Women and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood post-2013: Calls for Gender Reforms and Pluralism.

Abstract

The brief period of Muslim Brotherhood's governance in Egypt, followed by its 2013 ousting from power, heightened the movement's pre-existing internal divisions, causing members to question the tenets over which the organization was established and ran. Since then, a growing body of literature has investigated the Brotherhood membership's call for internal reforms, but this rests largely on the views of its male members. In order to fill this gap, this article explores how the Muslim Sisterhood, an important but often overlooked Brotherhood constituency, envisages the movement changing in the aftermath of 2013. Findings based on interviews with Muslim Sisterhood members suggest that the central issues over which women envisage change within the movement address the Sisterhood's desire for greater pluralism, the possibility to express women's diverse identities and pursue personal ambitions.

Introduction

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth Brotherhood) is not new to repression. Since its establishment in 1928, Egyptian regimes in turn repressed or co-opted the movement into the political system to suit their objectives. Yet, in all instances in which it was violently suppressed, the Brotherhood demonstrated the ability to resist repression and to re-emerge as more favourable circumstances for political participation materialised. The Brotherhood's ability to survive long periods of persecution rests on two closely entwined elements: the peculiarity of its organizational

structure and its ability to promote a strong collective identity among its members.[1] Both have been challenged since the 2013 repression, giving members greater opportunity to emerge as agents of change in the Brotherhood. This article shows how the Muslim Sisterhood's (henceforth Sisterhood or Sisters), the movement's all-female wing, desire to reform the Brotherhood internally after 2013 and how, in some instances, women are already leading internal change.

Since the Brotherhood's ousting from government in the 2013 military *coup* led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's regime has severely repressed the movement, targeting both its leaders and then also its rank and file members,[2] with the goal of eradicating the group from the country's political scene by depriving it of mobilization and operational capacities. As Zollner argues, however, the regime's strategy has proven ineffective; the Brotherhood has survived repression and carried on, relying on the activism of its individual members. This is because, the scholar argues, in highly hierarchical movements such as the Brotherhood, leaders only assume a symbolic function, while the implementation of their ideology and directives rest on single members, who can therefore implement these individually and independently even if the leaders are arrested or killed, thus guaranteeing the movement's survival.[3] Members' ability to carry out the Brotherhood's mission individually and independently, however, is only possible if they share a commitment to the organization's ideology, goal and strategy, all of which have grown increasingly contested since 2013.

The Brotherhood is very effective in socializing its members into its organization's ideology and mission – reforming society along Islamic religion, values and identity – thus enabling members to carry on its mission independently if the leaders are arrested or killed, but otherwise discourages independent thinking and activities and exercises control on members by imposing a culture of peer-surveillance.[4] As al-Anani shows, the Brotherhood is not only a political but also an identity-maker movement, seeking to reshape members' subjectivity into a shared ideology, culture, norms, values and code of identity.[5] It does so by binding individuals together into social, material and kinship networks, and by making members' adherence to the movement's ideology and identity

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[1] Khalil Al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood. Religion, Identity, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[2] Nathan J. Brown and Michelle Dunne, "Unprecedented Pressures, Uncharted Course for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2015. https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/07/29/unprecedented-pressures-uncharted-course-for-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-pub-60875

[3] Barbara Zollner, "Surviving Repression: How Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Has Carried On," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2019. https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/11/surviving-repression-how-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-has-carried-on-pub-78552

[4] Hazem Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); Mustafa Menshawy, *Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood. Self, Society and the State* (Palgrave McMillan, 2020).

[5] Al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood*, 1-2. See also Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, 6, 87.

a prerequisite for their membership and progression into the organization.[6] Albeit counterintuitive, the Brotherhood status as a repressed movement since the 1950s has also sustained its cohesion and collective identity, allowing the Brotherhood to gain strength and cohesiveness from repression while dissipating dissent. Identity-making movements rely on the construction of meanings and symbols to mould members' perceptions and worldviews.[7] In this respect, the Brotherhood has learned to capitalize on its history as a suppressed movement, turning repression into a source of strength and cohesiveness. As al-Anani shows, repression for the Brotherhood assumes a powerful symbolic value, which "enables it to achieve three key goals: garnering public support, reinforcing internal coherence, and avoiding internal change."[8] Repression helps the Brotherhood garnering public support by strengthening its image as a legitimate opposition movement. It promotes internal cohesiveness by reinforcing members' belief of being in the right path towards truth and justice, thus strengthening their ideological commitment and shared identity. Finally, repression spares the Brotherhood the need to revise its core ideology or strategy, as the message it promotes is that belief in God and steadfastness will grant members success in their mission.[9] Consequently, the Brotherhood survived decades of repression thanks to its ability to promote a shared collective identity, dismiss dissent and adopting immobility and endurance as survival strategies.

While after 2013 the senior Brotherhood leadership continues to support a strategy of self-restrain and immobility to survive repression, a growing body of literature shows that this approach has become increasingly contested among the membership. This is evidenced in members' claims for greater agency, individualism and independent initiatives, which do not necessarily align with the leadership's strategy of immobility. Ardovini, for instance, shows that after 2013 the Brotherhood finds itself divided into two main camps, the senior leadership and those loyal to them who abide to the Brotherhood's traditional "wait and see" strategy as a way to survive repression, and a network of members who advocate instead for a more pro-active approach to repression as a way forward.[10] The latter are, in the author's view, engendering a process of internal movement's change based on individual initiatives, autonomously from the senior leadership. Certainly, internal divisions have characterised the Brotherhood since its inception, and these have never been significant enough to

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meaningfully weaken the organization.[11] Nevertheless, the post-2013 repression is peculiar in that it took place after the Brotherhood had reached government for the first time in history. Its ousting, therefore, caused a greater sense of disillusioned among members who, for the first time, came to term with the "failure" of the Brotherhood and the political project that it had promoted for decades.

Membership's disillusionment with the Brotherhood, its organization and ideology after 2013, also engendered a process of rediscovery of their self-identity away from the collective identity of the movement. On this point, for instance, Menshawy shows that members' disengagement from the Brotherhood in the aftermath of the 2013 repression should be understood as a process encompassing aspects of an individual's self-identity, emotional and kinship networks, as well as ideological commitments.[12] Similarly, Biagini's work demonstrates how the Sisterhood's experience of repression post-2013 caused the formation of gendered subjectivities that challenge the Brotherhood's gender regime and code of identity for women.[13] Partially departing from his previous work, recently also al-Anani pointed to the need to observe how members individually experience and react to repression in order to assess the effect that this is having on the movement as a whole.[14] A process of internal Brotherhood reform led by individual members and opposed to the senior leadership's strategy of immobility, is therefore already under way in the post-2013 context. While literature addressing how individual members are carrying out internal change begins to emerge,[15] it rests mainly on the observation of Brotherhood male members, whereas women's views remain largely unexplored. The Sisterhood is an important Brotherhood constituency, whose activism is crucial to sustain the Brotherhood in times of repression. Accounting for their views is therefore imperative to gain a fuller understanding of how repression is affecting the movement and of how *all* of its members envisage this should be reformed after 2013.

Therefore, this article aligns with this emerging literature, claiming that looking at how individual members understand and experience repression is central to understanding the Brotherhood's present and future trajectories, and it fills an important gap in this literature by investigating how the Sisterhood imagines the Brotherhood changing after 2013. Focusing on three key venues where the Sisters manifest dissent and advocate for Brotherhood reforms, these being women's self-identity, *da'wa* and professionalism, the

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[11] Carrie R. Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood. Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, No. 3 (2005): 373-395.
[12] Menshawy, *Leaving the Brotherhood.*
[13] Erika Biagini, "Islamist Women Feminist Subjectivities in (R)Evolution: The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood in the Aftermath of the Arab Uprisings," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, No. 3 (2020): 382-402.
[14] Khalil Al-Anani, "Rethinking the Repression-Dissent Nexus: Assessing Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood's Response to Repression since the Coup of 2013," *Democratization* 26, No. 8 (2019): 1329-1341.
[15] See Ardovini, Menshawy and Al-Anani in this special issue.

article illustrates how the Sisters actively shape the Brotherhood's gender debates and how, in some instances, they lead internal Brotherhood change after 2013. The article proceeds as follows. First, it discusses data and methods. Second, it provides an overview of women's activism in the Brotherhood before 2013, to show that demands for gender reforms preceded the current repression. A third section illustrates the findings. Consistently with other works in this special issue, the article highlights the Sisterhood's desire to reform the Brotherhood internally along greater pluralism. The conclusion summarizes the main findings.

Data and Methods

The data for this research include 55 semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face with 35 Muslim Sisterhood activists in Cairo between 2013 and 2018, informal conversations with the Sisters and the author's observation of women, their activities and daily lives. All of the interviewees were Sisterhood members; they were either born into Brotherhood families (N. 26) or had joined the movement prior to the interview (N. 9). Interviewees were aged between 19 and 60 years old, with the largest majority (N. 25) being in their twenties and thirties. Consequently, the article relies significantly on the views of a younger generation of Sisterhood activists, whose voices remain important to assess given that they represent the future generations of Sisterhood activists and leaders. Class was also a significant factor among the Sisters interviewed. Most were highly educated middle class women, holding college degrees, masters, and some also a PhD. Some had travelled abroad or had spent considerable time outside Egypt (e.g. the UK, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Turkey), an experience that allowed them to compare how women and gender issues were dealt with in Egypt and by the Brotherhood in comparison to other societies. Senior Sisters had longstanding professional careers and occupied important roles in their communities and, at times, in the Brotherhood as well. The Sisters' social status was often reflected in their political ambitions and their desires to play a greater role in the movement and society. All of the women played an active role in the 2011 uprising, in the 2011-12 elections, and the Islamist resistance after 2013. All of the names reported herein are pseudonyms.

Field research began in 2013, coinciding with the Brotherhood's repression. For a long time, Egypt's authoritarian regimes spared Western researchers the same physical dangers to which they subject their citizens, but as the death of Cambridge researcher Giulio Regeni in 2016 demonstrated, the asymmetries separating foreign researchers and Egyptians citizens partially levelled after 2013,[16] exposing both to greater risks. Therefore, issues of access and trust-building should be discussed. Access to the Sisters was facilitated by liberal-secular oriented activists sympathetic to the Brotherhood but

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[16] Lucie Ryzova, "New Asymmetries in the New Authoritarianism: Research in Egypt in the Age of Post-Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, *No.* 3 (2017): 511-514.

after that, it was the Sisters themselves who took care of introducing me to other members, enabling interviews and participation in their activities. I believe that diverse factors facilitated trust-building between me and the Sisters. First, it was my willingness to take a risk by reaching out to Brotherhood members. While following Egypt's 2011 political opening Western scholars intensified their research on the Brotherhood, few dared approaching the movement after 2013. Sharing risky circumstances helped crating a bond between the Sisters and me, reinforcing trust-building. Second, it was the fact that participating in research offered the Sisters an opportunity to voice their views and opinions to a larger Western audience after the regime had silenced the Brotherhood in Egypt, leaving the Sisters little or no venue to defend themselves against mounting state repression and regime's proscription of the Brotherhood as a terrorist group. Third, I believe that collaboration and trust-building was favored by the fact that both the Sisters and I shared the common goal of documenting women's roles, activism and contribution to the Brotherhood's aims and goals. The Sisters perceived their role as having been central to the post-2011 Brotherhood's successes, but equally felt that the movement had marginalized their voices in the aftermath of the uprisings. Documenting their roles, views and contributions in research, became a way for the Sisters to regain a voice in the movement.

I used thematic analysis (TA)[17] to identify patterns in the data and assess Sisterhood's desires for change in the way the Brotherhood approached women's issues and their role. I used NVivo to facilitate the mechanical processing of the data. TA is widely employed in the humanities and social sciences because it remains independent from given theoretical and epistemological positions,[18] but for this reasons attention must be paid to issues of data interpretation, reflexivity and representation to make explicit the intellectual motivations guiding the research.[19] I embarked on this research with the goal to understand, describe, analyse and explain meanings that Islamist women ascribed to their activism and to interpret strategies that women used to remain active in the Brotherhood despite structural and gender constrains. However, particularly after 2015, the Sisters grew increasingly critical of the movement, of its perceived political mistakes and of its position towards women. Women's activism under protracted repression demonstrated their resilience but also their active role in addressing what they perceived as Brotherhood's shortcomings. This article reflects on these Sisterhood's conversations with the goal to assess how they envisage changing the Brotherhood and how they mobilize for this purpose after 2013. While the Sisters I

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[17] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, No. 2 (2008): 77-101.
[18] Kathryn Roulston, "Data Analysis and 'Theorizing as Ideology,'" *Qualitative Research* 1, No. 3 (December 2001): 280.
[19] Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta, eds. *Political Research in the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 14-15.

spoke to continue to abide to an understanding of gender complementarity, rather than equality,[20] all of them aspired to gain a better position for women in the movement.

The Sisterhood and their Call for Gender Change Before 2013

Women's involvement in the Brotherhood dates back to the movement's establishment. Its founder Hassan al-Banna sought to promote a nationalist ideology that found inspiration in Islam for society's reforms.[21] In his view, society's change could only be achieved by shaping Muslim subjects who would live by Islamic religion, morals and values.[22] By virtue of their role as biological and cultural reproducers of new generations,[23] women had therefore an important contribution to make to the Brotherhood's project. Indeed, al-Banna sought their inclusion since the very beginning. Like in most nationalist movements,[24] however, women's inclusion in the Brotherhood remained subordinated to the movement's goals, meaning that women's interests and demands acquired second place before that of the Brotherhood. Furthermore, the Brotherhood's emphasis on women's position in the family, considered central to its political achievements, caused the movement to support a gender ideology that privileged the institution of the patriarchal family, male authority over women, and complementary gender roles.[25] This was also reflected in the role that women assumed in the Brotherhood organization, which remained complementary and of support to that of men.

In the early years, women's greatest contribution to the Brotherhood was growing its female membership and spreading its *da'wa* (invitation to Islam) among their families and communities via charity and religious work.[26] Their role expanded in the 1950s and 1960s, subsequent to the Brotherhood falling under repression by the Nasser regime. With the arrest of male members, the Sisters emerged as the movement's powerhouse,

[20] A complementarian gender worldview, largely endorsed by Islamist women, ascribes men and women different roles in a male-headed family, based on what are believed to be natural differences between the sexes. It differs from an egalitarian gender worldview, which aspires to achieve equality between men and women in all spheres of society, including the family. See Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam. Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009): 332.

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

[22] Ibid., 82.

[23] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

[24] Jill Vickers, "Bringing Nations In: Some Methodological and Conceptual Issues in Connecting Feminisms with Nationhood and Nationalisms," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, No. 1 (2006): 84–109.

[25] 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 (London: MacMillan, 1991): 209.

[26] Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamist and the State: Contemporary Feminism in Egypt* (UK: MacMillan, 1998).

sustaining its network, the prisoners and their families,[27] and contributing to its ideological survival by acting as a bridge between the leaders in prisons and the outside world.[28] In the 1970s, when the Brotherhood took advantage of Sadat's tolerance to re-build the organization, the Sisterhood never gained back the strength it had acquired under repression. As Abdel-Latif notes,[29] the Brotherhood's status of illegality left it exposed to regime repression, allowing the leaders to justify women's exclusion from politics and denying them formal status in the organization as a protective measure.

Sisterhood's demands for greater inclusion and emancipation in the Brotherhood emerged as prominent in the 1990s,[30] when Mubarak-led liberalization created opportunities for Islamists' political participation, thus engendering demands for greater pluralism and democratic reforms.[31] The opportunity of participation also re-opened old Brotherhood debates concerning its nature as either a religious or political movement, upon which rested different participatory strategies. Senior leaders abided to al-Banna's view of Islam as a comprehensive system of religion and state. Consequently, they opposed the establishment of a separate party void of its religion mission, a Mubarak-set prerequisite for parties' legalization.[32] To avoid repression, senior leaders promoted a self-restraining strategy that limited the movement's political participation to areas that the regime considered non-threatening.[33] In contrast, politically oriented middle-generation members viewed repression as a direct consequence of the Brotherhood's ambiguous character in the political system. Consequently, they advocated for the separation of the Brotherhood's religious and political mission, the former to rest with the movement and the latter to be promoted via a party with separate goals and chain of command.[34] A revision of the Brotherhood's position on women was also central to their demands. Middle-generation leaders believed that the Brotherhood's religious emphasis, reflected in its conservative position on women and political participation, compromised the movement's appeal in Egyptian society. Accordingly, they demanded the Brotherhood to adopt a more moderate stand on women and grant them greater participation so to comply with Egypt's new social reality, were women already played political and leadership roles.[35]

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[27] Omaima Abdel-Latif, "In the Shadows of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2008. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/women_egypt_muslim_brotherhood.pdf

[28] Barbara Zollner, "Prison Talks: The Muslim Brotherhood's Internal Struggle during Gamal Abdel Nasser's Persecution, 1954 to 1971," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, No. 3 (2007): 441-433.

[29] Abdel-Latif, *In the Shadow of the Brothers*, 11.

[30] El-Ghobashy, *The Metamorphosis of the Brothers*.

[31] Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*.

[32] Hesham Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Pursuit of Legitimacy. Power and Political Islam in Egypt under Mubarak* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014): 82-83.

[33] Ibid., 176-177.

[34] Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*, 205-228.

[35] Ibid.; El-Ghobashy, *The Metamorphosis of the Brothers*.

While challenged, back then senior leaders successfully resisted internal reforms. In 1994, for instance, following pressure by middle-generation leaders, the Brotherhood issued its first position paper addressing women and political participation. This asserted the Brotherhood's duty to support women's political inclusion, but also restated women's primary role within the family and their responsibility to abide to traditional feminine qualities such as piety and modesty.[36] The Brotherhood leadership continued to project a conservative posture on women in further documents, such as the 2004 Initiative for Political Reform, the 2005 and the 2007 Party Platforms,[37] which it justified based on a religious choice and social reality.[38] As Tammam notes,[39] by the mid-1990s conservative members had effectively consolidated their position in the Brotherhood, further imbuing the organization of conservative religious views and traditional practices.

Despite this male-dominated organizational culture, women were active members of the reformist Brotherhood's wing. Since the 1990s, they availed of middle-generation leaders' support to partake in syndicates and parliamentary elections as candidates.[40] They also used university campuses and informal spaces out of the control of the conservative leadership to promote a more progressive vision for women and their role in the movement.[41] When the Brotherhood issued the 2007 party platform reinstating the exclusion of women's from the presidency of the state, the Sisters, like the Brothers,[42] made their criticism of the movement public in social media. In a letter[43] circulated on the internet and addressed to the General Guide Mohammed Akef (2004-10), Rasha Ahmad, a 35 year old Sister, criticized the Brotherhood for excluding women from its decision-making offices and for denying them the right to vote in internal elections. She also criticized the Brotherhood's educational curricula for women, asserting that they advanced an old-fashion image of women as exclusively concerned with house duties, child rearing and cooking. In her view, women played a much greater political and societal role than what the movement acknowledged, and the Brotherhood ought to revise its position to reflect the true extent of women's contributions.

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[36] Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*, 69-70.

[37] Abdel-Latif, *In the Shadow of the Brothers*, 1.

[38] Ibid., 9.

[39] Hossam Tammam, "The Salafization of the Muslim Brothers," *Marased* 1 (2011): 1-54.

[40] Al-Ghobashy, *The Metamorphosis of the Brothers*, 382.

[41] Biagini Erika and Paola Rivetti, "State Repression and Activist Organizing in Informal Spaces: Comparing Feminist Movements in Egypt and Iran," *MENA Politics Newsletter* 3, No. 2 (2020): 31-36.

[42] Marc Lynch, "Young Brothers in Cyberspace," *Middle East Report* 245 (2007). https://merip.org/2007/12/young-brothers-in-cyberspace/

[43] Al-Arabiya, "Sisters seek to join the office of the Guidance Bureau and to participate in electing the General Guide: The First Women's Protest in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Movement," 17 December 2007. http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/12/17/43077.html (accessed 6 January 2016)

Brotherhood's debates on women and political participation were never fully resolved, meaning that at the eve of the 2011 Egypt's uprising, Sisterhood's demands for emancipation persisted amid the conservative Brotherhood leaders' refusal to grant women greater leadership and decision-making powers in the movement. In contrast, conservative leaders took advantage of the 2011-12 electoral victories to push moderates out of politics,[44] further consolidating their power in the organization after 2011. This affected women's inclusion in the post-uprising period. Following the January 2011 popular revolts, the Sisters' contribution was crucial to secure the Brotherhood's electoral victories. While the movement reciprocated by expanding the Sisterhood's presence in political offices in 2011-12, women's inclusion in the movement and affiliated organisations such as the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) remained limited and it was only granted to ideologically aligned Sisters, selected by the senior leaders based on qualities such as piety and loyalty to the movement.[45] Furthermore, the Brotherhood never availed of the open political environment to include women in internal decision-making, effectively denying the Sisters a say on crucial political decision that the movement took while in government.[46] As such, women supporting gender reforms and more progressive views with regard to their role in the movement, like their fellow Brothers, suffered further exclusion and marginalization following the uprising.

This situation caused members' demands for internal Brotherhood change to grow in the movement.[47] Concerning women, the role that the Sisterhood played in the uprising – such as participating in the revolts and providing support to protesters in Tahrir Square[48] - and in the Brotherhood's electoral successes –voting and canvassing for votes[49] - granted further legitimacy to their claims for inclusion and emancipation in the movement. Furthermore, the open political environment of the post uprising period, albeit short and of a limited duration, invalidated the Brotherhood's secretive and nepotistic culture. The Brotherhood's newly acquired legal status in 2011-12 meant that it no longer had reasons to refuse greater transparency and openness to its members, or to exclude women from politics to protect them from regime retaliation. Therefore, core Brotherhood principles that sustained its organizational cohesiveness and collective identity -such as undiscussed loyalty to the movement and blind obedience to its leaders- lost traction among the membership.[50]

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44 Robert Woltering, "Post-Islamism in Distress," *Die Welt de Islam* 54, No. 1 (2014).
45 Erika Biagini, "Islamist Women's Activism under Morsi's Government (2011-2013). Political Inclusion, Gender and Discourse," *Egypte/Monde Arabe* 21 (2020): 37-55.
46 Ibid.
47 Ardovini, *Stagnation Vs. Adaptation*; Menshawy, *Leaving the Brotherhood*; Biagini, *Islamist Women's Feminist Subjectivities*.
48 Mona Farag, "The Muslim Sisters and the 25th of January Revolution," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 13, No. 5 (2012): 227-237.
49 Biagini, *The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood*; and *Islamist Women's Activism under Morsi*.
50 Ardovini, *Stagnation Vs. Adaptation*.

This means that the Brotherhood's ousting from government in 2013 occurred when membership's disillusionment with the movement was already high. Disenchanted members attributed the Brotherhood's "failure" to its lack of skills and its inability to set a coherent political project, and thus availed of repression to play leadership roles previously denied to them in the movement.[51] The Sisterhood established women-only movements, which they used to advance a political agenda in partial autonomy from the Brotherhood.[52] In them, young Sisters found a space to exercise leadership and collaborate with non-Islamist youth movements -such as the Egyptian Revolutionary Youth- on common goals. While their primary concern was resisting repression and ending the *coup*, gender issues acquired prominence among younger Sisterhood activists as they encountered resistance against their mobilization from both the Egyptian state and Brotherhood leaders. Among members of the Ultras Banat and Bint al-Tawra movements, for instance, demands for bodily integrity and autonomy became paramount consequently to their experience of state-led violence and the concomitant Brotherhood's efforts to silence women who suffered sexual abuses by the regime, for defying Brotherhood's norms regulating women's modesty and respectability.[53] These Sisterhood's experiences were significant as they fostered gender awareness among the activists and nurtured a critique of the Brotherhood's gender conservatism. However, the literature is till to address how the Sisters envision a future Brotherhood and how they are mobilizing to instigate internal movement change after its 2013 ousting, which is the scope of this article.

Muslim Sisterhood's Reflections on Women and their Role post-2013

Interviews with the Sisters after 2013 revealed that women were not only receptive to Brotherhood's internal debates, but also actively participated in them. In many cases, their grievances addressed well-known claims concerning members' lack of participation in the Brotherhood's decision-making, accusations of the Brotherhood's hijacking of the revolution for political power and its subsequent unwillingness to undergo substantial state reforms for fear of antagonizing the military establishment.[54] With regard to the Brotherhood's political "failure," the Sisters attributed this to the

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[51] George Fahmy, "The Struggle for the Leadership of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2015. https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/07/13/struggle-for-leadership-of-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-pub-60678.

[52] Biagini, *The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood*.

[53] Biagini, *Islamist Women's Feminist Subjectivities in (R)Evolution*.

[54] Among others, see Khalil Al-Anani, "The young Brotherhood in search of a new path," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9, (2009): 96-109; Jeffrey Martini, Dalia Dassa Kaye and Erin York, *The Muslim Brotherhood, its Youth, and Implications for U.S. Engagement* (USA: National Defense Research Institute, 2012). https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1247.html; Brown and Dunne, *Unprecedented Pressures*; Mostafa Hashem, "The Great Brotherhood Divide," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2016. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/62942.

movement's lack of political experience and the inner resistance of the "deep state," although several also referred to the Brotherhood's lack of an effective and coherent political strategy. Some acknowledged the Brotherhood's good intentions to safeguard the revolutionary process, but also that these alone were insufficient to govern a country through a post-revolutionary transition. They criticized the Brotherhood's lack of professionalism, which they attributed to its tendency to select members for position of leadership based on their demonstrated piety and loyalty to the movement rather than their skills. Several associated the Brotherhood's failure to the unwillingness of liberals to cooperate, but some also recognised the negative impact of the movement's exclusionary practices towards non-Islamist forces.

Concerning the Brotherhood's relationship with its members, the Sisters complained of a lack of transparency in the way in which the Brotherhood administered the movement, the FJP and the government, and thus in the reasons guiding many of the political decisions the Brotherhood took while in government. They considered this to be a main cause of the Brotherhood's loss of legitimacy among Egyptian society and its members after the 2011-12 elections. Since 2017, interviews with the Sisters in Egypt revealed a growing feeling of abandonment by the leadership abroad. Some accused the Brotherhood of corruption for capitalizing on prisoners' cause to collect funding which they then used to lead comfortable lives abroad rather than supporting members in Egypt. Remarkably, a minority of the Sisters who sided with the Egyptian Revolutionary Youth during the Rabaa sit-in held the Brotherhood accountable for those who lost their lives consequently to the dispersal. They also believed the Brotherhood to be responsible for the loss of religiosity among members and Egyptian society since the uprising, claiming that by using religion in politics the leaders had subjected religion to a test open to failure. As one young Sister put it, "[I]f you act politically in the name of your religion, you subject your religious believes to a test. Politics is a game. You really destroy your religious believes in a battle that is subjected to failure."[55] Among the younger generations in particular, there was a growing criticism of the Brotherhood's demonstrated immobility under repression and a sense of disillusionment with its refusal to undertake reforms in the aftermath of 2013.

The Sisters' criticism of the Brotherhood also addressed gender issues. Among their claims was that the Brotherhood actively excluded female members from decision-making positions out of the belief that women were emotionally and mentally unfit for leadership, or because such positions would compromise their family role. One Sister in particular, accused the Brotherhood to abide to gender segregation out of lack of trust that women could control their sexual desires.[56] Several argued that these practices had no religious basis, but rested on Brotherhood's outdated traditions. As one Sister in her fifties noted, "Tradition, more than religion, dominate[d] the Brotherhood's ideas about

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[55] Sarah, interview, 2018.
[56] Reem, interview, 2018.

women."[57] Younger Sisters in particular, criticised the Brotherhood for marginalizing women in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, rather than utilizing their energies and skills in the post-revolutionary period; as one member stated, "We [women] cannot be put aside anymore, this energy [women have] must be invested in building this country."[58] The remaining of the article focuses on the Sisters' own articulations addressing three key areas: women's self-identity, *da'wa*, and professionalism. This is done with a view to showing how the Sisters envisage reforming the Brotherhood's position on women after 2013 and to demonstrate how, in some instances, women are already contributing to reform the Brotherhood internally. Overall, women's efforts address their desire to make the Brotherhood a more pluralist movement, which would allow its female members to be "not just daughters and wives anymore, but women,"[59] in the plurality of all their identities, desires and ambitions.

The Self

Interviews with Sisterhood members after 2013 revealed their desire for the Brotherhood to be more tolerant of women's diverse identities and personalities. This desire was particularly evident in Sisterhood's discourses addressing what they perceived to be a Brotherhood's "excessive" emphasis on shaping women's identity to comply with standards of piety and femininity set by the movement. A Sister in her late thirties, born into a Brotherhood family abroad, who joined the movement upon relocating to Egypt during her university years, asserted that "the Brotherhood aims to produce girls like if they are blocks, all alike."[60] As she continued, she explained that women who displayed forms of behaviour, values or ideas that were different from what the Brotherhood imposed, suffered marginalization in the movement, herself included: "The time they [Brotherhood] realize or suspect that someone can have an influence on other girls and give them a shape that is a little bit different from what they want, they marginalize this person."[61] As she stated, to fit in the Brotherhood, women had to accept numerous restrictions, which she believed limited their freedom of expression and individuality:

> When I moved to Egypt … I was wearing a different kind of veil. Adopting a more conservative style of *Khimar* was the first thing I had to do in order to "fit in" the movement … But it's not about the veil per se. What they [Brotherhood] stress upon is the meaning they attach to veiling and the other behaviours to which you have to conform once you wear the veil. For them the veil implies a change in behaviour. They tell you that it is a responsibility to wear the veil and that you

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[57] Menna, interview, 2018.
[58] Lamia, interview, 2014.
[59] Feyrouz, interview, 2014.
[60] Lamia, interview, 2017.
[61] Ibid.

have to respect the fact that you are wearing the veil by behaving in a correct manner … They lead you though a path for building piety and modesty, eliminating all the behaviors that contradict their ideas of piety and modesty. So many things became suddenly *haram* [forbidden]: "You don't mix with men", "you don't talk out loud", "you don't draw", "you don't do sport that may damage you as a woman or your feminine behaviour", "you don't listen to music", "you don't wear high heels", "you don't live alone as a woman", "you don't go out alone" … I believe that the veil does not prevent me from having certain ideas and doing certain activities … What do you think of girls in a *Niqab* who play guitar? For the Brotherhood is a sign that the girl does not respect what she is wearing [the veil]. For me it is a matter of personal choice. There is something called personal freedom that does not exist within the group.[62]

Negative remarks on the Brotherhood's emphasis to regulate women's identity and behaviour were prominent also among Sisters born and raised in Egypt. One Sister in her early thirties, born into a Brotherhood family, married with two children, recounted of a similar experience:

It was about the small details. They [Brotherhood] requested that the dress we used be without any ornament or decoration, that they be of plain colours, that our *hijab* be very long, like a *Khimar*, and if you were not putting your veil so long, then you were not complying with the look they wanted. These details involved also personal hygiene and beauty. Many of the most conservative [Brotherhood] people would criticise women for shaving their upper lips; it was comparable to a crime! This also applied to body hair.[63]

Women's criticism was not only directed at the male leadership but also at conservative Sisters who enforced these practices on the younger ones. As the same Sister noted, "at times women are their own worst enemies."[64] When prompted to explain, she stated that

In Egyptian society, most of those who affect women negatively are women; mothers, sisters in law, and other Sisters who exercise diverse forms of oppression on you. Many do this because they are jealous of you trying to break a taboo, to be different. Others do it because they don't know anything else apart from the small world they live in. I am not saying this in an offensive way, but in a literal way. They are quite

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Leen, interview, 2018.
[64] Ibid.

> closed-minded, and they cannot accept what we [younger members]
> think, do or say.[65]

These words clearly spoke to the Sisters' desire to enjoy greater freedom to express their own identities and individualities in the Brotherhood and society at large. There were of course limitations to the pluralism the Sisters advocated. Even among those supporting the most progressive views, there were limits to freedom of expression. For instance, full freedom of expression could not be extended to Egypt's LGBTQ community, because homosexuality was considered a deviation of nature and as such it was dangerous for society.[66] This indicates that the freedom of expression the Sisters advocated for aimed at bettering their own status inside the movement but was not meant to be extended to all of society. Rather, it was directed at expanding the Sisters' right to manifest diverse identities and personalities, and did not reflect the Sisterhood's acceptance of pluralism as universal value.

Da'wa

As mentioned above, women play an important role as transmitters of a movement's culture and identity.[67] Women fulfil this role as part of their nurturing and caring responsibilities in the family and, in the Brotherhood, also as part of their *da'wa*. This women's role becomes even more important in times of repression, because it ensures the reproduction of new generations of members committed to the movement. During the Brotherhood repression in the 1950s and 1960s, this Sisters' activism ensured the survival of the movement and the renewal of its ideology, as women smuggled Brotherhood's political writings out of prison.[68] After 2013, the Sisters have been playing a similar role. However, in contrast with the past when they limited themselves to disseminate male members' writings,[69] this time the Sisters are availing of a fragmented Brotherhood organization to partially redraft the educational (*tarbiya*) material the Brotherhood uses for member's ideological cultivation. A prominent senior Sister involved in *da'wa* indicated that repression compromised the Brotherhood's ability to draft centralized curricula, thus "creat[ing] the opportunity for each district to draft their own."[70] Consequently, the Sisters began redrafting the curricula, introducing changes. This trend was observed in a particular district of Cairo and does not necessarily indicate an all-encompassing Sisterhood's endeavor. It is however a significant finding worth reporting.

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Lamia, interview, 2017.

[67] Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.

[68] Barbara Zollner, "Prison Talk: The Muslim Brotherhood's Internal Struggle during Gamal Abdel Nasser's Persecution, 1954 to 1971," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, No. 3 (2007): 411-433.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Nour, interview, 2017.

First, the Sisters redrafted Brotherhood curricula to promote a more moderate interpretation of Islam, relying on al-Banna's writings. While al-Banna had remained a primary Brotherhood ideologue since its death in 1949, the Sisters claimed that the leaders in control of the organization since the 1970s[71] had distorted al-Banna's moderate understanding of Islam by "picking and choosing" extracts of al-Banna's writings to suit their political objectives, while also infiltrating the movement of conservative *Wahhabi*[72] ideology and practices. Consequently, they believed that returning to al-Banna's texts, in their original and integral form was necessary to "purify" the Brotherhood from faulty and narrow Islamic understandings.[73] They also considered these appraisals necessary to retain the younger generations to the movement, which held more moderate views with regard to Islam, women and the role they ought to play in the Brotherhood and society.[74] Interviews with younger Sisters confirmed their view that the Brotherhood's gender conservatism was alien to Islam and Egyptian society but rested on the influence of senior leaders who spent time in exile abroad. As one Sister in her late twenties stated:

> Senior Brotherhood leaders have conservative ideas about women because they spent long time in Saudi Arabia and other countries where *Wahhabi* Islam is prominent. They think that as a woman you must limit yourself to teach other women, that there are only limited works you can do and limited roles you can play. But for me, my conditions as a woman are mine only to consider and should not dictate the role I play in the movement, in politics or in society.[75]

Second, the Sisters revised the Brotherhood curricula with a view to making them more gender egalitarian by introducing greater similarity in the religious content that men and women curriculum addressed. Traditionally, Brotherhood curricula for women included extracts of Surat (chapters of the Quran) which content addressed primarily women, their position in the family and men and women's duties in marriage, such as Surah *al-Nisaa'* (The Women). In contrast, men's curricula focused on Surat containing reference to *jihad* (resistance), such as Surah *al-Anfaal* (The Bounties) or Surah *al-'An'aam* (The Grazing Livestock), to reflect men's primary role in the public sphere and to prepare them for the repression they were likely to face by the regime consequently to political participation. After 2013, the Sisters introduced extracts from Surah *al-*

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[71] Tammam, *The Salafization of the Brothers*, 16-19.
[72] Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Islam prevalent in Saudi Arabia and Arab Gulf countries, considered to be the most conservative. Wahhabism permeated the Brotherhood since the 1960s and 1970s, consequently to the return of Brotherhood members to Egypt after being in exile in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf following the movement's repression under the regime of Gamal Abdul Nasser. See Tammam, *The Salafization of the Brothers.*
[73] Nour, interview, 2017.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Hessa, interview, 2018.

Anfaal and Surah *al-ʿAnʿaam* in the women's curricula, claiming that women were playing a similar role as men in the Brotherhood resistance, if not greater.[76]

Repression had severely fragmented the Brotherhood organization, making centralized communication and coordination more difficult. Consequently, I could not assess the extent to which the curricula reforms introduced by the Sisters applied to the broader movement. Nevertheless, women's effort to redraft the Brotherhood's curricula to promote a more moderate understanding of Islam and a more gender egalitarian approach remain significant, as it signals their desire to bring greater equality for women in the movement, building upon their contributions to the Brotherhood. Indeed, the Sisters were revising the curricula with a view to correcting perceived Islamic misinterpretation about women and their role, which they attributed to outdated traditions and religious understandings alien to Egyptian society introduced by the conservative Brotherhood leadership. Because this was also done with the goal to retain the younger generations into the Brotherhood, it demonstrates that women were already leading reforms internal to the movement.

Professionalism

Gender issues intersected with the Sisters' critique of the Brotherhood due to its apparent immobility and lack of reforms since the 2013 repression. After 2015, the Brotherhood's focused on re-building the organization and, under these circumstances, it perceived women's fulfillment of their family and caring responsibilities as necessary to its cohesion and survival.[77] The Brotherhood applied pressure on women to comply with their family duties.[78] It also provided financial support to the Sisters whose husband had been arrested or killed, to ensure that they could dedicate themselves to the family without having to seek paid employment. As the Sisters claimed, however, the money provided was often insufficient to support their families. In Egypt, the situation was exacerbated by the 2016 economic crisis.[79] Abroad, it was made difficult by the costly process of resettling into a new country.[80] Consequently, several women ended up seeking employment outside the home, but for the many who entered the job market for the first time, low paid manual jobs were often all what were accessible.

It is within this context that a broader critique of the Brotherhood' position on women and the family emerged. While the Sisters take pride in their family role, with the coming of repression women found themselves shouldering heavier burdens, which some perceived as unfair. In particular, those who had advocated for greater women's emancipation in the movement, but suffered marginalization, believed it was unfair that

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[76] Nour, interview, 2017.

[77] Biagini, *Islamist Women's Feminist Subjectivities*, 395.

[78] Reem, interview, 2018.

[79] Lamia, interview, 2018.

[80] Reem, interview, 2018.

women had to endure such heavy responsibilities and suffering when they had had no say in the political decisions that the Brotherhood took while in government and which led to its ousting.[81] Women's criticism intensified further amid the lack of Brotherhood's reforms in its position towards women, evidenced in the movement's continued emphasis to direct their efforts into the family. As some Sisters complained, for decades the Brotherhood had channeled women into the family, discouraging them from pursuing careers, work or activities in areas that the movement believed did not benefit their role and family duties. This penalized the movement after 2011, because it lacked skillful female politicians.[82] It also penalized women disproportionately under repression, as left women with little or no skills to sustain themselves independently after their husbands' absence. As one member stated, "They [Brotherhood] pushed women continuously into the house and made them unable to look after themselves. They taught us how to rely on our husbands but not how to rely on ourselves. The day our husbands are no longer there, we collapse."[83]

Consequently, the Brotherhood's efforts to bring women back into the family after 2015 was criticized by some Sisters, who perceived it as indicating the movement's reliance on traditional approaches to repression, which the 2013 political failure proved outdated and inefficient. In their view, the Brotherhood needed to take stock from the 2013 experience to reform internally with a view to be better prepared to take on the leadership of the country, should the opportunity materialize again. This included investing in the development of its female members, with a view at expanding women's range of skills so to enable them to play a wider range of roles in the movement. For instance, Reem, a member since the 1990s, who held a leadership post in the FJP's Women's Section in 2011-12 and lived in Turkey for a period after 2013 to escape repression, criticized the Brotherhood leadership in exile in Turkey for failing to capitalize on the friendly political environment in there to undergo reforms. As she argued, the leadership in exile limited itself to "copy and paste" in Turkey what the Brotherhood used to do in Egypt, without bringing any change to the activities, structure or ideas that guided their activism, so as to learn from past mistakes. As she stated:

> Many of the members who left to Turkey … forgot why we are in this situation, what brought us here [repression] and started living a normal life. Even the activities that the Brotherhood undertook in Turkey were the traditional activities that the movement carried out in a normal situation in Egypt. They focused on the upbringing of children, on praying, and organizing activities for the family of the martyrs. There was no real change in the curricula that was imparted to members. We need to build a new generation that is capable of going back to Egypt and carry on the mission … this applies to both men and

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[81] Lamia, interview, 2017.
[82] Nasibah, interview, 2018.
[83] Lamia, interview, 2018.

women. If this coup fails for any reason, are we ready to take up our role in society? I don't think so, and they [Brotherhood leadership in Turkey] never answered these questions.[84]

Sisters like Reem took the situation into their own hands, and individually begun pursuing professional and educational opportunities to compensate for the skills that they perceived the Brotherhood lacking.[85] While in Turkey, Reem enrolled back into education to pursue a diploma in human resources; she then opened her own trading company. She did so to gain greater financial independence from her husband so to be ready to stand on her own if the husband was arrested, and also to gain skills that she could place at the service of the Brotherhood was the movement going to be able to operate again in Egypt. Doing so made her encounter resistance from her husband and the movement. When this took place, Reem eventually divorced her husband and moved back to Egypt, where she remains engaged in developing women's skills with the goal of securing them paid employment.[86] Other Sisters I interviewed also pursued educational and professional opportunities for similar reasons. For instance, Fayrouz, a Sister in her mid-twenties, enrolled back in university to pursue a degree in psychology, because she believed that despite the Brotherhood's long history of repression, the movement lacked qualified trained psychologists to properly assist victims of regime abuses. Also Hessa, a Sister in her late twenties, pursued a master in communication after 2013, because she believed that the Brotherhood's demonstrated to be unable to properly convey its political message while in power and, as such, the movement needed qualified media specialists.

As these Sisters' initiatives demonstrate, women built on their experience of repression to better themselves and gain skills that they perceived the Brotherhood lacking. They saw this as necessary for the Brotherhood to exit the current crisis, re-gain relevance in society and practice politics again. These Sisters' efforts to better themselves based on women's independent and individual initiatives, should also be understood as a strategy to reform the Brotherhood internally, when contrasted with the senior leadership's immobility. In line with al-Banna, personal change is the first step into a process of society's reform; therefore, by bettering themselves in view of taking up a role in the Brotherhood in the future, women were already leading change within the movement.

Conclusions

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is not new to repression, but the post-2013 one is qualitatively different from previous instances in that it took place after the movement

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[84] Reham, interview, 2018.
[85] A similar trend is observed among male members. See Ardovini, Menshawy and al-Anani in this special issue.
[86] Reem, interview, 2018.

had reached power for the first time in its history, only to be violently ousted few months later in a military *coup*. This created widespread disillusionment among its membership, many of whom are now questioning the validity and efficiency of the Brotherhood political project, along the senior leadership's traditional self-restraining approach as a survival strategy. This is evidenced in growing members' claims for internal reforms, agency, individualism and independent initiatives, which do not necessarily align with the leadership's strategy of immobility. Within this context, this article set to investigate whether the Muslim Sisterhood, the Brotherhood's female members, are also advancing demands for internal reforms after 2013 and what role they play as agents of change in the movement, if any. It did so by focusing on three key venues where the Sisters manifest dissent and advocate for Brotherhood reforms, these being women's self-identity, *da'wa* and professionalism, to highlight the role that gender plays in the ongoing internal change the Brotherhood is undertaking in the post-2013 context. As the article shows, the Sisters actively shape the Brotherhood's gender debates and, in some instances, they play a role as active agents of change. In Egypt, a number of Sisters have taken advantage of the fragmentation of the Brotherhood organization due to repression, to reform the Brotherhood educational curricula for women so to make them more gender egalitarian and promote a more progressive interpretation of women and their role in Islam. This is done with a view at rectifying what the Sisters perceive to be senior Brotherhood leaders' traditional and conservative Islamic interpretations which are alien to a moderate understanding of Islam and the Egyptian social context. The Sisters are also acting as agents of Brotherhood change by engaging in processes of self-development and professionalization, aimed at gaining those skills that they perceive the movement lacking and as necessary for it to be able to play a political role again in Egypt. Overall, therefore, the findings demonstrate that the Sisterhood's discourses and activism post-2013 reflect their desire for the Brotherhood movement to undergo internal pluralist reforms that would ensure the expansion of roles that women play in it, but also women's ability to manifest their own individual identities and pursue personal ambitions, even when they do not align with traditional gender roles the Brotherhood set for its female members.

These findings are significant in several respects. First, they testify to the active role that women play in processes of internal Brotherhood reforms. Second, they indicate that the Brotherhood may no longer be able to overlook women's demands for greater inclusiveness and emancipation in the movement, should it wish to regain relevance among a significant segment of its membership in a post-2013 context. Third, these findings demonstrate that as members take greater space and agency within the movement to pursue independent initiatives which often challenge the senior leadership's strategy and approach to repression, the Brotherhood is likely to re-emerge from the current crackdown in ways that may be considerably different from how we have known it up until today.