emphasise women's traditional roles, the existential threat posed to the Islamist project by Nasser's socialism and by the consequent repression of Islamists, provided women with the necessary preconditions to legitimise their growing political involvement.

Eventually, the growth of popularity of Qutb's revolutionary ideas among the Brothers, intimidated Nasser who inflicted a final blow on the movement in 1966. As many as 18,000 MB members were arrested under allegations of complotting to overturn the regime.[50] Qutb was also arrested and sentenced to death the same year. Al-Ghazali, who by then had emerged as an important leader of the MB movement, also attracted Nasser's attention. As he previously did with the MB, Nasser tried to subsume the SMW under his control but, upon al-Ghazali's refusal, he eventually closed down the SMW in 1964, arrested al-Ghazali, and sentenced her to 25 years in prison with hard labour the following year. Fifty more Sisters were also arrested alongside al-Ghazali.[51] While in detention, al-Ghazali was subjected to the same kinds of torture and anguish of other MB male leaders. Her endurance to torture in the name of Islam is what makes of al-Ghazali an MB leader among both Brothers and Sisters to this day.

### 4.2.3 The MB and the Sisters under President Sadat

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[47] Ibid., 30.
[48] Zollner, *Prison Talks*, 418-419.
[49] Lamia R. Shehadeh, 'Women in the Discourse of Sayyd Qutb,' *Arab Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 45-65.
[50] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 4.
[51] Fathma Abdel Hady, *My Journey with the Muslim Sisters: from Imam Hassan al-Banna to Abd al Nasir's prison [Rihlaty ma' al-Akhwat al-Muslimat: min al-Imam Hassan al-Banna ila sugoun 'bd al-Nasir]* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2011): 37.

Sadat followed to Nasser who had died of heart attack in 1970. Despite their common past as Free Officers, Sadat's policies signalled a profound departure from those of his predecessor. Sadat lacked Nasser's charismatic leadership, and therefore needed to establish his rule on alternative power sources.[52] Domestically, Sadat promised greater rule of law and moved away from Nasser's one party system, opting instead for restricted political pluralism.[53] To consolidate his powerbase among the Egyptian private bourgeoisie, Sadat opened Egypt to foreign investments, endorsing a controversial shift of alliance from the Soviet Union to the United States.[54] This situation placed him in a position of antagonism *vis-à-vis* leftist and socialist forces remnants of the Nasser's regime, which he attempted to weaken by capitalising on Islamism. In 1971, boosted by the general disillusionment with the social pan-Arabism of Nasser following his defeat against Israel in 1967, Sadat reformed the Egyptian constitution making the *Shari'a* the primary source of legislation. To foster the expansion of Islamism in society, he allowed greater political freedom to the Islamic Movement in universities (*al-Jama'a al-Islamia*). He also released MB leaders from prison, including al-Ghazali, returning them their confiscated properties, and allowing them to perform peaceful *da'wa* activities. In addition, he entered negotiations with Islamists for the release of lower and middle rank MB cadres, who were then set free upon the Brotherhood's promise to de-radicalise the SA, and refrain from engaging in political activities.[55] The MB leadership welcomed this strategic realignment. Al-Hudaybi, in fact, who had always been opposed to the SA, saw in this an occasion to marginalise the MB radical fringes while promoting its commitment to peaceful *da'wa*.[56]

Once out of jail, the MB capitalised on its legacy of activism in the name of Islam, and on its 'ability to convey a complete program, respond to competing trends, and demonstrate flexibility in its views',[57] to attract a large number of *al-Jama'a* activists to its movement, successfully. By doing so, the MB managed to expand its control over the largest mobilising force in the country, the universities, re-establishing therefore itself once again as the largest Islamic force in Egypt. For their part, these young student leaders contributed to revitalise a tired MB organisation with new ideas and political skills.[58] This new generation of MB youth activists enjoyed the support of al-Tilmisani, the new MB General Guide succeeded to al-Hudeiby in 1973. Al-Tilmisani fostered

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[52] Hesham al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Pursuit of Legitimacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014): 35.
[53] Ibid., 36-37.
[54] Ibid., 38.
[55] Omar Ashour, *The de-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (USA: Routledge, 2009): 86.
[56] Barbara Zollner, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan al-Hudaybi and ideology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
[57] Al-Arian, *Answering the Call*, 17.
[58] Ibid., 168-171.

their desire for political participation, and continued to advocate for a greater role of the MB in Egyptian politics, notwithstanding the deal previously made with Sadat by his predecessor. In 1979, Al-Tilmisani's behaviour, together with mounting Islamist violence following Sadat's peace treaty with Israel and the events of the Iranian Revolution, eventually led to a renewed wave of MB repression.

During the 1970s, the Sisterhood never re-gained the power they enjoyed in the mid-1940s and 1950s. As observed by Abdellatif, the women's movement emerged from the period of Nasser's repression seriously damaged.[59] In addition, the Sisterhood's lack of a solid organisational structure in the previous decades rendered even more difficult re-building a strong Sisterhood in the 1970s. After the closing up of al-Ghazali's society, women relied primarily on individual efforts to remain active. Also, during the Sadat era the Brothers never intended to allow the Sisters a power and role similar to that which they gained in the previous decades. Women had paid a high price for having taken part in the political struggle between the MB and the regime, and the MB wished to avoid a similar situation to be repeated in the future. Therefore, when 'the state's siege was lifted on the Brotherhood's activities […] women's activities and work still took a back seat in the movement's priorities'.[60] During this period of organisational and ideological reconstruction, women were believed to best serve the interest of the movement by contributing to restore the MB social and charity networks, and raise a new generations of Muslims committed to the Islamist cause, a move embraced by the same al-Ghazali.[61] To a certain extent, these requirements provoked a reversal of the gender roles embraced by many of the women in the previous years of Islamist repression.

However, women did not abandon political activism altogether. The Islamic movement in universities became in fact an important venue for women's activism. In universities, the Islamic movement provided an attractive way for pious women to become socially and politically active while maintaining modesty. A new generation of women, now a large majority of those university students who benefited from Nasser's free education policies, suffered an increased 'assault on their modesty as a result of packed lectures halls, congested buses from home to campus, and cheap and crowded lodging facilities'.[62] Women, therefore, increasingly welcomed Islamists' assistance in providing gender-segregated transportations, women-only dormitories, student scholarships, free tuition classes, and self-help study groups among others. In addition, women's reliance on student services lent credibility, validity, and strength to the Islamic movement. It is in fact also during this period that the Islamic dress made its way on to university campuses and in Egyptian society more

[59] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 7.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Karam, *Women, Islamist and the State*, 121.
[62] Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*, 53.

broadly, assuming an explicitly political meaning. This phenomenon was also bolstered by universities' Islamic groups, which made veiling mandatory for women who wished to benefit from their services.[63] However, veiling in this period should not be equated with the subjugation or the exclusion of women. As recounted by Talhami, most of the incidents which followed the mobilisation of the student movements in Egypt during the 1970s involved veiled females as well as men activists,[64] this in itself a testimony of growing Islamist female activism, and not of segregation practices.

## 4.3 Developing Islamist Women's 'Feminism'

From its establishment in 1932 until the 1960s, the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood underwent dramatic changes, primarily as a consequence of events that invested the MB movement. Started as a section of the MB with the primary task of spreading its *da'wa* and supporting its charity projects, the Sisterhood turned into the powerhouse of the Brotherhood when this fell under increasing regime repression in 1948. This situation required different practical and ideological responses from the women activists and their leaders. The following section revises briefly the gender ideologies embraced by Labibah Ahmad and Zeinab al-Ghazali, two of the key leaders of the Muslim Sisterhood, with the objective of demonstrating how their different approach to activism was not only a product of their generations, but also of the circumstances they and the Sisters under their leadership faced. Both leaders supported a greater role for women in Egyptian society, but while Ahmad privileged social activism, al-Ghazali was first of all a political activist. The period of repression that characterised al-Ghazali's leadership, allowed her to emerge as a political leader of both female and male members, and also to articulate and legitimise a different kind of feminist discourse which not only advocated women's increasing political role in MB activities, but that understood this as part of women's duty. In this sense, al-Ghazali was responsible for consolidating women's political role as part of the Sisterhood's (feminist-nationalist) gender ideology.

### 4.3.1 The Social Activism of Labibah Ahmad

In 1932, when Labibah was called upon by al-Banna to lead the Sisterhood, she was already a well-established activist in both nationalist and Islamic circles. Of middle-class

[63] Ibid., 54.
[64] Ibid., 54-56.

background, her engagement with activism coincided with the 1919 Egyptian Revolution. At that time, inspired by the ideas of the nationalist activists Mustafa Kamil, Labibah joined al-Watani Party, a middle-class party of Islamic-conservative orientation led by the same Kamil. Like him, Labibah opposed the secular-nationalism of al-Wafd, as well as the feminist views espoused by its female activists, these largely elitists. Labibah, instead, espoused what she believed to be a more authentic Egyptian feminism, one that stressed women's roles as central to the Islamic family and nurturers of the nation. In this sense, Labibah can be considered a pioneer of Egyptian Islamic feminism at a time when Islamic nationalism had not yet established itself as a full force in Egyptian society. As narrated by Baron, Labibah 'spearheaded a movement that conceptualised women's rights in Islamic terms and pushed for a fusion of Islam and nationalism,' who 'used social welfare to enact local change and win adherents' and 'sought to introduce the image of the "new Islamic woman" as a credible alternative to the "new (secular) woman" espoused by women's associations such as the EFU'.[65]

Labibah's appeal to Islamic religion did not impede her activism. Rather, it boosted it. Often, Labibah would take part in national demonstrations, organise petitions, and give speeches at memorial services where she made sure to display elements of Islamic symbolism, a practice that distanced her from secular-nationalists.[66] To gain wider appeal for her views, she led a journal, *al-Nahda al-Nisa'iya* (Women's Awakening), where she never limited herself to treat exclusively women's issues. Rather, she used her journal to reach both men and women and encourage their participation in reforming Egyptian society and 'work for its complete independence'.[67] In the journal, she discussed issues such as morality, culture, and political economy as well as 'national progress, social reforms, women's roles, and Islamic revival'.[68]

Similarly to other nationalists, Labibah firmly believed that the revival of the Egyptian nation could only succeed with the participation of women. Therefore, in 1921, she established her own Society of Egyptian Ladies' Awakening (SELA) (*Jama'at Nahdat al-Sayidat al-Masryyat*) where she 'devoted [her] effort to educating women of the poorer sections of Cairo about the nature of the British occupation'.[69] The SELA functioned as a monitoring school of government's activities, where women scrutinised the Egyptian government's dealing with issues such as alcohol, prostitution, gambling, narcotics, and mixed bathing, subjects that Labibah discussed then in her journal. Women also organised boycotts of British goods, and staged public demonstrations.[70] These activities were nationalist in nature, yet imbued with religiosity. As the oath of allegiance to

[65] Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 189-190.
[66] Ibid., 195.
[67] Ibid., 200.
[68] Ibid., 205.
[69] Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*, 47.
[70] Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 200-201.

the organisation epitomises, Labibah's activism was strictly religious-nationalist: 'I swear that modesty will be my crown, and virtue my light, and I shall live purely: a useful and devout wife, whose hand in child-raising is superior. I shall fulfil my rightful and correct duty, toward God, the homeland, the family'.[71]

Labibah's charity-oriented activism never led the Sisters to challenge gender roles as established by the movement. During her time, the greatest contribution of the Sisterhood to the Brotherhood's renaissance project was that of helping the movement establishing and managing an extensive network of charity associations and medical clinics, which also became the primary sites of recruitment of other women to the cause. The situation changed significantly by the mid-1940s, when the charismatic Al-Ghazali was to lead a new generation of Sisterhood through one of the most difficult times for the Islamist movement. Breaking with the tradition of the past, she played an increasingly political and leadership role, being of inspiration for other Sisters at the time, and in the years to come.

### 4.3.2 Al-Ghazali and the Political Sisterhood

When al-Ghazali left the EFU to establish the SMW in 1936, it was not to promote women's unquestioned acceptance of traditional gender roles. Rather, it seems that al-Ghazali turned to Islam as a way of resisting popular ideas among secular-feminists that women's liberation was only possible through the adoption of Western feminist values. At that time, the liberal-secular feminism of the EFU had grown as increasingly class-biased, losing much of its appeal among middle-lower class women. What is more, the EFU had become increasingly selective in its membership not only as a consequence of the feminist values it espoused, but also in relation to the characteristics of women who were allowed the right to perform public roles and represent the EFU before Egyptian society.[72] These were exclusively educated upper middle-class Egyptian women. Al-Ghazali, instead, believed that to be able to appeal to a majority of Egyptian women, women's organisations had to convey a message that could speak to their culture and values.[73] Women's liberation, according to al-Ghazali, had therefore to be found in Islam. As recounted by Badran:

> 'For al-Ghazali […] Shari'ah regulates all aspects of life [and therefore] a separate ideology of feminism was at best redundant and at worsts an undermining western ideology. Al-Ghazali, who extols the absolute equality

[71] Ibid., 196.
[72] Badran, *Competing Agendas*, 201.
[73] Al-Banna, interview.

(*musawa mutlaqa*) between women and men in Islam, finds women's liberation within the framework of religion.'[74]

Al-Ghazali turned therefore to Islam to promote a more radical understanding of gender relations and women's role in Egyptian society. She did it in practice by living her life in contradiction with the more conservative female ideal-role promoted by the Islamist movement.[75] She also did it in her writings, supporting a greater involvement of women in the national struggle as an extension of their motherhood roles.[76] In her personal life, she placed her devoutness to God and the Islamist cause before any other duty as a woman. While she preached to women that their role was first and foremost that of being mothers and wives, she also considered herself 'blessed' for not having any children so that she could dedicate her life to the cause of Islam.[77] She also divorced her first husband when he became an impediment to her activism, and she re-married only after her second husband accepted in writing that her duties towards God came before her duties as a wife towards him.[78] Below is an extract of a conversation she had with her second husband in 1954, the year in which her activism in the MB movement intensified, as she recounted it in her prison memoirs *Days from my Life* (*Ayyam min Hayati*). The conversation exposes how al-Ghazali was able to free herself from the constraints of traditional gender roles and customs by raising the Islamic cause as the primary duty of women:

'I answered him [husband] briefly that their visits [of MB male leaders] were related to the re-organization of the *Ikhwan*. However, when he persisted in asking questions, I reminded him of the pact I had made with him at the time of marriage […] I have taken an oath with Hassan al-Banna to fight in the Cause of Allah […] if you personally disapprove my activities and consider them injurious to our relations, the best way for both of us is to separate. […] The day I go out to join the ranks of *Mujahids*, you should not ask me to explain my conduct, for in the marital tie mutual trust is of outmost importance. […] I am the one who had devoted herself fully to the Cause of the establishment of an Islamic state and to strive in Allah's cause before my marriage with you. However, in case of misunderstanding our tie will be severed, for I live for only the *Da'wa* for Islam'.[79]

By elevating her commitment to Islam before that to her husband, al-Ghazali shifted her primary allegiance from her husband to God, freeing therefore herself from the constraints that marriage traditionally bestowed upon women. In addition, by defining her primary relationship

[74] Badran, *Competing Agendas*, 210.
[75] See also Halverson and Way, *Islamist Feminism: Constructing Gender Identities in Postcolonial Muslim Societies*.
[76] Miriam Cook, *Women Claim Islam* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).
[77] Ibid.,102.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Al-Ghazali, *Days From My Life*, 38-40.

towards God rather than towards her husband, al-Ghazali re-claimed her individual identity as a woman. This was contrary to al-Banna's ideology, which instead defined women's identity first and foremost as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, and therefore exclusively in relation to male subjects and communities.

By framing women's activism as a religious duty, and linking women's religious duty to the national cause of establishing an Islamic state, al-Ghazali was therefore able to legitimise women's activism even when this transgressed traditional gender roles. The justification she provided for engaging in such behaviour, rested precisely in the 'exceptional circumstance' of threat faced by the Islamic movement, and which demanded that all Muslims, men and women, engaged in resistance (*jihad*) for their nation. In her memoirs she raised the same justification to her husband, acting as an example for the thousands of women who read her books and treated it as a manual for activism, faith, and resistance.[80] As she recounts of her conversation, al-Ghazali explains with these words how she won her husband: 'I owe allegiance to you, I told him frankly, and your directives are binding on me, yet you should not resort to it, for our Mission is passing through a critical state and it is of greater value than our tie'.[81] As also recognised by Cook, it is therefore the 'abnormal rules of war that allow for the adjustment of codes of social conduct and gender arrangements'[82] in al-Ghazali's view and that of the many Sisters who follow her example.

Al-Ghazali's promotion of women's political role did not come to the expenses of women's roles as mothers and nurturers of the Islamic community. Rather, al-Ghazali imbued motherhood with political value. By linking women's roles as educators of the new generations (*da'wa*) to the task of raising political men who can fill the ranks of those striving for the Islamic call, al-Ghazali politicised motherhood and blurred the boundaries between the private and public sphere, providing women's access the world of men's politics. Even if at first impression the conservative language used by al-Ghazali might seem to lead to understand that women's access to the world of politics is imaginary or 'behind the scenes' at best, al-Ghazali's chosen use of language, according to Cook, was strategic. It aimed in fact at reassuring men that women's political engagement will not be achieved to the detriment of women's 'natural' duties. As also remarked by Cook, 'to be a wife and a mother in Islam entails a religious, political activism that cannot be confined to the home, even if there is where it starts.'[83] In the interview, al-Ghazali was reported saying:

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[80] All Muslim Sisterhood activists interviewed for this study mentioned al-Ghazali as their role model, and many had been her students in the past. Al-Ghazali, in fact, died only in 2005. Her books, used by the Sisters as training manuals for activism, have been reprinted several times. Her prison memoire alone, *Ayyam min Hayati* [Days From My Life], was re-published eleven times.
[81] Al-Ghazali, *Days From My Life*, 40.
[82] Cook, *Women Claim Islam*, 103.
[83] Ibid., 91.

> '[Women] are the ones who are most active because men have to work. They are the ones who build the kind of men that we need to fill the ranks of the Islamic call. So women must be well educated, cultured, knowing the precepts of the Koran and Sunna, knowing world politics, why we are backward, why we don't have technology. The Muslim woman must study all these things, and then raise her son in the conviction that he must possess the scientific tools of the age […] Islam does not forbid women to actively participate in public life […] as long as that does not interfere with her first duty as a mother, *the one who first trains her children in the Islamic call*'.[84]

While al-Banna's appealed to Islam to elevate women's roles as mothers and wives, al-Ghazali reached to the Qur'an and the Sunnah to justify women's political involvement in the public sphere. By politicising women's motherhood roles, al-Ghazali blurred the boundary between private and public spheres, rendering political engagement an extended duty of motherhood. It was therefore al-Ghazali, a woman, an Islamist, and a Muslim Brotherhood leader, who provided those theoretical elements at the core of Islamist women's political activism as it continue to be valid in the Muslim Sisterhood movement today.

## 4.4 Conclusion: Making sense of Muslim Sisterhood Activism in the Early Years

By shedding light on the historical context in which the Brotherhood movement was established, the chapter unveiled the nationalist and anti-colonial character of its gender ideology. The MB rejected colonialism not only as a political but also as a cultural project, and advanced a nationalist model that sought inspiration for Egyptian national identity and modernisation in Egyptian indigenous culture, values, traditions, as well as Islamic religion. The conservative gender ideology espoused by the movement is not peculiar to the MB, but to the nationalist struggle it embraced. Like most nationalist movements, it placed emphasis on women's primary roles as that of biological and cultural reproducers of the nation.[85]

What remains a particularity of the movement is its use of Islam to justify its political actions, as well as its position on women. This, I would argue, is a consequence of the Orientalism that colonialism espoused. This portrayed Arab and Islamic culture as backward, while framing Western culture as superior,[86] leading therefore the movement to embrace Islamic identity as part

[84] Al-Ghazali quoted in Cook, *Women Claim Islam*, 90, *emphasis added.*
[85] Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.
[86] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

of their resistance to colonialism.[87] This trait, in the long run, has become an integral part of the movement identity politics.[88] The same has been for women, who continue to appeal to conservative gender roles as authentic and universally Islamic, and as part and parcel of their struggle against neo-colonialism, imperialism, and authoritarianism.

For the reasons outlined above, however, Islamist movements have been more than often considered detrimental to women. Feminist scholars that investigated the relation between women and nationalism contend that because 'nationalist movements tend to rely on traditional gender tropes to construct and define the nation' they consequently reproduce a patriarchal gender order.[89] Because women's interest loses priority before that of the nation, women's engagement in nationalist struggles is not understood as serving the objective of women's emancipation. The argument often made, in fact, is that women's energies would be better spent on other causes. As recognised by O'Keefe, however, 'these inter-related claims are based on the premise that women do not have a stake in nationalist politics and make presumptions about the nature of feminist organizing'.[90]

In the context of occupation and authoritarianism, it is in fact difficult to counter the argument that liberation and self-determination are 'less important' issues for women. As in most part of the post-colonial world, women have joined nationalist movements, or formed movements of their own, not to bring about gender equality, but to free their nations from colonial powers and obtain self-determination.[91] Dismissing the importance of women's engagement in Islamist movements only because their demands fail to be framed in terms of gender equality, means in fact not only negating agency to these women, but also dismissing the possibility that women might be interested in other political matters that are not necessarily understood as feminists in the liberal sense.[92]

Indirectly, mainstream theories of gender and nationalism tend therefore to promote the idea that women who take part in nationalist struggles remain victims of nationalist men, who use female support to attain nationalist objectives but give nothing in exchange.[93] The argument often made is that although women's contribution to the national objective is crucial to its achievement, once the goal is achieved women are asked to resume their traditional roles and are once again

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[87] Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*.
[88] Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., *Identity, Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminism in International Perspectives* (USA: Westview Press, 1994).
[89] O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*, 1.
[90] Ibid., 2.
[91] Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism.*
[92] For the debate concerning the political engagement of conservative women in the West see Celis and Childs, eds., *Gender, Conservatism, and Political Representation*.
[93] O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*, 3.

excluded from the political table, which remain a prerogative of men.[94] In the case of Islamist movements this image of women as 'victims' of men is even more strongly advanced because of Islamist movements' reference to religion to justify the terms and roles of women's participation.[95]

These views, however, often ignore how in the context of post-colonial and neo-colonial Arab world, Islamic activism has provided women, as well as men, with a source of empowerment. It fostered women's resistance, their political engagement, as well as their presence in the public sphere.[96] What is more, in conservative societies, Islamic activism often provides the only legitimate venue for women's activism, because it allows them to acquire visibility without questioning the gender and moral order of society. The case of the Sisters confirms that. Ahmad and al-Ghazali had independently engaged in Islamic activism as a way to acquire visibility and have a stake in building the future of their nation. The Brotherhood did not impose such activism on women, although it sought their cooperation, providing a venue were to grow their activities. Under the wave of repression that affected the MB, women expanded their roles to spheres usually reserved t male members, such as that of political leadership.

The criticism usually raised against such dynamics of gender roles reversal, is that, as also argued by Shitrit, such gains are not permanent. Because these roles are legitimised on the basis of exceptional circumstances, the change in gender roles is also only temporary.[97] The case of the Sisters seems to confirm this point. In the 1970s, women did not maintained the same political role they had come to play during the 1950s and 1960s.

However, this thesis takes issue with such a vision. Two points of contention are raised here. First of all, this study challenge mainstream views of gender and nationalism scholars, who tend to value women's engagement in nationalist movements as worthy or unworthy on the basis of the ability of nationalist movements to bring about greater gender equality. As already mentioned, gender equality is not, most of the time, the reason that leads women to engage in nationalist/revolutionary struggles. The point of contention is therefore not on whether women's renewed exclusion in the aftermath of nationalist/revolutionary waves has taken place or not, or if this was fair or not towards women. In a majority of cases women have suffered renewed marginalisation. What this thesis proposes is to abandon an understanding of gender equality as a necessary and primary reason for women to engage in national struggles, and/or as a by-product of the same.

Secondly, this study aims to challenge the view that nationalist/revolutionary movements are necessarily 'bad to women' because gender equality does not materialise at its outset.

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[94] Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; Pettman, *Worlding Women*.
[95] Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt*.
[96] Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*.
[97] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*.

Nationalist mobilisation continues to provide fertile ground for the birth of feminist movements.[98] By taking part in nationalist struggles women are increasingly politicised, they grow their experiences as activists, and become progressively more aware of their positions as gendered. In fact, as also recognised by O'Keefe 'feminist developments' are often fed by this very contribution women make to the struggle and their counter-intuitive subsequent marginalization.[99] This study, therefore, contends that gender identities are in continuous development, and therefore that feminist claims may develop at both times of women's engagement in nationalism - when women more likely expand their presence and roles to new areas - as well as during times of disengagement - when society pushes towards the return to the normal gender order and women face renewed marginalization.[100]

Only by observing women's engagement in activism over a long-time trajectory becomes in fact possible identifying how feminist identities emerge in times of struggle, and even though certain conditions do not materialise, how women continue to push for changes from within the margins. During the first decades of their existence, the Muslim Sisters have acquired awareness of their ability as women and political actors, establishing the basis for women's activism in the years to come. In the following four decades, and under a different set of relations between the Brotherhood movement and the Egyptian state, a new generation of women began in fact to advance claims for their greater participation on this very basis. Upon the Brotherhood's engagement in the political system, women turned into important assets for the movement as voters and recruiters of voters. The MB welcomed women's contributions once again because they boosted its legitimacy as a women-friendly movement, and provided a show off of Islamists' support. This, however, led women to realise their importance, leading them to make increasing attempts to expand their presence in the political spaces of the movement.

[98] Vickers, *Feminism and Nationalism*; O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*; Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*; Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*.
[99] O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*, ix.
[100] O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*; Vickers, *Feminism and Nationalism*; Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*; Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood.*

# Chapter 5 – Political Brotherhood, Strategic Sisterhood: searching for the origins of a moderate trend among women

## Introduction

A large portion of the academic literature sustains that male leadership's support for women is crucial to their ability to obtain greater access and political influence in male-dominated organizations.[1] This chapter covers the MB engagement with institutional politics since the 1980s, and the emergence of a younger and more moderate faction within the movement during the same period. It investigates the internal debates that the MB underwent as a consequence of the growing role played by the younger activists, these touching upon partitism, political pluralism, the role of religion in the movement, and women. The chapter demonstrates that such internal debates were crucial to the ideological reform of the MB's official position on the issue of women's political participation since the 1990s, and to the ability of the Sisters to play a greater political role that surpassed that of voters and recruiter of voters to include women's direct participation in institutional politics.

My argument, however, is in line with Clark and Schwedler,[2] who contended that women acquire growing roles in Islamist movements as a consequence of their agency. Therefore, a second section of the chapter explores how the Sisters took advantage of the internal debates taking place in the movement in the 1990s to expand their activism to new areas. As the chapter outlines, the presence of competing trends within the movement was reflected in the strategies adopted by women to grow their political role in the movement during this period. While a majority of women continued to appeal to conservative gender discourses to promote and justify their growing presence in the public sphere, an emerging group of younger Sisters appealed instead to the more progressive ideas. They, in fact, began to formulate claims for greater roles and participation in the political affairs of the movement on the basis of their rights to equal opportunities with their male members. Although by mid-2000s the old guard had largely marginalised the moderate trend in the movement, competing trends among both men and women activists survived, expanded in the informal activists circles of the MB movement, to re-emerge more powerfully after the 2011 uprisings.

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[1] Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals, *Gendered Political Opportunities?*; McCammon et al., *How Movements Win*.
[2] Clark and Schwedler, *Who Opened the Window?*

## 5.1 Mubarak's Presidency

Hosni Mubarak succeeded to Sadat only a week after this was assassinated by militant army officers. During his tenure, Sadat had increasingly marginalised the role of the military to favour instead that of the police. Amid growing militant opposition against him following the 1979 Camp David Accords, the army had then decided to 'return the favour' by facilitating Sadat's assassination by militant Islamists on October 6, 1981.[3] Upon coming into power, Mubarak's efforts were mainly directed at maintaining in place the regime structure he inherited. He continued to marginalise the role of an undependable military, supporting instead the growth of strong police state, together with that of the capitalist business elite that had established itself in the state sponsored National Democratic Party (NDP).[4] Mubarak, however, also differed from his predecessors in a number of ways. He was the first President who boasted no role in the 1952 Free Officers Revolution, and had little involvement in Egyptian political affairs before Sadat appointed him as his vice-president in 1975. Lacking a legacy similar to that of his predecessor, therefore, Mubarak attempted to boost his legitimacy by promoting limited liberalisation reforms and strong state institutions.

At first, Mubarak relaxed state repressive measures against the Egyptian syndicates and the professional associations, lifted restrictions on university student unions, and extended greater independence to the Judiciary, the press, and the media. Furthermore, he moved away from Sadat's one-party system, granting oppositional forces limited political participation. His liberalisation reforms, however, came with limits. During his presidency, Mubarak used the Party Committee - responsible to issue party licences - to limit the entrance of 'inconvenient' opposition forces in the political system and maintain the hegemony of the NDP. While Mubarak demonstrated to be tolerant of MB members entering parliament as individuals, he never allowed the MB to establish into a political party. A ban on religious parties, in fact, was maintained until Mubarak's ousting in 2011. Furthermore, Mubarak retained the 1981 emergency law issued by Sadat for its entire presidency, using it to significantly limit individual and collective political and social rights.

Throughout his tenure, Mubarak continued to rely on US and EU financial support, which became increasingly crucial to his ability to retain legitimacy before a mounting economic crisis. Since the 2000s, however, Western states made their support conditional on democratisation and neo-liberal economic reforms.[5] Mubarak succumbed to further political liberalisation, increasing

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[3] Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt* (London: Verso, 2012):173.
[4] Ibid., 219-220.
[5] Michelle Pace and Peter Seeberg, *The EU's Democratization Agenda in the Mediterranean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

state repression as a way to control the participation of opposition forces as a result. Mubarak's authoritarian measures heightened even further after the 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, which at that time was an undiscussed political power in the MENA region, as well as a major Egyptian donor. Since then, the necessity to control what seemed an ever-present, vaguely defined, and apparently borderless terrorist threat, allowed Mubarak to crash on political dissent indiscriminately and with impunity. Central to his ability to do so, was the State Security Investigation Service – *Amn al-Dawla* (SSIS) - controlled by the Ministry of Interior. This led to a mounting legitimacy crisis, and which Mubarak attempted to survive by heightening its use of repressive and authoritarian measures even further, until the January 25, 2011 uprisings.

### 5.1.2 Mubarak-MB Relationship

The relationship between Mubarak and the MB can be described as one of tolerance during the first half of his presidency (1981-1992) and as one of acute confrontation in the second half (1993-2011). Mubarak approached the MB in a similar way to which he approached other opposition groups. He allowed the MB to operate relatively freely within society until it did not represent a challenge to its own legitimacy. The Brotherhood made use of Mubarak's tolerance to expand both socially and politically. Denied of the possibility to legalise itself as an Islamic movement (*haraka islamiya*) or a political party (*hizb syasi*), the MB kept operating largely informally. To expand its role as an organization, the MB grew an extensive net of social services which increasingly tapped into the areas abandoned by the state as an effect of its decreasing social welfare role. In order to legitimize its political role in Egyptian society, the MB made use of the political liberalization enacted by the regime since the 1980s to expand as a civil and political force in professional associations and student unions. The support the MB enjoyed within these spaces greatly benefited its entrance in parliament since 1984, which it did by entering a system of alliance with other political parties.

In the 1980s, the entrance of the Brothers in institutional politics reflected the ability of the movement to strategically adapt to changes in the political system. Political participation, however, also required an ideological shift on the part of the MB towards the acceptance of *hizbiya*, literally, partitism. This shift was not uncontested. In the 1980s, a majority of the old MB leadership remained faithful to Al-Banna's views that a multi-party system created divisions in Egyptian society, therefore compromising the ability of the movement to grow a strong and united *ummah* that could lead to an Islamic revival. Also, the MB perceived parties as limited in scope when

compared to the comprehensive approach to society envisaged by the movement. In one of his earlier articulations, for example, al-Tilmisani, the third General Guide of the MB (1972-1986) after al-Hudaybi, criticised partitism on the basis that 'the manifestoes and policies of parties changed with the change of leaders and personalities, and were not related to the interests either of the nation or the *ummah*.'[6] Had the MB to enter politics, another major challenge for the movement would have been therefore that of reconciling its *da'wa* work with that of interest-based politics, as well as restructuring its chain of power and command on that line. Lastly, the movement needed to legitimise religiously its decision to engage politically a non-Islamic system.[7]

By 1983, however, the Brothers had come to the realization that establishing a political party represented the only viable solution for it to acquire a degree of legitimacy in the Egyptian political system.[8] In a controversial speech in 1983, al-Tilmisani endorsed the move, eventually managing to win the favour of a doubtful MB leadership. He managed to do so, by promising that the party would have remained faithful to the MB *da'wa* mission, and under the direct control of the MB leadership;[9] hence, the MB Guidance. In his initiative, al-Tilmisani enjoyed the support of a number of younger MB activists, convinced that political participation was the only course of action for the MB to survive in the Egyptian political system. These were the activists who joined the MB during the movement's expansion in university campuses in the 1970s, and the same that by the 1990s came to be known as the MB 'middle-generation' leaders, or the MB 'reformist trend' (*al-tayyar al-islami*).[10] These members held more moderate views and progressive ideas when compared to the MB old guard, and were responsible for several of the ideological revisions the movement underwent since the 1990s, including the MB position on women.

Before entering in the details of this latter debate, I provide a brief overview of the MB expansion in institutional politics since the 1980s. The growth of the MB as a mass-base socio-political movement during this period was largely the result of the efforts of the middle-generation activists, many of whom took leadership positions in these newly seized spaces. An overview of the expansion of the middle-generation activists in those venues provides a better idea of the ability of these members to promote their progressive ideas across the broader MB constituencies, including women.

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[6] Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Pursuit of Legitimacy*, 39.
[7] Schwedler noticed how the Jordanian IAF and the Yemeni Islah party underwent a similar process amid their own countries' political opening. See Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*.
[8] Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Pursuit of Legitimacy*, 39.
[9] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, 48-52.
[10] Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*.

### 5.1.3 The MB Struggle for Parliament

| The MB in parliament 1984-2010 | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Year** | | **Number of seats** |
| 1984 | MB (in alliance with al-Wafd) | 8 |
| 1987 | MB (in alliance with the socialist and liberal party) | 36 |
| 1990 | Boycott | - |
| 1995 | MB (as independents) | 1 |
| 2000 | MB (as independents) | 17 |
| 2005 | MB (as independents) | 88 |
| 2010 | MB (as independents) – Boycott | - |

**Table 1. A summary of the MB electoral gains from 1984 to 2010.**

The MB managed to enter parliament for the first time in 1984, by entering an alliance with the liberal al-Wafd Party. Then, the electoral law reserved access to parliament only to those parties that managed to obtain over 8 percent of the seats, while transferring to the NDP the votes of those who failed to meet such a threshold.[11] The MB alliance with al-Wafd proved successful, leading al-Wafd to gain 58 seats, 8 of which went to the MB, while no other party met the threshold. Still denied legal status as a party, the regime perceived the MB success as a threat to its legitimacy, leading Mubarak to declare the 1984 elections unconstitutional. The 1987 electoral law reserved 10 percent of the seats to individual candidates, redistributed the votes of those parties that failed to meet the 8 percent threshold proportionally among all those that instead met such criteria, and abolished the 30 seats women's quota. This time, the MB entered the elections in alliance with the Socialist Labour and the Liberal Party. The alliance won 56 seats, 36 of which went to the MB, making of the MB the single largest opposition block in parliament.[12] According to el-Ghobashy, the expansion of the MB support in the syndicates – led by the young MB activists in there - was crucial to secure the MB success in parliament that year.[13]

In parliament, the MB voiced its opposition against the reforms previously introduced to the Personal Status and Family Law (PSFL) by the former First Lady Jihan Sadat, and to advocate for a greater application of the Islamic *shari'a*. Also, MB members raised their concerns with regard to Egyptian educational standards, the shortage of housing, poor sewage and electric systems, Egypt's food self-sufficiency and its growing international debt, and the mass immigration

[11] Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Pursuit of Legitimacy*, 79.
[12] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, 47.
[13] Al-Ghobashy, *The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers*, 380.

of Russians to Israel. The movement also campaigned for those issues that touched its interest directly, such as the need to stimulate private investments, abolishing the emergency law, and restoring the autonomy of publishing houses and journals.[14]

Once again, the regime declared the 1987 elections unconstitutional, adopting further measures to undermine the participation of opposition parties since then. In occasion of the 1990 parliamentary elections, the law granted only to independent candidates the right to run for office. This manoeuvre aimed at restraining the ability of opposition groups to participate by way of increasing the cost of the electoral campaigns, facilitating instead that of NDP independent businessmen. Achieving an NDP majority in the 1990 was in fact crucial to the ability of Mubarak to secure his re-election to a third term in 1993. Mubarak's strategy proved successful. In 1990, opposition forces – including the MB – boycotted the elections in protest.[15] Since then, Mubarak's desire to keep the MB out of politics led the increasing interference of the regime in the electoral process, and to the use of authoritarian practices, such as pre-election violence, mass arrests, and intimidation, to refrain the political participation of oppositional forces.[16] Prior to the 1995 elections, for example, the Ministry of Interior arrests scores of MB members as a way to prevent their participation. In 1995, in fact, despite having listed over 100 candidates, the MB obtained only one seat in parliament, which was later revoked by the state.[17]

The situation changed slightly in the 2000s, when amid increasing international pressure Mubarak allowed once again judiciary supervision of the elections,[18] leading the MB to seize 17 seats. Greater judicial autonomy proved to the advantage of the MB also in 2005, when the movement seized 88 seats. The situation was however to reverse again in 2010, when in view of new presidential elections, together with Mubarak's desire to pass the reins of power to his son Gamal, Mubarak, strengthened once again its repressive measures against oppositional forces. That year, both the MB and al-Wafd abandoned the elections after the first round as a sign of protest against the regime's authoritarian and corrupted practices, leading to the overwhelming parliamentary victory of the NDP.[19]

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[14] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, 55.
[15] Ibid., 57.
[16] Hendrik Kraetzschmar and Francesco Cavatorta, 'Bullets over Ballots: Islamist Groups, the State and Electoral Violence in Egypt and Morocco,' *Democratization* 17, no. 2 (2010): 326-349.
[17] Joel Campagna, 'From Accommodation to Confrontation: The Muslim Brotherhood in the Mubarak Years,' *Journal of International Affairs* 50, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 278- 304.
[18] Mona el-Ghobashy, 'Egypt's Paradoxical Elections,' *Middle East Report* 238 (Spring 2006): 20-29.
[19] Omnia al-Desoukie and Tamim el-Ayan, 'Assessing Egypt's one party parliament: Part 1,' *Daily News Egypt*, January 12, 2011. Available at http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2011/01/12/assessing-egypts-one-party-parliament-part-1/

### 5.1.4 The MB in the Professional Syndicates

An extensive literature on the roles and performance of the MB in the Egyptian syndicates already exists.[20] Therefore, this topic will not be treated at length herein. What it is important to mention is that the advance of the MB in the Egyptian syndicates throughout the 1980s and 1990s, was crucial to its ability to expand as a socio-political movement and enter institutional politics. Another important fact to remember is that MB influence in these spaces grew as a result of the activism of the MB middle-generation activists, who made use of the syndicates to run ambitious socio-political projects directed at benefiting the Egyptian middle-classes. Women were a large number of those members who took part in the activities of the MB in the syndicates, and who also benefited from their services. Egyptian universities demanded for all of their graduates to be registered with their respective professional associations upon the completion of their studies and, by the 1990s, women were a large majority of university students. The first Sister who broke the MB taboo and contested elections, in fact, did it in the occasion of the 1992 syndicates' elections.[21] The growth of political influence and support of the MB in the Egyptian syndicates led Mubarak to reintroduce state control over the syndicates' elections from 1993. By 1995, however, the MB had already emerged as a prominent force in many of the most important professional association in Egypt, including these of the doctors, engineers, pharmacists, scientists, and lawyers. Together, these counted over 3.5 million members.[22]

### 5.1.5 The MB in the Universities

The student movement has always been a powerful mobilising force in Egypt, particularly since Nasser made higher education free, leading to a higher numbers of enrolments. To provide an idea of the extent of the mobilising power of the Egyptian student movement in the 1990s, it is enough to know that the number of urban Egyptians between 15 and 24 years old in that decade reached over 4.180.000 million, 2.198.000 of which were males and 1.982.000 females.[23] By

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[20] For the MB performance in the Egyptian Syndicates see Ninette Fahmy, 'The Performance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian Syndicates: An Alternative Formula for Reform?' *Middle East Journal* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 551-562; and Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, chapter 8.
[21] El-Ghobashy, *The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers*, 382.
[22] Fahmy, *The Performance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian Syndicates*, 552.
[23] UN Department of International Economic and Social Affairs Statistical Office, *UN Demographic Yearbook 1990*, Issue 42 (New York: UN Department of International Economic and Social Affairs Statistical Office, 1992): 224.

adding the students living in the countryside, the number surpassed 12 million.[24] For the MB, exerting its influence over the student movement and controlling its mobilization was therefore crucial. As also recognised by Abdelrahman, a previous MB Student Union (SU) leader at Cairo University, recruiting students into the movement had always been a central MB concern. As he stated:

> 'Schools and colleges have always been favourite areas of recruitment for the MB. When individuals are younger, like in age schools, it is easier to instil in them religious piety and values. When the individual is in college, which is the moment when he/she starts developing his/her own ideas about the world, the MB can offer a sense of participation in the community and a complete worldview'.[25]

As part of his attempt to befriend the student movement, Mubarak had granted independent authority to Student Unions (SUs) - present in every college and university – to the Egyptian Student Union (ESU) – one single office co-ordinating the SUs of all universities and colleges in the country – and to the Teachers' Faculty Clubs (TFCs) – present in all campuses. The MB, for his part, made use of these spaces to compete with the regime and win the hearts and minds of Egyptians' new generations. By 1989, the MB had managed to control a number of the most important SUs in the country, including those of Cairo, Alexandria, and al-Azhar.[26] It also had expanded its influence to the countryside to include the Zagazig and al-Mansoura Universities. In addition, the MB made inroads into the TFC in Asyut, rising for the first time as a competitor to *al-Jama'a al-Islamia* in Upper Egypt.[27] The power and control of the MB over universities grew relatively unchallenged until 1995, when as part of Mubarak's tightening grip on the movement, the Egyptian government re-established outmost control over the elections in the SUs, ESU, and TFCs.[28]

The strategy adopted by the movement to recruit university students was similar to that the MB espoused in Egyptian society and the syndicates: identifying material, spiritual, and political needs, and addressing those needs in the most efficient way possible. Among the range of popular services provided to students, for example, were copies of past exams, revision manuals, academic books, tuition classes, scientific and cultural exhibitions, technical equipment, health assistance,

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[24] *Population Trends Egypt* (USA: US Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, Population Division, International Programs Center, PPT/92-9, 1994). Available at https://www.census.gov/population/international/files/ppt/Egypt94.pdf

[25] Abdelrahman, interview by author, Cairo, Egypt, June 12, 2014 [Henceforth: Abdelrahman, interview].

[26] Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Pursuit of Legitimacy*, 122.

[27] Ibid., 123.

[28] Ibid., 155.

transportation, cheap students' accommodation for both genders, scholarships, spiritual and re-creational activities. At times these initiatives assumed a political tone, whereby the MB students discussed issues related to the Palestinian cause, the Gulf War, and a perceived global threat to Islam.[29] In addition, students took active part in monitoring these activities through the use of questionnaires the MB submitted regularly to students. Student's feed-back served to both improving the services provided, and gauging students' political support for the MB in times of SUs and parliamentary elections.[30] Middle-generation leaders were the most active also in university campuses; it was largely their responsibility to coordinate broader initiatives between the MB, the syndicates, and universities.[31]

## 5.2 Tracing the Effect of the Middle-Generation Leaders on Women

As widely recognised across the political science literature, Islamist movements that chose to engage with institutional politics ended up paying greater attention 'to the role [that] women could play in furthering their political goals and agenda'.[32] This is an expected consequence considering that women represented an additional resource to be employed in 'crucial political tasks such as election campaigning and voting'.[33] Blaydes and el-Tarouty's study corroborates such statement in the case of the Egyptian MB, pointing to the crucial role played by women in occasion of the 2005 parliamentary elections, when the MB secured 88 seats in parliament. According to the scholars, women's presences at polling stations 'helped to create common knowledge about the popularity of Islamist candidates in a particular district,' reduced 'the likelihood and effectiveness of government repression,' and functioned 'as a powerful and politically motivating symbol for both male and female voters […] inclined toward the Muslim Brotherhood'.[34] The increasing political role played by the Sisterhood since the 1990s, however, was not the unique result of the MB's strategic use of women. It was also the direct outcome of the middle-generation leaders' efforts to promote greater democratic and inclusive principles, and of women's desires to expand their presence, activism, and roles to new venues.

[29] Abdelrahman, interview.
[30] Nour, interview.
[31] Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, 178.
[32] Abdellatif and Ottaway, *Women in Islamist Movements*, 5.
[33] Ibid., 5.
[34] Blaydes and el-Tarouty, *Women's Electoral Participation in Egypt*, 365.

### 5.2.1 The Middle-Generation *Ikhwan* and the call for MB Reforms

Since the 1980s, and under the blessing of al-Tilmisani, a young generation of MB members made its inroad into Egyptian professional associations. By supporting a series of ambitious programmes previously unseen within these institutions, the young activists grew as a powerful and dynamic civil force in Egyptian society throughout the 1990s. As a result of their activism, the young *Ikhwan* ended up engaging with a large variety of actors outside the Islamic movement, becoming accountable to government officials, representatives of political parties, and civil society's activists, both men and women, with whom they did not necessarily share a similar ideology and worldview. As recognised by Wickham, the socialization process underwent by the young *Ikhwan* in this period deeply 'transformed their worldviews, values and beliefs'.[35]

As the political strength and confidence of the young members grew, so did their desire for a greater role within the MB organization. Towards this end, the middle-generation began to raise their demands for greater power-sharing with elder leaders, and for reforming the internal bylaws of the movement along the line of democratic principles and alternation of power. In addition, the middle-generation demanded more thorough ideological reforms. The inability of the MB to enter compromises with political actors of different ideological persuasion, together with their refusal to support the political participation of women and the right of non-Muslims to the presidency of the state, created frictions between the young *Ikhwan* and a majority of civil society's forces with which they operated.[36] The *Ikhwan*, therefore, began to push for MB reforms on those issues that they considered necessary for the movement to sustain its expansion and appeal among Egyptian society.

The MB old guard was not ready to acquiescence to the demands of the middle-generation leaders, a situation which inevitably led to the rising of frictions between the two. Contrary to the middle-generation leaders who entered politics in a time of limited liberalization, the old guard members developed their activism during the repressive years of the 1950s and 1960s, and under the influence of more conservative ideologies. This made them sceptics of the regime, and exclusionary towards other Egyptian political forces. Also, the MB old guard claimed their right to leadership in the MB organization in the name of the sacrifices they had made for the movement in the past, a sentiment which inevitably led the old guard to monopolize MB leadership offices, and to marginalize the middle-generation leaders.

The conflict between old and young leaders was not only ideological, but expanded to strategic considerations. After the death of al-Tilmisani (1986), the initiative to establish a political

[35] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, 59.
[36] Ibid.

party was progressively abandoned by the old guard. The new wave of regime repression began in the 1990s had led the old leaders to retrench into a practice of self-restraint and accommodation towards the regime, rather than confrontation. The middle-generation leaders, instead, held different views, and considered repression a direct consequence of the MB ambiguous status in the Egyptian political system. According to the young *Ikhwan*, establishing a political party separate from the MB and free from the influence of the MB religious *da'wa* mission was necessary to resolve the MB ambiguous position in the political system and put an end to MB repression. In 1996, the dispute led to a rift within the MB movement and to the departure of a small number of the middle-generation leaders for establishing their own party, al-Wasat.[37] By then, however, 'the ideas expressed by the Wasat party leaders had also become part of the overarching vision of the Brotherhood,'[38] a testified by some reforms introduced by the movement in 1994, and which benefited women directly in terms of their political participation.

### 5.2.2 Tracing the Evolution of the MB's Official Position on Women: from the 1994 position paper to the 2007 party platform

In 1994 the MB issued a position paper titled 'The Muslim Woman in Muslim Society, Consultation and Party Pluralism' (*al-Mar'a al-Muslima fi al-Mujtama' al-Muslim, al-Shura wa Ta'adud al-Ahzab*). While still emphasising women's motherhood roles, the paper limited the applicability of the principle of *qawama* – this sanctioning male guardianship over women - to the private sphere of the family.[39] Until before then, the MB interpreted *qawama* as authorizing men's leadership over women in both the private and the public spheres of society. As a consequence of such interpretation, women's political participation was denied because it meant that women who held political offices would have ruled over men in matters of political affairs, and therefore transgressed *qawama*. Since the mid-1990s, however, the principle went through profound revisions, leading exponential figures such as the MB Mufti al-Qaradawi to argue that *qawama* only applied to the private sphere of the family.[40]

This move symbolised the MB's endorsement of women's political participation. The 1994 position paper, in fact, not only asserted the right of women to vote and run as candidates in elections, but also made it a duty of the movement to involve women in political affairs, to raise awareness among its female members with regard to their political rights, and encourage women to

[37] Wickham, *The Path to Moderation*, 205-228.
[38] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, 92.
[39] Ibid., 70.
[40] Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt*, 115.

seek political office, to the exclusion of that of the head of state.[41] Although such views are not yet homogenous across the MB movement, a majority of its male and female members today support this vision.[42]

The 1994 paper represented a breakthrough in the MB's ideological position on women. While it did not bring significant change on matter of women's status within the family, it certainly did with regard to women's political role. Also, its significance rested in that it was the first official MB statement on women since decades,[43] this in itself an indication that by the 1990s the centrality of women to the MB movement's operations could no longer be ignored, as neither could the internal calls for reforms raised by its middle-generation members. As pointed out by Wickham, in fact, the 1994 paper followed animated discussions between the old and young *Ikhwan*.[44] As recounted by the scholar, one of the most difficult issues for the young members to tackle was the old guard's belief that women were not 'mentally fit' for political leadership, and their fears that were women to begin engaging in elections, their families and homes would have suffered from their absence. It was only after the old leaders acknowledged that 'candidates in most elected councils must fulfil a minimum age requirement, which is typically around forty, at which time most women have already completed the task of raising children,' that they agreed to revise their position on the matter.[45]

In addition, the 1994 paper represented also a necessity of the MB to justify before its electorate a practice which had already established. By then, in fact, women had grown increasingly defiant of the gender rules in place in the movement, and had taken actions that challenged them. As noted by el-Ghobashy, '[t]he position paper followed on the hills of actual practice,' and was promoted by the MB subsequent to 'a little reported incident [whereby] the female doctor, Wafaa' Ramadan, ran for elections to the medical associations board on the *Ikhwan*'s slate in 1992.'[46] To the event, the old guard reacted with widespread criticism, leading to the emergence of internal debates on the issue within the movement and, eventually, the 1994 paper.[47] Few years later another Sister, Jihan al-Halafawy - the wife of a prominent MB leader in Alexandria - took advantage of the same to nominate herself as candidate for the 1995 parliamentary elections. As noted by el-Ghobashy, however, by then '[s]easoned *Ikhwan* watchers

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[41] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 8.
[42] This point was highlighted in several interviews with the Sisterhood, and particularly in the interviews with Nadia, Nour, Maha, and Nadia.
[43] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 8.
[44] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, 70.
[45] Ibid.
[46] El-Ghobashy, *The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers*, 382.
[47] Ibid.

were not surprised by al-Halafawy's candidacy, belonging as she does to the generation of middle-aged activists changing the face of the organization'.[48]

By the mid-1990s, therefore, the two MB factions had eventually reached a compromise, albeit uncomfortable. The major ideological differences between the two MB factions remained in fact in place, and were clearly visible in the contradictory women's roles promoted by the same 1994 paper. While the paper supported women greater political role on the one hand, it also continued to emphasise women's duties as mothers and wives on the other, praising women's qualities such as piety and modesty.[49] The seemingly contradictory women's roles promoted by the MB then remained in place until the 2011 uprisings. Similar tensions also emerged in the MB official documents released in occasion of the MB Initiative for Political Reform in 2004, the 2005 elections, as well as the 2007 MB party platform.[50] The 2007 party platform is of particular importance. This followed the success of the movement in the 2005 elections, and served to reassure Egyptian society of the MB's moderate thought in the face of mounting movement repression. The document was the first serious attempt by the MB to make public its position on controversial issues such as the role of religion in the state, and how this related to fundamental civil liberties, including those of women. As it emerged, the party platform envisaged the establishment of a council of religious scholars whose opinions on state legislations were to be considered binding and continued to deny the right of women and non-Muslims to the presidency of the state.[51]

Some of the major controversies between the reformist and conservative wings in the MB remained therefore unresolved, progressively distancing the two on core issues, including women. As highlighted by Abdellatif, in fact, on the occasion of the 2007 party platform the '[m]embers of the Guidance Bureau […] did not speak in one voice.' While the old guard, including Mahmoud Ezzat, Mohammad Morsi, and Mohammad Habib 'based their exclusion of women from the post on a religious choice […] and social reality', more progressive leaders such as Abd el-Moneim Abd el-Futuh, Gamal Heshmat, and Essam el-Erayan, took challenge with such decision, contending that it 'did not take into consideration the reality and context of contemporary Egypt and that it violated the principle of a civilian state, to which the Brotherhood said it was committed'.[52] Eventually, the rift led the middle-generation leaders to make their refusal of the 2007 party

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[48] Ibid., 383.
[49] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, 70.
[50] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 9.
[51] Nathan J. Brown and Amr Hamzawy, 'The Draft Party Platform of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* 89 (2008). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp89_muslim_brothers_final.pdf
[52] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 9.

platform public, accusing the old leaders of having written the document without consulting all of the MB members.[53]

Amid the debates caused by the 2007 party platform, some younger Sisters also took the opportunity to raise their discontent with the MB official position towards women. In a much controversial on-line letter addressed to the MB General Guide Mohammed Akef (2004-2010), Rasha Ahmad - a 35 years old Sister holding a teaching position at the Faculty of Medicine - complained of the exclusion of women from the MB political offices and protested the lack of a direct channel of communication between women and the MB leadership. The Sister also criticised the MB's internal procedures for electing its General Guide - a right reserved to the twelve members of the Guidance Bureau - and advocated for the right of women to take part to the MB internal elections. In addition, Ahmad criticised the MB educational curricula for women, stating that these promoted an old-fashion image of women as exclusively concerned with house duties, childrearing, and cooking. As she contended, women played a much greater political role than what the movement recognised, and demanded the MB to revise its position on women so to reflect the true extent of women's social and political contributions to the movement, as well as Egyptian society at large.[54]

### 5.2.3 Coexisting Moderate and Conservative Trends among Women

Under increasing pressures, the old guard felt eventually compelled to declare the 2007 party platform provisional. By then, however, the MB old leaders had effectively marginalized the MB moderates. Such marginalization extended to a large portion of the movement's rank-and-files, who continued to be excluded from the decision-making processes of the MB. The marginalization of the middle-generation leaders affected also the ability of the more progressive Sisters to expand their influence in the MB movement. When the MB took the opportunity of the further wave of political liberalisation of the mid-2000s to engage parliament, in fact, those Sisters who enjoyed greater political visibility displayed a conservative and salafi-leaning character typical of the MB old guard. Moderate views among the Sisters, however, survived, and could be found in the informal activist circles of the MB movement, out of the strict control of its leadership. The next section looks at four different venues object of MB activism during the Mubarak period -

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[53] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, 5.

[54] 'Sisters seek to join the office of the Guidance Bureau and participate in electing the General Guide: The First Women's Protest in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Movement', [*Ikhwanyat yatlubna al-indimam li-maktab al-irshad wa al-musharaka fi ikhtiar al-murshid: awal haraka nisa'ya dakhil jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin al-Masria*], *Al-Arabiya*, November 24, 2007. Available at http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/12/17/43077.html

parliamentary elections, Islamic institutions, university campuses, and women informal gatherings - with the purpose of exposing competing moderate and conservative trends among the female activists who populated such spaces.

## 5.3 Conservative Sisters in Conservatives' Spaces

This section investigates the activism of those Sisters who acquired greater visibility in institutional politics in Egypt from the mid-2000s. The contention is that being the old guard in full control of the leadership offices of the movement by then, those women who enjoyed the backing of the MB for greater political participation and visibility were likely to share the conservative and salafi-leaning character typical of the MB old guard and its electorate. Also, this section looks at the activism of the Sisters in some of the Islamic institutions affiliated to the MB movement, where women expanded their presence and influence by stressing gender difference and the need to protect the institution of the family from a growing 'imperialist threat'.

### 5.3.1 The Sisters in Institutional Politics since the mid-2000s

In 2005, the year in which the MB gained 88 parliamentary seats, the movement nominated only one woman for the elections, Makarim al-Dairy, a number that the at-the-time MB deputy leader Mohammad Habib justified on the basis of security concerns.[55] Al-Dairy belonged to the more conservative faction of the MB. She was born in 1950, mother of five children, and professor of Islamic literature at al-Azhar University. She was also the widow of Ibrahim Sharaf, the ex-MB Secretary General under al-Tilmisani. During her election campaign, al-Dairy refrained from taking part in the wider debates taking place in the MB movement concerning women, limiting herself to mention that the entrance of women to the Guidance Bureau strongly depended on the establishment of the regime's peaceful relationship with the movement, and that women's absence did not diminish their role.[56] Supported by several men and women, al-Dairy competed against a prominent NDP businessman - Moustafa el-Sellab - in the Cairo district of Madinat Nasr. She fared well, but eventually lost the elections allegedly due to government's rigging.

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[55] Nadia Abou el-Magd, 'Muslim Brotherhood Woman seek Egypt Seat,' *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2005. Available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/06/AR2005110600774_pf.html

[56] 'Makarim al-Dairy for Sharq al-Awsat' [*Makarim el-Dairy li al-Sharq al-Awsat*], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 22, 2005. Available at http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=330031&issueno=9828#.V73_zPkrLct

The MB increased the participation of its female candidates in the occasion of the 2010 elections. In 2009, the Egyptian state reintroduced a female-quota system after this had been previously removed in 1986. The National Council for Women (NCW) presided by then by Suzanne Mubarak, together with a large part of the secular Egyptian feminist movement, had long lobbied for the introduction of a mandatory party-list women's quota.[57] The NDP, however, approved a quota which simply reserved 64 seats to women, an indication that it expected to avail of the quota to favour the entrance in parliament of NDP female candidates.[58] As mentioned before, in 2010 obtaining an NDP parliamentary majority was deemed crucial to Mubarak to guarantee the transfer of the presidency to his son Gamal in 2011 and, as expected, the NDP obtained over 92 percent of parliamentary seats. Having the MB boycotted the elections after the first round of voting in protest to regime's harassment and repression, none of the Sisters eventually managed to obtain a seat in parliament. Looking at the characteristics of those women who contested the 2010 elections, is however important to understand how the shifting power of the moderate/conservative factions in the movement influenced the fate of those Sisters who sought political participation.

As contended by Shitrit, the MB's show of support for its female candidates represented a strategic response of the movement intended to avail of the female quota to maximise its presence in parliament.[59] Despite opposing the quota as a corrupted system of foreign import, the MB listed nine candidates under the female-quota seats. These were Manal Abu al-Hassan (Cairo), Susan Saad Zaghlul (Suez), Huda Gonia (Qalyubya), Siham al-Gamal (Daqahlyya-Mansoura), Bushra al-Samny (Alexandria), Maysa al-Guhary (Daqahlyya-Sharbeen), Reeda Abdullah (Sharqyya), Wafaa Mashour (Asyut), and Manal Ismail (Behira).[60] The MB also engaged in a sustained media campaign in support of the Sisters. During such campaign, the MB framed Muslim Sisterhood's

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[57] Mariz Tadros, 'Quotas: A Highway to Power in Egypt… But for Which Women?' *IDS Bulletin* 41, no. 5 (2010): 89-99.

[58] As noted by Aili Mari Tripp, authoritarian regimes tend to prefer reserved seats over mandatory party-candidate quotas, because under a reserved seats system is easier to forge results. See Aili Mari Tripp, *Women and Power in Post-conflict Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[59] Lihi Ben Shitrit, 'Authenticating Representation: Women's Quotas and Islamist Parties,' *Politics & Gender* 12, no. 4 (December 2016): 781-806.

[60] The number of Muslim Sisterhood candidates who took part in the 2010 elections remains contested. While Tadros contends that the MB fielded only 3 female candidates (al-Hassan, Ismail, and al-Samny), Shitrit sets the number at 13, but does not provide any of the names of the women. However, in 2010 the MB conducted an extensive media campaign to sponsor its female candidates. The list of names presented herein follows an extensive online research, and include all those Sisters whose participation could be verified by the existence of online and published material sponsored by the MB, and listing the Sisters as candidates for the 2010 elections. See Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt*, 130; Shitrit, *Authenticating Representation*, 795.

participation as an Islamic duty, encouraging its electorate to vote the Sisters to counter the possible takeover of 'corrupted' secular women (NDP candidates) in the Egyptian parliament.[61]

By looking at the districts contested by the MB female candidates it is possible to infer that the majority of the women belonged to more conservative MB constituencies, those in the rural areas. These were also the areas of origin of a majority of MB old guard leaders, and those where salafi-leaning ideologies – envisioning more conservative women's roles - enjoyed the largest appeal. [62] It is in fact not by chance that most of the women candidates exposed a rather pious character, and promoted a conservative gender discourse. All the women were married and had children (nearly all of them had four), a requirement dear to the old guard because it promoted the ideal MB model of a pious and devoted mother. Also, all of the women wore a more conservative style of veiling, the *khimar*, promoting feminine traits of piety and modesty. Most women held diplomas in Islamic studies form al-Azhar University, some boasted a long legacy of activism in the International Islamic Council for Woman and Child (IICWC),[63] and all of them promoted the implementation of *shari'a* and the necessity to amend the PSFL on the basis of Islamic principles as part of their electoral programme. Most importantly, these women were selected to contest the elections rather than having named themselves for the role, and probably by the very same old guard members in concert with their pious constituencies. Nadia, a prominent Muslim Sisterhood cadre who did not run for election herself but who was closely involved in the election campaign of both al-Dairy and al-Hassan, pointed to this very fact. As she stated while discussing of the Sisters and political participation:

> 'If the group didn't believe that women were capable of contesting the elections *they wouldn't have selected them*. We don't promote women to places that are women-only concerns, women contribute to everything in the movement, and their work is absolute. The group attributes to members roles in the organization not on the basis of whether they are men or women, but on their ability to perform such a role and assume responsibility for it'.[64]

The MB does not lack powerful female candidates, influential in their own local communities. The decision of the old guard to extend political support to women who were relatively older, who boasted a considerable legacy in *da'wa* activism, and who conformed to the MB standard of pious and modest mothers, reflects MB old guard's concerns to maintain the support of its conservative electorate, and maximise women's chances to succeed. This situation stands in stark contrast with the previous candidature of Ramadan and al-Halafawy, who proposed

[61] Shitrit, *Authenticating Representation*.
[62] Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, 32-34.
[63] More on the Council will be said in the next section.
[64] Nadia, interview by author, Cairo, 2014 [Henceforth: Nadia, interview]

themselves for the post while enjoying the backing of the more moderate middle-generation *Ikhwan* leaders, and that of the Egyptian urban middle-classes.

The fact that these women were outwardly conservatives is not necessarily an indication of their submissive status within the movement, or lack of power. Rather, all of them led important professional careers, and enjoyed considerable power and influence in their local communities. What is suggested herein is that, similarly to when moderate women took advantage of the powerful positon of the middle-generation leaders to carve a growing political role for themselves in the 1990s, the consolidated hegemony of the old guard in the MB organization by the mid-2000s worked to the advantage of those Sisters who sought political empowerment by appealing to ideal motherhood roles, and more conservative gender discourses.

### 5.3.2 Sisterhood Activism in Islamic Institutions

Egypt was one of the earliest signatories of international human rights treaties in the region, including those dealing specifically with the rights of women. Nevertheless, it always maintained reservations when these served to preserve the status quo of the PSFL dear to the conservative majority of Egyptian society.[65] As noted by Zuhur, under Mubarak the Egyptian state 'advocate[d] a moderate elitist form of feminism which it perceive[d] to be helpful to the development process but [did] not necessarily want to introduce any disruptive social change regarding gender roles or women's status'.[66] In 2000, however, and under the lead of Susanne Mubarak and the National Council of Women, Egypt amended the PSFL to grant women in *urfi* marriages[67] the right to file a divorce (art. 17) and women in registered marriages the right to no-fault divorce, also known as *khul'* (art. 20). Article 20 'was seen as a revolutionary achievement, granting women irrevocable judicial separation without the need to justify their reasons, whether or not the husband agrees, and maintaining the financial obligations he has for the children'.[68] Other reforms concerned lifting the ban preventing female judges to enter the Supreme Judicial Council,

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[65] For a detailed discussion on women's rights reforms under Mubarak see Jasmine Moussa, *Competing Fundamentalism and Egyptian Women's Family Rights*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
[66] Sherifa Zuhur, 'The Mixed Impact of Feminist Struggles in Egypt during the 1990s,' *Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal* 5, no. 1 (March 2001): 85.
[67] *Urfi* marriages are customary marriages which are not supervised by a state representative, and lack state registration. Egyptian law recognises *urfi* marriages, but grants them a status inferior to that of registered marriages. In case of divorce in *urfi* marriages, women lack the same legal protection granted to women who entered traditional official marriages registered with the state. For a detailed discussion of *urfi* marriages in the MENA see Frances S. Hasso, *Consuming Desires. Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011).
[68] Claudia Ruta, *Gender Politics in Transition. Women's Political Rights in Egypt after the January 25 Revolution,* (PhD Thesis, American University in Cairo, February 2012): 65.

amending the nationality law in favour of women married to non-nationals, criminalizing the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) under the new Child Law, raising the minimum marriage age for boys and girls, and granting mothers longer custody of their children in case of divorce.[69] These reforms, posed a great challenge to the Islamists conservative gender discourse.

A group of Sisters took advantage of the developing debate on women's rights in Egypt to promote themselves as defenders of the Islamic family, and acquire a growing public role in both national and international arenas. Many pledged their commitment to the cause following their participation in the International Conference for Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994, and which objective was that of promoting reproductive and sexual health policies in Egyptian society.[70] In that occasion, the Sisters sided with the Brothers and al-Azhar Islamic in opposition to the ICPD, and to facilitate women's continuous involvement in such issues, al-Azhar instituted the International Islamic Council for Women and Children (IICWC) under the International Islamic Council for Da'wa and Relief (IICDR),[71] this a body comprising over a hundred Islamic institutions promoting Islam around the world.[72]

Throughout the years the Sisters consolidated their presence in the IICWC, from which they continued 'to present the Muslim perspective on proposed agendas and campaigning against the use of international women's treaties as the basis for reforming national family legislation in Egypt and other Arab countries'.[73] In 2003, the IICWC managed also to obtain consultative status at the UN, allowing the Sisterhood to make their voices heard at all major international initiatives discussing the future of women's rights in Egypt, and the region.[74] During that period, four Sisters rose to prominence for their roles in the IICWC: Kamilia Hilmi, Manal Abu al-Hassan, Makarim al-Dairy, and Hoda Abd el-Moniem. Together with Islamic scholars such as Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, Mohammed Imara al-Awa, and Ahmed al-Assal, these women drafted several documents, such as the 'Charter of the Family in Islam' (2008) (*Myithaq al-Usrat fi al-Islam*), and the Charter of the Child in Islam (1989) (*Myithaq al-Tifl fi al-Islam*),[75] presenting an Islamic response to the pressure exercised over Egypt to conform to international conventions on women, children, and the family.

On a hypothetical ideological spectrum measuring individuals' position on matters related to women's roles in the family and women's political participation, and with the right side being

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[69] Ibid., 66.
[70] 'Egyptian Woman, Dr. Kamilia Hilmy', [*Imra'h Masria, D. Kamilia Hilmy]*, Misri25channel, YouTube, September 22, 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lypumz2uMU
[71] Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt*, 124.
[72] For the IICDR webpage see http://www.iicdr.org/iicdr.sharepoint.com/Pages/default.html
[73] Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt*, 125.
[74] Ibid., 124.
[75] For a review of the work published by the IICWC see http://iicwc.org/lagna_I0I/catig/products/

conservative and the left side being progressive, all the above mentioned Sisters would stand on its very far right with regard to the role of women in the Egyptian family, and on the left with regard to women's political participation. Nevertheless, whether it was politics or *da'wa* to be the best venue to direct their efforts remained a personal choice of the women. For example, Manal Abu al-Hassan and Makarim al-Dairy both contested elections in 2010 and 2005 respectively, and Hoda played a crucial role in their campaign. However, when offered a high ranking political position post the 2011 uprisings, Hilmi refused privileging her commitment towards *da'wa* activities, and stating that 'the Brotherhood is responsible for the politics'.[76] The fact that all of the Sisters promoted however a conservative gender discourse, lends credit to the argument that some of the women employed gender difference as a way to political empowerment. Below, I look at the case of Kamilia Hilmy, to emphasise such a practice among the Sisters.

### 5.3.3 Defending *Qawama* as a way to Political Empowerment

Herein I briefly review one of Kamilia Hilmi's interviews with the MB-sponsored TV programme *Imr'a Masria* (Egyptian Woman).[77] The objective is that to provide an overview of the gender discourse popular among a more conservative section of the Sisterhood, and how some women managed to gain greater public visibility by embracing and defending such discourses. Hilmi had chaired the IICWC since 1987, and was one of the most active Sisters advocating for the adoption of Islamic principles in all matters concerning women, children, and the family in Egypt. Hilmi was also one of the most vocal defenders of the principle of *qawama* in both the private and public sphere of women's lives. Exposing her views is therefore important because they stand in stark contrast with those of a growing number of a younger generation of Sisters who, albeit also conforming to the principle of *qawama*, advocates for greater equal political roles and opportunities for women in the MB. It is also important because Hilmi was the only woman that the MB considered appointing to the FJP Executive Bureau in 2011, this a further indication that the MB old guard continued to hold on to a conservative gender vision even amid revolutionary change.

In the interview, Hilmi stated that she had been involved in activism since the time of the ICPD, when she realised that the Egyptian family, its position within society, the education of children, and Islamic values, had fell under the increasing threat of foreign powers. In her view,

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[76] 'Sister Kamilia: my work with the Brotherhood is my way to paradise' *[Al-Ikhwat Kamilia: 'amaly ma' al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin saykun tariqy li al-Janna] Egypty*, October 4, 2011. Available at http://goo.gl/ETVkaV

[77] 'Egyptian Woman: Dr. Kamilia Hilmy' *[Imr'a Masria, D. Kamilia Hilmy] Misri25channel*, YouTube, September 22, 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lypumz2uMU

international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), posed a major danger to the Egyptian family because it aimed at eradicating all those differences between men and women's roles crucial to the growth and development of healthy families and societies. In addition, Hilmi described the CEDAW as being offensive towards a majority of Egyptians who since the agreement was ratified by Egypt in 1981 continued to live according to their culture and tradition, and that for that reason were considered as backward, or accused of supporting discriminatory practices towards women. Finally, according to Hilmi, the CEDAW attacked the principle of *qawama* to its very core, and women had to hold to that principle to preserve the balance of the family, and that of society. As she stated:

> 'The content of the agreement and its definition of the word 'discrimination' does not allow for any difference between men and women's roles […] in fact, the UN considers any difference between the two as a form of [...] 'gender violence' […] and this is why they consider our laws discriminatory. If you ask them why it is discriminatory, they'd say that it is because we support women's obedience towards their husbands […] "*If he orders her she shall obey*" [citing a Quranic verse]. In our laws this is the core principle that maintains the family balance. If the wife does not obey her husband, there will be no *qawama* in the family… and *a boat with two captains will sink.*'

As she continues in her speech, Hilmi frames the CEDAW as part of a broader plan of foreign countries to weaken Muslim societies. In her views, women were the major transmitters of Islamic values, the same that were necessary to bring about an Islamic renaissance, and nurture the resistance against foreign imperialism. By attempting to free women from their role within the family, therefore, the CEDAW aimed at the failure of the very same Islamic project. As she stated:

> 'They [International community] understood that in the doctrine of Islam *jihad* is what allows Muslims to resist [foreign domination][78]…but who transmits religious values? They realised that the family is the artery through which religion is transmitted to the new generations. The mother is the first element of this artery… and this is why they want to interrupt this process by freeing women from their family duties.'

Throughout the rest of her discussion, Hilmi engaged in a similar reasoning linking the rest of law reforms underwent by Egypt as also part of the broader conspiracy aimed at weakening the family and the Islamic nation. For example, Hilmi criticised the law that increased the marriage age

[78] The Brothers and the Sisters understand *jihad* as 'resistance against all what is evil.' *Jihad* is exercised in resistance to both 'external' enemies, and 'internal' (personal) temptations. External *jihad* consists of the practice of resisting domination from external enemies/powers, like for example colonial powers. Internal *jihad* is the practice of resisting the 'temptation to act illicitly and/or immorally', like for example resisting the temptation to leave by what are considered 'easier' and 'more superfluous' non Islamic/occidental values and morals. Nour, interview(a).

of boys and girls to eighteen, as well as those promoting sexual health and family planning, for attempting to delay the formation of families and therefore the renaissance of an Islamic *ummah*. Hilmi also sided with men in attacking those laws granting women greater rights in case of marriage and divorce. For example, Hilmi rejected the notion of marital rape stating that within the framework of marriage sexual intercourse was a man's right. She also condemned the law extending women's rights to custody of their children in case of divorce, claiming that such law negatively affected men's decisions to marry. Finally, she criticised no-fault divorce to be to the exclusive benefit to wealthy women who did not necessitate material support for their living.[79]

Up to the uprisings, therefore, the national struggle against foreign imperialism - and authoritarianism as a phenomenon associated with it - continued to provide the basis for the activism of large part of the Sisters, and women's motherhood role provided the foundation over which a large majority of them established and justified their political, social, and religious engagement.

## 5.4 Locating Progressive Gender Worldviews among the Sisters

One contention of this study is that the Sisters were also influenced by more moderate ideas that began to permeate the movement since the late 1980s. Herein I consider potential venues where progressive gender views among women may have developed, contributing to the growth of Sisterhood demands for the adoption of a more egalitarian gender structure in the MB since the 2000s. In particular, I look at the space of the universities where the middle-generation leaders retained greater control until the mid-2000s, potentially influencing a larger number of students with their progressive ideas. I then look at informal activist circles of the MB movement, and women's religious gatherings in particular (*usra* meetings). Because these spaces are subjected to less control by the part of the MB organization, they represent ideal venues for progressive members to expand their ideas, including women.

[79] By opting for no-fault divorce Egyptian women lose part of their financial benefits, such as alimony for example. Also, they must repay their husbands the dowry originally given to them upon marriage.

### 5.4.1 The Gender Leadership Structure of the MB University Movement[80]

The institutional connection between the MB organization and the MB student movement in the universities was maintained through the MB Student Committee (MBSC). This office was created by al-Banna in 1928. It was responsible for co-ordinating the MB policies towards universities, and remained under the direct control of the office of the Guidance Bureau. MB members known as 'university supervisors', were those responsible to communicate the MB directives to the students, and supervise their activities in universities. 'University supervisors' were MB affiliated academics that enjoyed such role because of their institutional position. Among students, a student leader was in charge of coordinating MB students' activities in accordance to the guidelines of the MBSC, a task which required organizational and leadership skills.

While only male members could be elected to the Guidance Bureau, and therefore only male members could be in charge of the MBSC, 'university supervisors' were both male and female members. Inside universities, in fact, the MB replicated the gender divisions in place in the movement, meaning that male and female students were also grouped in separate male and female sections, requiring male and female supervisors. Most importantly, the separation of MB students' groups according to gender meant that both male and female student leaders existed for coordinating and implementing MB directives across male and female students. These with the objective of planning and organising students' activities, as also did the male and female supervisors, and students. The image below provides an illustration of the organizational structure of the MB university network (MBUN), and the way this was organised according to gender. The arrows indicate the direction of the flow of information between the MBSC and the student movement, and that of the interaction between its members.

[80] The information concerning the structure of the MB university student movement provided herein derives from a detailed interview with one of my respondent, Abdelrahman, who at the time of his activism in the ranks of the MB (early 2000s), was an MB Student leader at Cairo University.

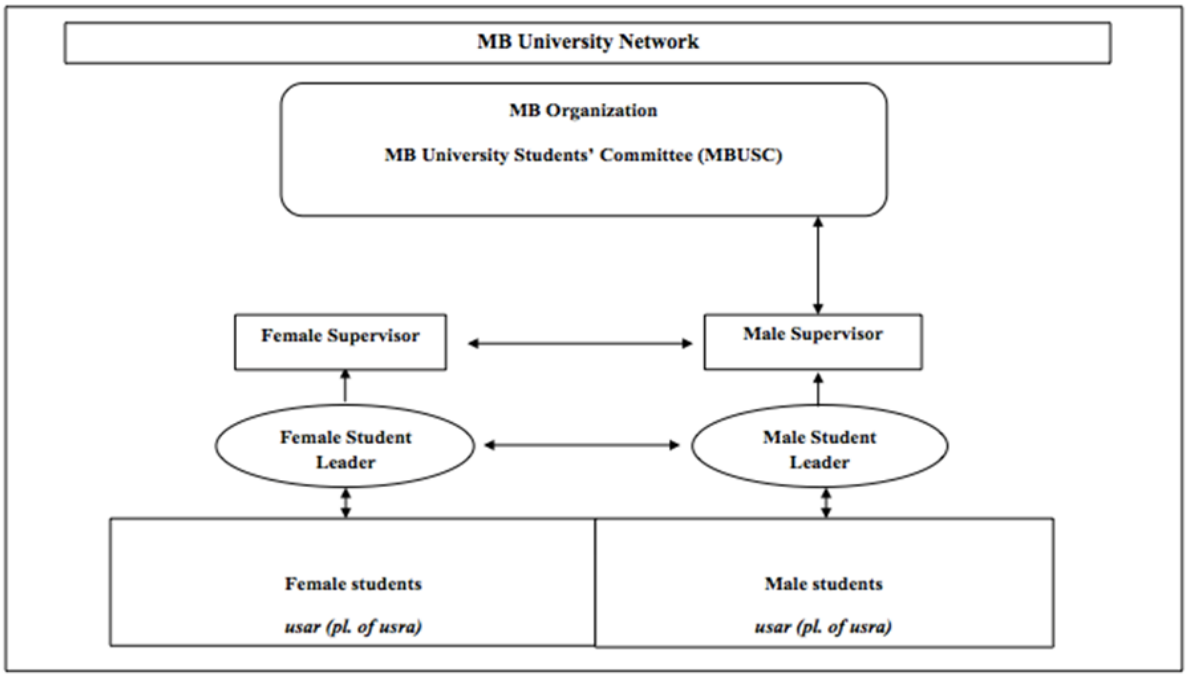


**Table 2: Author's elaboration of the gender leadership's structure of the MB's University Network.**

As it emerges, although the channel of communication between the MB organisation and its university network was maintained by a male figure, the organisation of the MBUN in separate structures according to gender inevitably led to a situation whereby inside universities male and female 'university supervisors' and male and female student leaders enjoyed equal leadership roles. Ababneh pointed to a similar situation in her study of the Hamas student movement at the University of Birzeit,[81] a state of affairs which led her to conclude that the gender segregation in place in the Islamist movement, contrary to general belief, had favoured the emergence of leadership and political skills among the female students. A similar point could be argued of the MB movement in Egypt, which also adopted a separate yet equal structure for both male and female members inside universities.

In effect, it seems that the MB maintained such an organization in universities precisely to foster political and leadership skills among its students, in preparation for their entrance in the ranks of the MB movement upon graduation. It is not by chance, in fact, that until the mid-2000s the MB leaders who held a role in the MBSC were the middle-generation leaders who had emerged as important MB activists themselves precisely because of the role they played in university campuses in the 1970s. Among them were Issam al-'Aryan, Abu al-Futuh, Hilmi al-Jazzar, and

[81] Ababneh, *Islamic Political Activism as a Means of Women's Empowerment?*

Abou El'ala Mady.[82] These were also the leaders who espoused more moderate views with regard to women's political role, who continued to advocate for the MB participation in institutional politics, and the establishment of the MB into a political party. That female students during this period have been affected by the moderate ideas of the middle-generation leaders, cannot therefore be underestimated.

As also highlighted by my respondent, during the 1990s, in fact, the MB had largely altered the criteria according to which university activists were to be recruited into the movement. While until before then the selection of members focused on their manifestation of piety and abidance to the principles of the organization, in the 1990s personal characteristics such as piety lost ground before considerations by the part of the movement of the 'potential benefit members could bring to the organization'.[83] Being the primary objective of the movement that of increasing its political participation and acquire legal status as a party, recruiting on the basis of individuals' ability to be activist, leaders, and politicians, had certainly acquired a priority among women as well.

However, the opportunities for political participation and leadership that women could enjoy in the MB movement upon graduation were limited when compared to those of men. Upon entering the movement, women's roles and activism remained largely confined to social and religious circles. Occasionally, women would partake in election campaigns, and some even run as candidates themselves, yet women were never allowed to enter the leadership offices of the organisation, notwithstanding their contributions to the movement. Under such circumstances, politically engaged women may have come to perceive a slowdown in their careers as activists, and feel that they had only limited opportunities in a movement that continued to channel their efforts towards the family, charity, and religious circles, like Rasha Ahmad had indicated in her letter. It was during this period, in fact, that a number of Sisters began to advocate for an all-female leadership structure equal to that of men in the Muslim Sisterhood movement.[84] Limited moves in that direction, however, were taken by the MB only after 2011.[85]

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[82] Wickham, *Evolution of an Islamist Movement*; El-Ghobashy, *The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers*.
[83] Abdelrahman, interview.
[84] Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, 2008.
[85] More on this point is said in chapter 7.

### 5.4.2 'The Liberation of Women at the Age of the Message': engaging the Sisterhood in political activism through *usra* meetings

In September 2014, I attended a conference held by the Women against the Coup (*Nisa' did al-Inqilab*) movement in Cairo.[86] There I met Maha, a Sister active in *da'wa*. After talking her through the reason of my stay in Egypt and the objectives of my research, she invited me to a meeting with the purpose of introducing me to 'how the Sisterhood think about politics.' The following day, Maha came to the meeting very well equipped with her *tarbyia* (educational) material.[87] One of the books, 'The Liberation of Women at the Age of the Message' (*Tahrir al-mar'a fi 'Asr al-risala*) was introduced to me by Maha as the Sisterhood's training manual for political activism. The book was an old first edition (1995) of the encyclopaedia on women written by the Islamic scholar Abdel Halim Abu Shaqqa (1924-1995). Maha was introduced to Abu Shaqqa's writings at her time in college (late 1990s), and had since then adopted the manual as part of the training material she used in the weekly *usra* meetings she held with the Sisters. The section introduced to me by Maha as the most important for the Sisterhood's political activism (Second Volume 'Muslim Women participation in Social life', chapter eight 'The foundations of the legitimacy of Muslim Women's Political Participation'),[88] is a manifesto calling upon Muslim women to take an active role in social and political life.

In the chapter, Abu Shaqqa provided a brief introduction discussing those socio-political phenomena which, in his opinion, had led to the increasing involvement of women in the social and political lives of Muslim societies. These were colonialism, imperialism, the development of the press, education, added complexities to women's lives, and the increased participation of civil society in political matters. The chapter continued with a description of the contemporary political activism of women, which Shaqqa considered as comprising two distinct realms, that of institutional politics and that social activism, the latter considered a springboard to the former.

As a way to enhance women's political participation, Abu Shaqqa invited existing political and social groups to train women on subjects such as public speaking, writing, politics, participation in political demonstrations, and the drafting of public statements. In Abu Shaqqa's view, the inclusion of women would have in fact benefited political parties because it would have allowed them to address a wider range of political issues, particularly those considered privileged areas of concern of women, such as the family, the education of children, and society more broadly. This view

[86] More on the emergence of this movement is said in chapter 8.
[87] Literally education, *tarbyia* is a major activity of Sisterhood and Brotherhood members, conducted during *usra* meetings. More information on *tarbyia* and *usra* meetings is provided in chapter 7.
[88] I thank Hassan Abdelhameed for helping out with the translation of Abu Shaqqa's chapter.

largely echoed with that of those Sisters who advocate for women's greater political participation by emphasising gender difference, and therefore by advancing claims for their participation on those matters women 'knew best' because of their central position within the family, and their role as nurturers of the new generations. Finally, the chapter set out a manifesto for women to follow to enhance their political role. Some of these points are rather progressive because they demand the cooperation of men in family duties with the purpose of freeing women's time to be used for political activities. What follows is Abu Shaqqa's list of points to follow:

1. The Muslim woman, like the man, is encouraged to be aware of political issues concerning our societies, and to take part in the activities of her community to the extent which is proportional to the time available to her, and for the purpose of promoting the good and forbidding the evil.
2. In certain times, political activism is considered a duty, and the Muslim woman should do what is considered a duty for her in this realm.
3. The political education of young girls is necessary to develop their interest in society's matters and to make them aware of the political role that women may have in it.
4. When participating in politics, the Muslim woman is asked to spend from her own money and those of her family carefully, and the man is asked to help his wife with the house chores in those instances in which her political activism makes it difficult for her to fulfil this task; men's help in this activity is to be considered a duty.
5. A Muslim society is one that supports the ability of women to carry out their political activities without compromising their responsibilities towards the family.
6. A Muslim government is one responsible to guide women and encourage them to embrace an active political role in their societies.
7. At any time, because of their work, women are required to enter in contact with men, both men and women should conform to proper Islamic code of dress and behaviour.[89]

That Abu Shaqqa's work has been of great influence for the development of the MB position on women is corroborated by the fact that the MB listed Abu Shaqqa as one of their influential

[89] Abu Shaqqa discusses more about 'proper Islamic code of dress and behaviour' in previous chapters. As a general guideline, this required women to live by principles of female piety and modesty, such as attaining to a modest dress code, lowering the gaze in presence of men, and avoid gender mixing. It is important to mention that Egypt is a conservative society, and there is a strong pressure on women of all backgrounds to conform to such standards of piety and modesty, not only the Sisters.

members and ideologues.[90] It can also be deduced by the fact that Abu Shaqqa enjoyed close ties with Sheikh al-Qaradawi and Sheikh al-Ghazali, two of the MB most influential Islamic intellectuals. Until recently, however, Abu Shaqqa has not received sufficient attention in academia. A scholar who engaged more broadly with the work on Abu Shaqqa and how this relates to the MB position on women is Milena Rampoldi. Rampoldi classified Abu Shaqqa's encyclopaedia *The Liberation of Women at the Age of the Message* as one of the most progressive accounts of Islamic feminism, bearing potential for the birth of a comprehensive egalitarian interpretation of women in Islam. She also believed that Abu Shaqqa's work had been instrumental in leading to the transformation of the MB's position on women since the 1990s. As she stated:

> 'Given the modernisation of the Egyptian Brotherhood in recent years, I am convinced of the importance of involving women in Islamic society and politics on the basis of the texts of Abu Shaqqa in an innovative yet traditional way. [This] can contribute to reconsidering the feminist movement in Islam from an innovative angle. […] With the aid of texts like those of Abu Shaqqa, modern Islam will be able to build up a comprehensive and egalitarian interpretation veering away from hierarchic, monistic, and sexist positions'.[91]

Although the MB older leadership continued to promote, in both discourse and practice, a conservative and salafi-leaning vision of gender roles up to the eve of the uprisings, progressive ideas on the subject persisted among the Sisters, who continued to promote such ideas within informal activist circles and women's spaces. Such activism contributed to their survival of a moderate trend among women, and also to the development of a new generation of Islamist women activists whose thought remained inspired by notions of greater female political participation and equal roles in both Egyptian society and the MB movement.

## 5.5 Conclusions

As the chapter demonstrated, the presence of a moderate faction in the MB movement was crucial to the ability of women to expand their political participation *vis-à-vis* the MB since the 1990s. However, the case of the Sisterhood also demonstrates that reality is complex, and that the gains made by women at the time cannot be reduced to the sole presence of moderate male members. Women, in fact, had an active role in the process of their inclusion. Women took

[90] Abu al-Halim Abu Shaqqa, 'Processes of Resistance in Science and Education,' *[Abu al-Halim Abu Shaqqa rahalat Jihad fi al-'ilm wa al-tarbyia] Ikhwanwiky*. Available at http://goo.gl/0K8jgF
[91] Milena Rampoldi, 'Interpreting Islam to Support Women's Involvement in Politics,' *Mint Press News*, October 10, 2014. Available at http://www.mintpressnews.com/MyMPN/interpreting-islam-support-womens-involvement-politics/

advantage of emerging opportunities to expand their political participation and roles in the MB while availing of the support of moderate members. This was the case of Wafaa' Ramadan, who run for elections in the medical association board in the MB list in 1992 enjoying the support of the middle-generation *Ikhwan* leaders. It was also the case of Ahmad, who took the opportunity of the 2007 MB party platform, and the discussion this raised within the MB, to voice her criticism against the persistent exclusion of women from the political decision-making offices of the movement. As also pointed by Clark and Schwedler, therefore, accounts relying uniquely on either Islamist movements' ideological-moderation or strategic-adaptation are insufficient to explain women's inclusion in the political activities of Islamist movements precisely because they fail to account for women's agency in the process of their involvement.[92]

The case of the Sisterhood also reveals that a change in practice may well precede Islamist movements' ideological moderation. It was only following Wafaa' Ramadan's candidacy in the syndicates' elections, in fact, that the MB issued the 1994 paper revising its position on women and political participation. In addition - and as observed also across a number of other Islamist movements - the case of the MB demonstrates that processes of moderation do not usually take place evenly across Islamist movements' members, and often are not guided by the same reasons.[93] In the case of the MB, the middle-generation leaders supported greater rights of women as part of their commitment to political pluralism and the establishment of a civil state. Their dedication to such principles resulted from their socialization process with different political actors in the Egyptian political system, and of their grown accountability towards Egyptian urban middle-classes holding more moderate ideas in matters of political participation, and the rights of women and non-Muslims. The response of the MB old guard to the woman issues in 1994, on the other hand, appears as strategic, and dictated by their necessity to justify in religious terms a changed political reality to its conservative constituencies.[94]

Furthermore, the case of the MB proves that Islamist movement's ideological moderation can take place even in absence of Islamist movements' complete acceptance of gender equality. Although the MB's commitment to further the political involvement of the Sisterhood did not come to the detriment of women's roles within the family, the 1994 paper remains ground-breaking because it made political participation a women's duty. Such an ideological shift was also evident in the debates concerning the principle of *qawama*, and which validity was limited to the private sphere of the family to favour women's entrance to the public world of politics. As pointed out by Schwedler, therefore, processes of ideological moderation in Islamist movements should be

[92] Clark and Schwedler, *Who Opened the Window?*
[93] Clark and Schwedler, *Who Opened the Window?*; Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*.
[94] Schwedler observed a similar process in the Jordanian IAF. See Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*, 195.

assessed in terms of Islamist movement's shifts 'from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives', and not against pre-determined results.[95]

The necessity to accommodate two competing trends in the movement explains also the contradictory position that the MB continued to espouse with regard to the 'woman issue', whereby women were simultaneously asked to be ideal mothers and wives, and also skilful political actors. Women responded to these competing trends differently. Some conservative inclined Sisters continued to exercise politics and expand their presence in the public domain by politicizing motherhood. Other Sisters, predominantly younger women also belonging to the middle generation of urban middle-class *Ikhwan*, appealed to more progressive ideas to advocate for women's greater political roles in the movement. In particular, they appealed to the notion of equal opportunity between men and female members within the movement on the basis of their continuous dedication and changing social realities.

Since by the mid-2000s the conservative MB guard had effectively marginalised moderates within the movement from the mid-2000s, it was conservative women who enjoyed greater visibility in the MB ranks, while the more progressive followed the destiny of the middle-generation *Ikhwan* and grew increasingly marginalised. Yet, progressive ideas were not completely abandoned by the women. These continued to be influential among a younger generation who populated the informal activist spaces of the MB movement, away from the rigid control of the MB organisation. When upon the opening up of the political opportunity structure which followed the 2011 uprisings, women continued to encounter resistance to their participation in the decision-making of the MB movement, such debates intensified once again, leading some of the women to 'rebel' against the MB rigid schemes and gender code after the movement's ousting from power in 2013.

The next chapter investigates the period of political opening and how the MB old guard, and its entourage, continued to exercise the undiscussed control within the movement, as well as dominating the Egyptian political transition.

[95] Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*, 3.

# Chapter 6 – The 25th of January Revolution and the Inclusion of the Sisterhood in Institutional Politics

## Introduction

Societal and regime changes are among those key factors prompting political parties, even conservative ones, to include women in their projects.[1] Given the opportunity to increase their presence and influence in the structure of the state, political parties are likely to include women as a way to maximise their appeal across female constituencies, and assert their image as modern and progressive parties before their electorate and international observers.[2] Islamist movements are not sui generis, and in the last two and a half decades, Islamists have made considerable efforts to boast women's political participation in their ranks, maximising their support among female constituencies.[3]

Because of the conservative gender ideology underpinning Islamist movements, the inclusion of women in Islamist political parties is likely to take place within a framework that emphasise complementarian gender roles between men and women. It is expected that women are included in separate structures from that of men, that are attributed roles that do not challenge men's positions and leadership, and are assigned areas of activism that focus on the promotion of women's motherhood roles, and the family. Women's confinement to women-only sections and areas of activism that are considered an exclusive concern of women, affect their ability to influence the political decision-making process in their parties, therefore also limiting women's ability to directly influence those decisions that could potentially alter pre-existing party structures, and increase their leadership, roles, and influence. Only when women's sections are strong enough and have a role important enough to the functioning of the whole party, women are then able to expand their representation, roles, and political influence, successfully.[4]

This chapter explores the effect that the 2011 opening up of the Egyptian political opportunity structure has had on the Muslim Sisterhood in terms of their political participation. The chapter focuses only on formal political institutions, such as the MB-led Freedom and Justice Party

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[1] Celis and Childs, eds., *Gender, Conservatism, and Political Representation.*
[2] Ibid.
[3] Clark and Schwedler, *Who Opened the Window?*; Cavdar, *Islamist Moderation and the Resilience of Gender*; Shitrit, *Authenticating Representation* and *Righteous Transgressions*; Abdellatif and Ottaway, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*; Cavatorta and Dalmasso, *Islamist women's leadership in Morocco*.
[4] Celis and Childs, eds., *Gender, Conservatism, and Political Representation*, 10-11.

(FJP), the Egyptian parliament, and government. Informal spaces of activism are dealt with in chapter seven. Attention is given to how the MB progressed to include women in institutional politics, to the roles and activities that women carried out within these spaces, and to how women contributed to the MB's political success in this phase more broadly. The findings demonstrate that following the uprisings the MB made considerable efforts to boast women's political participation and include them in its political project, and also that women had a pivotal role in guaranteeing the MB's successes. However, MB attitudes towards women, as well as the gender discourse it promoted, continued to be conservative and patriarchal in nature. The structure of the FJP replicated that of the MB. Women were included in separate women-only sections and remained absent from the party's leadership offices. As a result, women enjoyed only limited power to directly influence the MB and FJP political decisions. Also, those women who acquired greater public visibility because of their roles promoted narratives that reflected the conservative gender ideology of the elder MB leadership, and emphasised women's primary roles as mothers and nurturers of society. Albeit the Sisters made efforts to expand their presence, roles, and influence within the party in this phase, the short MB experience in government meant that women's gains remained limited.

## 6.1 The 25th of January Revolution and the Opening Up of the Opportunity Structure

Inspired by their Tunisian neighbours - and on the wave of nearly a decade of past mobilization[5] - in thousands joined the Egyptian youth and labour's coalition-movements in a national day of protest on January 25, 2011, national Police Day. For fears of provoking government retaliation against its members, the MB refrained from officially joining, albeit many of its youth took part to the demonstrations against MB orders. When the turnout exceeded expectations and mass sit-ins developed across the country, the MB altered its political calculations and, pushed by its youth, formally joined the protests on January 28. In the early days in Tahrir, the revolutionary youth had a leading role in defending the square against the attacks of Egyptian police forces. When the MB joined, however, the movement contributed to the protests by adding the numbers and the organizational skills necessary to sustain the sit-ins in the days that followed.[6] In this phase the Sisters also had an important role, contributing by supporting the protests in numbers, helping with securing the perimeter of the square, preparing food, and organizing shelter

[5] For Egyptian mobilisation before the uprisings see Baghdat Korany and Rabab el-Mahdi, eds. *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond* (Cairo: America University in Cairo Press, 2014).
[6] Fayrouz, interview by author, Cairo, 2014 [Henceforth: Fayrouz, interview]

and medication for the protestors.[7] Before long, the coalition-movements led by the April 6 Youth Movement[8] formulated a list of demands directed at the Egyptian government. These included 'Mubarak's resignations, lifting the state of emergency, release all political prisoners, dissolution of parliament, appointment of a government of independent technocrats, drafting a new constitution, and punishment of those responsible for violence against protesters'.[9]

After 18 days of protest, and over 300 lives lost to police violence,[10] the army intervened and deposed Egyptian President Hosny Mubarak. The military acted out of its own interest. The prospect of Mubarak's soon Gamal succeeding to the presidency put in fact the military's influence and power in Egypt at stake. The uprisings presented to the military as an opportunity to end Mubarak's rule and to consolidate its position in the future Egyptian state.[11] On February 11, 2011, Vice-president Omar Suleiman addressed the Egyptian people announcing that Mubarak had stepped down, and that the Security Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) - the Egyptian leading military body - was to take care of guiding Egypt through the phase of transition until power be transferred to a civilian government. From that moment onwards, the 'military leaders aimed at keeping maximum control over the political process, not least to secure their own position of power within the emerging political system'.[12]

The SCAF proceeded by dissolving the Egyptian parliament. Then, it provisionally amended the 1979 Egyptian constitution, setting new procedures for holding parliamentary elections and drafting the new constitution. This was to be written by a 100-member Constituent Assembly (CA), designated by the new parliament after elections. The army constitutional amendment was put to a popular referendum on March 19, 2011. Subsequently, the army proceeded by forming a technocratic government through which it continued to rule over the country until mid-2012. It also issued a series of laws that granted the SCAF additional sweeping powers over the transition process, independence from state supervision, and veto power over the constitutional-drafting process. During this period, the SCAF also retained the emergency law in

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[7] See also Farag, *The Muslim Sisters and the January 25th Revolution*.
[8] The 6th of April Youth Movement was established on 2008 by Egyptian youth activists to support the Egyptian workers of the al-Mahalla al-Kubra town in a day of national strike. The April 6 Youth Movement has since then played a leading role in organising anti-regime protests in Egypt, including those of the January 25, 2011.
[9] Dina Shehata, 'Youth Movements and the 25th of January Revolution,' In *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, edited by Baghdat Korany and Rabab el-Mahdi, 119-120 (Cairo: America University in Cairo Press, 2014).
[10] Human Rights Watch, *Tahrir Square Voices Will Never Be Silenced*, February 11, 2011. Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/11/tahrir-square-voices-will-never-be-silenced
[11] For the role of the Egyptian army during the transition see Stephan Roll, 'Managing Change: How Egypt's Military Leadership Shaped the Transformation,' *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 23-43.
[12] Roll, *Managing Change*, 26.

place during the 30 years of Mubarak's rule, and used it 'extensively as a tool not only to restore law and order, but also to repress political opposition'.[13]

The MB supported the road map proposed by the SCAF, backing the voting of the March 19 referendum. The revolutionaries and other opposition groups, which instead objected to the SCAF's road map, accused the MB of having sold the revolution for the sake of political power, continuing to occupy the streets for the entire period of the fragile Egyptian transition. By then, however, the MB and the SCAF had entered a tacit alliance. While the MB achieved its long-time objective to enter politics at the head of a political party, the SCAF retained its undiscussed control over key areas of government and the economy, as well as immunity from state supervision. The relationship between the MB and the revolutionary movement, worsened in fact on the coming up of the parliamentary elections, when the MB demonstrated once again to be ready to accommodate the SCAF in its desire for power as far as parliamentary and presidential elections were to be held.

When the MB-led FJP emerged as the uncontested winner of the 2011/2012 elections, in fact, the movement entered a parliament already emptied of its constitutional power. By then, the SCAF had extended its authority over the entire constitutional process, controlled most of the state apparatus, including the interior ministry and the judiciary, severely limiting any possibility of reform which did not mirror its ambitions in the future Egyptian state. In May 2012, in the attempt to increase its power before the SCAF, the MB filed a candidate for the presidential elections after having publicly promised not to do so. As a countermove, on June of the same year, the SCAF dissolved the MB-led parliament and issued a third constitutional declaration granting itself additional sweeping powers, including that of prolonging the use of military courts to try civilians. Over 12.000 people had already been tried in Egyptian military courts in 2011 alone.[14]

On June 30, 2012, the former FJP Chairman Mohammed Morsi became the first democratically elected civilian president in the history of Egypt, defeating ex-general Ahmed Shafik in a close vote. For many Egyptians who took part to the elections Morsi did not represent their ideal candidate. However, before a military man representing the old regime, Morsi figured as the lesser of two evils. A majority of the Egyptian youth, the leading force of the uprisings, also had voted for Morsi in the hope that he would bring about throughout radical reforms. Once in power, however, Morsi took only weak steps in that direction, continuing to privilege a slow-pace approach to political reforms distinctive of the MB movement. In addition, the MB remained

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[13] Roll, *Managing Change*, 27. For a comprehensive list of human rights violations perpetrated by the SCAF during the transition period see: Freedom House, *Timeline of Human Rights Violation in Egypt since the Fall of Mubarak*, (2013). Available at https://freedomhouse.org/article/timeline-human-rights-violations-egypt-fall-mubarak

[14] Human Rights Watch, *Egypt Retry or Free 12,000 After Unfair Military Trials*, September 10, 2011. Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/10/egypt-retry-or-free-12000-after-unfair-military-trials

engaged in a continuous power struggle with the SCAF. To the MB, maintaining the favours of the military was as important as maintaining the support of the Egyptian people. Soon, however, the MB failed on both fronts. The MB dealing with the constitutional drafting process was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Upon obtaining the presidency, Morsi forced the drafting of the new constitution amid a mounting political crisis.[15] Since the judiciary had dissolved parliament, the legitimacy of the CA had also been put into question.[16] Was the CA to be dissolve once again, the drafting of the new constitution would have suffered further delays. The MB, however, considered approving a new constitution a step necessary towards stability. Therefore, in the attempt to insulate the assembly and constitutional-drafting process from the Judiciary, Morsi issued a constitutional declaration on November 22, 2012, effectively placing himself and the assembly above the law. He then forced the drafting of the new text through essentially an Islamist dominated CA, submitting the document to popular vote on December 22, 2012. Egyptian society remained deeply divided over both the content of the new constitution, as well as the procedures which led to its drafting. Principally, a majority of Egyptian oppositional forces perceived the MB dealing with the constitutional drafting process as a further attempt of the MB to monopolise its power and enshrine its views in the new constitution, and therefore took advantage of Egyptian society's discontent with the MB to start a mass popular campaign against Morsi. The campaign was welcomed by the old power elites, who saw in Morsi ousting an opportunity to re-gain part of their lost powers. It was also supported by the military, who saw in it an opportunity to remove the MB from politics, and establish its absolute and uncontested power in Egypt.

## 6.2 The FJP Party Platform

On February 21, 2011, only three days after the army had deposed President Mubarak, the MB General Guide Muhammad Badie announced the establishment of the FJP, declaring this decision 'in line with the Brotherhood's policies and directions'.[17] In a move of great political

[15] For more information on how the MB dealt with the constitutional drafting process see Project on Middle East Political Science, 'The Battle for Egypt's Constitution', *POMEPS briefings* n. 17, January 11, 2013. Available at https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/POMEPS_BriefBooklet17_Egypt_web.pdf

[16] For the role of the Judiciary during the transition period see Mona el-Ghobashy, 'Dissidence and Deference Among Egyptian Judges,' *MERIP* 279, n. 46 (Summer 2016). Available at http://www.merip.org/mer/mer279/dissidence-deference-among-egyptian-judges

[17] 'Muslim Brotherhood Establish Freedom and Justice Party,' *Egypt Independent*, February 21, 2011. Available at http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/muslim-brotherhood-establish-freedom-and-justice-party

sophistication, the new party platform presented the FJP as a party capable of bridging the secular-religious divide.[18] In the document, the FJP expressed its commitment to a civil state with an Islamic reference, which it defined as a state 'not-ruled by the military' and neither a 'theocracy'. It stated its support for democracy and a parliamentary form of government characterised by free and fair elections, the rotation of power, and full separation between legislative, executive, and judicial authorities. It vowed to promote political pluralism, freedom, equality, and equal opportunities for all people, regardless of religion, sex, or race.

Although the party stated that it would abide to the principle of non-discrimination of its citizens on the basis of sex, it committed itself to promote women's rights as far as these complied to the values of Islamic Shari'a, and guaranteed a balance between women's rights and duties. The FJP short-term plan of action for addressing women's issues included reforming the PSFL in accordance with the values and traditions of an Islamic society, and substituting the National Council for Women (NCW) and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) with a National Council for the Family (NCF). Both institutions had been crucial in bringing about previous law reforms to the PSFL under the leadership of the ex-First Lady Suzanne Mubarak. In addition, the FJP said to be committed to reconsider Egypt's ratification to international treaties such as CEDAW, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Although the FJP avoided statements denying the right of women and Copts to the leadership of the state, on one occasion the FJP explicitly affirmed that the party would have only supported men for the position.[19]

### 6.2.1 The FJP, its Youth, and Missed Pluralism

To a majority of its youth members, the ability of the MB to promote a program of substantial state reforms and progressive civil rights was the only viable strategy that the movement had to overcome its ideological and class divides, expand its support among the moderate urban youth, and successfully survive the period of transition. Establishing the FJP in complete separation from the MB was crucial to the movement's ability to do so. The MB old leaders continued to envisage the movement's religious and political mission as one. Until then, this is what had prevented the MB to reform its vision and policies towards the acceptance of more egalitarian and democratic principles. If separation failed to be achieved, similar obstacles would have been in place also in the FJP. Separation, instead, would have allowed the MB old guard to retain the leadership of the

[18] For the 2011 FJP Platform see http://www.fj-p.com/Party_Program.aspx; for an English version see http://kurzman.unc.edu/files/2011/06/FJP_2011_English.pdf

[19] 'Freedom and Justice Party,' *Al-Ahram*, December 3, 2011. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/24939.aspx

movement and promote its religious mission from there. Also, it would have allowed the FJP to carry out its political mission free from the rigid ideological constraints that derived from the MB commitment to *da'wa*, and in compliance with democratic principles, civil and political rights, and political pluralism.

As occurred back in the mid-2000, the MB old guard maintained its monopoly over the MB movement, and forced its control over the FJP too.[20] They also continued to marginalise the role of the youth in the party, resisting their demands for internal democratic reforms. This occurred in large part because the MB leadership was unable to see past the achievements of the revolutionary momentum. Emboldened by their desire for power, the old guard opted for conforming to the institutional path set by the military and guaranteeing itself a political role in the transition, rather than embracing the demands of the youth for radical transformations and risk antagonising the military. Contented with marginal concessions, the MB opted therefore for gradual state reforms rather than revolutionary change. As we shall see, these were among some of the major reasons that contributed to the MB political failure.

Similarly to the MB movement, the FJP also displayed a hierarchical and authoritarian character. The FJP organizational structure included a Chairman, a Deputy, a Secretary General, and a Spokesman. Its two higher leadership bodies were the six-member Executive Office and the Supreme Council, both tasked with running the party's politics. It followed a Parliamentary Committee, a General Assembly representing the 28 regional secretariats, a Permanent Council of Founders, an office of Professionals Advisors, and 22 Specialised Committees, one of which was dedicated to the women and one to the youth. At the local level, the FJP replicated a similar structure in each one of the 28 Egyptian governorates.[21] Although the internal guidelines of the FJP envisaged democratic procedures for electing its leadership bodies, these failed to be realised in practice. According to the FJP guidelines, the members of the MB movement elected those of the General Assembly which, in turn, elected the Executive Office and the Supreme Council. In practice, however, the members of the MB Guidance Bureau handpicked members of the MB Shura Council and appointed them to the FJP office of the General Assembly.[22] Because woman and youth remained absent from the MB Shura Council, they also lacked representation in the FJP General Assembly as a consequence. In addition, the MB forbade its members to join any party

[20] Khalil al-Anani, 'Egypt's Freedom & Justice Party: to Be or Not to Be independent,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2011). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=44324

[21] For the FJP Internal bylaws and structure see http://www.slideshare.net/m0maga/ss-8851903 [in Arabic]

[22] Al-Anani, *Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party*.

other than the FJP, punishment being their expulsion from the MB. Membership in the FJP was then subjected to a probationary period of six months based on members' performances.[23]

As the MB bypassed democratic procedures to guarantee its monopoly over the FJP, the movement suffered defections. Al-Futuh and al-Zafarani, two of its most prominent and moderate Guidance Bureau members, resigned to establish their own parties, Masry al-Qawia and al-Nahda respectively. Young MB cadres like Islam Lofty and Mohamed al-Qassas, who played a leading role in the January 25th uprisings and were among those who pushed for the MB to join Tahrir Square, also left the MB in protest and went to established their own party, al-Tayar al-Masry, attracting a considerable amount of MB-youth to their ranks.[24] Many other members were later expelled in further purifying purges of the MB leadership over the same period. [25]

### 6.2.2 The JFP and the Inclusion of Women

Women consisted of a considerable number of FJP members, and over a thousand figured as party co-founders.[26] Many more entered the FJP Women's Committees established all over the country. However, similarly to the situation they faced in the movement, women remained excluded from the highest leadership offices of the party, their control being limited to the activities they run within women-only sections. Only in one occasion the FJP attempted to include one woman, Kamilia Hilmi, to the Executive Office.[27] The party sponsored the news as a demonstration of its support for women's political participation, and its recognition of the important role the Sisters played in the movement. Yet, when stating the reasons that had led to her nomination, the FJP alluded to Hilmi's activism in the International Islamic Council for Da'wa and Relief, meaning that the old guard continued to select members on the basis of qualities such as piety and loyalty to the movement rather than political competency, also during the phase of transition. Less than six months later, Hilmi eventually resigned, allegedly on grounds that 'her primary work as President

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[23] 'Muslim Brotherhood to establish the Freedom and Justice Party,' *Egypt Independent*, February 21, 2011. Available at http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/muslim-brotherhood-establish-freedom-and-justice-party

[24] Ashraf el-Sherif, 'Egypt's New Islamists: Emboldening Reform from Within,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2012). Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=46452

[25] Ibrahim El-Houdaiby, 'Islamism in and after Egypt's Revolution,' in *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, edited by Baghdat Korany and Rabab el-Mahdi, (Cairo: America University in Cairo Press, 2014): 126.

[26] 'FJP Announces Names of Party Co-founders,' *Ikhwanweb*, May 21, 2011. Available at http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28609&ref=search.php

[27] 'The only woman in the executive of the Freedom and Justice Party resigns,' *[Istiqalat al-mar'a al-wahida fi tanfidhy al-hurrya wa al-'adala] al-Masry al-Youm*, May 9, 2012. Available at http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/177736

of the Islamic Commission for Women and Children at the International Council for Da'wa and Relief […] posed an obstacle to her presence in the Executive Office'.[28] The party never elected another woman to substitute Hilmi. Hence, as the FJP approached the first free and fair parliamentary elections in the history of Egypt, it had already suffered defections from a number of its most prominent moderate members. In addition, women and youth, two of the major protagonists of the January 25th Revolution as well as two of the MB movement's largest subgroups, lacked real voice and representation in the political decision-making bodies of the party, as well as the movement.

## 6.3 The Muslim Sisterhood in the 2011-2012 Parliamentary Election: joining arms with the Brothers in the FJP

The opening up of the political opportunity structure created extensive additional opportunities for political participation that the movement seized. Women also maximised their involvement by asserting their presence in the new spaces seized by the movement. To inaugurate the beginning of a new era and a new phase of political involvement, the MB organised the first Muslim Sisterhood conference since the group was officially dissolved in 1948. The Conference was held on July 2, 2011, at the premises of al-Azhar al-Sharif, the leading Sunni religious institute in Egypt and the region, under the title of 'Women from the Revolution to the Renaissance' (*al-Mar'a min al-Thawra ila al-Nahda*). Its objective was to highlight the MB's vision for women and their roles in the future Egyptian state. Over 2,000 Sisters from all over Egypt joined the event.[29]

The General Guide Mohammed Badie inaugurated the conference by paying tribute to the role of women in the revolution, and calling upon the Sisters to join arms with the Brothers at a time in which 'women [were] needed more than ever before' in rebuilding the Egyptian nation.[30] His speech was followed by that of his deputy Kairat al-Shater, who underlined the MB's commitment to redressing women's low political participation, previously constrained by security concerns. It also stated the movement's obligation to offer women a space in the FJP to make their skills and ability useful to the national cause. When concluding, al-Shater invited the Sisters to support the

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[28] Ibid.
[29] 'Muslim Sisterhood conference ends with important recommendations,' *[Mu'tamar al-Akhwat al-Muslimat yunhiy a'malahu bitawsiyat hamma]* Ikhwan al-Ismailia, YouTube, July 3, 2011. Available at http://www.ikhwanismailia.com/ismailia/14564.html
[30] 'Muslim Sisterhood conference under the title "from the Revolution to the Renaissance," *[Mu'atamar al-akhwat taht shi'ar al-mar'a min al-thawra ila al-nahdha]* Ikhwan Online, YouTube, July 2, 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxtNaPIe1ps

MB in the upcoming elections by spreading awareness about election campaigns and political participation among fellow women and youth.[31]

In occasion of the parliamentary elections, the MB capitalised on women's support and, as occurred on previous occasions, women were greatly instrumental to the FJP's electoral successes. To make the most of the Sisterhood's efforts, the MB organised women-training days at its regional headquarters during which women were coached on election by-laws, vote canvassing, the FJP platform, and the MB vision for a post-revolutionary Egypt. The Sisters took up their roles as voters, recruiters of voters, canvassers, and election campaigners, maximising FJP support among their communities.

Many Sisters also participated as candidates in the elections. The September 2011 parliament election law (PEL) finalised by the SCAF abolished the quota reserving women 64 seats, but required political parties to include at least one woman in each of their electoral lists. The FJP contested seats in all 46 districts, having therefore to nominate 46 women as for legal requirements.[32] All nine Sisters who had run for elections in 2010 were once again nominated as FJP candidates in 2011, while many more availed of the opportunity to gain direct experience in electioneering and campaigning for the first time. Inexperienced female candidates enjoyed numerous advantages for participating through the ranks of the FJP. The party, covered all costs related to their campaign, provided them with specialised training, and supported them with an extensive media platform.[33]

In return, during rallies the Sisterhood candidates acted as skilful sponsors of the FJP platform. They emphasised the party support for economic development, social justice, and security, respect for the rule of law and separation of powers, as well as its objective to advance Egypt's cultural and educational development, and eradicate poverty, illiteracy, and youth unemployment. In addition, the Sisters endorsed the FJP as a true promoter of women's rights and political participation, while also being careful not to disaffect the MB's conservative electorate. While framing female political participation as necessary to re-build the Egyptian nation, women's political role continued to be framed only as secondary to women's motherhood duties. A speech of Azza al-Gharf, one of the most vocal MB female candidates in 2011, emphasised precisely this point:

> 'In the FJP we believe that women have an important role, and that this is equal if not greater than that of men. And this is why the FJP wishes to bring back a way of life proper of the Islamic era, where women were participating fully in

[31] Ibid.
[32] Said Shehata, 'Profile: Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party,' *BBC News*, November 25, 2011. Available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15899548
[33] 'Omaima Kamel interview with al-'Ashira Masa'an,' *[D. Omaima Kamil li al-'Ashira Masa'an]* YouTube, November 16, 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFuFaGeXxSE

> their societies beside men […] Women gain society's support when they excel in their role. Beside the political role, the first and basic role for women, the one I also never give up, is to be makers of the new generations. This role comes as a first priority to women. […] Women should not step back after the elections. Rather, they should participate on the basis of equal citizenship. However, they should put their priorities in order. First comes their house, and only after comes society. Also, the activities women carry out in society should aim at protecting their children and their homes'.[34]

As per the FJP program, the Sisters committed themselves to reforming the PSL according to Islamic principles, which they portrayed as necessary to solve issues such as high divorce rates, late marriages, and the phenomenon of working mothers.

### 6.3.1 The Role of the Young Sisters in Elections

By observing the roles of the women during the 2011 parliamentary elections, it is clear that a neat division of labour was in place also among the Sisters. This closely followed generational lines. The younger Sisters also were recipients of MB trainings and acted as street campaigners and vote canvassers, like this member emphasised:

> 'At the time of the elections we all [youth] participated. First, we took courses here in the Mokattam [MB headquarters in the Cairo district of Nasr City] about the FJP, their programme and vision. Then we would hit the streets to talk with people about the party, our views of society, and the future of our country'.[35]

At times, they also had a chance to play roles of responsibility such as representing the MB at polling stations the days of elections, as this other member recalled:

> 'During the parliamentary election I didn't enjoy the campaign as much as I enjoyed being part of the team who supervised the voting stations and took care of the actual bureaucracy related to the electoral process and the to-be-members of parliament. In that occasion, I had to deal with police officers and the judges responsible for that polling station; I would organize people outside the pools and count the votes'.[36]

However, while older Sisters were usually in charge of delivering women's trainings, organizing electoral campaigns, and stood as candidates in the elections, younger Sisters played primarily a

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[34] 'Azza al-Gharf Freedom and Justice Party candidate in the Giza list', *['Azza al-Gharf murashahat qa'imat al-hurrya wa al-'adala bi-al-Ghiza]* Huryaweadala's Channel, YouTube, December 5, 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k-OynJpHPU

[35] Farida, interview by author, Cairo, 2014 [Henceforth: Farida, interview].

[36] Safiya, interview by author, Cairo, 2014 [Henceforth: Safiya, interview]

role of support to the older activists, albeit still crucial. The Muslim Sisterhood movement, therefore, was not free from those hierarchical rankings and division of labour characteristic of the MB movement. Rather, it replicated similar organizational structures among women.

Such a rigid organization of labour had the obvious consequence of leading to the marginalization of young women's voices in the Sisterhood movement in a similar way to how Sisterhood's voices were marginalised in the leadership structure of the MB and the FJP. This is even more evident when considering that only one of the 2011 FJP female nominees was younger than thirty years old, Afsa Shoman.[37] It is however important to remark that youth marginalization was not a prerogative of the MB. Rather, it was a general reality in the post-uprising Egypt. Outside new political ventures, most long-established parties and movements largely failed to represent youth voices, or promote their participation in institutional political channels.

### 6.3.2 The 2011-2012 Parliamentary Election Results

The MB, already the best-organised political movement in Egypt, enjoyed extra advantages over other parties in the elections because of the 2011 PEL. This provided for a mixed parallel electoral system. In both chambers of parliament, parties had to contest seats through individual candidates' seats following a first-pass-the-post system (IC), and closed-party lists following a majoritarian-proportional-representation system (PR). The People's Assembly, the lower chamber of parliament, consisted of 508 seats in total, of which 166 were IC seats (two seats in each of the 83 IC districts), 332 were PR seats redistributed across 46 PR districts; 10 posts were to be appointed by the SCAF. The Shura Council, the higher chamber of parliament, counted 270 seats-total, of which 120 were PR seats redistributed across 30 PR districts, 60 were IC seats redistributed across 30 IC districts, and 90 seats were to be appointed by the Egyptian president following his election.[38] While the IC seats would have inevitably favoured well-known candidates in their districts, the PR closed-lists seats meant to provide smaller parties with a better chance of representation. As several scholars warned, however, most districts were too small (only four seats per district) to offer a real chance to minor parties to win any seat against dominant players.[39]

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[37] 'Afsa Shoman, 'Youngest FJP Candidate Vows to defend Women Rights,' *Ikhwanweb*, October 25, 2011. Available at http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=29122&ref=search.php

[38] International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Elections in Egypt: Analysis of the 2011 Parliamentary Electoral System* (Washington: International Foundation for Electoral Systems Briefing Paper, 2011). Available at https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/25621/uploads [Henceforth: IFES]

[39] IFES; John M. Carey and Andrew Reynolds, 'The Impact of Election Systems,' *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (October 2011): 36-47.

The MB took part in the elections as the leader of the Democratic Alliance. This included the FJP and 11 other minor parties: al-Karama, al-Ghad, Labor, al-Islah wa al-Nahda, al-Hadara, al-Islah, al-Geel, Masry al-Araby al-Ishtiraki, al-Ahrar, and al-Horriyya wa al-Tanmiya.[40] Aside from the MB, two other groups enjoyed sufficient organizational skills and resources to successfully compete in the elections. One was al-Wafd. Once a member, al-Wafd had however left the Alliance on claims that the FJP wished to dominate the coalition's candidate lists leaving no space for the other parties.[41] A third player was the Islamist Bloc led by the ultra-conservative Salafist al-Nour party. This posed several difficulties to the MB, which for the first time found itself competing against another religiously-oriented party claiming to best represent Islamic religion.

Nevertheless, the FJP ended up emerging as the uncontested winner in both chambers of parliament. The polls for the People's Assembly closed with 232 seats for the FJP,[42] followed by al-Nour with 121, and al-Wafd with 41 seats. The elections for the Shura Council also closed with a striking victory for the FJP, which obtained 105 seats,[43] followed by al-Nour with 45, and al-Wafd with 14. As the counting was finalised, therefore, Egypt figured a majoritarian Islamist parliament, with the MB and al-Nour counting over 70 percent of representation in the People's Assembly and over 55 percent in the Shura Council.

### 6.3.3 Muslim Sisterhood Representation in Parliament

Despite female representation in the Egyptian parliament had always been low, in 2012 Egypt figured one of the lowest, making the country fall down the world classifications rankings (125 out of 133 according to the World Economic Forum for 2012).[44] This occurred notwithstanding the fact that in 2011 many more women stood for the elections as candidates when compared to previous years. In 2011, 984 out of 6.591 candidates for the People's Assembly, and 369 out of 2.888

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[40] Hesham Sallam, 'Egypt's Parliamentary Elections, 2011-2012,' (Washington DC: Tadween Publishing, 2013): 102.
[41] Sallam, *Egypt's Parliamentary Elections, 2011-2012*, 36.
[42] Gamal Essam el-Din, 'In Search of a Parliamentary Alliance,' *Al-Ahram*, January 15, 2012. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/31801.aspx
[43] Morsi appointed the remaining 90 members of the Shura Council following the presidential elections. Among these, 17 were FJP affiliates, bringing the total number of FJP representatives in the Shura Council at 122. See 'Islamists Tighten Grip on Shura Council,' *Al-Ahram*, December 25, 2012. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/61266.aspx
[44] Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2012* (Switzerland: World Economic Forum, 2012): 168. Available at http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2012.pdf

thousands candidates for the Shura Council, were women.[45] One of the reasons for such a low female representation rests in the failure of the PEL to make it mandatory for parties to place women in their lists in winnable positions. Under a PR system, and after considering the number of winnable seats in each district, women needed to be placed in the top-half of the parties' lists to have a real chance of being elected. Yet, most parties placed women in the bottom-half of their lists, considerably hindering women's probabilities.

As a result, out of the 508 members of the People's Assembly, only nine women were elected - and three appointed by the SCAF – leading to 2.2 percent of female representation. For the first time, the Sisters seized four seats: Azza al-Gharf, Hoda Ghonia, Siam al-Gamal, and Reeda Abdallah. Of the other women elected, three belonged to al-Wafd, one to the Social Democratic party, and one to the Reform and Development party. Out of the 270 members of the Shura Council, only five women were elected - and eight later appointed by Morsi in December - bringing the total number of female representation to 4.8 percent. Of those elected, three women were also Muslim Sisterhood members, Susan Saad Zaghlol, Nagwa Gouda, and Wafaa Mashour, while two belonged to the al-Wafd party.

| | **Female MPs in the People's Assembly** | **District/Circle** | **Political Affiliation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Margret Azel | Cairo-2 | Al-Wafd |
| **2** | Sanaa Ahmad Gamal Eddine | Assiut-2 | Social Democratic Party |
| **3** | Hanan Sa'd abu al-Ghayt Hassan | Damietta | Al-Wafd |
| **4** | Azza Mohammad Ibrahim al-Gharf | Giza-2 | FJP |
| **5** | Magda Hassan al-Noweshy | Ismailia | Al-Wafd |
| **6** | Huda Mohammad Anwar Ghaneya | Qaluybia-2 | FJP |
| **7** | Siham Abdullatif Mohammad al-Gamal | Daqaliyya-1 | FJP |
| **8** | Reeda Abdallah Mohammad | Sharqia-1 | FJP |
| **9** | Fadeya Salem | North Sinai | Reform and Development |
| **10** | Susie Adly Nashed | Appointed | Independent |
| **11** | Marian Malak Kamal | Appointed | Independent |
| **12** | Hanna Gerges Grayss | Appointed | Independent |

**Table 3. Female Representation in the 2012 Egyptian People's Assembly.[46]**

[45] Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, *Report on Egyptian Woman Conditions in 2012* (Cairo: Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, 2012): 6. Available at http://ecwronline.org/?p=1743 [Henceforth: ECWR Report]

[46] Data were collected from Sallam, *Egypt's Parliamentary Elections*, 2013.

| | Female MPs in the Shura Council | District | Political Affiliation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Susan Saad Zaghlul Hassan Ahmad | Suez | FJP |
| **2** | Mervat Mohammad Hassan Abid | Monufeya | New Wafd |
| **3** | Nagwa Mohammad Gouda Mohammad | Fayyoum | FJP |
| **4** | Wafaa Mustafa Mashour Mashour | Assiut | FJP |
| **5** | Reeda Nour al-din Hussein Mohammad | Port Said | New Wafd |
| **6** | Eman amin Fadil Mohammad | Appointed | Al-Wasat |
| **7** | Susie Adly Nashid Gerges | Appointed | Independent |
| **8** | Fadya Salem Abdallah Salem | Appointed | Reform and Development |
| **9** | Laila Samy Mohammad Alalbany | Appointed | Independent |
| **10** | Mona Makram Ebeid | Appointed | Egyptian Social Democratic |
| **11** | Nadia Henry Beshara Gerges[47] | Appointed | Independent |
| **12** | Noha Mohammed Othman Mohammad Salameh | Appointed | Independent |
| **13** | Nelly Emile Faam Jacob | Appointed | Independent |

**Table 4. Female Representation in the 2012 Egyptian Shura Council.[48]**

Despite women's minor successes, it is interesting to note that the FJP, together with al-Wafd, was the one party that placed the highest number of female candidates in winnable positions. For example, Wafaa' Mashhur, the daughter of the fifth MB General Guide Mustafa Mashhur, was placed first in the FJP list for the Shura Council in Assiut while Azza al-Gharf listed fourth out of 12 in the FJP list for the People's Assembly in Giza. As these data reveal, however, nepotistic tendencies continued to prevail. Those women who were placed in higher positions in the lists continued in fact to enjoy family linkages to prominent MB male leaders, but not only. The Sisterhood candidates who were given greater chance to succeed were also those who displayed a stronger affinity with the MB in matters of both gender and political ideology. In addition, the FJP demonstrated to be ready to sacrifice its female candidates when it availed of a prominent male alternative in the same district. This was the case of influential Muslim Sisterhood cadres such as

[47] MP Nadia Gerges later resigned, bringing the total number of women in the Shura Council down to 12.

[48] Data were collected from the following sources: 'Al-Ahram Gate publishes the names of the winners of the final round of elections of the Shura Council,' *al-Ahram*, February 25, 2012. Available at http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/176776.aspx; and from 'Morsi formally announces the names of the appointed members of the Shoura Council,' a*l-Arabiyya*, December 23, 2012. Available at http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/23/256566.html

Manal Abu al-Hassan, for example, who was placed only fifth in the FJP list for the People Assembly in North Cairo, after having to relinquish her place to a male nominee.[49]

### 6.3.4 Muslim Sisterhood's Responses to the low Female Representation in Parliament

Despite previous attempts, it was the first time that the Sisters had managed to enter parliament upon popular vote. Therefore, they considered this a success regardless of the results. Most of them said to be committed to address women's low representation in parliament in future elections, albeit they held divergent opinions on how to do this. The Secretary General of the FJP Women's Section in South Cairo Sabah al-Saqqary, for example, considered the low female representation a consequence of the MB contesting elections as the leader of the Democratic Alliance, a situation that demanded some women to give up their places to members of the Alliance in respect of democratic and inclusive principles. To redress the situation she suggested adopting a zip-list female party quota in future elections, pointing to the successes of such a quota system for women in the case of Tunisia.[50] MP Azza al-Gharf also had wished for more women to enter parliament, but remained opposed to the adoption of any quota system. As she stated: 'I don't support positive discrimination in favour of women; I prefer that women rise politically as a result of their own efforts and work to change obsolete customs and traditions'.[51] Manal Abu al-Hassan, by then Secretary General of the FJP female section in North Cairo, considered Muslim Sisterhood's results a success, albeit still unsatisfactory. Her approach to redress the situation remained however peculiar, because it involved informal procedures. As she was reported saying:

> 'I made present to the leaders of the party of our low representation and I suggested that the Sisters could be present within the parliamentarian committees even informally. In the specific, I proposed to the party to associate a woman to each Member of Parliament to assist them in their work. This would enhance the presence of women in parliament, and allow women to gain experience in parliamentary affairs'.[52]

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[49] 'A debate between Dr. Manal Abu al-Hassan candidate of the Freedom and Justice Party and Margarite 'Azib, candidate of the al-Wafd Party', *[al-munathara bayn Duktura Manal Abu al-Hassan murshahat hizb al-Ikhwan wa Margarite 'Azib Murashahat Hizb al-Wafd]* YaQiyyn TV, YouTube, November 26, 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVvaT5Wqo3o

[50] 'Interview with Dr. Sabah al-Saqqary' *[Liqa' ma' D. Sabah al-Saqqary]*, al-Jazeera Mubasher, YouTube, October 3, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-FoGQIvur8

[51] '"Women's Fight" between Azza al-Gharf and Farida al-Shubashy' *[Ghinaqa sittat bayn Azza al-Gharf wa Farida al-Shubashy]*, Misrtokarer's Channel, YouTube, February 18, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUb6JKN93K4

[52] 'The secretary of women in the Brotherhood's party: we refuse to take part to the March women's protest because these promote a foreign agenda' *[Aminat al-mar'a fi hizb al-Ikhwan: rafadhna al-musharaka fi masyirat "Hara'ir Masr" li'anna al-musharikat fiha mamawalat wa*

Manal's suggestion is interesting because it reflects the secretive and informal character that had characterized the MB organization and its internal procedures for decades. It also alluded to the greater - but yet mostly invisible because of background - role that women already played in the MB organization.

### 6.3.5 The Muslim Sisterhood's Activism in Parliament

The post-uprising Egyptian parliament held its first session on January 23, 2012, only to be dissolved on June 23, 2012, following a ruling of the Egyptian High Constitutional Court (HCC) declaring it unconstitutional.[53] Because of its short-lived experience, the parliament was unable to produce abundant legislation. However, during this period there were several discussions which offer valuable material for analysis.[54]

During its six months of life, issues related to the martyrs of the revolution and to the need to restore security dominated parliamentary debates; the Sisters engaged in such discussions, generally sharing the views of their fellow Brothers. By January 2011, not one police officer had been brought to justice for the crimes committed against protestors during the 18 days of the uprisings. The military-led government had in fact no interest in establishing a fact-finding committee that would have likely exposed its own involvement. As early as February 1st, MP Azza al-Gharf suggested establishing a fact-finding committee autonomous from the Egyptian government, and setting up a fund to compensate the families of the martyrs of at least 100.000,00 Egyptian Pounds each (approximately 9.000 Euros).[55] The parliament brought the initiative forward and, after Morsi's election, submitted the relevant documentation to the judiciary, which, however, put the process to a halt.[56]

The Port Said clashes consisted of another issue – together with violence against civilians more broadly – that put the work of parliament to a test. During the derby between al-Ahly and al-Marsy

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*ladayhinn 'agenda ghasa']*, al-Sharq al-Awsat, January 14, 2012. Available at http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=658885&issueno=12100#.V_KFByErLcv

[53] 'Court ruling means dissolution of both chambers of Egypt Parliament,' *al-Ahram*, June 14, 2012. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/44898.aspx

[54] For a comprehensive overview of Egyptian parliamentary discussions between January and June 2012 see http://parliamenttoday.org/

[55] 'Watch how the Sisters speak in parliament' *[Shahidu kaif yatahadthna al-akhwat fi al-barlaman]*, YouTube, February 1, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXv-McV5M5w#aid=P-5rXC7qhFI

[56] Human Rights Watch, *Egypt: Publish Fact-Finding Committee Report* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2013). Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/24/egypt-publish-fact-finding-committee-report

football teams on February 1st, 2012, ultras from al-Masry blocked those of al-Ahly inside the stadium, attacking them, and allegedly killing more than 70 people while injuring over a thousand. At the time, police forces intentionally refrained from intervening as a way of punishing al-Ahly fans for the role they had played in the Port Said uprisings in early 2011.[57] The incident provoked an upsurge of protest across Egyptian civil society, which questioned the ability of the MB-led parliament to solve the mounting security situation in Egypt. In that occasion, MP Reeda Abdullah attributed the incident to the mounting corruption among Egyptian police forces, and called upon the Interior Ministry to intervene to reform such institution.[58] MP Hoda Ghonia, instead, demanded for the wounded to be transferred to medical facilities in Cairo so to prevent government officials from tarnishing evidence of police involvement in the clashes.[59]

The Sisters backed the Islamist camp also with regard to religious-related matters. After the uprisings, the clerics of al-Azhar al-Sharif requested the reversal of the 1961 law - previously passed by President Nasser - allowing the state to retain control over the budget of the institution and the appointment of its Grand Mufti.[60] The FJP had already expressed its desire to reform al-Azhar in the party platform. It was therefore no surprise that MP Susanne Sa'ad Zaghlul extended her support, and that of the FJP, to the requests of al-Azhar, claiming that the institution had always demonstrated to be a 'real promoter of women and a true model for moderate Islam'.[61]

Most crucially, in March the parliament remained still divided over the procedures to select the 100-member Constituent Assembly. Like the Brothers, the Sisters insisted that the distribution of the seats in the committee needed to replicate Egyptian political forces' representation in parliament. If applied, such system would have secured an Islamist majority, while limiting the role of Egyptian opposition forces in the constitutional drafting process. In the attempt to appease Egyptian opposition forces, the Sisters proposed for 25 out of the 100 members to be selected from the larger Egyptian community, albeit they failed to specify the criteria according to which these were to be selected. Notably, they also demanded the parliament to extend particular consideration to women when selecting the members of the Assembly, and to include a number of women which

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[57] Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, *The Port Said Massacre: the State Secures Safe Environment for the Murder of Innocents* (Cairo: Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2012). Available at http://www.cihrs.org/?p=1144&lang=en

[58] 'We need to reform the police forces' *[Labud min darurat tathyir jihaz al-shurta]*, SotelSha3b's Channel, YouTube, February 7, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjINnn2KWmA

[59] 'Hoda Ghonia during Parliament Emergency Session' *[Hoda Ghonia fii Jalsa Tari'a li al-Barlaman]*, Dr Hoda Ghania's Channel, YouTube, February 2, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHusi7NPLQU

[60] Noha El-Hennawy, [untitled], *Egypt Independent*, January 9, 2012. Available at http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/al-azhar-reform-draft-law-stirs-controversy

[61] 'Law al-Azhar al-Sharif,' *[Qanun al-Azhar al-Sharif]*, Parliament Today, YouTube, March 5, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0is3u3B7aqY

adequately reflected the roles and contributions that women bring to Egyptian society in 'critical as well as normal political times'.[62] When the parliament selected the members of the Constituent Assembly the first time in March 2012, these included only six women, of which two belonged to the FJP, Susan Sa'ad Zaghlul and Hoda Ghonia.[63]

During this period, there were also several discussions concerning amending the PSFL and other legislation related to women. Members of the Salafist al-Nour party raised the most restrictive proposals.[64] On one occasion, al-Nour members suggested to lower the age of marriage of girls from 18 to 16 on the ground that families in the countryside tended to marry their daughters early and that in a democratic state the law should accommodate all its citizens. A second suggestion concerned lowering the age of custody of children to 7 years for boys and 9 years for girls.[65] Such suggestions spurred national demonstrations from the part of the Egyptian feminist movement, which the state-led media helped to sustain through a heavy media campaign against Islamists.

Many Sisters criticised al-Nour's behaviour as 'petty nonsense',[66] while others accused it to 'deliberately plan to thwart the revolutionary parliament'.[67] Nevertheless, the Sisters also issued statements that the feminist movement considered 'worrying' for the future of women's rights in Egypt. MP al-Gharf, already known for her support of the classic MB patriarchal party line, became a primary target of the state-led media anti-Islamist campaign. In May 2012, al-Gharf attracted considerable media attention for having apparently proposed to decriminalize FGM.[68] FGM is still a widespread practice in Egyptian society, though it has no religious basis. In 2008 Egypt criminalised the practice, forbidding hospitals to carry out the operation. However, FGM persists outside hospitals, obviously leading to greater risks of infection transmitted diseases, as well as death, for girls subjected to the practice.[69] Apparently, al-Gharf advocated for decriminalizing FGM, on the ground that 'no one shall perform FGM outside hospitals and without

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[62] 'Siham al-Gamal: We must involve the larger community', *[Siham al-Gamal: yagib an tusharik nisba kabira min al-mujtama']*, On Ent, YouTube, March 3, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdoErKJ5S0A

[63] Gamal Essam el-Din, 'Final list of Constituent Assembly members', *al-Ahram*, March 26, 2016. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/37659.aspx

[64] Menna Omar, 'Women, Minorities and Marginalized groups in Egypt,' *The Legal Agenda*, June 16, 2014. Available at http://english.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=621&lang=en

[65] Since 2005, mothers held custody of their children until these reached 15 years of age, unless they remarried, and in which case they would lose their right to custody.

[66] Nour, interview(a).

[67] Nadia, interview.

[68] ECWR Report, 7.

[69] Mohammed A. Tag-Eldin et al., 'Prevalence of Female Genital Cutting among Egyptian Girls', *Bulletin of the World Health Organization 86*, no. 4 (April 2008): 241-320. Available at http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/4/07-042093/en/

consulting a competent doctor able to judge on the female need'.[70] Al-Gharf was also reported to have granted backing to al-Nour's proposal to abolish article 20/2000, granting women the right to unilateral divorce, or *khul'*.[71]

Muslim Sisterhood activists had long advocated against the *khul'* on the ground that it disrupts family life and induces men to refrain from entering marriage.[72] It is however important to mention that not all the Sisters agreed that *khul'* had to be abolished. Some of those women who did not receive media attention and remained out of politics during the period, considered in fact the law beneficial to women. As one Sister stated:

> 'One of the good things that Susanne Mubarak did was reforming the Family Code, because it made it very easy for women who are subjected to abuse to get a divorce and their allowance. One has to say what works for you and what works against you. This was a good thing'.[73]

Diverse worldviews concerning women's issues and legislations, therefore, also existed among the Sisters. The fact that those women who acquired public visibility tended to comply with the conservative MB party line, leaves open the possibility that those women felt compelled to conform to the views of the elder leadership in order to rise up to leadership positons themselves and maintain such roles, or that they were selected by the MB male leadership precisely on the basis of their gender views and demonstrated deference to the principles and values of the MB organisation.

Despite much discussion taking place, during this time the Islamist-led parliament managed to pass only one law concerning women. This provided state-paid health insurance for women heads of the households and their children. The law, drafted by the FJP and approved with a striking parliamentary majority on May 26, 2012,[74] was sponsored by the MB as the 'parliament's greatest achievement' in support of women's rights.[75] The Egyptian women's movement responded to the law by reiterating that this remained insufficient to solve women's issues, and by reaffirming

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[70] 'Egyptian society express its shock at 'Umm Ayman' statements about female genital mutilation', *[al-Masry al-igtima'y yu'rib 'an sadmatuhu min tasryihat "um Ayman" 'an khitan al-inath] Al-'Aqbat al-Muttahidun*, May 12, 2012. Available at http://www.copts-united.com/Article.php?I=1167&A=58950

[71] ECWR Report, 9.

[72] For more on the Sisterhood's position on the issue see chapter 5.

[73] Nour, interview(a).

[74] 'The People approve the Breadwinner Woman Law', *[al-sha'b yuwafiq niha'yan 'ala qanun al-mar'a al-mu'iyla], al-Youm al-Sabia'*, May 12, 2012. Available at https://goo.gl/JXCwK2

[75] 'Parliament's Greatest Achievement Support Rights of Female-Headed Households,' *Ikhwanweb*, May 28, 2012. Available at http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30028&ref=search.php

its demands for greater female representation in the political institutions of the state.[76] The Sisters, on the other hand, welcomed the law, and considered it a first step towards empowering a vast majority of lower-class women. As articulated by Nour in another statement:

> 'Laws concerning women and the family helped a lot. But what about the majority of women who spend all day on the streets selling vegetables for few pounds a month, or those who must work all day in worse jobs because their man are sleeping, taking it easy, or have no husbands? Laws promoting equality and most of those laws we have now are not of any use to these women, who, by the way, are the majority in the Egyptian society. If you want to develop the country you need to start taking care of the majority of its people, you need to empower the weak of Egypt. Morsi' government had this idea in mind'.[77]

The different reaction of the Egyptian women's movements and the Sisterhood to the law continued to highlight the diverse priorities driving the activism of the two, as well as the class-element that continued to characterise their support-base. While mainstream secular feminist movements endorsed elitist issues such as female representation in institutional politics and gender equality, the Sisters remained committed to a bottom-up approach to women's empowerment.

## 6.4 The Muslim Sisterhood during the Presidential Elections

The cause of the martyrs of the revolution acquired particular salience during the presidential elections. The army continued to dominate the transitional process, threatening the possibility of a throughout investigation on the use of state violence against protestors during the 18 days of the revolution to be carried out. The Sisters appealed to the iconic role of women as mothers of the martyrs to mobilize the female members in support of the MB's presidential campaign. They framed the success of the MB in the elections as necessary to attain justice for women and their martyred sons, and to accomplish the goals of the January 25th Revolution.

The MB presidential campaign was inaugurated by the FJP Women's Section with a conference titled 'Our Martyrs are the Light of our Renaissance' (*Shuhada'una Nur Nahudatuna*), on April 6, 2012. The session delivered an atmosphere heavily charged with emotions. A male member opened the event by reciting a poem. In the verses, he personified a revolutionary martyr asking his mother to forgive him for the pain he had caused her, and inviting her to carry on the struggle for their beloved Egypt. Throughout the recitation, the female attendees across the room cried, raising portraits of their lost sons with their arms. Directly after, Hoda Abd el-Moniem

[76] ECWR Report, 7.
[77] Nour, interview(a).

delivered a speech praising women's past role in resisting regime's oppression, and highlighting the importance of women's participation in re-building a new Egypt. At her back, a massive poster depicting Khairat al-Shater and Mohammad Morsi, the two MB presidential candidates, hung from the wall. Below are el-Moniem words:

> 'The FJP believes that women had a major role in igniting the revolution. Theirs was a struggle of resistance. Women have been captive of oppression for so many years. Yet, they have been able to resist and make use of their oppression to increase their knowledge and awareness with regard to the causes of their oppression. […] Women will be successful in finding the necessary tools to rebuild this *ummah*, and lead Egypt once again to its position of strength and leadership. This *Nahda* requires a solution grounded on Islam for peace, law, and constitutional legitimacy'.[78]

Manal Abu al-Hassan led a second talk praising tribute to the MB presidential candidates. She said:

> 'The FJP took the decision to contest the presidential election due to the obstacles that hinder the revolution's goals. It introduced two loyal candidates. They both have a program to help Egypt and uphold women's rights. Their objective is to help women to overcome those difficulties that prevent them from playing an effective role in public life, while helping them to maintain a balance between their duties at home and these towards society'.[79]

During the presidential elections, the young Sisters, like the senior Sisterhood activists, conducted their campaign primarily from within the spaces of the FJP, leaving streets activism to the men. For the occasion, many young women took up roles in the Media and Foreign Relations Committees of the FJP, leading a considerable part of the Morsi's internet and media campaigns, or acting as official ambassadors of the to-be-president abroad.[80] Several young Sisters were responsible to convey Morsi's presidential platforms and initiate formal relationships with state representatives of countries such as Poland, Malaysia, Turkey, Tunisia, and the USA. Since the establishment of the FJP, the MB youth had complained of their marginal role in the party and their exclusion from leadership positions. As stated by one of the Sisters involved in the Foreign Relation Committee at the time, the greater role attributed to the youth in such committees

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[78] 'Mohammad Morsi and Khairat al-Shater at the General Conference', *[Mohammad Morsi wa Khairat al-Shater fi mu'tamar 'alamy]* Part 3, YaQiyyn TV, YouTube, April 19, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pgVn0HvDm0&nohtml5=False

[79] 'Mohammad Morsi and Kairath al-Shater at the General Conference', *[Mohammad Morsi wa Khairat al-Shater fi mu'tamar 'alamy],* Part 5, YaQiyyn TV, YouTube, April 19, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jbauuenv-4Q&nohtml5=False

[80] Safiya, interview.

consisted of the MB response to the demands of the youth for greater political participation and leadership.[81]

Nevertheless, the MB's promotion of women to leadership positions continued to take place within limits. When Morsi staged his bid for the presidency, Sabah al-Saqqary proposed herself for the post of FJP Chairman by then left vacant by Morsi. In an interview with the channel al-Jazeera, al-Saqqary stated that the FJP posed no restrictions to women for this role, and that it was therefore her right to aim to the post, also affirming her belief that the FJP would have chosen the next Chairman based on the candidates' competencies, and not gender. In her move, al-Saqqary hoped to be as a model for those women who wished to play a greater political role in Egyptian society. As part of her programme, she expressed her commitment to further the role of women and youth in the party, as well as campaigning for the adoption of a mandatory zip-list female party quota in the next elections.[82] Al-Saqqary was not elected. In her bid, she competed against two leading MB male figures, Essam el-Arian and Saad al-Katatny, then elected to the post of FJP president and vice-president respectively.

### 6.4.1 The Presidential 'Initiative to Support the Rights and Freedoms of Egyptian Women'

On June 30, 2012, Mohammad Morsi became the first democratically elected civilian president in the history of Egypt. Morsi had run a highly contested election against the retired-general and ex-Mubarak ally Ahmed Shafik, successfully securing the presidency with 13,230,131 votes, just over 51.73 percent.[83] On June 25, he took a symbolic oath before thousands of Egyptians grouped in Tahrir square, promising to be a president for all Egyptians, to uphold to the aims of the revolution, protect the rights of all people, and turn Egypt into a modern civil state. [84] In addition to that, as early as June 6, Morsi had entered a commitment with the Egyptian feminist movement, promising to improve women's rights and freedoms during his presidency if it was elected.[85]

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[81] 'Naseba Ashraf Talks About Women', *[Naseeba Ashraf fi tamthylna li al-mar'a]*, YouTube, June 12, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1c4B6WYmN8

[82]'Interview with Dr. Sabah al-Saqqary', *[Liqa' ma' D. Sabah al-Saqqary]*, al-Jazeera Mubasher, YouTube, October 3, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-FoGQIvur8

[83] The Carter Centre, *Presidential Election in Egypt*: *Final Report*, (Atlanta: The Carter Centre, 2012). Available at https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/egypt-final-presidential-elections-2012.pdf

[84] 'President Mohammed Morsi's Speech in Tahrir Square, 29 June 2012,' Ikhwanweb, June 30, 2012. Available at http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30153

[85] 'Words from Dr. Omaima Kamel', *[Kalimat al-Duktura Omaima Kamel]*, YouTube, June 6, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ylex0zzN7d4

Not far down the line from his speech, however, Morsi forced a constitutional-drafting process through a majoritarian Islamist-Salafist Constituent Assembly. The 2012 constitution granted the army further powers and, according to the Egyptian feminist movement, failed to adequately protect women's rights. In the 1971 Egyptian constitution, former article 11 provided that 'The State shall guarantee harmonization between the duties of woman towards the family and her work in the society, ensuring her equal status with man in fields of political, social, cultural and economic life without violation of the rules of Islamic jurisprudence'. Article 10 of the 2012 Constitution, removed the reference to 'equality' in the text, stating instead that 'The family is the basis of the society and is founded on religion, morality and patriotism. The State is keen to preserve the genuine character of the Egyptian family, its cohesion and stability, and to protect its moral values, all as regulated by law. The State shall ensure maternal and child health services free of charge, and enable the reconciliation between the duties of a woman towards her family and her work. The State shall provide special care and protection to female breadwinners, divorced women and widows'. [86] The constitution rendered instead equality a funding principle of the new state in its preamble, albeit it failed to qualify equality as gender equality, or to make explicit reference to the principle of non-discrimination of its citizens on the basis of sex.[87] For a majority of Egyptian feminist activists, human rights NGOs, and local and international observers, such a lack of specification, together with the weak wording used in the constitutional texts to refer to the rights of women, rendered women's rights opened to possible violations and expropriation.[88]

To recover the relationship with the Egyptian feminist movement and civil society actors, Morsi made himself promoter of the 'Initiative to Support the Rights and Freedoms of Egyptian Women' - (*Mubadara d'am Huquq wa Hurriyat al-Mar'a al-Masrya)* - officially inaugurated on March 26, 2013. Morsi endorsed the initiative as representing the beginning of a new era in the way the Egyptian government was going to deal with women-related legislations, one that supported true democratic procedures and was inclusive of the perspectives of a broad based society. As he stated:

> 'The time of top-down politics is over. From today, we will operate according to truly democratic procedures, where every Egyptian citizen has a role in the making of its future, so that every Egyptian citizen can feel that their opinions

[86] Brown and Dunne, *Egypt's Draft Constitution*.
[87] Ellen McLarney, 'Women's Rights and Equality: Egyptian Constitutional Law,' in *Women's Movements in Post-"Arab Spring" North Africa*, edited by Fatima Sadiqi, 109-126 (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2016).
[88] Amnesty International, *Egypt's New Constitution Limits Fundamental Freedoms and Ignores the Rights of Women* (Egypt: Amnesty International, 2012). Available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2012/11/egypt-s-new-constitution-limits-fundamental-freedoms-and-ignores-rights-women/

and visions are reflected in the decision and policies that government authorities take and implement, at all levels'.[89]

The initiative aimed at bringing civil society actors and state institutions together to work on women's issues and eventually produce a package of recommendations and laws to better the situation of women on six broad areas. These were harassment, women's political, economic and social rights, women's representation in the media, and furthering co-operation between women's NGOs. Over 170 representatives from various sectors of Egyptian society and political backgrounds joined the initiative, including independent activists, political parties, syndicates, academics, bureaucrats, NGO's, GOs, and HR organization, the NCW, the IICWC, the Egyptian Population Council, representatives of the State Information Services, the National Council for Sociological and Criminological Research and, for the first time, representatives of the youth.

The MB was ousted from power by the military on July 3, 2013, only few weeks later the initiative was launched, making therefore impossible to know with certainty what the outcome of the initiative would have been. By then, only one workshop had been held, that on harassment, on April 1st, 2013. MP Hoda Ghonia's intervention at the workshop provides some insight on what the MB approach to the issues could have been. In response to the mounting problem of harassment plaguing Egyptian women since the uprisings, Ghonia envisaged a bottom-up approach that re-valorised the role of the family and the religious institutions during the phase of upbringing and education of children.[90] Albeit the importance of education in tackling issues of gender and women's violence in Egypt is paramount and cannot be denied, Ghonia's intervention reflected the characteristic approach of the MB to society, whereby long-term cultural and educational reforms acquired a priority before short-term legal interventions.

In addition, one could have imagined the kind of women's policies Morsi's government was more likely to promote when knowing that the MB looked at Turkey as a model for state feminism in Egypt. Omaima Kamel, Morsi's personal advisor on women's affairs, used to state this very clearly in her interviews with Turkish television channels during Morsi's presidential campaign. As she was reported saying once: 'We always place ahead of us the Turkish model. It is a very civilized model of political Islam. It was successful in building a strong country and a strong

[89] 'Initiative for the Rights and Freedoms of Egyptian Women', *[Mubadara d'am huquq wa hurriyat al-mar'a al-masrya]*, SupportEgyWomen, YouTube, March 26, 2013. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0p0JXjT_MZk

[90] 'Dr. Omaima Kamel and Dr. Hoda Ghonia on harassment', *[Dr. Omaima Kamel wa Dr. Hoda Ghonia qissa al-taharrush]*, NCWegypt, YouTube, April 13, 2013. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fo6C0wUVwl4

economy […] and in granting women's freedom at the same time'.[91] In the last ten years, ex-Prime Minister and current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sponsored women's legislations which assumed an increasing familial, pro-natal, and conservative character.[92] Even if only a conjecture, were the Islamists to remain in power, it is likely that Morsi's government would have also promoted legislation that placed the welfare of the family - and women's position within it - as its priorities.

### 6.4.2 Muslim Sisterhood Activism from within the FJP

Throughout the years 2011-2013, the Sisters run several initiatives from within the new spaces of the FJP. These aimed at promoting Islamic identity, and the ideal woman role that the MB envisioned for the future Egyptian nation. This emphasised women's roles as mothers and educators of the new generations, and the complementarity of roles between men and women. As Manal Abu al-Hassan announced to a large audience of women attending a Sisterhood conference organised by the FJP Women's Section on March 8, 2012:

> 'The Muslim Brotherhood believes that women are not in conflict with men, but that both walk together towards the same path, in a relationship that is not based on equality, but on the responsibility for women to be truthful and devoted wives, and for men to be caring husbands'.[93]

All through the period, the politicisation of motherhood and the family, together with charity and religious work, continued to be a key strategy employed by the Sisters to mobilise women into activism in support of the MB and the FJP. During women's conferences, the Sisters continued to portray previous reforms to the PSFL as responsible for having damaged the family, and led to the emergence of rampant social problems such as late marriages, divorces, and extra-marital relationships. Correspondingly, restoring the family of its Islamic values was framed as the key to re-building a successful Egyptian society. By playing a central role within their families, women were by design supporting Egypt towards its *Nahda* – renaissance. This is why promoting motherhood, was a core concern of the FJP's Women Committees.

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[91] 'Dr. Omaima Kamel responds to the fears and concerns of women', *[Dr. Omaima Kamel tarud 'ala al-shubuhat wa al-muatharat haula malaf al-mar'a]*, YouTube, June 12, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBmiv5h8fuE

[92] Zeynep K. Korkman, 'Politics of Intimacy in Turkey: a distraction from "real" politics?' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 2016): 112-121.

[93] Ahmad 'Awys, 'The women of the Brotherhood do not talk politics at their first conference,' *[Nisa' al-Ikhwan fi mu'tamarhunn al-'awal: la hadyth fi al-syasa]*, *Al-Shuruq*, March 9, 2012. Available at https://goo.gl/iYH3yM

Strategically, the Sisters availed of national recurrences to promote their own version of ideal Muslim woman and Islam as an alternative value system for Egyptian society. In occasion of International Woman's Day on March 30, 2013, for example, the FJP Women's Committee rented the entire area of the Pyramids of Giza to host a 'Day to Honour Ideal Mothers and the Mothers of the Martyrs'.[94] Similar celebrations along the year were also held in the country side, and at the outskirts of capital Cairo, albeit these were more modest in style.[95] Charity activities such as collective visits to orphanages,[96] contests of Qur'anic recitations for children,[97] and workshops aimed at promoting the development of female-led small businesses and crafting skills among women,[98] also continued to be central to Muslim Sisterhood's activism in the FJP during this period.

From with the FJP, the Sisters worked also at establishing formal relations with women's committees of other Islamist parties across the MENA region, and with the female sections of the Tunisian Ennahda and the Turkish Justice and Development Party (JDP) in particular. These meetings aimed at favouring cooperation between likeminded activists committed to boost Muslim women's roles and identity in post-uprising societies. As early as January 2012, for example, a delegation of Muslim Sisterhood members of the FJP led by Kamilia Hilmi, visited the woman's section of the Tunisian Ennahda movement. For the occasion, the Sisters delivered a series of lectures suggesting ways to 'encourage Tunisian women to reach their full potential following the revolution', and reviewing 'methods to restore the Islamic identity into the family unit [this] previously lost to processes of westernization'.[99]

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[94] 'The Freedom and Justice Party celebrate mothers', *[Ihtifal Hizb al-Hurryia wa al-'Adala bi'ayid al-'um]*, Mohammad Morgan, YouTube, March 30, 2013. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDYYzZE1UwI

[95] 'Ceremony to honour ideal mothers', *[Hafl takryim al-ummahat al-mithalyat]*, Markaz Waqry Ishmoun,YouTube, March 16, 2013. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEQHu1HyhS8

[96] 'The Women Secretariat visits the 'School of Hope for deaf and dumb' in Ashmun', *[Zyarat amanat al-mar'a li-madrasat al-'amal li al-sum wa al-bukm bi'ashmun]*, Markaz Waqry Ishmoun, You Tube, April 13, 2013. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxfv-ggqUAA

[97] Nour, interview(a).

[98] 'Freedom and Justice Party in Alexandria teaches women how to craft', *[al-Hurryia wa al-'Adala yu'alim nisa' wa fatayat gharb al-Iskandarya maharat yadawiya]*, *Alexnews*, March 8, 2012. Available at https://goo.gl/TdKPU4

[99] 'Ennahda Movement Host FJP Women Delegation in Tunisia,' *Ikhwanweb*, January 19, 2012. Available at http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=29573

### 6.4.3 Muslim Sisterhood's Relationship with the Egyptian Feminist Movement and the Revolutionary Movement

After the uprisings, women continued to be a considerable part of the activists who regularly took to the streets during the phase of transition. Many female activists had fell victims of state violence, were arrested, killed, tortured, and sexually assaulted, because of their participation. In addition to siding with the revolutionary movement in broader political matters, Egyptian women demanded comprehensive gender reforms, challenged the army abuses against female protestors, including the use of 'virginity tests', and called for the government to intervene on the mounting issue of sexual harassment that had plagued Egypt since after the uprisings.

The Sisters never joined ranks with the Egyptian feminist movement during this period. When it occurred, co-operation between the two movements ensued only from personal initiatives. On December 21, 2011, for example, when the feminist movement organised a march in protest of women violence following the notorious case of the 'Blue Bra Girl',[100] the Sisters refrained from joining the demonstration. On the contrary, those who enjoyed greater public visibility because of their position criticised the actions of the secular women's movement, accusing Egyptian feminists to uphold a foreign agenda, and push forward their narrow interest. Take for example Manal Abu al-Hassan's statements in defence of the non-participation of the Sisters to the December 21st demonstration:

> 'The March of the Egyptian feminist movement is a sectarian march. Women's rights are of concern for the whole of society; it is not up to women alone to defend them […] A woman should never aim to defend her rights alone because when she does this is an affront to her dignity. Doesn't she have a husband, a son, or a brother to defend her? I have refused to take part in the march because those who took part to it did not originally take part to the revolution, but are women funded from abroad to pursue their own agenda'.[101]

To this statement, al-Hassan added:

> 'Also, Tahrir Square is no longer a place for rebels. Elements from other groups and with other purposes have taken their place in there. These are the same

[100] For more information on the 'Blue Bra Girl' incident see Ahdaf Soueif, 'Image of unknown woman beaten by Egypt's military echoes around world,' *The Guardian*, December 18, 2011. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/18/egypt-military-beating-female-protester-tahrir-square

[101] 'The secretary of women in the Brotherhood's party: we refuse to take part to the March women's protest because these promote a foreign agenda', *[Aminat al-mar'a fi hizb al-Ikhwan: rafadhna al-musharaka fi masyirat "Hara'ir Masr" li'anna al-musharikat fiha mamawalat wa ladayhinn 'agenda ghasa']*, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 14. Available at http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=658885&issueno=12100#.V_KFByErLcv

> group of people involved in the events of Mohammad Mahmoud and Maspero clashes, and who distort the image of Tahrir and the revolution, and live in tents and impurity. This is not a manifestation of the ethics of the revolution. They turned Tahrir into an environment for spreading irregularities. The revolution is not that'.[102]

As this reaction clearly reveals, these Sisters reflected attitudes similar to that of the MB towards not only the feminist movement, but also the revolutionaries, who they treated as part of the same group of outsiders. For them, the revolution had already led to major outcomes. Mubarak was removed, and a new political era had begun. From that point onwards, all sort of protests in the streets were considered counterproductive to the advancement of this new era and the re-establishment of political stability. The youth had to returned to their lives as prior to the revolution, and leave to the elders the task of dealing with the regime and leading Egypt towards the transition. At best, they could have participated, but within the terms and rules set for them by the MB, confined to a role of support for the new political cast.

## 6.5 Conclusions

As the chapter highlighted, the Muslim Sisterhood benefited considerably from the opening up of the Egyptian political space. Following the 2011 uprisings, women expanded their participation to the newly established MB-led Freedom and Justice Party, as well as Egyptian society at large. Also, some Sisters gained office in the Egyptian parliament and government for the first time, acquiring greater public visibility and political experience as a consequence. Yet, similarly to the situation they already faced in the MB movement, women continued to be excluded from the higher political offices of the FJP.

Women consisted of a considerable number of the FJP funders, activists, and supporters, but their participation remained confined to separate women-only sections; only occasionally women were included into additional party committees. In addition, only in one instance the FJP considered including one woman into its Executive Office, Kamilia Hilmi. Hilmi's resignation six months later, together with the failure of the FJP to elect al-Saqqary to the post of party Chairman, meant that women remained absent from the higher leadership offices of the party. This state of affairs limited the ability of the Sisters to influence the political decision-making process of the FJP, and constrained women's possibilities to make their voices heard at the level of the higher leadership.

[102] Ibid.

Despite the short-lived experience of the FJP, women made efforts to acquire greater roles and influence in its structure. Following the success of the parliamentary elections, to which women had greatly contributed, the younger Sisters took the chance to object to their continued marginalisation, and advocated for expanding their presence in additional offices of the FJP. The party addressed the demands of the young women in occasion of the presidential elections, leading to a number of Sisters to be included in the Media and Foreign Relations Committees of the FJP during Morsi's presidential campaign.

The majority of the Sisters who entered institutional political offices during this period seemed to conform to the MB's party line, including its gender discourse. This continued to put emphasis on women's motherhood roles, and promoting women's activism in areas related to the family and the promotion of an Islamic identity. Women's political participation was also supported, but only to the extent that furthered the ideal role that the MB envisaged for women. Two elements best explain the fact that those Sisters who acquired greater public visibility at the time complied with the overarching ideology and gender discourse of the MB. One is the monopoly that a conservative and Salafi-leaning leadership continued to enjoy over the MB movement and, once the opportunity for greater political participation opened for the MB, also in the FJP and the institutions of the state seized by the movement. The second is the rigid, nepotistic, and hierarchical structure of the MB organisation, which fostered the participation and leadership of those members who acquiesce to the movement's creeds and objectives, penalising instead those who disregard or defy its directives.

In this respect, the chapter demonstrates that political opportunities can work as a catalyst for women's political participation and empowerment also in male dominated organizations such as Islamist movements, although the inclusion of women does not necessarily translates into a genuine power sharing between the male leaders and the women. Opportunity structures are, therefore, gendered.

The exclusivist and authoritarian attitudes embraced by the MB towards the youth and other Egyptian political forces during this period, together with the reformist approach to political change adopted by its leadership, were not, however, uniformly supported across the movement. Several members opposed them, including some women who disagreed with many of the decisions that the MB took while in power. Yet, the views and voices of these members continued to be marginalised by the movement, and within the structure of the FJP. This state of affairs stimulated a reaction by the part of some Sisters, who found in informal activist circles an alternative space to raise their criticism against the conservative leadership and push for greater reforms. As chapter seven illustrates, it is in fact within informal activist circles that a more profound 'Sisterhood Revolution' took place during the same period.

# Chapter 7 – Muslim Sisterhood's Activism at the Margins of Institutional politics

## Introduction

This chapter investigates the effect of the opening up of the political opportunity structure on Muslim Sisterhood's activism in the informal activist circles of the MB movement, and therefore outside the institutional political offices occupied by the leadership during the years 2012 and 2013. While doing so, the chapter takes into consideration the internal cleavages at play in the MB, focusing on the generational divide as the most relevant. Ideological differences and splits internal to the MB movement are generally found along generational lines. However, the emergence of an alliance between a large base of young Sisterhood members and some of their senior female cadres, proved decisive to the ability of the Sisters to bring about changes to the position of women within the movement during this period. More crucially, this intra-generational alliance between younger and senior Sisters was central to the ability of some senior Sisterhood cadres to emerge into a position of leadership in the MB following the ousting of the group from power in 2013.

First, the chapter discusses the main issues - of both ideological and strategic nature - at the basis of the divide between the older MB leadership and its youth at the eve of the 2011 uprisings. It then explains how the opening up of the political opportunity structure exacerbated such divisions. Although the youth was the catalyst force that spurred the uprisings on the wave of which the MB gained political power, the youth continued to be excluded from the decision-making offices of the movement, as well as the party. Also, after the uprisings the youth had wished for quick and radical change, while the older leaders continued to prioritize a reformist, and slow pace approach, which accommodated, rather than challenged, the old power elites and the Egyptian army.

Next, the chapter illustrates how the alliance between the younger and the senior Muslim Sisterhood came about. This alliance was more broadly nurtured by the sharing of common grievances among both generations of Sisters towards the MB leadership. Activists of both ages agreed that the youth should have had a greater leadership role during the transitional phase, or at least that their concerns should have been better addressed. Also, these activists complained about the inability of the leadership to promote revolutionary change, even after Morsi was elected President. The MB inadvertently fostered unity between the young Sisters and the senior cadres

when it introduced in 2011 a new internal by-law allowing the young Sisters to elect their cadres in the women's sections of the MB movement.

Lastly, the chapter discusses some of the initiatives that were carried out by the younger Sisters within the informal female-only spaces of the MB movement, and which took place with the approval of their newly elected women cadres. These initiatives provided the young Sisters with a certain degree of decision-making that they normally lacked within the structure of the MB movement. As it will be argued, these initiatives – of which the young Sisters were the main advocates – testify to the growing desires of the younger female members for greater emancipation, leadership, and gender balance within the movement.

## 7.1 The Muslim Brotherhood Generational Structure: the generational divide explained

The MB movement claims a legacy of over 80 years of activism during which different generations followed one another leaving a mark of their presence. As different generations experienced different periods of the history of Egypt and the region, they developed diverging ideological positions on, and strategical preferences towards, similar issues. This section provides an overview of the generational structure of the MB movement. In particular, what divides the MB youth from their older leaders is examined at both the ideological and strategic level. Also, this section analyses how these differences have been exacerbated by the events connected to the uprisings.

Al-Anani identifies four main generations of activists in the MB movement.[1] The first generation is known as the 'old guard'. These are the founding fathers of the MB, and are its 'most conservative members […] ideologically, politically, and religiously'.[2] The conservatism of the old guard leads them to put greater emphasis on 'underground missionary work and other forms of ideological outreach rather than [direct] political action'.[3] Their main concern is that of guaranteeing the 'movement's survival and the institutional preservation of the Brotherhood cohesive organization'.[4] The fact that they have lived in a time when Egyptian governments used the MB to counter the rise of leftist political forces, also rendered the old guard more inclined to bargaining political gains with the regime at the expenses of other partisan groups. At the time of the political opening, they were all aged between 60 and 80 years old, and occupied the highest

[1] Al-Anani, *The Young Brotherhood in Search of a New Path*, 96-109.
[2] Ibid., 98.
[3] Ibid., 98-99.
[4] Ibid., 98.

leadership offices of the MB movement, to which they claimed a legitimate right on the basis of the sacrifices they endured for the movement during the repression of the 1950s and 1960s.

The second generation is known as the pragmatists or, as these members prefer to be named, 'reformists' (*islahy*).[5] These individuals comprise of a large cohort of university activists affiliated to the Islamist group *al- Jama'a al-Islamia* in the 1970s, and who joined the MB during its comeback on the political scene at the time. The MB worked to include these members in the movement hoping to make use of their political skills to regain ground in Egypt after the organization had been severely crushed as a result of the 1950s and 1960s repression. Because of their long experience as political activists, reformists tended to uphold more moderate views in matters of political pluralism, and civil and political rights of women and religious minorities, and sought political inclusion with a higher degree of pragmatism and professionalism. At the time of the uprisings, they were all in their 50s and 60s, and occupied leading positions in the Freedom and Justice party (FJP), the MB political wing, to which they claimed their right on the basis of the elected positions they had held in the past in the MB movement, as well as in the parliament, syndicates, and professional associations.[6]

Third generation members are known as 'neo-traditionalists'. They are individuals who matured their activists' careers during the time of the MB's political engagement under the Mubarak regime in the 1990s. A majority of these members had grown disillusioned of political participation as a consequence of the repression that Mubarak exercised against the movement in the same decade. Similarly to the old guard, therefore, they also favoured ideological and religious outreach to the expenses of political participation. In 2011, most of these members were in their 40s and 50s, and 'dominate[d] the organization's various administrative bureaus and mid-level leadership positions in the provinces'.[7]

The fourth generation comprises of the MB-youth. These are the youngest Brotherhood and Sisterhood members, a majority of which are sons and daughters of MB affiliates. At the time of the uprisings they were all in their 20s and 30s or younger, and counted for approximately 35 to 50 percent of the total MB movement.[8] Like their peers, these young individuals have grown at a time of vivid political unrest characterising Egypt since the mid-2000. Within universities, they socialised and learned to cooperate on common issues with other youth movements. Their greater access to alternative sources of information, thanks to the growth of the Internet and social media,

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[5] Martini, Jeffrey et al., 'The Muslim Brotherhood, its youth, and implications for U.S. engagement.' (USA: National Defense Research Institute, 2012): 42 [Henceforth: RAND Report]. Available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND_MG1247.pdf

[6] RAND Report, 36.

[7] Al-Anani, *The Young Brotherhood in Search of a New Path*, 99.

[8] It is estimated that the MB counts a total membership of between 600.000 to 700.000 individuals, of which 240.000 are MB-youth members. RAND Report, 10.

exposed them to different sociological processes, a situation that made them 'more intellectually curious and open than the elder Brothers',[9] and more action-oriented than their leadership.

On the eve of the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, the main issue of contention between the MB-youth and their leaders concerned what the two groups believed the movement's first mission should have been. While the elders continued to privilege religious outreach (*da'wa*) to reform society, the youth favoured direct political action, and considered the religious orientation of their elders as the biggest obstacle of the MB, preventing the movement from establishing a political party able to support civil and political liberties of all citizens, including the youth themselves. In addition, the youth complained about their lack of leadership and representation in the decision-making offices of the movement. They criticised the MB for promoting members to leadership positions on the basis of personal qualities such as loyalty and abidance to the principles of the organization, rather than because of leadership and political skills. Also, the youth complained about the lack of a direct channel of communication between the youth base and the leadership.

Reality is of course more complicated than what is suggested herein, and neither the youth nor the older generational groups hold homogeneous opinions. Young members who hold very conservative views are present along with older cadres who are more open minded than how they are usually portrayed. The geographical origins of members complicate these generational typologies further. As widely recognised, MB rural members tend in fact to be more conservatives and salafi-oriented when compared to their urban peers.[10] While acknowledging diversity and heterogeneity, it is however correct to say that a majority of young and urban MB activists are today more inclined to think in terms of civil liberties when compared to their older leaders, who instead remain attached to the romantic ideal of establishing an Islamic state.[11] It follows that, at the time of the uprisings, a large number of the MB-youth had more in common with the secular, liberal, and leftist revolutionary-youth movements rather than with their older leaders.

The uprisings exacerbated these generational divides further for several reasons but, most importantly, because they provided the youth with a legitimate claim to the leadership, which they had lacked before then. The MB-youth played a major role in the uprisings. They were among the first group to join ranks with the revolutionaries in Tahrir Square on the eve of the January 25th Revolution. Together with the revolutionaries, they helped defending the square from police attacks throughout the 18 days of the sit-ins. They were also those who pushed their leaders to support and join the demonstrations. Following the fall of Mubarak, the youth acted as foot soldiers for the MB. The MB-Youth mobilized rallies to propagate the MB message to the Egyptian people, campaigned

[9] Al-Anani, *The Young Brotherhood in Search of a New Path*, 99-100.
[10] RAND Report, 33.
[11] For an excellent analysis of MB ideology and its implication for the movement's rise and fall from power in Egypt see Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*.

for the MB candidates, and secured the polling stations on the days of voting. Hence, the youth considered itself the catalyst of change which eventually allowed the MB to gain political power in Egypt and, consequently, claimed leadership in the movement based on this role.

While the older MB cadres acknowledged the role of the youth in the revolution, they framed it as part of a broader popular movement that the MB leaders themselves had helped to bring forth thanks to their previous 80 years of social and religious activism.[12] Such framing was convenient to the older leaders because it freed them from the duty of having to share power with the younger activists, and allowed them to sanction their role as the legitimate guardians of the transition once again. Throughout the whole period of transition, in fact, the youth lacked any sort of representation in the institutional offices that the MB accessed after the uprisings. Moreover, the participation of the youth in the movement continued to be moulded to 'the principle of "listen and obey", preserving their status as "cogs in a wheel that is turned by senior leaders"'.[13]

The MB leaders' political managing of the transition, also contributed to estrange the MB-youth from the movement even further. The youth criticized the authoritarian attitudes that the MB leaders continued to display towards its members. In particular, the MB-Youth disapproved of the MB decision to expel from the movement those members who had joined other political parties, established their own party, or supported decisions that the older leaders objected.[14] They protested the lack of coherence in the leadership's political actions, which they believed had led to a significant loss of popular support for the movement after the uprisings. For example, the youth questioned the MB's decision to file a candidate in occasion of the presidential elections after having publicly promised not to do so. Like other youth revolutionary movements, the relationship between the younger members and the MB leadership suffered further estrangement when, soon after the 18 days of protest, the MB old guard entered a deal with the SCAF for political power, whereby the MB agreed to deflate the uprisings by recalling its members off the streets 'in return for a larger share of the political pie'.[15] Finally, and most importantly, the MB-youth diverged from its leaders on the nature of change sought. While the MB leadership remained faithful to a reformist approach, the youth sought quick and revolutionary change.

During this period, a number of MB middle-rank cadres also grew increasingly disillusioned as a consequence of the actions of the MB leadership. These were members who had had only a marginal political involvement until then, but who grew increasingly politicised because of the events that engulfed the movement after the uprisings. Some of these cadres were Muslim Sisterhood members who occupied middle-rank positions in the religious outreach apparatus of the

[12] RAND Report, 37.
[13] RAND Report, x.
[14] El-Sherif, *Egypt's New Islamists: Emboldening Reform from Within*.
[15] Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, 137.

MB movement. The proximity of these female cadres to the younger generations of MB activists allowed them to empathise with the claims of the youth, and to strive to maintain unity between the MB and its youth base during this phase. The following section explores the major grievances that both the young Sisterhood and their cadres held towards the movement, and which were at the basis of the alliance that developed between the youth and some of their cadres during this period.

### 7.2 Morsi...'Not Revolutionary Enough'!

Although since the mid-2000 scholars paid increasing attention to the role of the youth in the MB movement and their grievances,[16] studies investigating whether the Sisters share the criticism of their fellow Brothers towards the leadership are lacking.[17] Interviews with the young female members of the MB movement revealed that the young Sisters are sensitive to the internal debates taking place in the organization, and that since the uprisings the Sisters are an integral part of the group of MB-youth who had broken the internal taboos in place, and begun to voice openly their complaints against the leadership. Although the hierarchical structure of the MB organization made it hard for both Brothers and Sisters to raise their criticism against the older leadership, for the Sisters it is more difficult to break such taboos. This is because the movement holds different expectations for men and women. While both genders are expected to comply with the principles and rules of the organisation, objections from male members tend to be considered a 'healthy sign of difference in opinions'.[18] Women, instead, are expected from a young age to be supportive, faithful, and obedient towards their male counterparts, even in situation of disagreements.[19] For this reason, the Sisters are in general more reluctant to speak out against the organization. What facilitated the opposite at the time was the general sentiment of frustration which pervaded the movement after its ousting from power in 2013, and which rendered the Sisters more willing to express their bitterness towards the political failures of the MB leadership.

Several of those interviewed considered the generational divides in place in the organization a reflection of a broader generational struggle pervading Egyptian society. Young Egyptians, they claimed, had grown increasingly frustrated with having to comply with the decisions of their elders, whom they considered for most part unable of understanding their

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[16] Marc Lynch, 'Young Brothers in Cyberspace', *Middle East Report* 245, (2007). Available at http://www.merip.org/mer/mer245/young-brothers-cyberspace

[17] An exception to this trend is the work of Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*, dating back to 2008. After the uprisings scholars have provided several accounts with regard to the MB-Youth and their grievances towards the movement, but these all fail to adopt a gender perspective.

[18] Nadia, interview.

[19] Nour, interview(a).

problems, struggles, and desires. The revolution had been an expression of this general dissatisfaction with the old establishment, and a call for broader social and political change. Youth's feeling exacerbated even further when their demands kept being disregarded after the uprisings. As a result, like it was among young Brothers, defecting orders had become a common strategy also among young Sisters, like this member emphasised:

> 'It is a problem within society in general. It is the same in our houses, there is actual frustration with the elders. They live in their own bubble, and they are not related in anyway, neither remotely, to what actually takes place in the streets. When we [youth] realised this frustration and voiced it, then the clashes started. The girls are never really attached to the MB or work rigorously within the MB framework. […] We have never followed the MB to the letter before, and we will keep following our instinct more than the MB even now'.[20]

Like the Brothers, the young Sisters too desired to play a greater political and leadership role in the MB movement. The Sisters too had taken a more active stand in the political events that characterised Egypt in the decade prior to the uprisings, and contributed to the success of the MB in the 2011-2012 elections. Their involvement translated into a desire for greater power sharing with the older leaders, like the comment of this member suggested: 'the MB members in parliament are the same members of the constitutional committee, and the same who are in the MB Shura Council….the youth should have had a bigger role. Why do they limit our role in these bodies?'[21] Female members' desire for emancipation was not confined to institutional political life, but extended also to the role they envisioned for themselves within the MB organization as a whole. Some continued to complaint about women's subordinated position to male leadership and demanded for the greater presence of women leaders in the hierarchical organizational structure of the MB. Interestingly enough, many considered this an issue to be discussed internally to the MB, and not publicly, like this member expressed:

> 'Every group makes mistakes. I am not saying that the Muslim Brotherhood is a mistake-free group. But how to change this is an internal issue. We should not discuss with every person the fact that we should have a woman leader for the Muslim Sisterhood's section or how we want to solve this matter inside the Muslim Brotherhood'.[22]

The MB was not immune to youth's requests for greater leadership and participation. On the contrary, it organised a number of initiatives hoping to mitigate the generational challenge it faced. The movement expanded the numbers of committees of the FJP that the youth could join.

[20] Safiya, interview.
[21] Farida, interview.
[22] Lamia, interview.

Many young members, males and females, took up roles in the Media and Foreign Relations Committees during Morsi's presidential campaign when compared to the period of parliamentary elections, when the youth had been employed nearly exclusively in activities related to street campaigning and vote canvassing.[23] Unpredictably, the MB instituted an internal process of democratic reforms. It not only lowered the age requirements to enter the office of the Guidance Bureau from 45 to 25 years old, but also promised to render the process of the internal elections more transparent. Also, the MB attempted to overcome the lack of dialogue between the youth and its leadership. Efforts made in that direction included organizing an extensive online survey requesting youth's opinions on several crucial issues, hosting conferences dedicated exclusively to the youth, and facilitating face to face meetings between MB-youth members and MB-cadres.[24] The Morsheed[25] Mohammed Badie himself toured several provinces with the purpose of meeting youth members.[26] The problems with these initiatives was that most times they failed to translate into concrete actions, a situation that contributed to nurture, rather than ease, youth's disappointment of their leaders, like this Sister lamented:

> 'They would ask our opinions and listen to us. We would be given questionnaires, allowed face to face meetings, we would meet weekly in the party offices and be asked about our vision, and our opinions about current events, but our opinions would be left there and never applied...something is wrong *yani*, something is missing. I felt that the youth had an opinion but the leaders acted without considering it. I felt that the majority [youth] is something and the leaders are something else'.[27]

Soon, adding to the youth's feelings of marginalization and exclusion was one of betrayal. Even before the fall of Mubarak, the MB made sure to take advantage of the revolutionary wave to strike a deal with the Egyptian army for power. As early as the February 1, 2011, the MB sent two of its representatives - Mohammad Morsi and Sa'ad al-Katatni - to discuss the political future of the movement with the army chief Umar Suleiman. On that day, the MB 'offered to help (or, at least, try) to deflate the uprisings in return for a larger share of the political pie'.[28] From that time on, the MB remained commitment to a political transition based on the role of state institutions and electoral legitimacy, working to gain a share of representation in parliament sufficient enough to allow the movement to influence the course of the transition from within the state establishment.

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[23] For more information on the role of the youth in the 2012 MB presidential elections see chapter 6.
[24] RAND Report, 45.
[25] The *Morsheed* (or General Guide) is the highest leadership figure in the MB movement. Its role in the movement is not only political, but also of religious guidance.
[26] RAND Report, 47.
[27] Safiya, interview.
[28] Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, 137.

For that reason, the MB maintained a pragmatic and accommodating approach towards the SCAF, inevitably downplaying the demands for radical change of the revolutionary movement and its youth. The MB and the revolutionary movement, in fact, reached a breaking point on the leading up to the parliamentary elections.

On November 1, 2011, just before the parliamentary elections were set to begin,[29] the army pushed through a second constitutional amendment granting itself additional sweeping powers.[30] The al-Selmy document, named after the at-the-time Deputy Prime Minister who introduced it, granted the army immunity from state supervision, autonomy over its own budget, veto power over the constitution's drafting process, and exclusive control on foreign policy. Furthermore, in contradiction to previous statements, the military made public its intention to postpone the presidential elections, originally scheduled for early 2012, to late 2013. The document, together with the army announcement, was yet a further attempt of the military to consolidate its position in the Egyptian state, and testified to its unwillingness to cede power to a civilian elected government. The amendment caused mass popular protests reminiscent of the January 25 revolution. In that occasion, the MB, which had until then turned down most of the protests organised by the revolutionary movement, called all of its members to stage a demonstration in Tahrir Square on Friday 18 November, 2011, which resulted in the largest Islamist show off since the uprisings.

On Saturday 19, Islamist forces left the square, leaving secular movements and popular groups alone to hold it. Security forces made attempts to evacuate the area, but when the protesters demonstrated to be determined to hold the square, clashes erupted, prompting more to join, and violence to escalate. The revolutionary forces who joined Tahrir led police forces to retreat towards the building of the Ministry of Interior. A violent battle between police forces and protestors protracted for over five days in a street adjacent to Tahrir, Mohammad Mahmoud, as a result of which 90 people lost their lives, and more than a thousand were seriously injured.[31] Apart from a group of MB-youth who took the streets side by side with the revolutionary movement and against

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[29] Originally, the parliamentary elections were set to be hold in September, but the SCAF took several steps aimed at slowing down the handover of power to civilian forces, while attempting to reinforce its position in the Egyptian state.

[30] A first constitutional amendment was put to popular referendum by the SCAF on March 19, 2011. Among its major changes, the document limited the Egyptian presidency to a maximum of two 4-years-terms, demanded the president to appoint the vice-president, allowed for judicial supervision of the elections, and set the establishment of a 100-members commission to draft a new constitution following parliamentary elections. For a full list of amendments see Michelle Dunne and Mara Revkin, 'Overview of Egypt's Constitutional Referendum', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 16, 2011. Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/03/16/overview-of-egypt-s-constitutional-referendum-pub-43095

[31] Freedom House, *Timeline of Human Rights Violation in Egypt since the Fall of Mubarak*, (2013). Available at https://freedomhouse.org/article/timeline-human-rights-violations-egypt-fall-mubarak

MB orders, the MB refrained from taking part to the protests in the days which followed, stating that their presence would have only led to more violence.

While both secular and Islamist forces were united in their demands for an immediate military handover of power to a civilian-led government, they differed with regard to the procedures that should have facilitated this. Secular groups believed that were the elections to take place as scheduled, these would have favoured the Islamist forces, granting them the upper hand on the drafting of the new Egyptian constitution. Therefore, although they wished for the army to hand over power and give up on the supra-constitutional authorities that it had granted itself with the al-Selmy document, secular forces were also prone to accept a greater involvement of the army in the drafting of the constitution, hoping that this would have safeguarded civil and political liberties from being curtailed by Islamist forces. The MB, on the other hand, remained opposed to the role of the military as a guarantor of the constitution, and wished for elections to follow as planned.

The military responded to the crisis by holding an emergency meeting with political forces, to which most secular groups refused to take part in protest, but to which the MB participated with a majoritarian presence. On November 22, the at-the-time Defence Minister Tantawi made a television announcement stating that the army had agreed to carry on with its road map as planned, that parliamentary elections were to start on November 28 as scheduled, that presidential elections were to be held at the beginning of 2012, also as scheduled, and that the other amendments to the constitutions concerning the SCAF were to be discussed with the political forces in course of elections. The Muslim Brotherhood backed the army decision, and prepared itself to reap the benefits from the November parliamentary elections.

To the many MB-youth members who continued to side with the revolutionary movement against the SCAF, the MB behaviour sounded like one of betrayal towards the principles of the revolution, values to which the MB had turned its back for the sake of political power. Although many of the Sisters seemed in fact able until then to show greater understanding and forgiveness for the political mistakes of their leadership, in several could not excuse the MB for having abandoned the streets after November 18, and for having decided to go ahead with the parliamentary elections while the revolutionary movement was still engaged in clashes against the military forces in the streets. This created further schisms inside the MB, leading also some of the Sisters to break ranks with the MB, as this young ex-member clearly stated:

> ‘MB leaders had press releases and interviews saying that the youth were thugs who had been paid money to stay on the streets. We have been trashed for the sake of the parliamentary elections, and because the MB wanted to promote the idea of a political reformist solution and not a revolution. One of the MB leaders who had a much respected stance in favour of the revolutionaries was Mohammad al-Beltagy and his daughter Asmaa. They were actually in Mohammad Mahmoud the day of the clashes…but what about the other

> leaders? Those like Sobhi Salah went out thanking the army for the great management of the transition while we were getting killed in the streets! […] I felt that this was no longer the group that represented the revolution, because even right after the parliamentary elections it took the side of security forces!'[32]

Of course not all the Sisters held similar opinions. Some acknowledged the divide within their movement but also held themselves responsible for failing to be more supportive of their leaders during the difficult time of the transition, like this Sister seemed to suggest: 'After the elections we were not active enough and we failed to do what we were responsible for, we could have helped a lot more. […] I felt that the leadership needed our support to overcome all the obstacles it faced'.[33] Others, instead, recognised that making political decisions during the phase of transition was not an easy task, but held the MB responsible for not being able to promote the right people to leadership positions:

> 'The MB has a very wide pool of skilful people but does not necessarily know how to employ them, it does not know how to manage the resources it avails of, and it does not know how to place the right people in the right role and position'.[34]

The frustrations of the MB youth with the leadership reached a further apex after the MB successfully secured the presidency of Egypt. Until then, the MB controlled only the parliament. In such circumstances, the members were aware that their leaders had only limited power to challenge the status quo. When the MB tossed its promise and filed a candidate for the presidential elections on the claim that this step was necessary to accomplish a real revolution, the youth - not only the MB-youth but all those who voted for Morsi as a bulwark against a representative of the old regime, hoped for the radical change they had until then been prevented to achieve. Differently from all previous Egyptian presidents, Morsi was elected following a revolutionary wave, and enjoying a popular mandate. His main objective should have been to keep the streets on his side by instigating the changes people advocated for, and for which they had led a revolution in the first place.

On the contrary, under the directives of the old leaders in the Guidance Bureau, Morsi continued to adopt a gradual (reformist) approach to change. Being afraid of disrupting the precarious alliance with the army generals, Morsi failed to bring about any adjustment that could have curbed the power of the army or the old establishment. On the contrary, the MB sought cooperation, hoping to be able to win the favours of the old establishment in the long run. Those

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[32] Habiba, interview by author, Cairo2014 [Henceforth: Habiba, interview].
[33] Farida, interview.
[34] Safiya, interview.

state security forces responsible for the attacks against civilians during the 18 days of the revolution were never brought to justice or held accountable. Quite the opposite, several old Mubarak associates were appointed once again to crucial leadership positions in the Egyptian state.[35] In addition, when the revolutionaries took back to the streets protesting against both the SCAF and the MB, Morsi gave the army *carte blanche* to deal with the protestors. Other times, like in occasion of the Ittihadiya Palace clashes in 2012, it was the same MB supporters who use violence against the revolutionary movement in Morsi's defence. What was previously attributed to the MB's political ineptitude began therefore to appear as pondered political decisions. On the long run, this situation contributed to alienate young female members too, including some who claimed blood lineage with the founding families of the movement, like this Sister expressed:

> 'The problem with the MB leaders in the last ten years is that they have developed into selfish capitalists! All what they care about is 'how much money I am getting there?' and 'which seat I am getting where?'…Power and money, more power and more money! Also, by being in direct contact with state security officials, they ended up adopting the worse out of them! We have reached a point in which most of them are easily corrupted. They started alienating everyone, middle-class, youth, and whoever was actually speaking, […] and raising any issue within the organization. Everyone from the original families, al-Banna, al-Hudeyby…we are all completely alienated! The MB wasn't the MB anymore. Actually, a plus side of all what happened [after the coup that led to the arrest of the elder leadership and to a 'purification' of the movement from the capitalist and power driven figures] is that the MB is now the MB again'.[36]

It is therefore no surprise that almost all the Sisters interviewed claimed that Morsi's greatest political fault was his obstinacy to 'act reformist and not revolutionary.' Such a claim was raised by very different categories of Sisters, both those who had been significantly involved politically and in street demonstrations, as well as those who had until then maintained a low political profile. One such Muslim Sisterhood cadre was Nour.

Nour made clear since the beginning her objection to the decision of the MB to list a candidate for the presidential election. She believed that the movement was not prepared to take on itself such a task, particularly during the difficult time of transition.[37] Her opinion, however, was silenced along with that of the youth she would take care of growing into fully-fledged MB activists. Because of her *da'wa* activism and her work as educator of the MB younger generations, Nour could empathise with the frustration and the demands of the MB-youth. Also, knowing how

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[35] Abdel-Rahman Hussein, 'Egypt swears in first post-revolution cabinet with plenty of old guard', *The Guardian*, August 2, 2012. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/02/egypt-middleeast

[36] Fayrouz, interview.

[37] Nour, interview(b).

crucial the new generations are to the future of the MB as a movement, she was ready to diverge from the approach of the MB leadership and accept responsibility for political failures. She therefore echoed the complaints of the youth, and supported the young members in their quest for change, hoping to maintain unity within the movement. Her dearest objective was to maintain the youth close to the MB's core aims and principles. For this reason, she would distinguish between the movement's *da'wa* and political mission, and attribute the political failures of the movement to the action of its leaders rather than the principles over which the movement was established. Somehow this allowed her to maintain the youth close to the movement, share their criticism, and agree with their demands. As she stated:

> 'The MB represents us in everything… but politically. We don't explain ourselves the reasons behind many of the decision taken by the leadership. The constitutional declaration, the way they dealt with the Ittihadyia Palace clashes, the fact that we did not join the revolutionaries in the Mohammad Mahmoud and Maspero protests….. The same claims raised by the revolutionaries. The youth and I, we were voicing those opinions very clearly, but the leadership refused to listen. […] This was his fatal mistake, Morsi did not follow the revolutionary pattern, he acted reformist, believing that he could succeed. […] He opted for making the people inside state institutions working clean rather than getting rid of the *fuloul* [deep-state] all together. By throwing all those people out of the system, he was afraid that the institutions of the state would collapse, and this was his biggest mistake. We do not have institutions. Everything is corrupted, and everything is dead. He should have taken the chance'.[38]

Women like Nour are part of the MB middle-rank cadres who strove to maintain unity between the movement and its support base during the delicate phase of the transition, and after. Such a role, as well as her progressive and pragmatic approach, allowed her to gain the sympathy of a growing portion of the MB-youth. The youth looked up to her as an important leader during both the phase of the transition and that of mobilization that followed the ousting of the MB from power in 2013. This created a sort of alliance between Nour and the young Sisters, which was also unintentionally fostered by some by-laws introduced by the MB in 2011. As the next section explains, these by-laws endorsed internal elections in the Muslim Sisterhood's sections of the MB movement, allowing therefore the younger Sisters to designate their women cadres.

## 7.3 The Muslim Sisterhood's Internal Elections: planting the seeds for women's leadership post the 2013 coup.

[38] Nour, interview(a).

In 2011 the MB decided to address Muslim Sisterhood's demands for greater leadership and autonomy. Following the first general Muslim Sisterhood conference in July 2, 2011 in Cairo,[39] the MB introduced a new internal by-law. This modified the criteria according to which the Muslim Sisters acquired positions of leadership in the women's sections of the MB movement. Until then, Muslim Sisterhood cadres had been appointed by the MB male leadership. The new regulation granted the Sisters the power to elect their women leaders, making the Sisterhood cadres accountable to the youth for their own work.[40] The following year, the MB introduced a second by-law. This created two positions inside the women's sections to be held by representatives of the youth.[41] Despite being little changes, these two by-laws significantly impacted the leadership structure of the Muslim Sisterhood, bearing important consequences for the possibility of the Sisterhood cadres to rise to a position of leadership over the MB movement in the post-2013 period.

Since its establishment in 1928, the organizational structure of the MB and the way the movement operates internally remained largely unchanged.[42] The highest position in the organization is that of the General Guide (*al-Mursheed al-'amm*), who is both the leader of the MB movement and the Chairman of the two second highest leadership bodies of the organization, the Guidance Bureau (*maktab al-irshad al-'amm*) and the Shura Council (*majlis al-shura al-'amm*), respectively. The Guidance Bureau is tasked with ruling over the operations of the organization, supervising the work of its administrative offices, and shaping and executing its policies. The Shura Council, instead, functions primarily as a consultative body. A second role of the members of the Shura Council is that of electing those of the Guidance Bureau. Below those offices stands the decentralised administrative structure of the MB, also known as the 'field apparatus'.

Mirroring Egypt's territorial divisions, the field apparatus comprises of 28 Administrative Offices (s. *maktab al-idary*), one for each Egyptian governorate, and of District Offices (s. *mantiqa* or *hay*). These are smaller headquarters coinciding with the official sub-divisions of the governorates. These two bodies, district and administrative offices, function as a liaison between on the one side the Guidance Bureau and the Shura Council – where the decisions are taken – and, on the other side, the two most important MB offices existing at the most local level, namely the Branches (s. *shu'ba*) and the Families (s. *usra; pl. usar*). These are in fact the two units in charge of executing the directives of the higher MB leadership at Egyptian local level, of both organizational and ideological nature. The Branches act as MB headquarters, and are not only the basic unit of

[39] This was the first Muslim Sisterhood general conference organised since the MB was officially dissolved in 1948. For more details on the conference, see chapter 6.3.
[40] Nour, interview(a).
[41] Ibid.
[42] For a comparison, see Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*.

administration, but also the first point of reference and allegiance of MB members.[43] The *usar* are not simply administrative divisions, but work as primary units for the socialization into the movement of Brotherhood and Sisterhood members, as well as new recruits. At this point it is important to explain in more details the function of the *usar* for the broader MB movement, and their internal leadership structure. In fact, up to the uprisings, the *usar* were the only units of the MB organization structure which existed also for the Sisters. The internal by-laws introduced by the MB in 2011 gave to the *usar* the power to elect their own leaders.

In order to understand the vital role that the *usar* play within the MB movement, it is necessary to think of the MB as an ideological rather than a political movement. As originally postulated by al-Banna, reforming individuals' values and believes was the first step towards the establishment of an Islamic state. The act of reforming society started with reforming individuals, progressed gradually into the families, then society, and, eventually, state institutions.[44] The ability to cultivate a community able to live to the principles and way of life of the Brotherhood must therefore be understood as the movement's first and most important goal. As explained by Kandil, the MB's ideology is driven by what the scholar terms 'religious determinism'. This is the belief, like in classic social determinism theory, that social change, and spiritual change in the case of the MB, is all that suffices to bring about to a transformation of the state and its institutions.[45] This is why most of the efforts of the MB movement are directed at moulding the personal believes of its members, rather than towards taking direct political action in the ordinary world. The unit of the *usra* is where this personal ideological transformation of members takes place.

The ideological cultivation of MB members is obtained by mean of education (*tarbyia*), which purpose is that of 'permanently changing members' knowledge, behaviour, and belief'.[46] Members receive *tarbyia* through detailed curricula. These are drafted by a 'committee of specialised […] teachers, and university professors expert in psychology, education and Islamic studies'[47] and are conveyed to Brothers and Sisters during the weekly *usra* meetings. For this reason, *usar* exist in every neighbourhood,[48] and consist of the primary unit where MB members, their families and children, as well as new recruits, group according to age, level of progression, and gender, for the purpose of ideological acculturation. For a long time, most observers have given only little importance to the role that *tarbyia* plays for the MB movement, dismissing it as

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[43] Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 176-177.
[44] Maha, interview by author, Cairo, 2014 [Henceforth: Maha, interview].
[45] Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, 85.
[46] Nour, interview(a).
[47] Ibid.
[48] *Usar*, in fact, exists internationally. The MB is an international organization, and wherever there are Islamists, there are *usar*. As mentioned by one of the Sisters, 'the whole idea and system is studied so that you can find an *usra* wherever you are.' Esma, interview by author, Cairo 2014 [Henceforth: Esma, interview].

simple religious indoctrination. But as recognised by Kandil, *tarbyia* is more than religious education. It consists instead of:

> '[A]n elaborate activity that borrows from at least four different schools: it instils a transformative worldview in the minds of members, as communists do; it claims that converting into this worldview is contingent upon a spiritual conversion, as in mystic orders; it presents this worldview as simple, uncorrupted religion, as in puritan movements; and it insists that this worldview cannot be readily communicated to society because it is not ready to handle the truth of the human condition, as in Masonic lodges. The ultimate aim, therefore, is not to win over more believers, but to produce a new kind of person: the Muslim Brother'.[49]

*Tarbyia* is administered to members progressively, by means of curricula. Members can advance in the hierarchical pyramid of the MB organization only if they successfully progress through the several *tarbyia* curricula that the movement lays out for its members throughout their life time.[50] Members' progression is assessed by means of both written tests and behavioural observation by the part of MB educators.[51] This whole encompassing approach of the MB to the cultivation of the individual explains why only older and acquiescent members are promoted to leadership positions in the MB organization. By the time members manage to progress through the majority of the *tarbyia* curricula, they are most likely around their 40s and 50s, and have already turned into fully fledged members compliant with the principles and rules of the MB organization.

Muslim Sisters have always been 'enrolled in a parallel structure often described as an 'order not an organization (*nizam la tanzim*)'; this was 'to keep them out of harm's way, since membership in an illegal organization warrants arrest'.[52] Women, therefore, remained absent from the leadership offices of the Guidance Bureau, the Shura Council and, as might be expected, from being appointed to the position of *Mursheed*. Their presence in local branches and districts offices remained occasional, and limited to administrational tasks.[53] Women, however, always grouped in *usar* at the local level, with the primary objective to receive and/or administer *tarbyia* to other women, as well as organizing and conducting charity and welfare activities. The largest majority of those to whom the Sisters administer *tarbyia*, are MB-youth, comprising of the children of MB families.[54] Al-Banna envisaged this role for women since the very beginning, whereby women are not only the primary biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, but also the first nurturer of the new generations of Muslim Brotherhood and Sisterhood activists.

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[49] Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, 6.
[50] Lamia, interview.
[51] Esma, interview.
[52] Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, 8.
[53] Esma, interview.
[54] Nour, interview(a); and Esma, interview.

For the purpose of ideological cultivation, each district figures a woman leader. The *munassiqa* (*pl. munassiqat*), as she is known, is in charge of supervising the internal work of the *usar* in her district, appointing the *usra* leaders (s. *naqyba*; pl. *naqybat*), monitoring their work and monetary budget. In each district, the *munassiqa* avails of four *naqibat* for assisting her in the education of children, grouped in *usar* of *zahraat* (flowers), and of students, grouped in *usar* of *talibaat* (students), as well as the organization of welfare activities, and that of the *da'wa* programmes in local mosques.[55] University students also grouped up at the local level of the districts in *usar* called *talibaat al-jamia'* (university students). This is in addition to them meeting up in on-campus university *usar*. But while the on-campus university *usar* remained under the control of the MB male leaders, at the level of the districts it is the *munassiqa* who leads the *usar* of the *talibaat al-jamia'*. This state of affairs suggests that the *munassiqa* also enjoys a certain degree of influence on the MB students, a driving mobilising force of the movement.

The *munassiqat*, however, had always been appointed by the MB male leadership. As mentioned before, under the MB movement the Sisters operated under a parallel but separate structure from men. The liaison between the movement and the women's section was provided by a male leader belonging to the local branch and in charge of supervising women's activities in his district. The connection between the male leader and the women's section was maintained through the *munassiqa* who, for security reasons, until before the uprisings used to be the wife of the male leader of the local branch in that district. This means that the Sisters had never had an elected woman leader, and that the *munassiqa* enjoyed the privilege of leadership over the Muslim Sisters because of her family ties with the male leader of the local branch. In addition, given the criteria for advancing into leadership positions within the MB, it is also likely that the elected *munassiqat* held rather conservative views, and remained uncritical of the movement to which they remained accountable for their position.

Following the 2011 uprisings, MB security concerns vanished. As a consequence, the MB gave no longer the same importance to the family ties in place between the female leader of the women's section and the male supervisor of the branch, and passed the new by-law allowing women to elect their own *munassiqat* and *naqybat*. As Nour explained:

> 'Inside the *shu'ba* you have a male leader and then four helpers under him. One of them is in charge of women and his wife used to be in charge of the women in the same district. This structure was in place to facilitate communication under a repressive environment. It facilitated us strategically, and increased our security. After the uprisings we no longer suffered repression, and therefore this system was no longer necessary. So we started having elections. Now, each

[55] Esma, interview.

> district chooses its own head, who is elected, and the four helpers, who are also elected…It's only a small step, but it's a step nonetheless'.[56]

Although trivial, the change brought about by the new internal by-law was in fact extremely significant because it shifted the power to elect the local female leaders from the MB male members straight into the hands of the young Muslim Sisters. It is no coincidence in fact that after the new by-law was introduced the leadership structure of the Muslim Sisterhood in the local districts underwent a radical rejuvenation. Most of the female leaders elected in 2012 were in fact much younger than those who used to be in leadership positions before, when the MB was in charge of appointing the women.[57] Most importantly, this meant also that the new leaders did not necessarily share the strict ideological views and strategies of the MB central leadership. The internal elections gave in fact an opportunity for leadership also to those female cadres who had been previously marginalised by the MB movement precisely because of their progressive views or because of their criticism towards the central leadership.

Nour is a good example of the fresh leadership brought about by the new regulations. Previously an *usra* coordinator in the district of New Cairo, Nour was elected as *munassiqa* of the university female *usra* in the district of Nasr City, directly by the will of the youth.[58] One of the young Sisters belonging to the *usra* supervised by Nour described how her election represented one of the few occasions in which the young Sisters objected collectively to MB rules. As the young member explained:

> 'We were all together in a camp in Ayn Sukhna. It was our last day and we were supposed to vote on our *usra* leader. Just before being handed the list of candidates, we were informed that one of our dear member had passed away and that Nour, who is a relative of this member and was with us in the *usra* camp, left the camp to go home and support her family. We [girls] decided to add Nour in the list and vote for her despite her name was not among the candidates, but the leaders rejected our choice. They claimed that Nour was not there at the time and that there was no reason to insist for introducing her in the list. It was at that specific moment that all the girls united and objected the orders of the leaders for the first time. It was nearly two years ago and since then Nour has supervised our *usra* meetings'.[59]

Nour's election, therefore, testifies to the youth's determination to take maximum advantage of the 2011 by-law in order to push up the ladder those cadres they thought could best promote their interests, even if that meant challenging incumbent MB leaders. Nour, in fact, did not propose

[56] Nour, interview(a).
[57] The by-law was introduced in 2011, but the Muslim Sisters run internal elections only in 2012.
[58] Nour, interview(a).
[59] Safiya, interview.

herself for the post. It was the Muslim Sisterhood youth who took the initiative to list her for the position. As Nour explained, this contradicted the new regulations because 'the Sisterhood cadres needed to nominate themselves for the position in order to be considered, but in my case it was different. I was nominated. The youth chose me.'[60]

Ultimately, because the internal elections were scheduled to take place every three years, the *munassiqat* were made accountable to the youth for re-election, rendering therefore the senior Sisters more inclined to satisfy youth's demands if wanting to maintain their leadership position. This was not the case before, when arguably the appointed Sisters had a better chance to retain their post if complying with the movement's directives. As Nour remarked:

> 'Because the young girls are the ones that have a bigger role in electing the heads of the districts, this gives them a say. Now it is the responsibility of the head of each district to keep those girls satisfied. I sit with them every once in a while, approximately every three months, and explain them what we [MB] have achieved of what they wanted, and also what we have not achieved yet, and what cannot be achieved, and explain them why'.[61]

One year later, under increasing pressure by both the youth and their leaders, the MB made further concessions to appease the desire of the youth for greater voice and participation in the movement. As a result, the MB introduced a second internal by-law, endorsing the establishment of two additional positions reserved to youth members in the administrative offices of the district. According to Nour, the new by-law was an indication that together, the MB-youth and the middle-rank cadres could be successful in bringing about changes.[62]

However, given the limited concessions allowed, the *munassiqat* had to be more creative to find ways to appease the desire for change of a generation that had grown extremely tired of old rules and rigid schemes. Lacking representation in the higher decision-making offices of the movement, and the authority to issue new by-laws themselves, leaders like Nour supported the youth to find and cement alternative forms of freedom and emancipation within the informal activist spaces of the MB.

## 7.4 Informal Avenues of Change

Following the uprisings and the opening up of the political opportunity structure, for the first time in decades the MB could relax its security measures. The MB change of approach

[60] Nour, interview(a).
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

towards Egyptian society was communicated to its base by means of the new *tarbyia* curricula drafted by the movement in 2011, in which the group invited its members to 'open up to Egyptian society' and 'spread the love for Islam'. The Sisters, who had until then operated in a much more secretive manner when compared to the Brothers, were also invited to adopt a more overt approach to society for the first time since 1948. How to 'open up', however, was a matter left to the Sisters to decide, as this *usra* coordinator explained:

> 'In the curricula we are not given specific details or orders, we are just told the general idea, the tools to realise this idea in practice must be found in ourselves. They [MB] suggest the goal; we [Sisters] suggest the methods that match the current social circumstances. And this is another demonstration that, contrary to what is usually told about us, we are not sheep, but are encouraged to take initiative in our activities. […] In the 2011 curricula, the verses of the Qur'an, the biography of the Prophet, and the theological studies regarding the *fiqh* [the understanding of the Islamic Shari'a and Sunna] did not change. What was asked of us was to change our attitude towards society. We adopted a much more open approach, and taught our pupils to do the same. […] This was our main goal in 2011, whether we were working at the level of the district, the branch, or the *usra*. The youth had a major role in devising the tools that allowed us to be more actively involved in society, and their leaders, whether in the *usra* or the branch, helped them to put those in practice'.[63]

The following section discusses some of the initiatives proposed by the young Sisterhood members of the university *usra* supervised by Nour, in response to the MB's invitation to 'open up to society'. As will be shown, the young Sisters took the opportunity of the MB message in the 2011 curricula to promote reforms that partially challenged the gender code in place in the movement. More explicitly, the Sisters advocated for the possibility to take part in *usra* camps, an activity until then reserved exclusively to men. They also proposed relaxing the female dress code in place in the movement, as a way of being more inclusive to 'others'. As these initiatives seem to suggest, the Sisters believed that applying greater gender equality in the movement would have made the MB appetible to a higher number of young Egyptian women. Lacking access to formal institutional channels for altering the rules in place, the young women found therefore a venue for bringing about some of their desired changes in the informal activist spaces of the movement which remained under their control.

### 7.4.1 Female *Usra* Camps

[63] Esma, interview.

The Muslim Sisterhood cadres attempted to satisfy the young women's desires for greater equality and opportunities within the MB movement by supporting their demands to take part in *usra* camps. Camps have been in use in the movement for decades, but were an activity organised strictly for male members, meant to prepare them for life in prison. As recounted by Nour:

> 'For men, the camps have the objective of teaching them to cope with prison. […] My husband used to tell me that the MB took them [men] to camps and forced them to sleep where animals used to sleep, with nothing to protect from the cold. They were made to eat *foul* [fava beans] everyday, like in prison. Basically, they were made to live an *'asal 'asuad* [literally 'black honey', an Egyptian expression describing a bittersweet life], do things they didn't want to, be awake when they wanted to sleep, dig huge holes just for the sake of working hard. It is like entering the military. Because if you are a Muslim Brother in this country, or a member of any other organization preaching for justice, you know that you will be persecuted'.[64]

For men, camps were mandatory: 'men must hold a camp once a year at least, and once a month they must have a sleep-over'.[65] The same rule did not apply to the Sister. Camps and sleep-overs were simply considered inappropriate activities for modest and pious women. But Nour believed that camps could have been beneficial to women. Hence, after the uprisings, Nour began acting as an advocate of youth's demand for female camps among the MB and the families of the girls in her district. The fact that she claimed blood lineage to the founding father of the movement, gave her the extra leverage she needed to successfully bring about this change. As she stated: 'we did not have these things for women but we started. I am the granddaughter of Hassan al-Banna. I have leverage, so we started'.[66]

Nour believed that *usra* camps had become necessary for educating the new generations of Muslim Sisters. In her view, many of the girls in her district were way too 'fussy' for traditional educational approaches to bring about the desired results. Nour wished to further the young Sisters' sense of responsibility, for themselves, their families, communities and Egyptian society, and growing in the young women the necessary confidence to stand up for themselves and for what they believed in, regardless of the difficulties they faced. For example, Nour believed that under the political turmoil affecting Egypt at the time, overcoming the fear of blood was one of the things the girls needed to learn. She had an 'unusual' approach to the problem, and considered camps to be ideal venues where to implement this alternative educational methods:

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[64] Nour, interview(a).
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

> 'I wanted to teach the girls how to kill chicken the *halal* (permitted) way.[67] In Egyptian villages is very common, but not in the city. […] I believe that it makes you stronger because it enables you to apply your religion in all aspect of your life, always, and under all circumstances. And I think it is needed today more than before, so that when the girls take part in a protest and someone is killed in front of them, they will not be afraid because they are used to see blood. This is what I really wanted for them, teaching them to be full persons, able to have a mission and carry it forward. […] It has nothing to do with being violent. It is about having a personality strong enough to cope with different situations. And this is why you have camps'.[68]

Camps represented an important opportunity for young women to spend time on their own and away from their families, something that young females would not normally be allowed to do in a conservative society such as Egypt. The Sisters wished for camps to be introduced as part of the required training that women, like men, were expected to undertake as a result of their membership in the MB. The fact that Nour had managed to advocate for camps successfully, was what apparently persuaded the young Sisters to vote for her in the first place. Nour herself admitted it when she stated that:

> 'The girls thought that we needed camps, so we pushed for it. And this is why the girls voted for me to be the head of the district. Because I allowed them to do the things they wished for, without antagonising men or their families.'[69]

As this section made clear, the young Sisterhood's wish to take part in MB camps testifies to the Sisterhood's desire for greater equality in terms of the possibilities, trainings, and opportunities that the MB was able to offer its female members. Also, the fact that they voted for Nour to become the new leader of the district when she managed to make camps part of the Sisterhood's trainings, demonstrates that the young women took advantage of the 2011 by-law to push up the ladder those Sisterhood cadres who held more progressive views about women's roles, and were committed to advance progressive change in the movement.

### 7.4.2 Changing the *Usra* Dress-Code

[67] Islam demands practicing Muslims to eat meat that derives from animals that have been killed according to the procedures set for by Islamic law. The animal must be killed by a trained Muslim who is able to kill the animal by cutting its throat, by severing the carotid artery, jugular vein, and windpipe in a single swipe. While doing so, the person must recite specific Quranic verses. Muslims contend that this procedure kill the animal instantly, saving it pain.
[68] Nour, interview(a).
[69] Ibid.

To the Sisters, the dress-code is an expression of one's own religiosity, modesty, and commitment to the principles of the movement. The more concealing the dress style is, the more pious the woman is believed to be.[70] Different styles of veil in Egypt exist. A more common style of veil is the *hijab,* usually consisting of a scarf wrapped around women's hair, and falling around the neck either in a looser or tighter style. A more conservative style of veil is the *khimar*. This covers women's hair, part of their forehead, cheeks, and chin, falling loosely on the body so to conceal shoulders and torso. The most conservative style of veil is the *niqab*. The *niqab* covers a woman's head and face, leaving only a little fissure for the eyes to see, and falls loosely on the body at different lengths. Women who conform to traditional and Islamic dress styles usually wear also '*abayat*. These are loose tunics, covering women's body top-to-toe in order to conceal women's body shapes and promote modesty. Colour is an important element of women's dress style in Egypt. Like many other women across the region, Egyptian women are increasingly employ bright colours and colourful patterns fabrics as a way for expressing personality and femininity, but more pious women would adopt less bright and single pattern colours.

Generally speaking, the large majority of Muslim Sisters, regardless of their age, adopt a conservative style of dress. They tend to wear single colour '*abayat*, most commonly in shades of black, brown, and blue, and a *khimar*, almost rigorously white. Even though many do not conform to the 'white *khimar* rule', which represents almost a uniform among the Sisters, those in position of leadership usually do.[71] To such a conservative dress-code, the Sisters usually add strict social manners, and gender segregation practices. It must be remarked that the Sisters are not the only ones to adopt such a dress-style and behavior. Egyptian society is conservative and many women follow the same rules out of religious belief and/or tradition. What makes the Sisters different from other pious Egyptian women is that to the Sisters such a dress-code and social behavior is not exclusively an expression of piety, but also of political conviction. The Muslim Brotherhood has made of women's piety and modesty a core pillar of its identity politics, and the Sisterhood dress-style is a direct expression of it. In fact, although most Sisters would remark that such a dress-style is a personal choice and an expression of their devoutness to God, the Sisters are under severe pressure by the part of the movement (and other women) to conform to it. As stated by some of the

[70] The discourse around the dress style and veiling in the Middle East is of course more complex than how it is portrayed herein. In the Sisters' views, a conservative dress code is not sufficient to make of a person a devoted Muslim. Belief in Islam, good intention, and proper Islamic behaviour, in addition to the cultivation of other spiritual, personal, and cultural values, are demanded of practicing and devoted Muslims. Nevertheless, the dress style that the Sisters adopt provides a good indication of how the women relate to their religion personally, and of their expression of piety.

[71] This is particularly true for more conservative and older Sisters. Since 2013, because the Sisters who emerged into a position of leadership are younger and more progressive, the white *khimar* has superseded to brighter styles of *hijab*.

young Sisters interviewed, persuading other university students into wearing conservative clothing was in fact an integral part of their on-campuses activism.[72]

The dress-code adopted by the Sisters makes them easily recognisable in Egyptian society. This bears some consequences for the women. Firstly, it facilitates those who have aggressive and repressive tendencies against the movement to identify and harass the Sisters involved in street activism, like some young members lamented. Secondly, it renders socialisation between the Sisters and their university peers more challenging. The dress-style the Sisters adopt functions as an identity marker of the young members, contributing to constructions of identities such as 'us' (Sisters) and 'them' (other students), which may eventually further social divide rather than unity among university students. This situation is particularly felt by the Sisters during their first years in university, when they are supposed to expand their personal group of followers (*muhebbin*) by attracting more girls to the movement. Because of the social and moral code they promote, of which the dress-style is a foremost expression, many Sisters suffer marginalisation and are subject to substantial mocking, from the part of their university peers. This phenomenon is so widespread that university students are delivered training on how to resist peers' marginalization and harassment as part of the *tarbyia* curricula of the MB movement.[73]

When asked to elaborate strategies on how to open up to society, young Sisters proposed changing the dress-code in place in the movement. According to the members who advanced such a proposal, in fact, being tolerant of different dress-styles would have benefited the women's movement in several ways. To begin with, it would have lowered the risk for girls to be harassed in the streets while carrying out social and political activities, rendering therefore their work easier and more enjoyable. Furthermore, the young Sisters believed that being open to a variety of dress-styles would have sent a message of inclusiveness to non-members, and of respect for individuals' diversity, therefore facilitating recruitment. As Safiya, the young Sister promoter of the initiative, explained it:

> 'Some people have really aggressive and repressive attitudes towards the Sisters. They think that we are very strict and at times unsociable. I think that the dress-code and the strict social manners we follow might be one of the reasons. […] The aim is not to change the dress-code form *abaya* to jeans, but to give a space within the group to those people who are not in *abaya*, to give people a space to exist as they are. They may or may not change gradually by staying with us. But if they do, it should be their own choice, it shouldn't be imposed. The aim of our participation is not to be seen and identified as Sisters, but to be identified as good persons, and getting work done in society'.[74]

[72] Feyrouz, interview by author, Cairo 2014 [Henceforth: Feyrouz, interview]
[73] Esma, interview.
[74] Safiya, interview

Eventually, the Sisters managed to persuade the leadership into relaxing the dress-code for female members in the *usra*. The entire district of Madinat Nasr progressively relaxed the rules concerning women's way of dressing since 2012. This allowed the Sisters who failed to conform to a conservative style of dress to feel more at ease in the *usra* and among their peers. Since it had been implemented, this change allowed the Sisters to recruit a higher number of women into the ranks of the MB:

> 'When we carried out our activities looking as normal girls, people started changing their own opinions about us and the whole group. […] As a result, I managed to recruit into the movement girls of very diverse backgrounds only by softening the strict dress-code that the MB used to impose on women. Now we have girls who dress very differently from the way MB female members used to dress. I think that opening up a little on this issue allowed us to be more inclusive towards different personalities, and to create an environment where girls do not feel constrained to abide to a rigid scheme. We also have unveiled women in our *usra* now'.[75]

Several of the young Sisters belonging to the *usra* I interviewed dressed in '*abaya* and *khimar*, but many others also wore tight jeans, colourful shirts, and a simple *hijab*. By relaxing dress-code standards, this *usra* had managed to adopt a pluralist approach to diversity and integrate a wider portion of the female cohort of its district. Although the religious aspect is still what attracts many to the MB, not all those who are sympathetic to the movement and its cause, do necessarily share - or desire to comply with - the MB's conservative outlook and strict social manners. Relaxing some of these strict rules, which are primarily a reflection of the movement's religious mission, had therefore proved successful among women. Like their male counterparts, the young Sisters too seemed to believe that pluralism and the separation of the movement's religious and political mission was the way forward. Encountering resistance for change from the higher leadership of the movement, the Sisters reverted to those more informal venues under their control to implement those changes they had probably wished for the movement as a whole.

## 7.5 Conclusions

This chapter examined how the opening up of the political opportunity structure affected Muslim Sisterhood's activism within the women-only spaces of the MB movement. In doing so, it

[75] Ibid.

also paid particular attention to how members' grievances towards the movement developed across different generational cohorts of Brotherhood and Sisterhood members during this period. Evidence revealed that the movement's internal divisions were heightened by the political events that engulfed the MB after the uprisings, widening the gap between the younger and older generations. In addition, a cross generational alliance between some young female members and their senior Sisterhood cadres emerged as a result of shared grievances towards the movement.

Because of the central role they played in the uprisings, the young MB members perceived themselves as the catalyst of change, and claimed a greater decision-making role in the phase of transition as a consequence. They also advocated for radical political reforms, and had hoped that after being elected president, Morsi would have accomplished this. However, the MB kept being focused on preserving its fragile position in the Egyptian political system. To avoid antagonising the military establishment, the MB leaders conformed to the SCAF's transitional road map, privileging a slow-pace reformist approach to the transition grounded on gradual institutional change. Inevitably, the MB isolated itself from the revolutionary movement, and downplayed the demands of the youth for revolutionary change. As a consequence, the youth felt increasingly marginalised, deceived, and expropriated of a once-in-a-life-time opportunity to instigate a new course of history, predictably growing increasingly disaffected towards the MB leadership because of its management of the transition.

A number of middle-rank Sisterhood cadres shared youth's frustrations. Differently from the MB higher leadership, they enjoyed greater proximity to the youth because of their roles as educators and nurturers of the new generation of activists. They also make it a priority to guarantee the survival of the movement and of its cohesive institutional organisation. But differently from the higher MB leadership, these middle-rank Sisters believed that the future of the MB rested in its younger generations. For this reason, the Sisterhood cadres acted as advocate of youth's demands, while also attempting to maintain unity between the movement and its social base. Lacking the direct political power to affect the MB internal decision-making process and by-laws, the Sisterhood cadres made efforts to satisfy youth's demands for change within the informal networks of the movement under their control. This cross generational alliance led to important changes, albeit limited, being brought to the gender code in place in the informal activist spaces populated by women in the MB movement.

Unity between the youth and the Sisterhood cadres was strengthened further when the MB introduced a new regulation allowing Muslim Sisterhood internal elections. Following the 2011 by-law, the Muslim Sisterhood's leadership structure underwent a radical reconfiguration. Given the power to elect their own Sisterhood leaders - the *munassiqat* – the youth pushed up the ladder those women who held more progressive worldviews, and demonstrated to be inclined to fulfil youth's demands. The same was not true before, when it was the MB who appointed the Sisterhood leaders,

arguably selecting them on the basis of criteria such as personal piety and abidance to the principles and rules of the MB organisation. As chapter six showed, a similar dynamic continued to prevail in the formal institutional political offices occupied by Sisters after the uprisings, where the MB old guard continued to exercise utter control.

As the next chapter illustrates, the relationship between the younger Sisters and the elected women cadres cemented even further in the phase of MB repression that ensued the ousting of the movement from power on July 3, 2013. After the coup, the majority of the MB leadership was arrested, causing the youth and women to emerge as the largest mobilising force of the movement. Boasting considerable influence over the MB youth movement by then and being the largest pool of experienced cadres available, the Sisterhood emerged as crucial leaders of this new phase of MB resistance.

# Chapter 8 - Muslim Sisterhood's Activism post the 2013 coup: women in charge of revolutionary resistance[1]

## Introduction

This chapter looks at the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood as it unfolded after the July 3, 2013, military coup that ousted the MB from power, giving way to a new phase of MB repression. It investigates how, following the closing up of the political opportunity structure, the Sisters mobilised the resources and networks under their control to resist a restoring authoritarian military regime in Egypt. The time-window under analysis goes from the day of the coup until September 2014, a time by the end of which the military had fully re-consolidated its power in Egypt, and the majority of the opposition forces were silenced through the use of regime intimidation, repression, and violence.

The ousting of the MB signals a moment of profound transformation for the Muslim Sisterhood, involving a change in the roles and the repertoires of activism embraced by the women, and the evolution of their identities as both women and political activists. During this phase, not only the Sisters played their traditional roles as supporters and nurturers of the MB movement, but also expanded their political roles and influence to new areas. Under the initiatives of both older and younger Sisters, women established new 'infrastructures' for activism which they used to resist military rule. These included women-only movements independent of the MB, coalitions of lawyers and human rights defenders, and female political committees intended to build cooperation and solidarity between the MB and other Egyptian political forces opposed to the regime.

By taking part in the front lines of the struggle, women inevitably fell as direct targets of state violence. Women have been affected by violence as a consequence of being family members of those arrested and killed, but they have also been subjected to beating, arrest, torture, humiliation, and sexual assaults by the part of Egyptian security forces. State violence had the objective of disempowering and intimidating women, leading them to withdraw from the Egyptian public sphere. Although women partially retreated, state violence had also the opposite effect of sustaining their mobilization and resistance. Violence against women allowed the Sisters to frame a gender discourse that resonated across a wider range of women, therefore expanding the collective

[1] Part of the empirics informing this chapter have been previously published in Erika Biagini, 'The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood, between Activism, Violence and Leadership,' *Mediterranean Politics* 22, no. 1 (January 2017): 35-53.

identity of the women's movement to include non-Sisterhood members within their ranks. Also, violence had the effect of transforming women's identities in a way that empowered them politically and as women *vis-à-vis* the Egyptian state and the male-dominated Brotherhood movement.

The participation of the younger generation of Muslim Sisterhood activists in this phase significantly impacted this process. The young activists had been at the forefront of the uprisings which gave the MB the opportunity to exercise political power, but were excluded from the political decision-making process afterwards. Following the coup, the absence of male leaders provided the young women with an opportunity to implement their own decisions, and rise to a position of political leadership in this phase of resistance. Also, the younger generations contributed to the resistance by imbuing the women's movement with new ideas and personal experiences of activism, influencing the modalities that the Sisters embraced for resisting the coup during this phase, as well as their worldviews.

Throughout the struggle, and because of the role they played against the regime, women have emerged as leaders within these newly created female-only spaces. In addition, because of the influence they came to enjoy over the on-the-ground youth activists, some senior Sisterhood cadres came to play a greater political role, directed at maintaining the cohesiveness of the MB movement during these difficult times. The leadership role played by the senior Sisters in this phase, added to the one the women already enjoyed in their women-only movements and the female informal activist circles of the MB movement, allowing women to increase their political influence over the MB movement overall.

## 8.2 The Fall of the MB from Power and the Establishment of the Women's Resistance Movement

On June 30, 2013, the day of the first anniversary commemorating President Mohammed Morsi's coming into power, Egypt witnessed one of the largest mass protests since the 2011 uprisings. In millions responded to the invitation of the Tamarod (Rebel) Movement,[2] taking the

[2] The Tamarod Movement is an Egyptian grassroots movement established in 2013 with the purpose of collecting signatures to withdraw confidence in President Morsi. The petition was launched by five young Egyptian activists, including Mahmoud Badr, the coordinator of the grassroots opposition movement Kefaya (Enough), which had a crucial role in leading mass demonstrations against President Hosny Mubarak since 2004. Among the political forces first in granting their support to Tamarod were the Kefaya movement, the 6th of April movement, the National Salvation Front led by Mohamed el-Baradei, and the Strong Egypt Party led by the ex-MB member al-Futuh. Tamarod enjoyed also the official endorsement of Ahmed Shafik, the presidential candidate and ex-Mubarak General who lost the 2012 presidential elections against

streets to demand Morsi's resignation and early presidential elections. The same day, the SCAF, which had both directly and indirectly helped fostering the anti-MB protest, imposed Morsi an official ultimatum. The Minister of Defence General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi demanded Morsi to meet the demands of the people within 48 hours, promising to intervene and set a new course of transition if Morsi failed to meet such request. Morsi refused. In contrast, he invited his supporters to take to the streets to defend the legitimate electoral process which had brought him into power. On July 3, 2013, as warned, the Egyptian army intervened, arresting President Morsi alongside the MB higher leadership.

The reaction of the Muslim Sisters to the threat of an MB ousting was immediate. On June 28, 2013, in view of mass protests being organised against Morsi, the National Alliance in Support of the Electoral Legitimacy (NASEL) - an MB-led coalition of Islamist movements and parties - called for an open ended sit-in to be held in Rab'a Al-'Adaweya square in East Cairo, under the slogan 'Legitimacy is a Red Line'.[3] On that occasion, the MB instructed women not to take part in the demonstrations, in view of a possible violent attack against the sit-in by anti-Morsi supporters or security forces. Women, however, refused the MB orders, joining the sit-in en masse. As remarked by Lamia, a Muslim Sisterhood youth leader, it was women's belief that, as an integral part of Egyptian society as well as the movement, it was women's role to share in the struggle:

> 'When the Rab'a sit-in was organized, the MB didn't want women to go. They said 'this sit-in will be only men'. What happened? We did not say "yes, ok, we will not go". We opposed and we went! It is my role to be there! I am part of the society, and I am part of this group!'[4]

The Rab'a sit-in turned rapidly into a hub of national Islamist opposition, a situation that allowed the Sisters to capitalise on their personal networks and set-up an all-female resistance movement. The first women-only movement established and led by the Sisters after July 2013 was *Nisa' did al-Inqilab,* Women against the Coup (WAC). This group emerged as early as July 14, 2013, and remains to this day the most active in coordinating Islamist women's anti-regime activities and mobilization across Egypt. Its founding statement makes clear Muslim Sisters' desire

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Morsi. For more information on the Tamarod initiative see Dina Hussein, 'Tamarod: The Organization of a Rebellion', *The Middle East Institute*. Available at http://www.mei.edu/video/tamarod-organization-rebellion

[3] The members of the NASEL who originally joined the MB call for the sit-in were al-Asala, al-Islah, the Building and Development, al-Fadila, al-Wasat, and al-Watan parties, the Salafi Front, and al-Jama'a al-Ilsamia. Later on, more movements and individuals of different political affiliations also joined the Islamist-led sit-in. See 'Islamist Parties to Rally on Friday,' *Daily News Egypt*, June 24, 2013. Available at http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/06/24/islamist-parties-to-rally-on-friday/

[4] Lamia, interview.

to play an active role in the phase of MB resistance, as well as to hold on to the political achievements and freedom gained up to that point:

> 'Women Against the Coup emerges as part of the continuous efforts of Egyptian women to play a significant and active role in facing all kinds of injustice in the political sphere, in addition to their usual role as nurturers of this nation. This movement comes as a natural reaction to the brutal coup d'état that wants to kill our new born Egyptian democracy. It also killed our women, our children, our husbands and our brothers. This movement aspires to unite women's efforts in an organized and effective manner, with the objective of restoring the will of the people that was exercised under the law and the constitution, and which equates with the return of Dr. Mohamed Morsi as a President of the Republic'.[5]

The establishment of the Muslim Sisters into a women-only movement signals the salience of gender identity in the process of women's mobilisation and resistance.[6] It also marks a point of departure with the past with regard to the repertoires of activism employed by the Muslim Sisterhood. The only occasion in which the Sisters operated under the umbrella of a women-only movement separate from, and independent of, the Brotherhood, was between 1954 and 1964, when the Sisters joined forces with al-Ghazali's Society after President Nasser had outlawed the MB organisation. In the 1970s, when the MB made its comeback into the Egyptian political scene, the Sisters never re-established a women's movement separate from the MB. Rather, they re-grouped under the women's section of the Brotherhood organisation, and despite operating in separate spheres of activism because of the gender segregation in place in the MB, their activities remained largely subjected to the blessing of the MB male leadership. The WAC, therefore, is the first only-women movement established, coordinated, and led by the Muslim Sisters since the 1960s.

The extensive participation of a younger generation of Sisters willing to expand women's political and leadership roles was crucial to the creation of a separate women's movement from that of the Brotherhood. Such point is substantiated by the personal accounts of young WAC leaders, keen to emphasise their contributions at the time of the establishment of the WAC, and their desire to promote a greater role for women in the phase of resistance, as Lamia's comment suggested:

> '[T]he movement that I established and I am working on at the moment, which is Women Against the Coup, has not been established on as a consequence of

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[5] Maha Abu Azz's speech in occasion of the first Women Against the Coup conference. See 'First Conference of the Women against the Coup Movement, *[al-mu'tamar al-ta'sisiy al-awal li-harakat nisa' did al-inqilab]* YaQiyyn TV, YouTube, July 14, 2013. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHfPEZZe_34 [The author thanks Shaima Omar and Shaima Magdy for helping with the transcript and translation of this speech].

[6] Ray R. and A. C. Kortweg, 'Women's Movements in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization, and Autonomy,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 47-71.

> the MB leadership's directives. It emerged out of women's independent initiative. We were in Rab'a and we were trying to find a way to help the revolution going on. We were a group of women, and we were all against the coup. I am particularly interested in furthering women's role so, the name comes without saying'.[7]

The leadership structure of the WAC, in fact, includes senior Muslim Sisterhood leaders such as Hoda Abd el-Moniem, who is also a current leader in the NASEL, and Hoda Gonia, who is an ex-MP. But is also comprises of several young Sisters such as Lamia and Maha Abu Azz, as well as middle-cadre Sisters who had enjoyed only limited political involvement up to that point, but who had nevertheless remained active in informal female networks linked to the Brotherhood movement. The middle-cadre Sisters at the leadership of the WAC are those who had managed to establish a solid relationship with the youth movement because they supported their demands for greater participation and leadership in the previous two years, such as Nour for example, who is also a founding member.

Finally, the establishment of the WAC testifies to women's ability to bring those resources under their control, such as pre-existing women's networks, in a way that allows them to acquire greater prominence and leadership. For such purpose, older cadres contributed with institutional connections to the MB movement and other parties, as well as organizational skills. Younger Sisters, instead, contributed in terms of mobilisation capacity. Their ability to frame a political discourse in a language more attuned to the desires and aspirations of the youth, allowed them to reach out to a larger cohort of young activists, and urge them in resistance in the ranks of the movement.

In the days following the establishment of the WAC, the Sisters availed of the pre-existing network of the MB and FJP women's branches across the country to turn them into fully-fledged divisions of the WAC. Since the second half of July 2013, in fact, women's mobilisation occurred regularly across Egypt. The growing involvement of women in anti-regime mobilisation had the consequence of exposing the Sisters to increasing violence and repression. This, in turn, strengthened women's independent identity from the MB even further. Initially, the Sisters used to partake in demonstrations by marching in conjunction with men. Men would be positioned at the extreme ends of the marches' cordons, while women would walk in between men for security reasons. However, confronted by growing Islamist unrest, the regime soon decided to use violence against women as a strategy to contain MB mobilisation. The MB had always been extremely protective of its women, not only because male members are particularly concerned with issues of women's modesty, but also for practical reasons. As Khairat al-Shater, a member of the MB Guidance Bureau and MB leader, once emphasized, women are the one left to 'run the show' when

[7] Lamia, interview.

men are arrested. If women were also imprisoned, 'what would it be of our families and businesses?'[8] By attacking women, therefore, the regime aimed at destabilising the MB movement to the core.[9]

As early as July 19, 2013, security forces carried out their first attack on women. On that date, three Sisters died of gunshot wounds while partaking in a pro-Morsi march in the city of Mansoura, in response to the 'Breaking the Coup' campaign called upon by the MB. The youngest woman to lose her life was Hala Abu Shesha (17 years old), who has since then become an icon of the WAC resistance. The Mansoura march was not the first occasion in which women had suffered violence as a consequence of participating in pro-Morsi demonstrations. Women were also among the victims of the July 8, 2013, Republican Guard Massacre, when Egyptian security officers opened fire on MB supporters engaged in morning prayers, killing over 50 people.[10] What made the July 19 attack different was the deliberate intention of the regime to harm the Sisters. The regime affiliated *baltagiya* (state paid thugs), in fact, waited to have an easy grip on women before waging the attack, a clear indication that security forces meant to destabilize MB mobilization by attacking its female members.[11]

In a first moment, the strategy of the regime seemed to have attained its objective. The killing of the three women provoked in fact disagreement among Brothers and Sisters with regard to the practicality of women's participation in demonstrations. Male members began to accuse women of putting both themselves and their men at risk by taking part in protests, demanding women 'to stay home'.[12] Besides, the regime's open attack on women led the Sisters to realise that there was going to be no special regard for the 'gentler sex' from that point forward, and that violence would instead be the norm were the Sisters to continue their protest activities. As remarked by Lamia: 'In every country in the world women and children are red lines. […] That was a clear signal making us to realise that the regime was not going to spare women, but that rather we were going to be a target'.[13] Women's mobilisation, however, continued; this in itself a

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[8] 'Mr. Khairat al-Shater on the Renaissance project and the role of women in society,' *[Mr. Khairat al-Shater bayn mashru' al-nahdha wa dur al-mar'a fi al-mujtama']* Ya Qiyyn TV, YouTube, August 13, 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cu203Eo19d0

[9] As it appears, there was a tacit deal in place between the regime and the movement prior to its ousting, whereby women would be spared during waves of repression against the movement. The only time in which female family members of prominent MB leaders were arrested, including al-Ghazali, was in fact during the repression of the 1960s. Since then, and until 2013, the regime refrained from arresting any other Sister notwithstanding the several cycles of MB repression preceding the MB ousting from power.

[10] 'Statement from Peaceful Protestors Survivors of Brutal Military Coup Massacre,' *Ikhwanweb*, July 8, 2013. Available at http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=31115&ref=search.php%20

[11] Nadia, interview.

[12] Safiya, interview.

[13] Lamia, interview.

demonstration of their determination to resist any attempt at women's repression and marginalisation.

Furthermore, since mid-July, 2013, the Sisters began to organise themselves in women-only marches. The first of such a march was held on the day of Hala's funeral. On July 21, 2013, hundreds of Sisters walked to the Ministry of Defence in central Cairo, demanding justice for Lamia and the other women killed in the attack.[14] This comeback was quite significant because it sent a regime a clear message that violence was not going to be enough to demobilise women. Also, it was noteworthy because the march took place despite the objections of MB male members. From that point on, in fact, women's activism and street protests could only continue in defiance of constraints impinging on women in both the public and the private spheres, as an extract from Nour's interview highlighted:

> 'Women don't want to stay inside. They feel that they have voted and they want their votes. They have seen their friends being killed and violated in front of them. They want justice. They are on the streets because they want to be on the streets and they won't leave them, whatever anyone does or says. This is a decision of the women. […] My daughter is nagging me every day to go down and take the streets. My husband does not let me because on January 25 [2014] I was about to be arrested, but we still go when he is not around'.[15]

By the end of July 2013, after a month of sustained mobilisation by the part of both pro and anti-MB protestors, the regime began planning for a 'final solution' to MB unrest. In particular, the regime wished to pose an end to the Rab'a sit-in, which by then had grown into a powerful platform for Islamists' propaganda and incitement of resistance. On July 24, 2013, al-Sisi called for 'all good Egyptians' to take the streets in a show-off of support for the army in dealing with the 'terrorist threat',[16] thus openly seeking a popular mandate for the forceful dispersal of the Rab'a sit-in. On July 26, pro-army supporters flooded the streets of Cairo in response to al-Sisi's invitation, marking a day of acute violence for both pro and anti-MB protestors.[17] Violence gave the Egyptian

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[14] Manar Mohsen, 'Women Against the Coup Condemn Mansoura Clashes,' *Daily News Egypt*, July 21, 2013. Available at http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/07/21/women-against-the-coup-condemns-mansoura-clashes/

[15] Nour, interview(a).

[16] Abdel Fatah al-Sisi quoted in Patrick Kinsley 'Egypt's army chief calls for show of support from citizens,' *The Guardian*, July 24, 2013. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/24/egypt-army-chief-support-citizens

[17] 'Egypt: Deaths as Rival Rallies Clash,' *The Guardian*, July 26, 2013. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/26/egypt-showdown-army-supporters-muslim-brotherhood-live

cabinet grounds to declare the Rab'a and al-Nahda sit-ins a terrorist threat, demanding the Ministry of Interior to proceed to their evacuation on July 31.[18]

Egyptian state's institutions took the occasion of a dismantling of the sit-ins being imminent to demonise Islamists further by criminalising the presence of women and children in the Rab'a and al-Nahda camps. The National Council for Women (NCW) accused the MB of using women and children as 'human shields', and requested the backing of the UN and UNICEF to condemn their presence at the sit-ins internationally.[19] The same was not done during the January 25th Revolution, when women's practice of bringing their children to the squares 'was hailed as a valuable political education for future generations'. [20] This time, because it was an Islamist sit-in, women were denied such an admiration. The official response of the Sisters was not late coming. Only few hours later, the WAC released a statement demanding the NCW to issue 'an apology to all free Egyptian women who refuse[d] to submit in the face of live bullets.'[21] Determined to bring the struggle forward, the majority of the Sisters continued in fact to occupy the squares.

On August 14, 2013, at dawn, the Egyptian police, in conjunction with, and under the directives of, Egyptian army forces, initiated the dispersal of the Rab'a and al-Nahda Squares. The Rab'a dispersal alone lasted for over 12 hours during which over 1,000 protestors were killed and more thousands injured, in what Human Rights Watch defined as 'the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history'.[22] Rab'a was only one of a long series of mass unlawful killings of demonstrators carried out by Egyptian security forces since Morsi's ousting, but remains an indelible mark of Muslim Brotherhood and Sisterhood members' collective identity.

In retrospect, some women criticised the obstinacy of their fellow Sisters to occupy the squares up to the day of dispersal, as well as their continuing participation in protest activities after that.[23] Nonetheless, the majority of the Sisters interviewed objected to such criticism, as Lamia, for example, stated:

> 'Such statements leave me really astonished! How can people accuse women of being toys in the hands of Muslim Brotherhood leaders […] but then ask the MB to 'remove' women from the sit-ins?…How is it possible that people find it

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[18] 'Egypt Cabinet orders end to sit-in protest,' *al-Jazeera*, August 1, 2013. Available at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/07/2013731144419285305.html
[19] 'The National Council for Women denounces use of children at pro-Morsi sit-ins,' *Al-Haram*, August 2, 2013. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/78142.aspx
[20] Hatem, *Gender and Counter Revolution*, 12.
[21] 'Women Against the Coup: al-Tallawy offends the Rab'a protesters… paying lip-service to her mistress Susanne Mubarak,' *['Nisa' did al-inqilab: Isaa'at al-Tallawy limu'atasimat Raba'a, qurban tuqadimuhu li sayydatiha Suzaan Mubaarak'] Amlalummah*, August 2, 2013. Available at http://www.amlalommah.net/new/index.php?mod=article&id=38560
[22] Human Rights Watch Report, *All According to Plan*, 6.
[23] Interviews with Safiya, and Maha.

> so hard to even imagine that we, women, can think for ourselves and take our own decisions? People recognise women's will only when this opposes Muslim Brotherhood's orders, but when it is women's desire to do something which happens to be in agreement with the Muslim Brotherhood, than they refuse to acknowledge that this can be women's decision!'[24]

Similar feelings were echoed even by senior Sisters present in Rab'a on the day of dispersal, like el-Moniem:

> 'If we had been ordered [by the MB] to evacuate the squares we would have never done it. Yet, we could have never imagined that the dispersal was going to be so violent. We expected tear gas. But what happened…we could have never imagined all that killing. We have been attacked by snipers from helicopters and by cars at all entrances of the sit-in at the same time. We have not been left any safe pass. It was a massacre since the very first moment'.[25]

The wave of repression that ensued since the Rab'a dispersal is unparalleled in the history of the MB movement. Amnesty reports that according to Egyptian official figures, over 34,000 people, the overwhelming majority of which Islamists, have been arrested between August 2013 and July 2016.[26] Independent human rights organisations, however, set the same number at over 60.000, a figure which would explain the commissioning of the Ministry of Interior of ten new prisons since the repression started in 2013. As a sign of commitment to eradicate the movement from the political and social sphere, the Egyptian state declared the MB a terrorist organisation on December 25, 2013, and classified the Freedom and Justice Party as an illegal party on April 2014.

## 8.3 Sustaining Female Mobilisation in a Repressive Environment: Muslim Sisterhood's politicisation of regime violence against women

The Rab'a dispersal marked the beginning of a new phase of Muslim Sisterhood's mobilisation, to which the Egyptian state continued to respond with increasing repression and violence. As it usually happens in situations of conflict, violence against women during this period assumed both direct and indirect forms.[27] Indirectly, women have been affected as family members of those arrested, killed, or who left the country in search of a safer place. But as regime violence against Islamists became systematic, women also turned into direct targets of regime repression.

[24] Lamia, interview.
[25] Nadia, interview.
[26] Amnesty International, *Egypt: Officially, You Do Not Exist. Disappeared and Tortured in the name of counter-terrorism* (Amnesty International, 2016):19. Available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/4368/2016/en/
[27] Holt, *Violence Against Women*.

According to a WAC report dated September 2014, 1,558 Muslim Sisters had been arrested and 85 killed by Egyptian security forces between July 2013 and August 2014.[28] During this period, violence against women, however, served also to sustain Muslim Sisterhood's mobilisation in such a repressive environment. The Sisters adopted new strategies to maintain their presence in the streets, contain the damages due to their participation, and build support for their cause.

Since the end of 2013, and throughout 2014, the WAC made considerable efforts to reach out to the broader Egyptian society. It organised several public conferences, released numerous media appeals, and also hosted awareness campaigns with the objective to expose the extent of regime's abuses against women taking place during protests, in prison, or in women's private homes. For the purpose, WAC activists became involved in a meticulous work of data recording, presented then to women at conferences in the form of detailed reports. Besides, at these meetings women victims of violence were often invited to share their personal stories as a way to lend validity to the WAC's cause. Furthermore, to maximise their appeal, but also because participation became increasingly dangerous, the WAC recorded and then broadcast the events on MB media channels.[29] Violence against women also helped to sustain the Sisterhood in street protests. Women-only marches became increasingly organised around this issue, and banners depicting female prisoners and women's martyrs started to progressively replace those representing Morsi.

The Sisters started to deploy also stratagems to contain the number of women prisoners. Among the various strategies employed was that of forming pressure groups outside those police stations where women were brought to for questioning immediately after arrest. The objective was to intimidate police officers with the prospect of further mobilisation and/or violence, and get the women arrested released before these were formally assigned to a prison. Also, such a strategy served to contain the number of forced disappearances,[30] because the pressure group tracked the location of the activists from the time of arrest until it was transferred to a penitentiary centre. In the process, social media tools were used to signal the location of capture to the group of fellow activists, so that the pressure group could reach the police station in the shortest time possible. It also facilitated the work of fellow activists of keeping track of the whereabouts of the prisoners, and to signal areas potentially at risk of police patrolling to other members.

Internet activism has become another important repertoire of contention used by the Sisters to delegitimise the military leadership. The practice is not new. Even before the uprisings, Al-

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[28] Women Against the Coup, *Violations Against Women: 100 Days Under the Rule of al-Sisi, ['Intihakat did al-mar'a: yum 100 taht hukm al-Sisi' ]* (Cairo: Women Against the Coup Report, 2014), presented by Lamia at the WAC conference held at the premises of al-Istiqlal Party, Cairo, September 2, 2014 [*unpublished*]

[29] *RASSD* and *YaQiyyn* were among the channels were Sisterhood videos were broadcast.

[30] For more information on Egypt forced disappearances see the Amnesty International Report, Egypt*: Officially, You Do Not Exist*.

Anani reported of how a number of young female activists recurred to the internet to share their frustration with the Mubarak regime and its treatment of Islamists, or to advocate the release of their male family members.[31] After the coup, however, web activism has become widespread among both young and senior Sisters who used it as a tool to overcome the regime's attempts at silencing them. Besides, a majority of the internet campaigns and pages run by the Sisters after the coup were dedicated exclusively to women. Internet was also used by the Sisters also to seek support for the WAC's cause internationally. Diaspora communities of Brothers and Sisters, made up of those who fled Egypt after 2013 in search of refuge in neighbour countries such as Turkey and Qatar, but also Malaysia, Canada, and European states such as France, Germany, England, and Ireland, among others, contribute substantially to translational Muslim Sisterhood's activism. One of the main objectives of the Sisters abroad, is to raise foreign states' awareness with regard to the conditions affecting Egyptians living under the authoritarian military regime, and challenge foreign states' support to the Egyptian military from abroad.

Such practices helped the Sisters to build solidarity among the women involved, and therefore to sustain women's anti-regime mobilisation in spite of the high risk associated with political activism in a context of restored authoritarianism.

### 8.3.1 Exposing the 'Double Standards' of Women's Rights in Egypt

With their discourses, Muslim Sisterhood activists unveiled the contradictions at the heart of the Egyptian state and Western countries' approaches to women's rights. In particular, the Sisters underlined how the al-Sisi's regime used women's rights to boost his political prestige among national and international observers, while holding little regard for the rights of women per se. For example, when al-Sisi passed a law criminalising sexual harassment,[32] the Sisters criticised the move as hypocritical, pointing out to how sexual violence remained a systematic practice used by regime forces against both male and female protestors during interrogations and prison torture.[33]

Also, the Sisterhood highlighted the paradox inherent in Western countries' promotion of a human rights-led agenda in the region, in correspondence to their extended support for a regime that acted in complete violation of human rights standards. According to the Sisters, this point was

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[31] Al-Anani, *The Young Brotherhood in Search of a New Path.*

[32] The law was passed following a case of gang rape against a woman in Tahrir square the day commemorating al-Sisi's election to the presidency of Egypt. See 'El-Sisi visits Tahrir sexual assault victim, apologises to Egypt's women,' *Al-Ahram,* June 11, 2014. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/0/103444/Egypt/0/ElSisi-visits-Tahrir-sexual-assault-victim,-apolog.aspx

[33] Nour, interview(a).

underscored by the fact that Western governments remained highly critical of Islamists for failing to promote gender equality when in power, but did not extend the same criticism to the al-Sisi regime notwithstanding the widespread abuses against female protestors. For this reason, the Sisters claimed that Western states' promotion of women's rights in the region was not genuine, but remained instrumental to their broader imperialist agenda.[34]

Overall, this situation led the Sisters to state that human rights, as understood by the West and its allied military leadership, do not envisage equality for all. Rather, human rights acquired relevance only when they served the promotion of specific political projects, like portraying Islamists as illiberal and enemies of women, for example.[35] Continuing on this logic, the Sisters believed that the West condoned human rights abuses against Islamists due to the fact that Islamists represented 'inconvenient' political actors. Because of the social, political, religious, and economic changes they aspired to, Islamist threatened Western political and economic interests in the region, and their lives were therefore easily expendable. A military dictatorship, instead, allowed returning to the status quo prior to the uprisings, and provided greater security to Western interests in Egypt. And this was the reason why a military dictatorship could enjoy the backing of the West regardless of its human rights record. An extract from Nour's interview elucidates this point better:

> 'In Saudi Arabia veiling is mandatory for women and many of the things the Saudi Arabian state does are against human rights as understood in the West. But the West accepts Saudi Arabia the way it is because it has money, and petrol, and is a profitable market. Why then you don't accept that Egyptians might want to be ruled by Islamic principles, and want their religious values to be protected by law? Why don't you accept that an Islamist group can be in power? […] Because you [West] are corrupt and you want corrupt leaders to help sell your things over here! It has nothing to do with Islam or being Muslims. It has to do with the West wanting to keep our societies as markets for themselves, for their weapons, and for their goods. This is the issue. The problem is not Islam, or anything that has to do with Islam, or women's rights, and you [West] know it very well'.[36]

Such reasoning, although not entirely mistaken, underlines the close link between authoritarianism and human (and women) rights struggles in post-colonial societies, and demonstrates how it is nearly impossible for the Sisters to separate the two. Western states' support for al-Sisi renders the West directly implicated in the oppression of Islamists and the continuous human rights abuses carried out by the Egyptian regime against civil society and political groups that opposed it. For this reason, in the views of the Sisters, the cause of achieving women's rights

[34] Nour, interview(a); Lamia, interview.
[35] Nour, interview(a).
[36] Nour, interview(a).

cannot be separated by the broader cause of ending authoritarian rule and imperialist dynamics in Egypt.

Similar discourses influenced the relationship of the Sisterhood with the Egyptian women NGOs. Throughout the years, Western governments channelled considerable funding through local and Western-sponsored women NGOs to promote an international women rights agenda in the region. Because many Egyptian women NGOs supported themselves through foreign funding,[37] and given the contradictions inherent to Western human rights agenda in the region as perceived by the Sisters, Women NGOs in Egypt were also consider by the WAC an instrument of Western states' imperialist agenda. Muslim Sisterhood perceptions were reinforced by reluctance of a majority of the Egyptian feminist NGOs to intervene in support of the Sisters when faced with brutal regime repression.[38]

Through their discourses, in fact, the WAC put the attention to the silence of a majority of women and feminists NGOs in Egypt with regard to the abuses that the regime carried out against Islamist women's protestors, and framed it as an inherent contradiction in the values and causes that underpinned the activism of the Egyptian feminist movement. Lamia articulated this thought in a video stating the reasons behind the establishment of the WAC:

> 'All those Women's Rights NGOs that kept complaining about the status of women's rights in Egypt and called for women's equality in the previous period [Morsi's government], they are all silent now with regard to what is happening. They ignore the huge amount of killings, imprisonment, and the unprecedented number of violations against [Islamist] women. This is why there is an urgent need of one entity [WAC] able to raise people's awareness about the current situation, to document the violence, and to alert people of the scale of the tragedy that Egyptian women face as a result of the military coup'.[39]

By doing so, therefore, the Sisters promoted the idea that Egyptian feminists' NGOs endorsed 'women's rights to equality' but not 'equal rights for all women', and boosted the image of the WAC movement as a 'true' promoter of women's rights in Egypt.

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[37] Maha M. Abdelrahman, *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt*, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

[38] The Sisters did not work in complete isolation during this phase of repression. Although Islamists were the primary target of the Egyptian regime, since 2013 other political forces including leftists, secular, and liberal activists, were repressed too because of their opposition to the military rule. Being subjected to a common threat allowed for cooperation to emerge between the Sisters and some leftist human rights organisation throughout the year 2014. More on the topic is said in this chapter in section 6.

[39] *Banat al-Horrya: taruwy tadashyn haraka nisaa' did al-inqilab]*, Mukamalyin TV Satellite Channel, YouTube, February 14, 2014.

### 8.3.2 Explaining the Silence of the Egyptian Secular-Liberal Feminist Movement: Islamists and secular women's competition over the public sphere

Among those who supported the military intervention against the Islamists were several Egyptian women. These were both women affiliated with the regime as well as common middle-class women. The fact that a number of Egyptian women backed the military intervention might seem paradoxical. Previous experiments with state feminism in Egypt are well-known for having brought women only nominal gains. Even Nasser, who is still recognised by many Egyptian feminist as a liberator of women due to his support for women's access to the public sphere, did so only to the extent that this favoured women's inclusion in the Egyptian labour force, a precondition necessary for the success of Nasser's social-nationalist project.[40] Neither Nasser, nor Sadat, or Mubarak, have in fact ever promoted gender reforms that could break the knot of women's submission to men in the private sphere of society.[41] Yet, it is precisely this protracted failure to bring about gender equality within the family that explains the continued support of women for state feminism, and al-Sisi's intervention against Islamists.

As argued by Zaki, since reforms in the private sphere have become nearly impossible to achieve, in the last decade Egyptian secular feminists have increasingly directed their efforts to the public sphere as the last bastion for achieving greater equality - this represented in women's right to work and education and, more recently, political participation.[42] According to this view, Islamists' protracted emphasis on women's primary role within the family threatened women's access to the public sphere. The broader gender discourse Islamists promoted while in power, together with the backlash against women that followed the 2011 uprising, augmented women's fears of losing the small gains they had made up to that point. It is therefore that between an authoritarian military regime, and a seemingly authoritarian Islamist regime, part of Egyptian women and secular feminists chose the former as the lesser of two evils.

That of the Sisters is also a struggle to gain and maintain their active presence in the Egyptian public sphere but, ironically, Islamist women's right is questioned by a secular-military regime, as well as by secular and state feminists who perceive such a regime as the main guarantor of women's rights. Since Islamist women increased their attempt at political participation from the 1990s, the struggle between secular and Islamist women's movements has in fact converged on the Egyptian public sphere.[43] The difference between the two movements rests on the values according to which women may claim legitimate access to it, and on the gender norms that women assert

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[40] Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*.
[41] Karam, *Women, Islamist and the State*.
[42] Zaki, *El-Sissi's Women?*
[43] On this point see also Philbrick-Yadav, *Segmented Publics*.

should regulate such space. While the Sisters claim access to the public sphere on the basis of women's roles as mothers of the nation, epitomised in their struggle for liberation against an authoritarian regime, and frame this in Islamic terms, secular feminists make similar claims on the basis of women's citizenship rights and gender equality.[44] Albeit women's efforts are driven by different ideologies and discourses, their objectives remain therefore very similar.[45]

As a demonstration of its determination to retain the streets, since 2014 the WAC began to impart self-defence trainings to women. An 'Instruction Manual for Revolutionaries' (Women) - *Dalyil al-Irshadat al-Thawria* – drafted by the WAC in partnership with the youth movement Bint al-Thawra (Girl of the Revolution), coached women on physical exercise to increase body strength, provided a guided illustration of the most sensitive (male) body parts women could aim at in case of aggression, and showed basic self-defence tactics. The manual was distributed by the WAC in the form of a pamphlet as well as an online document. On line, the manual counted over 3,400 views.[46]

## 8.4 Youth Mobilisation post the Coup: united we stand, divided we fall.

Youth mobilization was crucial to the ability of the MB to signal its presence in the streets after Morsi ousting. The beginning of the new academic year in late September 2013, just over a month after the dispersal of the Rab'a sit-in, provided a boost to youth mobilisation at a time when sentiments of outrage towards the regime were still at their height. By the winter of 2013, in fact, many additional youth movements linked to the MB had emerged. Several of these were led by female academics and students affiliated with the Sisterhood, like the 7-AM Movement (*Saba'a al-Sabah*), the Free Women of al-Azhar (*Hara'ir al-'Azhar*), Ultras Girls (*Ultras Banat*), Girls against the Coup (*Banat did al-Inquilab*), Students against the Coup (*Talibaat did al-Inquilab*), and University Professors against the Coup (*Asatizat al-Jami'at did al-Inquilab*).[47] Among these, Ultras Girls is worth mentioning further.

Al-Azhar was one of the universities that suffered the most at the hand of government's repression during the winter of 2013/2014. Violence led some of the al-Azhar female students to embrace new 'transgressive' performances while protesting. For that, they took inspiration from the

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[44] For a comparison between secular and Islamists' women discourses see Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam*; and Hafez, *An Islam of her Own*.
[45] See also Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own*.
[46] Women Against the Coup and Girl of the Revolution, *Instruction Manual for Revolutionaries [Dalyil al-Irshadat al-Thawria]* (Cairo: Nisa' did al-Inqilab wa Bint al-Thawra, 2015). Available at http://www.slideshare.net/WomenAntiCoup/ss-43754071
[47] These were only the movement led by Muslim Sisterhood members; more movements emerged but were male-led. Nadia, interview.

Egyptian Ultras football fans. Like them, Ultras Girls adopted a more 'radical dress-code' believed to help women concealing their identity during protests, and used drums and horns to make themselves heard when taking part in gender mixed demonstrations.[48] The Ultras Girls received widespread criticism from their male peers as well as the MB male leadership for their 'unfeminine' behaviour.[49] The girls, however, objected to the MB notion of woman virtuousness, signalling a continuous process of transformation in the feminist identity of the women in the course of resistance:

> 'Many men of the Muslim Brotherhood have criticised our initiative, particularly on social networks. They think it is undignified for a pious woman to act like a football fan. I disagree with this point of view, because I believe a woman can show her enthusiasm while remaining virtuous. Unlike football fans, we do not swear and we do not attack anyone'.[50]

The Egyptian army took several measures to contain students' mobilisation. Among the earliest strategies adopted was that of involving university staff in the process of identification of students and colleagues 'suspected of being Brotherhood affiliates and carry out 'terrorist' acts'.[51] Confronted with mounting protests, however, the Ministry of Interior introduced soon more severe measures.[52] On November 22, 2013, after it had already hired private security companies to patrol university campuses, the Egyptian government expanded the repressive power granted to the police, lending them the authority to enter university campuses and suppress protests without necessitating prior government approval.[53] Two days later, the cabinet passed the Assembly Law 107/2013, whereby it made it a legal requirement for protesters to obtain an official permission from the Ministry of Interior before staging demonstrations, and made it lawful for police to use

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[48] 'Al-Azhar spawns first female 'ultras' group,' *World Bulletin*, October 28, 2013. Available at http://www.worldbulletin.net/haber/121687/al-azhar-spawns-first-female-ultras-group

[49] Mohammed Badie was reported criticising Ultras Girls from prison, and inciting women to conform to the modest and feminine code of conduct supported by the MB. See Salman Lufti, 'The Egyptian Brotherhood Navigates Internal Generational Divisions and the Demands of its People in Turkish Exile,' *[Al-Ikhwan al-Misri iatarnuhun bayn inqasamat al-ajial wa mutathalabat al-munafa al-taraky] Al-Hayat*, September 20, 2016. Available at https://goo.gl/p6YOsH

[50] '"Ultras Girls", the Muslim Brotherhood's rowdy female fan base,' *The Observer*, November 11, 2013. Available at http://observers.france24.com/en/20131111-ultras-girls-muslim-brotherhood-female

[51] C.C., interview by the author, Cairo 2014 [Henceforth: C.C. interview].

[52] For more information on the protests taking place in Egyptian universities between September 2013 and April 2014, see Nicola Pratt, *From Revolution to Repression: Egyptian Universities on the Frontline of Protest* (UK: Egypt Solidarity Initiative, 2014). Available at https://egyptsolidarityinitiative.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/es-pamphlet-for-web.pdf

[53] 'Egypt Gives Police new Powers as Students Clash,' *Al-'Arabyia*, November 22, 2013. Available at https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2013/11/22/Egypt-gives-new-powers-as-students-clash-.html

water cannons, tear gas, and birdshots, to disperse protests.[54] The new law defined an assembly as a joint meeting consisting of ten or more people. Such measures led to scores of students being arrested, and killed, across university campuses. To provide an idea of the extent of students' repression, it is enough to know that in 2016 the Egyptian government was facing bureaucratic difficulties to arrange the final college exams for 3,462 students in prisons.[55] When all the above mentioned measures proved insufficient to control students' mobilisation, in April 2014 the Minister of Education proceeded by suspending the academic year altogether.

The massive suppression of students is a demonstration of the important challenge that a united youth continued to represent for the Egyptian regime. As also noted by Nour, 'youth solidarity is fostered in colleges, and this is why the regime stopped the academic year [2013/2014]. It fears students when they are united because it was a united youth that led to the uprisings'.[56] Unity among students was however difficult to maintain. In 2013/2014, the broader political divides in place within the Egyptian society played out on university campuses as well. The MB-students, like their older leaders, demanded that other parties agreed to the reinstatement of Morsi to the presidency as a precondition for cooperating together. For them, the reinstatement of Morsi continued to symbolise the reestablishment of a legitimate democratic process in Egypt, and the end of military interference in political affairs.[57] Furthermore, Rab'a had left a deep mark in the collective identity of the MB. MB students continued to hold other political forces responsible for Morsi ousting and Islamists' renewed repression. On the other hand, other youth revolutionary movements, such as the 6th of April and the Ahrar Movement, for example, also opposed the army rule but could not agree on the reinstatement of Morsi. Besides, they remained suspicious of the MB given that the movement had left them alone to protest against the SCAF during the period of transition.[58] Youth mobilisation, therefore, took place but remained divided, a situation that made it easier for police forces to raid and repress students.

In addition, after the MB ousting and the protracted repression of Islamists, the MB lacked a solid leadership structure able to coordinate youth's mobilisation under a single strategy. On the one side, this meant that the youth had a greater space to apply their own initiatives and exercise leadership, like this al-Azhar student emphasised: 'right now is the youth who is moving things in

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[54] Human Rights Watch, *Joint Letter Addressing the Situation of Human Rights in Egypt at the 26th Session of the UN Human Rights Council* (Human Rights Watch, May 30, 2014). Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/30/joint-letter-addressing-situation-human-rights-egypt-26th-session-un-human-rights

[55] Jihad Abaza, '3,462 Student Detainees to Take their Exams in Prison amid Bureaucratic Difficulties,' *al-Ahram*, January 29, 2016. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/186214.aspx

[56] Nour, interview(b).

[57] Lamia, interview.

[58] Fayrouz, interview.

the streets because most of the MB leaders are rather in jail or abroad, and this is the reason why the regime can't manage to re-gain control'.[59] On the other side, however, the newly created space for leadership led to an increase in competition among the several sub-groups of the movement, causing the inability of the students to elaborate a common long-term plan of action, like this MB student highlighted: 'students do not really know what to do. [They] unite in committees which are independent from each other, and there is no actual plan for the future.'[60] It was precisely at this time that a majority of MB student leaders started blaming the MB central leadership for its inability to provide a strategy to address these difficulties.[61]

Uniting students was therefore an urgent and necessary objective. As this Sister maintained: 'we both have made our mistakes and we both sold each other [to the SCAF], but it is time to reunite the ground'.[62] It was during this period that some Muslim Sisterhood members, by then the largest pool of experienced MB cadres available, attempted to fill in part the vacuum left by men, emerging as intermediary leaders between those in jail or on the run, and the larger movement's network of women and youth. This situation, in the longer term, allowed the Sisters to expand their political influence and leadership in the MB movement overall.

## 8.5 Coordinating the 'Ground' with the 'Political': The Committee of the Pragmatic Women Leaders

The wave of repression that ensued Morsi's ousting caught the MB largely by surprise. Therefore, the movement lacked any meaningful political strategy to face the situation. In the months that followed the coup, most of its efforts were directed at minimising the damages of repression and holding its ground. It was only after nine months, when most of its members had been arrested and its leadership structure severely compromised, that the MB began to contemplate unity with other political forces as a way out of the crisis. This new strategy became visible in the *tarbyia* curricula that were issued after the coup, as this Sister explained:

> 'We had three curricula since the coup. The one for the first three months after the coup [July-September 2013] invited us to stand our ground and show people that they did wrong. The one that followed [October 2013 – May 2014; time of stronger student mobilisation] asked us to attempt to return to the stage of the January 25th Revolution. The latest curriculum [June 2014 – Sept 2014] focuses on reaching out to people, making efforts to bridge the divides that have taken

[59] Farida, interview.
[60] Abdul, interview by author, Cairo 2014 [Henceforth: Abdul, interview].
[61] Ibid.
[62] Abdul, interview.

> place in Egyptian society, and to demonstrate to the people that we are all united under the same cause of breaking the coup'.[63]

As also confirmed by another Sisterhood cadre, by the summer of 2014 the MB leaders were in fact trying to find a compromise that could made cooperation between the MB and other political forces possible. In order to join forces, the other political groups demanded that the MB gave up on political power and on the reinstatement of Morsi as president of Egypt. Some Sisterhood cadres said also to be ready to accept such conditions if it served to foster political unity.[64] To be achieved, however, unity entailed not only seeking a compromise among the senior political leaders. It also required negotiating with the youth revolutionary movements, and convincing the MB-youth to work once again under the control and direction of the MB leadership. But persuading the youth to accept orders decided upon by the MB leaders in isolation from the youth, was no longer easily attainable.

After the ousting, several young activists filled the vacuum created by the arrest of their leaders, emerging to a position of leadership themselves. Their legitimacy was grounded on the anti-regime struggle they endured daily in the streets, and were therefore no longer willing to comply with the old principles of 'listen and obey' sponsored by the MB organisation. As also noted by Fahmy, '[f]or a large portion of the new [MB] leadership, decisions should no longer be made within the organisation's leadership offices and sent from the top down to the base'; rather, the young members believed that 'the base should lead, and it is the role of the new leadership to balance between initiatives on the ground and the principles of the organization'.[65] Some Muslim Sisterhood cadres were among this new tier of leadership who attempted to find a balance between the objectives and desires of the on-the-ground activists, and the objectives and principles of the MB movement.

By the summer of 2014, eight of the most influential Muslim Sisterhood cadres grouped into a committee that, for lack of a better term, they called 'The Committee of the Pragmatic Women Leaders'. Their role was that of monitoring that the decisions taken by the MB elders reflected the desires of the younger generation, and could therefore be accepted as a viable political compromise by the MB youth-base. As Nour, who was part of this Committee, explained it:

> 'You have the political, and you have the ground, and you don't want the ground to come out of the hands of the political, you have to keep them going together. So, if you say something the people [youth] does not want, it will be a

[63] Esma, interview.
[64] Nour, interview(a).
[65] Georges Fahmy, 'The Struggle for the Leadership of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2015). Available at http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/07/14/struggle-for-leadership-of-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-pub-60678

> big problem. Therefore, before we take any political decision, we need to understand what the people want, and what they are fighting for, and it is this committee that is keeping the balance, it is the women'.[66]

These were women who already enjoyed a considerable influence over the MB-youth movement because of the relationship they had established with them over the years. They were in fact eight of the most influential *munassiqat* in their districts, elected by the youth following the introduction of the 2011 MB internal by-law granting the Sisters the power to elect their own leaders.[67] In addition to having a strong relationship with the youth, these women had also displayed considerable influence and leadership skills across the women's movements emerged after the coup, and were regarded as influential leaders by youth groups for being able to be pragmatic before political differences.[68] The way these leaders attempted to promote unity among youth movements operating on the ground included emotional persuasion and leading by example.

The role played by women at this time increased their influence and leadership inside the MB movement, adding to the leadership role they already played within their own women-only movements. Furthermore, it allowed women to make their voices and opinions heard at the heart of those MB political offices from which they had previously been largely excluded, like the Guidance Bureau, the most important political office of the MB movement. As pointed out by Nour:

> 'After the coup women really have a say, even men are consulting with us on what to do, even the Guidance Bureau is counselling with us before taking decisions, because they are now aware that we knew better than them what should have been done'.[69]

This committee had not yet been officialised when fieldwork for this research project was carried out, but it was nonetheless fully-functional and meetings were held weekly. There is no guarantee that it will be formalised as part of the MB political structure, but its importance lied in the fact that the MB male leadership recognised its existence, and that it represented Muslim Sisterhood's continuing efforts to increase their influence, presence, and political role in the MB movement.

### 8.5.1 Developing Female Leadership

[66] Nour, interview(a).
[67] For more information on the *munassiqat* and the 2011 internal MB by-laws see chapter 7.3.
[68] Nour, interview(a).
[69] Ibid.

The efforts that the Sisters devolved in the act of 'being pragmatic' came as a consequence of their realisation that one of the major failures of the MB movement while in power was precisely its inability to be inclusive of other political forces and deal with ideological and political differences in a positive way. This portrayed the MB as authoritarian, leading the movement to lose much of the support it had enjoyed at the start. As Nour admitted: 'The mistake was to believe that once you have a majority then you can dictate the rules and everybody has to listen. This is not democracy. The good thing that has come out of the coup is that now we need to learn how to accept each other and rule in co-operation'.[70] Learning how to deal with political differences required a profound personal transformation by the part of these women, who until then had maintained a MB-centred approach in their activism, as Nour explained:

> 'The Sisters used to work secretively, therefore we were not trained on how to deal with society as a whole and accept differences. This resulted on us having women who could act as excellent leaders among the Sisters, but who could hardly succeed when dealing with others. Think of al-Gharf for example. With us she is an excellent leader, but with others? […] We are now training on how to deal with differences, and we are trying to identify those women among us who are able to sit down with others [non-MB], accept them for who they are, discuss with them, and reach agreements without being offensive. […] This doesn't mean that you stop being MB. You still work under the same logic and values, but it is the way in which you portray yourself and manage political difference that must be improved'.[71]

As this extract suggests, the coming together of these women in a Committee testifies their desire to develop a robust female leadership that could live past the time of repression. Several Sisters, including Nour, were aware of the risk that the ease of repression might have threatened women's leadership and the political role they acquired at this time, but seemed determined to maintain their position also after the wave of repression. Lamia, for example, explicitly stated her commitment to promote women's leadership roles in the MB movement also in the future:

> 'The MB did a mistake by leaving us aside for a very long time. Yet, we were working. In the opinion of women they were all working, and from within the boundaries of their group every woman was trying to improve herself. […] After all these efforts, you cannot just throw away all this women's energy and will to give. Women are already playing a greater leadership role in the movement and it is inevitable that they will continue to play the same in the future'.[72]

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[70] Ibid.
[71] Nour, interview(a).
[72] Lamia, interview.

On April 4, 2014, in a further attempt to unite those movements operating on the ground into a single front of resistance, the Sisters established the Revolutionary Coalition of Egyptian Women – *al-Tahaluf al-Thawry li al-Mar'a al-Masryia* (RCEW), under which they unified all those women's movements that had emerged until then.[73] In addition to those mentioned so far, three others are members of the Coalition. These are Women against the Killing of Demonstrators (*Nisa' did Qatl al-Mutathahirin*), the Coalition of the Mothers of the Detainees (*al-Tahaluf min Umhat al-Mu'ataqalin*), and the Rights of my Children (*Huquq Awlady*).[74] Of these, the Rights of my Children is worthy of special mention. This group consists of the mothers of more than 100 MB children abducted by security forces from the Alexandria district of Kom el-Dikka in the winter of 2013/2014 as a tactic to extort from their families information on the whereabouts of MB male leaders.[75] Although the role of the Sisters by that time had become increasingly organisational and political, the RCEW provided the Sisterhood with further scope to sustain mobilisation throughout the years of 2014 and 2015.

## 8.6 Rescuing the MB Movement: Islamist-Leftist cooperation against human rights abuses in Egypt

As a consequence of the mass wave of repression that ensued since the 2013 coup, an important part of Muslim Sisterhood's activism to this day is directed at sustaining the network of the Islamist movement. Women sustain MB members and their families with psychological support, and material and financial assistance. In addition to that, women also continue to engage in lengthy battles against a corrupted legal system, in the attempt to win the freedom of thousands of MB members. In this, the Sisters enjoyed the support of prominent leftist NGOs boasting a long legacy of human rights activism in Egypt. Cooperation between the Sisters and these organisations was made possible by the joint efforts of key female leaders working on both sides, and committed to foster human rights in Egypt independently from political affiliations and ideological inclinations.[76] Because activists from all political spectrum had by then fell victims of the repressive hand of the al-Sisi regime, this fostered mutual understanding and cooperation among such diverse women.

[73] Nadia, interview.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Fayrouz, interview.
[76] Ibid.

Among the organisations that lent support to the Sisters since 2014 were the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre (HMLC) and the al-Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence (al-Naddem Centre). The HMLC was established in 1999 by Ahmed Seif al-Islam in memory of the prominent human rights defender Hisham Mubarak. Since then, the organisation provides legal assistance to prisoners of conscience and victims of torture in Egypt. Cooperation between the HMLC and the Sisters proved crucial to the latter's ability to deal with the surge in number of MB prisoners.[77] Under the supervision of HMLC activists, a number of Sisters obtained training on how to file detainees' legal appeals, then passing on the information to the Sisters working in other governorates. This allowed the women to expand the MB legal support network across and outside Cairo, and accelerate the response time of the lawyers when dealing with the swelling number of legal cases linked to MB detainees.[78]

Together with the HMLC, the Sisters also coordinated several hunger strike campaigns both inside and outside prisons in denunciation of prison torture, the detention of activists on political grounds, and the inhumane conditions of Egyptian detention facilities. Only in a minority of cases the hunger strike campaigns led to the successful release of MB detainees. In one occasion, Mohamed Soltan, the Egyptian-American dual citizen and son of the well-known MB leader Salah Soltan, was released on health ground on May 2015, after over 400 days of hunger strike, and only after relinquishing his Egyptian nationality. Another such occasion occurred on June 6, 2014, when the joint efforts of Dr Hoda Abd el-Moniem, Laila Soueif (HMLC), and Aida Seif al-Dawla (al-Nadeem Centre), led to the release of the MB journalist Abdallah Shami.[79]

Throughout the summer of 2014, the HMLC also functioned as a powerful media platform for those Sisters who wished to go public with their personal stories. Although most women would use this opportunity to report of the hardship and injustice that them and their families were facing as a consequence of repression, some would also go further and share their personal experience with episodes of sexual abuse. Because women's honour has always been at the heart of Islamist movements, this practice signifies an important breakthrough for the Sisters. By narrating of their direct experience with sexual violence, not only the Sisters challenged Islamists' code of female modesty, but exorcized the stigma associated with the violation of women's honour, turning

[77] The MB boasts an important network of lawyers. However, after the coup the regime carried out indiscriminate arrests targeting also the lawyers who dealt with MB legal cases, decimating the network. During my last visit in September 2014, Fayrouz told me that the roundup of lawyers had led to a situation by which there were on average over 1,000 legal cases to deal with for each lawyer still operating at the time. In addition, to proceed with each legal case required the payment of fees. Following the state expropriation of MB businesses, NGOs, and the seizure of MB members' personal assets, the lack of financial resources was another major obstacle faced by the MB in its attempt to continue to provide legal assistance to the prisoners.

[78] Fayrouz, interview.

[79] Nour, interview(a).

violence against women into a source of resistance. This practice resonated with that of many other Egyptian women, who since the outbreak of the uprisings share their experiences with sexual violence publicly. These women challenged the belief that being sexually assaulted brought shame to women and their male relatives, asserting instead that women victims of sexual violence deserved the same honour attributed to other protestors who had fallen victim to violence as a consequence of their anti-regime activism.[80]

The fact that the Sisters availed of the HMLC as a media platform is also an indication of their attempt to overcome the isolation in which the MB movement had dragged itself into, and of their continuous efforts to gain credibility with regard to the sort of torture and abuses that the movement had been subjected to since its overthrow. Since the ousting of Morsi, the Islamists also faced widespread hostility from Egyptian society. For this reason, people tended to dismiss cases of violence against Islamists as lies or, even worse, condoned it. Human rights activist and director of the al-Nadeem Centre Aida Seif al-Dawla, worried about the implications of such a widespread attitude among Egyptian society for the future of human rights in Egypt. She also believed that such indifference towards the abuses of regime forces on civil society, favoured the reestablishment of the authoritarian Egyptian state in the long run. As she stated:

> 'After the June 30, 2013 protests calling for an end to the Muslim Brothers' rule, torture increased. But the public stopped wanting to see it, and started to label accounts of torture as lies. Some opted instead to acknowledge that torture is happening—and to endorse it. This is the major difference from before. The state will always oppress, but it is no longer so important for the state to hide its crimes of torture as it was in the past […] torture is part of state policy [and] there are laws in place to limit a tortured citizen's ability to get justice'.[81]

The Sisters availed of the cooperation with the al-Nadeem Centre, to provide psychological support to the high numbers of victims of state violence, torture, and sexual abuse. Sexual violence had in fact become a common practice that security forces employed against women and children to intimidate Islamists. As one Sisters and human rights activist put it, rape had become 'the salt and pepper' during police interrogations.[82] By abducting and raping women and children, Egyptian security forces hoped to exhort information on the whereabouts of Islamist male leaders, and deter MB resistance. As Nour stated:

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[80] On this point see also Vickie Langohr, 'This is Our Square,' *Middle East Report* 268 (Fall 2013): 18-25.
[81] Aida Seif al-Dawla interviewed by Lina Attalah 'A Beast That Took a Break and Came Back: Prison Torture in Egypt,' *Middle East Report* 275, no. 45 (Summer 2015): 8-9.
[82] Fayrouz, interview.

> ‘One of the new methods used by the regime to intimidate Islamists, and which is disgusting, is rape. There are police microbuses going around daily. They kidnap girls from the streets, mostly those who adopt the Islamic dress, just because of the way they look. […] They take them, rape them, and bring them back a mess. Sometimes they are pregnant. Other times their uterus must be removed because of the damage. They keep them for two or three days, raping them continuously, and then they throw them back in the streets. They are doing this also with boys. This is done in Giza, in Helwan, and every village in Egypt’.[83]

Such acts were largely carried out by plainclothes security officials connected to the Egyptian National Security Agency - *al-Amn al-Watany* - (NSA), the al-Sisi new version of Mubarak’s State Security Investigation Service - *Amn al-Dawla* - (SSIS), which had fallen under mass popular attack after the uprisings. The strategy that the Sisterhood adopted with al-Nadeem Centre, was similar to that they adopted with the HMLC. An initial number of Sisters underwent rudimentary trainings from the activists of al-Nadeem, to be then dispatched to the provinces for assisting the victims of violence in there.[84]

Despite all the difficulties, by mid-2014 the Sisters had set up an important cross-national network of human rights activists and lawyers, able to provide psychological and legal assistance to Brotherhood and Sisterhood members, and their families. In addition, the Sisters underwent a meticulous work of data recording. Legal cases of human rights abuses were filed in the hope that one day the MB could bring them to the attention of international courts, but also because it allowed the Sisters to follow up on the MB network providing the necessary support.[85] Women considered providing assistance to the women and children, as well as men, part of their role as nurturers of the MB future generations, and saw this as necessary to allow the movement to survive repression and rebuild once again in the future. They also hoped that their activism would have allowed rebuilding trust and loyalty towards the movement, and its principles. As articulated by Nour, this had been a major role of the Sisterhood since the birth of the MB:

> ‘Once you know what is happening on the ground you can assist people with the help they need. […] the Sisterhood has been working since the beginning until now the same way. Women are those who allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to regain power during Sadat. What protected and supported the MB during the time of Abdul Nasser until Sadat, were the women. […] At the time of Abdul Nasser most of the women were not educated, and they didn’t

[83] Nour, interview(a). In its report, Amnesty International also signals the use of ‘white microbuses’ by the part of NSA officers to patrol the provincial areas outside Cairo. See Amnesty International, *Egypt: Officially, You Do Not Exist*, 16.
[84] Nour, interview(a).
[85] Lamia, interview.

> have money, and so a lot of children of the prisoners were lost. Now, we are in a much better position. Now, *alhamdulillah*, this is not happening'.[86]

By 2015 the Sisters had managed to set free 1,545 women, therefore the largest majority of those who had fell under arrest throughout the first months of MB repression (1,558 by July 2014).[87] However, more women had been imprisoned by then, and in July 2015 the WAC was still dealing with over 77 cases of Muslim Sisterhood political prisoners. In addition to that, the Sisters remained committed to free over 30,000 male detainees, providing a dignified living to the families of the prisoners, obtaining justice for the martyrs, and dealing with the new phenomenon of forced disappearances. Forced disappearances have become a growing phenomenon in Egypt since the military coup, but even more since 2015, when Major-General Abdel Ghaffar, the former high ranking member of Mubarak's *Amn al-Dawla*, was appointed by al-Sisi as the new Minister of Interior. [88] Since then, as remarked by Aida Seif al-Dawla, 'no one is safe anymore' in Egypt.[89]

## 8.7 Conclusions

Waves of repression and violence, like wars, are incredibly damaging to women. Yet, what is less frequently recognised is that difficult situations can lead to the opening up of new opportunities for women to expand the parameters of their activism, to enter new spaces, and gain greater political influence, therefore providing women with a renewed sense of empowerment. Although the phase of repression that affected the MB since July 2013 remains unprecedented in the history of the movement, repression opened up new opportunities for Muslim Sisterhood's mobilisation, activism, and political leadership. In a manner similar to that occurring during revolutions and wars, when the gender order of society is temporarily suspended, negative circumstances provoke a suspension of the gender structure normally in place in Islamist movements, allowing women to expand their influence and leadership in areas from which they are traditionally excluded. Thus, these findings agrees with previous studies contending that political

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[86] Nour, interview(a).
[87] Women Against the Coup, *2 Years After the Military Coup* (Cairo: Women Against the Coup Report, 2015). Available at http://www.slideshare.net/womenanticoup1/women-anticoup-report-2-years-after-the-military-coup
[88] For more information on the phenomenon of forced disappearances in Egypt, see the report of Amnesty International, *Egypt: Officially, You Do Not Exist*.
[89] Aida Seif al-Dawla interviewed by Attalah, *A Beast That Took a Break and Came Back*, 8.

opportunity structures are gendered, meaning that because of their gender identity, men and women are likely to perceive and experience similar situations differently.[90]

Not all the new roles that women embrace were the result of personal choices. Violence against women in times of conflicts has the effect of blurring the divides between the private and public spheres, therefore propelling more women into mobilisation and resistance as a way to defend their own families.[91] The contention herein is that, paradoxically, women have been empowered by the wave of repression that affected the Brotherhood movement since July 2013 more than they have been in the period of political opening when the MB was in government (as examined in chapters six and seven). Together with the suffering and a feeling of frustration expressed by the Muslim Sisters, was one of growing power, assertiveness, and awareness of their personal capabilities as women and political actors. The emergence of the Muslim Sisters into the 'Committee of the Pragmatic Women leaders' for assisting the Guidance Bureau in its political decision-making task, testifies precisely to the role that negative situations, such as repression, can have in creating additional opportunities for women to expand their presence and influence, including political influence, into spaces which are not necessarily women-only areas.

Several factors facilitated the expansion of the Muslim Sisterhood's leadership roles. Firstly was the absence of men, and which made the Sisterhood the largest pool of cadres available, rendering the women's committee increasingly necessary to the ability of the movement to organise its resources within a cohesive political strategy. Secondly it was women's deeper understanding of youth groups' dynamics in Egyptian society, and their desires. This was largely a consequence of women's greater embeddedness within their local communities and the role as nurturers and educators of the MB new generations. This contrasted with the situation of the MB male leadership, who remained mainly concerned with the 'big politics' taking place in the higher offices of the MB organisation, and far away from the movement's support base. Women's proximity to the 'ground' - to use Sisterhood's terminology – is what allowed women to rise to a position of leadership post the coup. Women acted as mediators between the MB movement's base and its leadership, being able to ease political rivalries, establish cross-parties alliances, as well as merging the objectives of the support base with that of the MB movement, and vice versa. Finally, women had supported the youth in their demands for greater leadership and decision-making roles since before the ousting, and were therefore in a better position after the coup to gain the trust of the young activists.

The case of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood demonstrates that women have been able to expand their presence and roles within the ranks of the MB movement at different historical

[90] Doug McAdam, 'Gender as a Mediator of the Activist Experience: The Case of Freedom Summer,' *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 5 (March 1992): 1211-1240.
[91] See also Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*; and Holt, *Violence Against Women*.

junctions, but that it is only when the survival of the Muslim Brotherhood was under threat that women managed to increase their influence in those political offices regarded as male-only domains. The case seems therefore to conform to broader theories of gender and nationalism, contending that the gains that women make under exceptional circumstances hardly translate into permanent changes. As these scholars contend, the ease of repression lead to a return of the 'business as usual', whereby a traditional gender order also falls back into place, leading women to lose much of the gains made during the time of national upheaval/struggle/revolution.[92]

Although this is more than often the case, the fact that the return to normality may lead to a return to traditional gender roles does not eradicate women's past experiences or their transformed identities. Women may return to their traditional spaces, but still cognisant of their own capabilities and power as women. Women are permanently transformed as a consequence of their experiences, and this process cannot be undone. It is in the personal characters and consciousness of women, reflected on their new feminist identities, their demands for greater roles, emancipation, and authority, that permanent change survives and consolidates, even when this fails to be translated into new material and political arrangements. When pushed back, women's agency acquires new venues to channel their demands, and assumes new shapes to express their desires. Bier observed a similar process among Egyptian women in the period that followed the 1919 revolution. She noticed how the renewed exclusion of women from the public sphere led women to engage in new forms of art, including poetry, painting and music, as a way to express their new found status and identities.[93] At the time, Egyptian women may have even failed to translate their desires for emancipation into a permanent reality, but their resulted permanently transformed as a consequence of their participation. As observed in chapter seven, the younger Sisters engaged in a similar process immediately after the uprisings. Prevented from playing a greater role in the ranks of the MB and its newly acquired political spaces, they reverted to informal activist circles of the MB movement to bring about change.

Although it is impossible to predict with certainty what the future holds for the Sisterhood in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood movement, as we knew it, is never going to exist again. The oldest generation of the movement is under arrest, and if the MB will ever be able to play any political role in the future, it will be almost certainly under a new leadership, and not entirely under the same rules. Transformations and reconfigurations of socio-political movements and organisations do not in fact occur only at times of revolution and repression. The evolution of the Brotherhood movement is ongoing. Women are having a crucial role in it, and there is no reason to think they won't have the same in the future.

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[92] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*.
[93] Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*.

# Chapter 9 - Explaining Changes in Activism, Practices of Engagement, and Identities among Islamist Women.

This study investigated how Islamist women responded to changes in political opportunity structures for the purpose of gaining, preserving, and strengthening their roles and influence *vis-à-vis* male-dominated Islamist movements. At the core of the study rested an interest in understanding how women's agency, in all its various manifestations, meets with gender and political constraints with the purpose to expand women's presence, roles, and influence to new venues of activism. In addition, the study gave attention to how women's subjectivities are transformed as a result of their engagement, without excluding the possibility that women may develop more progressive worldviews and feminist identities as a result. Crucial to this study, was the abandonment of dichotomous understandings of agency as bounded to either religious or secular normative commitments, and ideas of feminist practice as inextricably linked to the establishment of gender equality. In the specific, the questions this thesis addressed were so formulated:

4. How women in Islamist movements navigate gender and political constraints to acquire greater presence, roles, and influence in Islamist movements and/or male-dominated Islamist organizations?

5. How women may take advantage of particular circumstances to make this possible?

6. How women's worldviews and identities are transformed as a consequence of protracted activism?

As the case of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood demonstrated, transformations in Islamist women's activism, their practices, and identities, cannot be reduced to single explanations. Rather, several factors contributed to determine how women's activism evolved in relation to both gender and political constraints. The study also revealed that women adapted to such constraints by employing new strategies to maintain an active presence in their movements and, possibly, expand their influence to areas from which they had been traditionally excluded. Also, the study confirmed that there are benefits derived from observing activist practices over a long period of time. Both short term shifts in political opportunity structures, as well as long term ongoing processes, were

important to explain changes in Islamist women's activism, practices of engagement, and subjectivities.

Among the most relevant short-term and long-term factors for explaining change in Islamist women's activism, this study identified (1) variations in the MB status in the political system (2) variations of state's approach to the MB – accommodation or repression (3) generational change (4) the coexistence of moderate and conservative factions in the MB movement, together with their shifting influence on the movement's decision-making process and areas of activism over time (5) and Islamist women's changes in worldviews and identities. By observing how these factors interacted with each other in ways that facilitated or hindered women's activism, this study contributed to a better understanding of the contextual dynamics that may result in women's greater participation and influence in Islamist movements, as well as those which contribute to prevent it. Adopting a long-term perspective also permitted to identify with more accuracy those elements of continuity and change in the practices of activism of women in Islamist movements, and how their identities were shaped by their experiences. This study, therefore, welcomes complexity in the analysis of political processes, and celebrates differences in Islamist women's desires and identities.

Below, I review the major analytical findings of this research and contextualise them in relation to the main questions asked, as well as the existing literature. In doing so, I aim to reflect on the value of observing Islamist women's activism and practices of engagement over a long period of time, compared to short term observations. When analysing change in practices of activism and identities, a longitudinal perspective allows to better identify how current manifestation of activism constitute a response to imminent changes, but also how the specific responses are informed by long-term historical processes too. Also, I aim to reflect on the value of investigating women's activism as it unfolds in informal activist circles of Islamist movements, and how these spaces may become alternative venues for women activists to acquire greater political empowerment, express alternative worldviews, and challenge rigid gender codes. While women's participation in formal offices of Islamist organisations remain constrained by the values that underpin Islamist movements, among which their gender ideology, informal activist spaces are subjected to Islamist movement's control to a lesser degree, and therefore remain potential venues for women to challenge existing structures of power, as well as gender codes. These two analytical elements can be useful to observe women's activism and identity change in other Islamist movements too, beyond the MB. I conclude by identifying possible areas for further research.

## 9.1 Long-Term and Short-Term Factors, and Changes in Islamist Women's Activism and Identities

The necessity to evaluate contemporary revolutionary processes and manifestations of contentious politics on the basis of both short-term and long-term underlying factors is highlighted by a growing number of political science scholars who engaged more broadly with the events of the 2011 uprisings.[1] With particular reference to the case of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood, the greater benefit of this approach rested in the fact that it made possible to identify transformations in practices of Islamist women's activism even when these have not, apparently, changed.

Comparing Muslim Sisterhood's activism as it unfolded during the 'exceptional times' of repression of the 1950s and 1960s (as observed in chapter four) with the post-2013 period (as observed in chapter eight), made possible recognising elements of both continuity and change in their activist practices, repertoires of contention, subjectivities, strategies for participation, and claims. One major difference observed in the post-2013 repression period, consisted in the emergence of several women-only movements established and led by the Sisters as a means for, and expression of, women's resistance. The organisation of the Sisters in women-only movements may appear as a similarity with the previous period of repression when, following the outlaw of the MB movement in 1948, and the wave of repression instigated by President Nasser, the Sisters grouped under al-Ghazali's Society to carry on with their activities. One may also be tempted to attribute this trend to the fact that women continue to play a complementary role in Islamist movements, resulting in women operating in parallel but separate spaces for activism from those of men. According to this viewpoint, the establishment of the Sisters of women-only resistance movements can be simply considered a reflection of the pre-existing gender structures according to which women in Islamist movements operate. Yet, this phenomenon remains significant because of its magnitude, and also because it displays other important elements of difference with Muslim Sisterhood's experience with the past.

The women-only movements have been established by the Sisters in complete autonomy from the MB male leadership, and women retain thorough control of their activities, leadership structure, and of the political claims raised. The expansion of female leadership in the post-2013 period is in fact noticeable if compared to the early years, when the weight of leading women's resistance fell almost exclusively on the shoulders of al-Ghazali, and a small number of female

[1] Nouri Ghana, ed., *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Context, Architects, Prospects* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2013); Fawad A. Gerges, ed., *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); John Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

family members of MB leaders. The increase in women's autonomous leadership from the MB has several causes, which spur from both short-term and long-term factors. It is certainly a direct consequence of women's experience with repression and violence, which propelled them to take action for resisting oppression and their renewed marginalization in the Egyptian political system.[2] It is also contingent on longer-term processes of generational change. In the last decade, younger members had already expressed their criticism at the marginal political role of women in the MB movement.[3] These members have found in repression an opportunity to play a greater political role previously denied to them, and to make their opinions and voices heard. The MB attempt at political inclusion since the 1990s (observed in chapter five) also bears significant explanatory power for the emergence of female leadership in the decade leading up to the uprisings, and after the MB ousting. Since the 1990s women have been increasingly involved in the Egyptian public political discourse, and grew cognisant of the fact that their efforts and contributions have a direct consequence in shaping the fate of their movement, as well as the society around them. This grew women's desires for greater political roles and leadership, manifested more broadly in the last decade and after 2013 coup by claims by the younger generations. Also, broader socio-political changes in Egyptian society should not be underestimated. The increasing participation of women in the workforce, access to education, and the expansion of accessible information thanks to technology, contributed to a greater involvement of women in the public sphere and politics, leading them to play a greater political and leadership role as a consequence.

The development of Islamist women's feminist identities separate from that of the MB movement is also an important manifestation of the post uprisings period. Contrary to before, when in times of repression women would maintain a low profile to guarantee their safety and support the movement, after 2013 women's contentious practices have taken place in outward defiance of regime repression and violence, as well as MB male leaders' will. Most importantly, unlike before, when women would justify their participation in resistance predominantly by appealing to their roles as mothers and nurturers of the nation, after 2013 women openly challenged notions of ideal womanhood as propagated by the MB movement and the conservative Egyptian society. Explicitly and defiantly, women portrayed themselves as capable political leaders and agents of change. In the process of activism they challenged ideals of femininity, piety, and modesty as supported by the MB, and defended their actions on the basis of their equal role with men to take part to the struggle.

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[2] For a discussion of how similar processes influenced women's activism and leadership in the Palestinian, Lebanese, and Iraqi context, see Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*; Holt, *Violence Against Women*.

[3] Al-Anani, *The Young Brotherhood in Search of a New Path;* RAND Report; Abdellatif, *In the Shadows of the Brothers*.

Ultimately, the study found that while women successfully expanded their presence and roles in Islamist movements during both ordinary and exceptional times, it is during the latter that they enjoyed greater opportunities to enter and expand their influence in those political offices of Islamist organizations which traditionally remain a prerogative of men. The establishment of the Committee of the Pragmatic Women Leaders, to which Nour is part, testifies to this claim.[4] As it has been demonstrated, being able to signal its presence in the streets, coordinate the social base under a unified political strategy, and establish alliances with other political forces, were all tasks the MB needed to fulfil to survive repression. The Sisters were better positioned than men to supply to this need because of their connectedness to the local communities, and the influence they enjoyed over the younger generations of activists, and other women.[5] This situation increased the leverage that the Sisters came to enjoy *vis-à-vis* men, allowing them to exercise greater voice and decision-making in those offices from which they had previously been excluded, such as the Guidance Bureau, the second highest leadership office of the MB movement. For this reason, the case of the Sisterhood supports claims previously made in the literature stating that opportunities are gendered, and that men and women, therefore, experience similar situations differently because of their gender.[6]

All the same, this study challenges the claim that the expansion of women's roles in times of crisis has little potential to bring about permanent change to the gender structure of Islamist movements. In her study of women's activism in religious-political movements, for example, Shitrit acknowledges that 'transgressions of complementarian gender roles and their reversal has the potential to challenge the existing gender order [and the] underlying gender ideology'[7] of such movements. She however questions the long-term effect of such a practice, when women transgress gender roles on the basis of a nationalist frame. In the scholar's view, the presence of a national liberation struggle allows women to step-out pre-determinate gender roles and justifies their 'transgressive' actions by virtue of the greater good of saving the nation, but this situation is only temporary, such as is the ability of women to justify their transgressions.

In her analysis, Shitrit avails of a conceptual framework more broadly used in studies of drag performances. This framework contends that in order to permanently undermine dominant binary constructs of gender and sex roles, activists' performances must (1) openly *contest* dominant relations of power that maintain these roles, (2) *intentionally* embrace narratives that undermine

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[4] For more information on the Committee see chapter 8.5.
[5] Belinda Robnett defined this sort of leadership as 'Bridge-Leadership,' referring precisely to the ability of women to act as mediators between the social base of a movement and its leadership. See Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Right* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[6] McAdam, *Gender as a Mediator of Experience*.
[7] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*, 225.

such understandings, and (3) aim to produce new *collective identities* whose objective is that of expanding categories of belonging.[8] After analysing the practices and discourses employed by the women in the movements she studied, Shitrit dismissed the possibility that those women activists in Islamist movements that embrace elements of a nationalist agenda - like the Egyptian MB does - are able to permanently change the gender regime in place in their movements on all the three grounds.[9]

According to the scholar, the fact that women appeal to 'feminine and maternal affectivity to articulate their motivation undercuts the contentious nature of women's activists' action in relation to their movement's ideology'. [10] Therefore, because women advocate for greater participation on the basis of gender difference, they fail to challenge the very same construct over which Islamist movement's gender ideology rests. Then, Shitrit dismissed the element of 'intentionality,' claiming that women's ability to challenge dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity is unescapably bounded to the existence of exceptional circumstances, leading her to state that women displayed therefore no desire to elaborate frames that could challenge similar gender structures also in ordinary times. As the scholar argued, this situation 'draws further attention to the cataclysmic instability and out-of-the-ordinariness of their practices and implies that when things are in order, when the desired normalcy returns, transgressions will no longer have a place.'[11] Then Shitrit dismissed also the third element of 'collective identity,' contending that when Islamist women transgress gender roles in place in their movements, they do it with the purpose to 'strengthen a dominant religious-nationalist identity that is profoundly committed to a clear cut gender dichotomy and to exclusionary nationalism'.[12] Although recognising that the 'effect of [women] actions may be more ambiguous that the activists intend,' and therefore that women's practices have the potential to 'routinize a different kind of public behaviour by women,' Shitrit concluded that:

> 'Their [Islamist women] political agenda ultimately works to restrict, rather than expand, women's freedoms and choices. Their frame of exception […]

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[8] Shitrit borrows her conceptual framework from Verta Taylor, Leila J. Rupp, and Joshua Gamson, 'Performing Protest: Drag Shows and as Tactical Repertoire of the Gay and Lesbian Movement', *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 25 (2005): 105-137.

[9] Shitrit analyses four different religious conservative political movements: the Jewish Settlers in the West Bank, which she categorises as primarily nationalist; the ultra-Orthodox Shas movement, which she defines as predominantly religious; the Islamic movement in Israel, modelled after the Egyptian MB and which, similarly to the MB, she defines as hybrid because it portrays both proselytising and nationalist tendencies; and Hamas, which she defines as predominantly nationalist.

[10] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*, 225.

[11] Ibid., 226.

[12] Ibid., 227.

> construct women as simply affective, maternal, nationalistic beings who step out of assigned roles only for the sake of the 'nation', and in defiance of a menacing, uncomplicated 'other'. In this respect, they promote politics that work to reduce women's options for autonomy from their 'nation' and their 'land' and make concern with the well-being of the nation the only legitimate justification for women's transgressions.'[13]

This study, however, contends that it is the short time frame upon which Shitrit's study rests that leads the scholar to reach such conclusions. It is only by observing women's activism over a long period of time, in fact, that becomes possible to appreciate how novel elements enter women's discourses, allowing them to maintain an active presence and role in Islamist movements within changing circumstances. Women's responses to the gender constrain they face are in fact informed by new subjectivities resulting from historical cumulative processes, their experiences with activism, as well as generational change. It is this element of identity development that is overlooked in studies that investigate Islamist women's activism, practices, and discourses, in relation to short timeframes rather than in light of long-term historical processes.

The case of the Sisters confirms this point. In the early years, al-Ghazali used to justify the transgression of gender roles in place in the MB by appealing to the nationalist cause, and advocated for women's greater political participation on the basis of their roles as mothers and nurturers of the nation. Those frames remain greatly influential among the Sisters to this day, who still regard al-Ghazali as a role model for their activism. However, the narratives that the young Sisters are using to justify a more active political and leadership role for themselves today, albeit still relying on broader discourses of national resistance, are not necessarily contingent on the 'maternal frames' that used to be dominant in the past. Rather, these narratives openly challenge general ideals of feminine virtues as understood by their movement. Take for example an excerpt from one of Lamia's interview - one of the young leaders of the Women Against the Coup movement - and the argument she makes to justify women's roles in the post-2013 phase of resistance. As she stated:

> 'Women in Eastern societies are always considered as submissive, ready to surrender to anything, and fragile. They are less known for their strong character and opinions. Sadly, those women who have a strong character and enjoy a strong presence in society are considered authoritarian, or women who want to play the role of men. This idea is entirely mistaken. Women cannot be forgotten or marginalized. If we look at women's roles in society, women occupy several leading positions in many fields. Their roles are so effective that nations can be built upon them'.[14]

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[13] Ibid., 228.

[14] *Banat al-Horrya: taruwy tadashyn haraka nisaa' did al-inqilab]*, Mukamalyin TV Satellite Channel, YouTube, February 14, 2014.

As this quote suggests, Lamia openly challenges conservative notions of womanhood as upheld by Egyptian society, as well as the MB movement, and which emphasise women's fragile and submissive character. She also contests binary constructs of masculinity and femininity, contending that strong characters and opinions are not exclusive male traits. As she continues, she also alluded to the already leading role that women played in their society to justify their leadership role in the current struggle. The fact that she refers to women's leadership as already part of the 'ordinary', suggests Lamia's attempt to normalise women's leadership roles also in the phase of resistance. In addition, in her speech Lamia portrays women not as mere reproducers of the nation, but as leaders over which the nation can stand for rebuilding its future. What remains therefore overlooked in Shitrit's argument is that narratives are subjected to change, and are influenced by processes of feminist identity development among the women who partake in the struggle. Both factors - narratives and feminist identities - are, in fact, contextual.

In Shitrit's study, it is women activists in movements that adopt exclusively a proselytising agenda who enjoyed greater possibilities to bring about permanent changes to their movement's gender ideology. In Shitrit's view, women's direct engagement with the sacred texts allowed them to reinterpret their religion in ways that challenged patriarchal gender structures resting on conservative religious understandings of gender roles.[15] This claim resonates with that of several feminist scholars who identified in practices of *Ijtihad* (reinterpretations of religious texts) a more beneficial strategy for achieving women's emancipation in the MENA region.[16] The case of the MB revealed that understandings of gender difference grounded on a religious discourse is what continued to provide justificatory narratives for the exclusion of women from certain leadership positions. Take for example this extract from Nour's interview, where she discusses women's political leadership. As she stated:

> 'I believe that women are fit for the position of the Presidency, and can also enter the Guidance Bureau, but I don't think that women will ever be able to enter the office of the Morshed in the *Ikhwan*. A woman has certain weaknesses that impact the whole organization if she becomes a Morsheda. At the present moment the Morshed is arrested and tortured. How would the followers consider the Morsheda knowing that she is jailed, she has been tortured, and possibly raped? This is why I do believe, like in Islam, that a woman can do everything, but she cannot hold the leadership of a religious office. At the time of the Prophet, when the head of the state was also the head of the religious institution, a woman could not be the leader. But now that we have separation between the political and the religious office, women can become the head of state'.[17]

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[15] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*, 228.
[16] One influential work that testifies to this practice is that of Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).
[17] Nour, interview(a).

As this quote explicitly suggests, feminine constructs grounded in religious understandings of gender, are what continued to limit the possibility for the Sisters to think of themselves in terms of equality with their male counterpart, and therefore of having entirely equal leadership roles and opportunities when compared to male members. This quote also underscores the role of religion in preventing women from entering certain leadership offices of the MB, particularly those to which the movement attributes an aura of religiosity, such as that of the Morshed, for example. It also underlines how the MB religious discourse serves the male leadership to confine women's participation to predetermined roles and offices. More broadly, in the conservative religious discourse of the MB women are primarily constructed as sexual and fragile subjects. Because women 'by nature' arouse males' sexual desires, they are unsuited to hold a religious office, which demands instead its leader to promote values such as piety and modesty among his followers.

This study, therefore, agrees with Shitrit in that the ability of the Sisters to bring about more profound change in terms of gender relations inside Islamist movements would envisage a greater engagement of the Sisters with religious texts, and their reinterpretation.[18] This view is also corroborated by those scholars who underwent a more throughout investigation of the role that Islam plays in women's resistance movements. Their conclusion was that although Islam has provided women with unprecedented means for their empowerment, the 'genuine adherence to the spiritual ideals of Islam would necessitate the questioning and reappraisal of gender relations in light of patriarchal practices that have encroached upon these Islamic ideals'.[19]

On the other hand, Nour's case also demonstrates that the Sisters engaged in refined ideological reasoning to circumnavigate the constraints dictated upon them by religion, and play therefore a greater public, political, and leadership role than what is usually attributed to them. In particular, the Sisters operated a neat distinction of what they believed it constituted 'the secular' and 'the religious' realms. When applied to activism, this practice is what allowed the Sisters to advocate for equal roles and opportunities with men in those offices and areas of activism which lacked a religious character, and were considered secular. And this is why, although the Sisters could not enter the office of the Morshed in the *Ikhwan*, they believed that they could still - theoretically - advocate for that of the presidency of the state.

The case of the Sisters, therefore, also reveals profound differences with the women activist in the nationalist leaning movements observed by Shitrit, whose ability to transgress traditional gender roles remained anchored to the existence of the 'exceptional circumstances' dictated by the national struggle. The distinction between 'the secular' and 'the religious' spheres

[18] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*, 228.
[19] Holt and Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*, 177.

operated by the Sisters, in fact, freed women from this necessity, supposedly making them able to challenge traditional gender roles also in ordinary times. This practice also significantly increases the Sisterhood's possibility to permanently expand their roles in Islamist movements. Such a phenomenon is already noticeable when bearing in mind that until before the 1990s it was unthinkable for the Sisters to engage in elections, whereas at present their political participation is considered a duty. Therefore, this study parallels Hafez's claim in stating that distinct notions of the secular and the religious - when taken separately - are no longer useful for investigating Muslim Sisterhood's subjectivities and practices of activism in Egypt today.[20]

## 9.2 The Value of Observing Islamist Women's Activism in both Formal and Informal Activist Spaces

Another major value of this study is that Islamist women's activism has been observed as it unfolded in formal as well informal spaces for activism. Chapter five observed how the Sisters made their entrance in institutional politics at a time when the Mubarak regime posed serious challenges to MB political participation. Chapter six, instead, observed Muslim Sisterhood's political participation at a time in which the MB enjoyed a position of power in the Egyptian political system, and therefore, presumably, in the absence of similar constraints. Chapter seven, instead, observed Muslim Sisterhood activism s it unfolded in the informal activist circles of the MB movement during the same period of political opening. By observing women's activism under different political opportunity structures, this study allowed for a better understanding of those contextual dynamics that influenced women's ability to expand their roles and leadership in Islamist movements, beyond that of exceptional circumstances. The study, therefore, also expanded notions of context and meanings of opportunities that inform women's activism in the MENA region.[21]

Under a similar context of limited and unrestrained MB political opportunity (as observed in chapter five and chapter six respectively), women continued to suffer exclusion from the leadership offices of Islamist organizations. In both cases, it was the enduring authority of the religious conservative MB male leadership that limited a greater involvement of women in political leadership, marginalised their participation to complementary areas of activism, and prevented the further moderation of the MB position on women. In the earlier period (1990s and 2000s), the

[20] Hafez, *An Islam of her Own*.
[21] For scholarly work that emphasised the need to attribute a greater role to context, see Goodwin and Jasper, *Contention in Context*; Beinin and Vairel, *Social Movements in the Middle East and North Africa*.

desire of the MB to expand its participation in the Egyptian political system, compelled the old guard to revise the MB official position on women and political participation. The internal pressures raised by the middle-generation moderate activists and some women pioneers, were crucial to the ability of women to attain a greater political role in the movement. After the 2011 uprisings, the old guard continued to monopolise the leadership offices of the MB, and extended its control to those of the newly established Freedom and Justice Party too. As a result, women benefited from the opening up of the Egyptian political system, by expanding their presence and roles to new spaces. However, their inclusion continued to be confined to pre-determined women's roles, and did not entail leadership in the political offices of the movement and the FJP. The younger generation of women were the ones that most suffered marginalization and lack of leadership. Being among the main agent of change that had spurred the uprisings, they claimed a greater decision-making role in the MB on this basis. This, however, continued to be largely denied to them.

When considering female participation to formal political offices in this study, it became apparent that the women who acquired greater public visibility in both periods were those who displayed conservative gender views, as maintained by the older MB leadership. These were women who most strikingly resembled Shitrit's description, and who seem to step-up outside legitimised gender roles only to reinforce conservative gender discourses, and promote policies that would further limit women's freedoms and choices.[22] This study does not underestimate the challenge that conservative women represent to feminist projects and scholars. However, it also recognises that participation in Islamist movements imposes several constrains upon those who seek inclusion in formal political offices, and who need to adapt to the rules in place to gain access. These constraints contribute to mould the claims, narratives, and political projects of those women who desire to enter political offices within the ranks of the MB, particularly when the movement boast a gender conservative and Salafi-leaning male leadership. The study, therefore, does not exclude the possibility that these women's appeal to feminine virtues and ideal motherhood roles was partly inevitable, and also partially a strategy adopted by the women to expand their political participation.

Ultimately the study found that the MB did not revise its official position on women in the period of political opening that followed the uprisings. Consequently, when considering gender issues in Islamist movements, the study's findings support claims already sustained by political sciences scholars, contending that the inclusion of Islamists in pluralist political systems does not necessarily lead to their moderation.[23] The study identified the conservatism of the MB leadership,

[22] Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*, 228.
[23] Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*.

the undemocratic structure of the MB organisation and the FJP, together with the exclusion of moderate members, among the major factors that prevented the MB from adopting a more moderate position on women after the uprisings; all factors already pointed out as crucial to processes of moderation in Islamist movements.[24]

Nevertheless, the study demonstrated that more progressive ideas survived within the movement - among both men and women members - albeit outside formal political structures. One could argue that there is little value in the resilience of ideas that cannot be translated into more tangible political projects. It is however the resilience of these ideas and the emergence of new worldviews that have continued to inform the more transgressive practices of activism among the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood to this day. Such ideas and worldviews continued to populate the informal activist circles of the MB movement, less subjected to the pressures of gender constraints that permeated the hierarchical MB organization. More egalitarian gender structures survived in Islamist circles in the universities since the 1990s, which have continued to be a fertile ground for Sisterhood's mobilisation and resistance after July 2013. Some of the women's movements that emerged post the movement's ousting from power and that most transgressed the MB notions of female modesty and docility, spurred precisely out of Sisterhood-affiliated university students, like the Ultras Girls for example. Also, progressive ideas concerning women's roles in politics and society persevered in women's *usra* meetings and informal gatherings, where female members have more freedom to engage in independent interpretations of Islamic texts, history, and teachings. These are also spaces were women have a greater role in interpreting the policies and directives that the MB leadership imparts to its members. These are delivered in the form of broader principles, and women are required to use their initiative when proceeding to their practical application.

Informal activist spaces also welcomed those women who upheld more progressive views in matters of gender roles, and who suffered increasing marginalisation within the MB movement as a result. When post-2011 the MB proved to be unwilling to undergo more profound gender reforms, younger female members reverted to informal spaces to promote a more egalitarian gender structure. It was within the informal activist circles of the MB movement that women accomplished their equal right with male members to take part in *usra* camps, and challenged the strict dress code that the MB imposed on women. Amid the continued exclusion of women from the MB internal elections, the Sisters advocated – successfully - for the right to elect their *usra* leaders. When given this opportunity, the young members used it to promote a younger and more progressive tier of leadership willing to support their demands for change. It is not a case, in fact, that the women who populated the informal circles, had less reservations when it came to express their criticism of the

[24] Ibid.

leadership, or voice their disagreement towards those norms that they perceived as limiting women's roles within the movement.

Two main conclusions can be drawn here. One relates to broader processes of feminist identity development that follows women's renewed encounter with marginalization after revolutionary waves. The failure of the MB to respond to the demands for reforms of its younger female base at the outset of the uprisings, led the Sisters to employ different strategies and to revert to informal activist circles for bringing about change. Informal venues of activism, therefore, are what allowed the survival of a feminist revolutionary spirit following the encounter of the Sisters with renewed exclusion and marginalisation at the outset of the uprisings. This observation resonates with that of other scholars who also noticed how feminist revolutions, when aborted, continue to survive in alternative spaces, and assume new forms of expression.[25] It also resonates with those studies of feminism and nationalism contending that it is precisely women's experience with exclusion and marginalisation that contributes to the development of stronger feminist identities.[26]

A second reflection rests on the importance of withholding judgement about the effectiveness of feminist projects at the immediate outset of revolutionary waves. Feminist revolutions, like women's subjectivities, are in continuous development, and they should therefore be observed over a period of time. In addition, Islamist women's feminist projects should not be valued exclusively with respect to their ability to bring about gender equality, but for the efforts women make to promote practices that contribute to expand their freedom, albeit within a limiting framework. Fieldwork with members of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood movement confirmed the existence of differences in the desires, roles, and identities among women. Greater attention should therefore be placed on such differences, on the several arrays of constraints that impinge on their activism, and on women's creative practices to overcome such constraints. Such an endeavour is necessary if assumptions that contribute to perceive Islamist women as mere objects of Islamist movements are to be challenged. Rather, such an approach leads to a better appreciation of the various manifestations of Islamist women's agency, as well as their multiple, and at times complex, feminist identities.

## 9.3 Areas for further Research

[25] Badran, *Creative Disobedience*; Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*.
[26] O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*.

While investigating the evolution of Islamist women activism and the development of their feminist identities over time, this study has only begun to uncover the complex dynamics that contribute to transform Islamist women's movements. For example, this research demonstrated that the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood engaged in articulations of 'the secular' and 'the religious' to justify their political participation. This practice among Islamist women was initially pointed out by Hafez in her study of women activists in the Egyptian Islamic movement al-Hilal, leading the scholar to argue that distinct notions of the secular and the religious, when taken separately, are no longer useful to investigate notion of women's agency and their subjectivities.[27] Since 2013, Islamist women have acquired a growing presence in the Egyptian public sphere, and their role has become increasingly political. The extensive participation of the Sisters in anti-regime protests has put them in greater dialogue with their secular counterparts, who also have occupied the public sphere for resisting authoritarianism. Further research should focus on whether the interaction between the two groups in the current context of repression has led the Sisterhood to engage in 'selective borrowing' of secular feminist's discourses and practices. Such an investigation could shed insights on whether the Sisters have developed identities that expand categories of belongings to reach out to women outside the Islamist movement, causing the strengthening of their feminist identities, or making their discourses more attuned to those of other Egyptian secular actors. Expanding the boundaries of identity and belonging was one aspect that Shitrit's study designated as crucial to the ability of Islamist women to bring about permanent changes to the gender structure of Islamist movements, an aspect that this study only tangentially touched. A similar research could also be applied in the context of Islamist women's movements in Tunisia and Morocco, for example, where Islamist movements participate in public spheres that are increasingly secular.[28]

To this day, the MB remains under heightened repression, as a consequence of which its structure, leadership, and, possibly, worldviews have been affected. The old guard leaders, who until 2013 maintained their monopoly over the movement, are currently in jail. Even if set free, given their age they will unlikely be able to re-establish their outright control over the movement in the future. In addition, a large base of youth members are leading the resistance, claiming their rights to the leadership of the MB movement on the basis of their contributions. This means that the MB, as MENA scholars have known it, will no longer exist. This is therefore an important moment of transition and transformation for the MB movement, also giving greater opportunities to the youth and women to bring about profound organizational and ideological reforms, which could set the basis for their greater political and leadership role in the future. Further research is therefore

[27] Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own*.
[28] Salime began to explore similar dynamics in her study of the Moroccan Islamist women's movement. See Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*.

needed to trace how repression is impacting the MB leadership structure and the role of women and youth at these and future times.

Further exploration should also address the relationship between the young male and female members of the MB, as well as their relation with other youth movements in Egypt. The alliances, cooperation, and rivalries that have emerged during this time of transition, all bear significance for the way these groups will engage the Egyptian political system in the future. How have the practices of activism of the Muslim Sisterhood and Muslim Brotherhood youth members changed as a consequence of repression? And how have gender identities transformed in the context of activism, and how has this impacted the relationship between young male and female Muslim Brotherhood activists? The answers to these questions could deepen our understandings of the tools deployed by MENA social movements to survive in authoritarian contexts,[29] and the impact of gender identities in the creation of new contentious practices for challenging Arab regimes. The events of the Arab uprisings have demonstrated that revolutions are on-going, and that both long-term and short-term factors contribute to their emergence.[30] Attention on these on-going processes is therefore crucial for understanding a region in continuous transformation.

Finally, the study has only mentioned the surge of Muslim Brotherhood and Muslim Sisterhood diaspora movements across Europe, the US, Canada, Turkey, as well as the Gulf Countries and Malaysia, and of their affiliated international organizations currently engaged in lobbying for political change in their home countries from abroad. Examples of those translational pressure groups are the Canadian and the International Coalition for Egyptians Abroad, and the Egyptian Revolutionary Council. The activism of these groups bears important implications not only for the host countries, but also impacts the sustenance and practices of activism of their mother movements in their home states. International political changes, such as the latest US elections, are also likely to impact the activism of MENA diaspora movements in their host countries, for example, and their ability to influence change and sustain activism in the countries of their home movements. Similarly, issues of financial support, identity change, and the 'travelling' of ideas and practices of activism between diasporas and their mother movements only began to be explored,[31] and certainly represent a much needed and imperative area for further research.

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[29] For the work of scholars highlighting the necessity to expand the role of context in the study of activism in the MENA region, see Beinin and Vairel, *Social Movements in the Middle East and North Africa*.

[30] For the work of scholars who employ a long-term perspective see also Ghana ed., *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution;* Gerges, ed., *The New Middle East;* Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*.

[31] See Roel Meijer and Edqin Bakker, ed., *The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

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