

## Pre-print

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### Abstract

This article draws attention to a young generation of Islamist women activists and to how it reacted to the patriarchal tendencies of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movement following the January 25, 2011 revolution in Egypt. Although women's support was central to the ability of Islamists to win power, after the uprising Islamists failed to grant women significant political rights and autonomy. While the existing literature on gender and nationalism demonstrates that practical gains for women are frequently sidelined by their movements in a post-revolutionary era, there is increasing recognition to examine the relationship between feminism and nationalism in relation to the particular context in which this evolves. This article substantiates this claim with new evidence. Based on a feminist ethnographic study of the Muslim Sisterhood, the female members of the Egyptian MB movement, conducted in Cairo between 2013 and 2018, the article demonstrates that a new gender politics has emerged among Islamist women activists as a result of their engagement in revolutionary struggle. This gender politics has explicit feminist overtones, which have become evident as women begin to challenge men's position of privilege within the sphere of the family.

**Keywords:** Egypt; Muslim Brotherhood; Arab uprisings; Islamist women; feminism; activism; subjectivity.

### Introduction

Feminist scholars have shown that although nationalist and revolutionary movements welcome women as allies, the same movements often sideline or abandon practical gains for women in the post-revolutionary era (O'Keefe 2013; Enloe 2014). Accordingly, scholars remain skeptical of women's ability to further their emancipation by joining nationalist struggles. Studies demonstrating that women's emancipatory projects are fundamentally linked to struggles for national liberation also abound, particularly in the Global South, where

women are prominent actors in anti-colonial, anti-occupation, anti-authoritarian, and religious and/or ethnic minority movements (Jayawardena 1986; Al-Ali and Pratt 2011; Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga 2016; Al-Ali and Tas 2018). As a result, scholars have recently begun exploring the relationship between feminism and nationalism in particular historical and geographical contexts, moving away from abstract analyses (O’Keefe 2013; Al-Ali and Tas 2018). However, scholars still agree that whether in the Western world or the Global South, women face significant challenges in retaining the gains made in times of national and revolutionary struggle.

The Arab uprisings demonstrate these difficulties. Women’s participation was central to the protests that ousted authoritarian leaders in the region, but women were then systematically excluded from the political table in the post-revolutionary transitions (Sadiqi 2016). When women complained of their renewed marginalization, counter-revolutionary forces constructed their demands as inauthentic and often violently pushed women away from the public and political sphere (Pratt 2013). Where democratic elections followed and Islamists rose to power, their social and moral conservatism provided further legitimization for women’s marginalization (Pratt 2013; Sadiqi 2016; Allam 2018b). Further, scholarly attention on Islamists’ gender conservatism also contributed to obscuring Islamist women’s emancipatory efforts since the so-called “Arab Spring” and its aftermath.

Islamist women are seldom portrayed as feminists, nor do they describe themselves as such. Like Islamist men, Islamist women embrace a gender ideology that emphasizes men’s and women’s complementary – rather than equal – roles in society, and they promote a gender politics that associates women with the private sphere of the family (Karam 1998). While Islamist women across the Middle East and North African region (MENA) gained access to the public sphere by politicizing motherhood and the family, scholars agree that this strategy limits their ability to attain greater gender equality within Islamist movements. Observing Islamist women activists in Palestine and Israel, Ben Shitrit (2016) found that the politicization of motherhood provides women with a justificatory framework to engage in the national struggle without contradicting Islamist movements’ gender ideology. However, she concluded that this practice is detrimental to women, as it accords men the right to demand women return to the private sphere of the family when they consider their activism no longer necessary (Ben Shitrit 2016, 14). This view corroborates Karam’s (1998) observations on

Islamist women in Egypt; she concluded that by seeking liberation through the glorification of motherhood and the family, women freed men from having to ask them to “‘go back to the home’, for in a sense, even at the peak of their activism, they have never left” it (Karam 1998, 230). While scholars admit that Islamist women’s strategy may affect their gender consciousness more than the women themselves suggest (Ben Shitrit 2016), Islamist women’s failure to address gender inequalities within the patriarchal family remains a major limitation of their feminist politics and activism.

Nevertheless, in the context of the Muslim Sisterhood movement in Egypt, it appears that women’s politicization since the uprising led to the emergence of a new gender politics among some of the women activists. Although Islamist women do not define themselves or their commitments as feminist, this emerging gender politics has explicit feminist overtones, in the sense that it reflects Islamist women’s adoption of feminist practice. These feminist overtones have become evident in the current period of Islamist demobilization, as women begin to challenge men’s authority and position of privilege within the sphere of the family. Borrowing from Karl Mannheim’s (1936) concept of political generation, Allam (2018a, 312) demonstrated that the exposure of women to the events of the January 25 Revolution in Egypt led to the emergence of a post-uprising subject, one with a distinctive consciousness. Likewise, this article argues that the involvement of a young cohort of Muslim Sisterhood members in the uprising and the subsequent repression of Islamists, also led to the emergence of a new Muslim Sisterhood generation. This generation is united in an intense experience of politicization that contributed to nurture their gender consciousness, as manifested in the new gender politics and feminist subjectivities of these women. Although those Sisters opposing the patriarchal structure of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) post-2011 have had little choice but to accept things as they were or to leave (Tadros 2017, 102), it is important to consider how women’s experience of marginalization amid activism affected their gender awareness and feminist politics. Such an examination provides useful insights for understanding how women’s involvement in revolutionary struggle produces new feminist subjects and affects gender politics.

This article highlights a young generation of Muslim Sisterhood activists and how they reacted to the patriarchal tendencies of the MB movement subsequent to the 2011 Egyptian uprising and its aftermath. It shows how women’s politicization and involvement in activism

prompted them to raise demands for self-determination and to challenge the MB's patriarchal structure, gender ideology, roles, and identities. It also demonstrates how the Sisterhood's demands for emancipation resist the current period of Islamists' demobilization, as women bring their struggle for autonomy to the sphere of the family, where they challenge male privilege and authority. My analysis draws on the work of O'Keefe (2013), Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga (2016), Al-Ali (2014), and Al-Ali and Tas (2018), all of whom have demonstrated that nationalist and revolutionary movements "can nurture feminism, albeit sometimes in a reactive manner" (Al-Ali and Tas 2018, 455). These works show that counter-revolutionary processes often lead to emphasizing gender conservatism as well as creating new opportunities for women to challenge normative gender roles and identities (Al-Ali 2014). This article contributes to these debates with new evidence, focusing on the case of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood since the 2011 uprising and its aftermath.

### **Notes on methodology**

This article is part of a broader research project addressing the activism of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood after the so-called "Arab Spring." It employs a critical feminist perspective to investigate how, since the 2011 uprising and the subsequent repression of Islamists, women's politicization has shaped their gender politics and feminist identities. The article relies on the concept of political opportunity structures (Jasper 2012, 28) to identify three distinct periods of contentious MB politics post-2011, each of which signaled a shift in the MB's relationship with the Egyptian state and raised new challenges for the Sisterhood activists wishing to advance an emancipatory agenda. The analysis focuses on women's activism in the informal activist circles of the MB movement. Women-only spaces can foster the development of a shared feminist identity, and, consequently, feminist demands (Allam 2018b). Informal spaces, less frequently subjected to institutional politics' structural constraints, provide women with greater autonomy and opportunities to bring about gendered change.

The article begins by examining the Sisterhood's activism during the period of MB governance (2012–2013). Feminist literature shows that the institutionalization of oppositional movements coincides with the reinstatement of conservative gender agendas

(O’Keefe 2013; Al-Ali and Tas 2018). The MB is a reformist movement rather than a revolutionary one. It played no role in instigating the protests that ousted Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and only joined the demonstrations late due to pressure from its revolutionary youth members. In 2011–2012, the MB successfully participated in the parliamentary and presidential elections by endorsing a conservative social program characteristic of its organization (Biagini forthcoming). Once in government, the MB downplayed the revolutionary youth members’ demands for sweeping state reforms and internal democratization.

During the second period discussed in the article, which saw the repression of Islamists (2013–2014), the women activists gained opportunities to advance autonomous political agendas (Biagini 2017). The MB supported women’s independent initiatives when they served MB objectives, but their later curbing of women’s newfound autonomy led to new challenges for the women activists.

Finally, the article addresses a third period, that of Islamists’ demobilization (2015-18). Since 2015, the MB has focused on minimizing the damages done to its organization and on rebuilding the movement, and it has demanded that women support the movement by returning to their traditional role within the home. However, women activists have begun to connect their broader struggle for self-determination to the sphere of the family and are challenging male privilege in that sphere. Exploring how Islamist women activists challenge normative gender roles and identities within the sphere of the family in times of revolutionary regression gives important insights into how their participation in revolutionary struggle affects their commitment to gender politics and feminism.

This article also illustrates how women’s politicization led to the emergence of distinct feminist subjectivities among some of the women involved. The term “subjectivity,” is defined as the agency of a subject informed by his/her self-reflective experience and resulting from his/her embeddedness in a system of power and meaning (Lettow 2015). In assessing Islamist women’s agency, I operate independently of normative understandings of agency as either liberal/secular or non-liberal/religious (Mahmoud 2012), embracing instead Hafez’s (2011, 155) view that because Islamist women’s “desires and subjectivities embody the mutual embedded ideals of historically produced Islamic traditions and secular liberal

projects of modernity,” their agency cannot be accurately captured by either secular or religious normative lenses.

The adoption of the term “subjectivity” (rather than “identity”) emphasizes the coming into being of a new Islamist female subject that challenges the normative gender identity together with feminine traits of piety, modesty, and docility that Islamist movements traditionally attribute to women. Herein, these subjectivities are termed “feminist” with the caveat that “feminism” remains a contested term in the Arab world, often refused by Islamist women activists. Nonetheless, I contend that Islamist women’s refusal to adopt the term should be understood in light of their commitment to Islamist identity politics, rather than taken as a reference point to deny the feminist value of their goals. Islamist movements are anti-colonial/oppositional movements. Their politics and ideology are sustained by a process of “othering” whereby Islamic religion, culture, and identity are framed in contraposition and as superior to those of the West. Women, their image, qualities, and traits are a contested terrain on which Islamists enact their politics and processes of “othering.” Islamist women refuse the term “feminism” because they understand it to embody a specific Western historical process and a struggle between the sexes alien to Arab Muslim societies. However, as postcolonial scholars observed in the MENA (Holt and Jawad 2013, 154), the rejection of the term “feminist” does not preclude Islamist women from desiring greater equality, equal treatment, and opportunities within their own movements, societies, and families, nor does it prevent them from engaging in feminist practice. Islamist women’s actions illustrated herein speak to women’s efforts to gain greater equality and autonomy for women within their own movement, society, and families. As scholars, we may choose to abide to Islamist women’s standpoint and also refuse to term their actions as “feminist”, or adopt the term while acknowledging that most (but not all) Islamist women refuse to do so. I choose to adopt the term “feminism” to describe Islamist women’s practices to emphasize similarities in women’s struggles despite differences in geographical origins, religion, race and class, and to include Islamist women in the broader feminist debate, rather than cast them aside as alien to feminist struggles. Differences exist between Islamist women’s feminist worldviews and positions, and this move represents an effort to acknowledge them. The article adopts a definition of feminism broad enough to capture feminist practice as it emerges in particular historical contexts and in response to specific power dynamics and patriarchal designs. I draw here on Margot Badran, who defined feminism as

broadly construed to include an understanding that women have suffered forms of subordination or oppression because of their sex, and an advocacy of ways to overcome them to achieve better lives for women, and for men, within the family and society. (Badran 1991, 202)

I collected data, including participant observation of Muslim Sisterhood activities and semi-structured interviews with 35 women activists, during five research visits to Cairo between 2013 and 2018. I grew particularly close to a number of these women over the years and interviewed them multiple times to identify salient gender issues as the political situation in Egypt changed and they entered new phases of activism. All were members of the Egyptian MB movement, having either been born into MB families or joined the movement prior to the interview. All were politicized by the uprising, played a role in it, took part in the elections that brought the MB into power, and mobilized in resistance following the MB's ousting from government in 2013.

Despite these points of commonality, the women varied considerably in terms of the role and position they held in the MB, their area of activism, geographical origins, and age. Among those interviewed were women who occupied senior leadership posts in the MB, middle-rank cadres active in the movement's *da'wa* (religious) circles, and women who had held a post in the MB-led Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees held no particular leadership post in the MB but remained active in its affiliated social and religious circles by playing a variety of auxiliary roles. Interviewing women who held no particular leadership role rendered visible the grievances that the Sisters held toward the MB due to their perceived marginalization. During my last research visit in 2018, although most women were still MB affiliates, some questioned their commitment to the organization, while others were uncertain of whether the MB still considered them members given their outspoken criticism. A minority had been expelled or had willingly left the MB. All of the interviews took place in Cairo, but some of the women came from the Delta and Sohag governorates. The women ranged in age from 19 to 60 years old; the large majority were in their twenties and thirties. Since a majority of the women interviewed were young Muslim Sisters, progressive gender views emerged as prominent. At the same time, age was not a universal predictor of women's feminist positions. Conservative and progressive views exist across the Muslim Sisterhood's generational spectrum, and women often held contradictory

views on women's roles and gender issues. These contradictions confirm that Islamist women's feminist subjectivities are multiple and diverse and follow no particular geography (Hafez 2011). As the largest of the MB sub-groups, young members (Martini, Kaye, and York 2012) are likely to serve as MB leadership in the future; thus, the women's worldviews explained below represent those of a small but significant cohort of Sisterhood activists.

In terms of limitations, when fieldwork for this research began in July 2013, senior MB political figures had been arrested, fled the country, or were living in hiding. Consequently, I could not interview any of the seven Sisterhood members who served in parliament under the MB government. Nonetheless, the study recounts the experiences and positions of that majority of Sisters who were active in the informal MB circles. Although I interacted with and interviewed women of diverse political and ideological inclinations in Egypt, this article focuses on the Sisterhood and their relationship with the MB movement. All of the names of participants used herein are pseudonyms.

### **Challenging the “Not Now, Later” after the uprisings (2012-2013)**

Having spent most of its existence as an outlawed movement, the MB emerged from the 2010–2011 uprising as the dominant political force in Egypt. In 2012, the MB-led FJP secured a parliamentary majority, and its candidate Mohammad Morsi was elected president. Women contributed to the MB's electoral victories, and the movement reciprocated by granting them greater political participation. Sisterhood members became FJP co-founders and acquired leadership posts in the FJP's Women's Sections and Media and Foreign Relations Committees. Seven women obtained office in parliament, and two entered Morsi's cabinet, helping to draft the 2012 Egyptian constitution. Above all, during this brief period of political opportunity the Sisters could practice their activism freely in Egyptian society and experienced an unprecedented sense of personal freedom.

Once in power, however, the MB adopted a gradual approach to reform, consequently downplaying Egyptian revolutionaries' demands for radical change. MB conservatives maintained full control of the organization, and, by extension, the FJP, and resisted members' calls for internal democratic change. The MB's progressive and youth members criticized



these actions, and many of them left the organization in protest. Women also voiced grievances, some of which had a specific gender dimension, toward the movement. The majority of the Sisters interviewed complained that women lacked representation and decision-making power within the MB organization, and they demanded the right to participate in internal elections. They criticized the MB for selecting women for leadership positions based on their demonstrated loyalty to the movement rather than their professional qualifications, and for marginalizing younger women in favor of those who had already fulfilled family responsibilities. Some Sisters demanded that there be a woman (rather than a man) at the head of the Sisterhood division. Several also criticized what they believed to be the MB's excessive emphasis on women's feminine qualities such as piety and modesty. Chiefly, the Sisters demanded greater autonomy, decision-making powers, and equal opportunities for themselves within the MB.

Amid mounting pressures, the movement adopted a number of initiatives to make the organization more inclusive to its young members (Martini, Kaye, and York 2012, 45–49). A new internal by-law, adopted in 2011 and implemented in 2012, became crucial for the Sisters to advance change within their women-only spaces. The Sisterhood exists as a separate section of the MB movement and is therefore excluded from the MB organizational structure. Nevertheless, like the Brothers, the Sisters meet at the local level in MB families (*usra*, pl. *usar*), the smallest organizational unit of the movement. Families consist of five to eight members and a coordinator tasked with their cultural, religious, and ideological development. Until 2011, the MB directly appointed the women coordinators; to promote security, they appointed to the post the wives of MB male leaders, so that women could maintain contact with the organization without having to leave the home and expose themselves to the regime. This policy also allowed the MB to appoint women whom it considered trustworthy and who would promote its interests. The new by-law changed this system entirely. First, it granted the Sisters the right to hold internal elections and designate their own *usra* coordinators. Second, it allowed the Sisters to group into districts (*hayi*), the upper-level organizational unit comprised of the MB families active in a given neighborhood, and to elect the district coordinators as well.<sup>1</sup> Albeit small, these changes significantly impacted the Sisterhood's division because they provided women with the opportunity to elect those members who they believed could promote their interests. Indeed, by 2012 the Sisterhood's leadership structure had undergone full rejuvenation, as youth members voted to elect younger and more progressive women cadres.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the internal elections also made

the new cadres accountable to their base for their re-election, meaning that women leaders felt greater pressure to listen to their constituents.<sup>3</sup>

During the summer of 2014, I had the opportunity to closely observe one *usra* of Muslim Sisterhood university students in Cairo over a number of weeks. Its members explained that after legalization, the MB abandoned secrecy to adopt a more open approach to Egyptian society and invited its base to do the same.<sup>4</sup> Despite being a highly hierarchical organization, the Sisters emphasized that each *usra* enjoyed some flexibility in how to apply MB directives at the discretion of the *usra* coordinator.<sup>5</sup> Supported by the newly elected coordinators, the *usra* I observed took advantage of the 2011 by-law and of the MB's call to advance initiatives to expand women's activities in the MB and to grant women greater freedom to express *their own* identity.

One of these initiatives focused on gaining access for women to participate in MB camps. Nour, a Sister in her fifties and the coordinator of the *usra* I observed, explained that the MB organized camps to "train men to resist repression and life in prison," but that "women were not allowed to hold camps."<sup>6</sup> The MB attributes women a primary role within the family, and the militant purpose of the camps contradicted its traditional gender division of labor. Nonetheless, Nour believed that women had a political role to play in the post-revolutionary transition and that camps provided an ideal setting to foster the young Sisters' sense of social and political responsibility. She also believed that camps were ideal venues to prepare women for protest activities. As she explained, the uprising had been marked by violence, and women needed to familiarize themselves with the sight of blood to carry their mission forward. As such, Nour wished to use camps to "teach [women] how to kill chickens the *halal*<sup>7</sup> way ... so that when [women] go out in a protest and see someone killed in front of them, they [are] not afraid because they are used to see[ing] blood."<sup>8</sup> Nour's *usra* was the first in Cairo to introduce camps for women. Because of her demonstrated leadership, the young Sisters elected Nour as district coordinator a few months later.<sup>9</sup>

Under Nour's leadership, the same *usra* loosened the strict dress code that the MB demanded of women. The Sisters adopt a modest dress style, which they believe to be both an Islamic requirement and an expression of one's own religiosity. To this, women add conservative social manners, including gender segregation practices aimed at cultivating modesty. While

most Sisters adopt a modest dress code of their own volition, several of those interviewed admitted that the MB exercised significant pressure on women to conform to modest standards of dress code and behavior.

The Sisters who voiced this opinion articulated diverse reasons as to why women should be allowed to adopt a dress style of their choosing. Some believed that the dress code had become a well-known mark of MB identity, making women easily identifiable and subjected to harassment.<sup>10</sup> Others admitted that the MB's strict emphasis on women's dress code and modesty discouraged potential members from joining the movement, making recruitment difficult and preventing the Sisters from integrating in Egyptian society. Significantly, a number of Sisters also maintained that the MB's emphasis on women's feminine qualities such as piety and modesty contradicted their right to personal freedom. Notably, they claimed that the revolution epitomized Egyptians' call for self-determination, and criticized the MB for failing to honor such principles. As one of them stated:

[The Revolution] was a call for freedom, not only for political democracy understood as electoral democracy ... but a call for freedom, in all its forms. Freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of religious practice, freedom in diverse social practices ... [the MB] didn't have a clear vision of freedom ... because later on, when we changed the outfit they had agreed upon, which is part of personal freedom, the rule number one of freedom, to express freedom, to be free to dress the way you want, this was not accepted inside the movement.<sup>11</sup>

With Nour's support, her *usra* gradually relaxed the rules concerning the Sisterhood's dress code. This included women in *niqab*, *khimar*, and *hijab*, and it also included unveiled women. Safiya, the Sister who promoted the initiative, explained that this change was meant to open the movement to women's diverse identities and personalities. In her words, "the aim [was] not to change the dress code from *abaya*<sup>12</sup> to pants, 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."<sup>13</sup>

The initiatives promoted by this *usra* testify to the Sisterhood's willingness to amend the rigid MB-imposed schemes for women and to their desire for equal opportunities and freedom to express their personalities. Although women might have held such desires even

prior to the revolution, the uprising encouraged them to raise the ceiling of their demands and provided them opportunities to implement change.

### **Remaining true to the revolution (2013-2014)**

The MB's ousting from government on July 3, 2013 led to a new wave of repression of Islamists lasting to this day. As in the past (Karam 1998), the role of women was central to the Islamists' resistance; it was not limited to background support but included the Sisterhood's direct participation in street protests. On July 14, 2013, women established the first Sisterhood-led women-only movement from the heart of the Islamist-led Rabaa al-Adaweya sit-in. Women Against the Coup (Nisaa' did al-Inqilab – WAC) emerged as an independent initiative of both junior and senior Sisters who wished to continue playing a leading role in Egypt's post-revolutionary transition. As Nour, by then also a founder and spokeswoman of WAC, stated, "women voted and they want[ed] their votes"<sup>14</sup> to be respected. WAC demanded Morsi's reinstatement to the presidency and the non-interference of the military in Egyptian politics as preconditions for Islamist demobilization and democratic rule. Within a few weeks of its establishment, WAC emerged as a leading force of Islamists' mobilization and resistance, along with other youth movements.

Initially, the MB opposed women's participation in protest activities; they considered it too risky and at odds with their traditional role. However, it conceded to the Sisterhood's desires, hoping that women's involvement could attract greater international attention to their cause and put pressure on the military to release Morsi and the MB leadership. Indeed, in the second half of 2013, the MB supported the establishment of independent anti-coup movements and the additional Sisterhood-led protest groups that emerged (Biagini 2017, 47). However, the new military regime proved far more repressive than the MB anticipated. By early 2014, scores of MB members and supporters had been arrested and killed, including hundreds of women (WAC 2014), which prompted the MB to consider new strategies for restricting the damage caused by repression and find a way out of the crisis. Nonetheless, any common strategy required the MB to regain control of its members, many of whom by that point had established autonomous leadership structures and political agendas (Fahmi 2015).

The MB relied on the Revolutionary Coalition of Egyptian Women (RCEW) to regain control of the Sisterhood. The MB promoted the RCEW as an independent and non-partisan women-led alliance aimed at coordinating the activities of existing anti-coup women's movements. In truth, the RCEW was an MB-led coalition comprised of Sisters loyal to the movement and appointed by the MB because of the influence they exerted on youth members. By then, WAC was the largest and best-organized Islamist women's movement, and therefore the first group that the MB sought to bring back under its control. Ahead of the RCEW's establishment, the MB co-opted a number of WAC senior and youth leaders into the RCEW. It then availed of their support to win an alliance with WAC by offering institutional and material backing in exchange for support. By 2014, regime repression had significantly weakened WAC's ability to mobilize women in protest activities. As remarked by Lamia, one of its youth leaders:

[V]iolence allowed us to grow as a movement. The more the regime abused women ... the more women joined our protests. But violence didn't stop... mistreating ... [and] killing women became normal ... and [violence] was no longer enough to mobilize.<sup>15</sup>

Safeguarding women during protests had become a priority, and WAC entered the RCEW hoping that the MB could provide protection.

Soon, however, the MB reneged on its promises and stopped supporting WAC in protest activities. In fact, it worked to boycott the movement and ordered Sisterhood members of WAC not to join demonstrations. As Lamia stated, each time WAC "organize[d] a protest, everything [was] set and announced ... they [MB] call[ed] the protest off... order[ed] [MB] women not to go and ... we [WAC] would find ourselves alone in the streets."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Sisters in the RCEW began to undermine the WAC leaders' authority by assigning leadership roles in WAC to Sisterhood members loyal to the MB. They also gave the RCEW the power to oversee WAC's statements, depriving WAC of its independent political voice and agenda. Young WAC leaders' suspicions of an MB takeover were confirmed on the day of the RCEW's first general conference, on June 7, 2014, when only MB-affiliated movements attended the meeting and non-MB women's movements were not invited. Notably, the Mas'uul al-Akhawat (the male MB senior leader responsible for overseeing the Sisterhood division and their activities) sat at the table of the RCEW's leadership. During the

meeting, the MB appointed “senior Sisters [it trusted] as leaders of pre-existing women’s movements.”<sup>17</sup>

The MB began recalling its members from the streets, hoping to begin a new course of negotiations with the military. As part of the negotiations, the MB contemplated giving up its call for Morsi’s reinstatement to the presidency, a demand that the MB youth were not yet ready to relinquish.<sup>18</sup> The MB youth perceived the MB’s willingness to negotiate with the military to be a sign of weakness. They also believed that entering negotiations with the military would have legitimized the latter’s intervention against the elected MB government, rendering worthless the sacrifices of the MB youth and all Egyptian revolutionaries. A majority of MB youth were determined to bring the revolutionary struggle forward, and preserving their independence from the MB became necessary for them to do so.

To that end, young WAC leaders gathered their followers and established two sub-movements separate from WAC: Bint al-Thawra (Revolutionary Girl) and Ultras Banat (Ultras Girls) were formed as fully fledged women-only protest divisions. Both engaged the frontline of the revolutionary struggle side-by-side with male MB-youth movements; they led the chants and provided first aid. The two women-only groups were inspired by the Egyptian Ultras, who had gained a distinct reputation as leading actors in the revolutionary resistance since the 2012 Port Said riots (Hamzeh and Sykes 2014). Like the Ultras, the women used drums, loudspeakers, and smoke bombs to distinguish themselves from male members and make their voices heard in the crowd.<sup>19</sup> When protests turned violent, the women did not hold back from the struggle but joined the clashes against security forces, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. Additionally, women led *farasha* (butterfly) protests. These were short theatrical performances, lasting between two and five minutes, staged over one single day in diverse locations of Cairo. They were brief and scattered across the city to maximize impact and to minimize the likelihood that protestors would be arrested by security forces.<sup>20</sup>

Inevitably and with time, more and more Sisters fell victim to regime violence, independently of their involvement in protest activities. Women protestors suffered regime abuses in the streets and in prison. Those who did not mobilize suffered similar abuses in their own houses following incursions by state security. Many were subjected to enforced disappearances.<sup>21</sup> By the end of 2014, there was hardly a single MB family that had not lost a member and that

could sit together for a meal. While those Sisters who had joined the revolutionary struggle since the eve of the uprising, particularly youth members, had grown familiar with the brutality of the state, the overwhelming majority of those who suffered the repressive hand of the regime since 2013 had not. Women's honor had always been a major concern of the MB, and the movement had avoided involving women in activities for which it expected regime reprisal or which it believed would compromise their modesty.

In 2014, the Egyptian regime began using sexual and gender-based violence against women to demobilize Islamists. As one Sister put it, rape became “the salt and pepper” of prison interrogations.<sup>22</sup> Ultras Banat and Bint al-Thawra activists were at the frontline of the protests and, as such, they became aware of the gravity of the situation before any others. This prompted the activists to reach out to the MB for support. Women asked the MB to use its network to increase women's awareness about the extent of the regime's brutality and to provide them with self-defense training. The MB refused, believing that discussing such issues would have spread fear among its members and deflated mobilization. In addition, the MB asked the women activists to keep silent about cases of sexual violence against MB women to protect their honor and that of their families.<sup>23</sup> In the activists' view, the MB gave more importance to issues of family honor than to women's well-being. It welcomed women's support but refused to prepare women for protest activities. More importantly, it was neither able to protect women nor willing to accord women their same worth if they were sexually abused. As Lamia lamented, the MB “[w]anted women to take part in protests, but its mentality did not allow accepting those women after, if they were raped. Those women would still be judged, considered of less value and ... given up by their families as second wives.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, in the activists' opinion, the MB adopted a utilitarian approach to women, which led to a growth in women's grievances toward the movement.

Women took the situation into their own hands. Ultras Banat and Bint al-Tawra activists organized self-defense training for women, and, in full disregard of MB orders, used MB platforms to raise awareness about the regime's abuse of female protestors, also disclosing information on cases of sexual violence.<sup>25</sup> A network of Sisterhood activists mobilized along with leftist NGOs, such as al-Nadeem and the Hesham Mubarak Law Center, to assist the victims of violence, launch wider awareness campaigns against human rights abuses, and obtain abortion pills for rape victims. They reached out to the victims and their families and

tried to convince women to get medical treatment, often only to be refused by the victims' families out of concern for the girls' honor.<sup>26</sup> Some victims died as a result.<sup>27</sup>

The MB resorted to traditional patriarchal tools of control to silence and discipline the women activists who defied its orders. It first criticized their behavior as unfeminine and then boycotted and marginalized the women, expelling them from the MB movement.<sup>28</sup> By then, however, women no longer made a distinction between the abuses of the authoritarian state and those of the MB, perceiving both as instruments of women's oppression. The MB's attempts to discipline women only increased their resolve. As one Ultras Banat member put it, freedom for the MB had meant "freedom of political participation ... [F]reedom for me is to be able to act the way I believe is right."<sup>29</sup> In defiance of the MB structure of which they were a part, the Sisters continued to spread awareness of regime violence against women on media platforms and social networks. In doing so, they intentionally challenged preconceived notions of Arab women as docile and submissive subjects and elevated Sisterhood revolutionaries as symbols of the Islamists' resistance. As O'Keefe (2017, 171) observed in the case of the Irish Republican Movement, women activists' exposure to state violence nurtured their gendered consciousness, and, in turn, their ability to read their experiences through gender lenses "helped to foster a deeper, feminist political awareness" among the women.

### **When the political becomes personal: Islamist women in times of demobilization (2015-2018)**

The repression of Islamists in Egypt severely damaged the MB organization, leading the post-2015 movement to adopt a path of self-restraint in the hopes of maintaining cohesion and rebuilding its organization. Under such circumstances, the MB believed that women could best support the movement by returning to their traditional role within the family, promoting *da'wa* and providing moral and material support to the families of the martyrs, the prisoners and their children. Several Sisters agreed that their role in the family was crucial for rebuilding a strong movement and willingly devoted their efforts to this sphere.<sup>30</sup> For most Sisters, disengagement from street protests was not a choice but a decision that they were compelled to take following the arrest or death of their husbands, after which they became the main breadwinners in their own families.<sup>31</sup> However, it was during this period of



demobilization that many women activists began connecting the gendered abuses that they experienced at the hands of the Egyptian regime and the MB with those to which they were subjected within their own families. As one Sister explained:

At the time of the revolution, I was not fighting to achieve personal freedom as a woman in the movement, but I was looking to achieve freedom for my country, for the people, all. As I demanded freedom for my society and for the MB to participate in it, I should also demand the freedom of women and my own freedom. To be truly free in a society you need to be free as an individual. How can I demand freedom for my society when I lack the freedom to speak out my opinion in my own house? How can I be free when you [the MB] demand that I obey my husband no matter what? How can I demand the freedom of everyone in my country when I lack the freedom to criticize the decisions of my own leaders?<sup>32</sup>

Repression led to a halt in MB activities, but women continued gathering within their neighborhoods. In a context of repression, women's gatherings became even more important than when they met as part of the MB political project. These gatherings became support groups that women accessed for material and moral sustenance and to find a sense of solidarity in hardship. This was particularly true for those women whose husbands had been arrested or died at the regime's hands and who found themselves alone as they coped with the difficulties of daily life. The Sisters organized within such groups to prepare meals, to look after the children of those women who had to work, and to provide financial support to those in need, when possible. In addition to helping women cope with material needs, women's gatherings became safe venues for women to share their frustration with their personal and marital lives, often due to their husbands' absence or return from jail. As such, women's gatherings turned into hubs for feminist thinking and resistance, where women reflected more deeply on how they were deprived of autonomy, rights and dignity – just for being women.

For instance, divorce – considered demeaning for women by Egyptian society at large as well as within the MB – was a central topic of conversation among the wives of MB prisoners attending the meetings. Some of the Sisters argued that divorce was not the appropriate measure to take to alleviate their personal situation, believing that it compromised their integrity, morality, and social status, but others maintained that divorce was legitimate in

their circumstances. Often, women maintaining this position understood divorce as a temporary measure to qualify for government benefits, and several divorced in mutual agreement with their husbands on this basis.<sup>33</sup> However, some claimed their right to divorce based on what they believed was a woman's equal right to be sexually and emotionally fulfilled. For instance, Nenet, a young woman in her thirties whose husband had been in jail for more than three years pending trial at the time of interview, stated:

In Sharia I have the right to divorce my husband if he is away for more than four months. ... After that [time], I am left sexually vulnerable. But if I divorce, society will look down at me as if I am an immoral wife who has abandoned her husband in a time of need. Standing by my husband's side in these circumstances should be my personal choice only, not anybody else's. ... He [her husband] doesn't even discuss the issue [of divorce during prison visits] because, if he did, he would [have to] recognize my right as a wife to be emotionally and sexually fulfilled, and then, it would become completely moral for me to divorce him. In a reversed situation, he would have already remarried with the support of society, his family, and community.<sup>34</sup>

In her words, Nenet challenged the obligations that both Egyptian society and the MB assigned women based on gender. In particular, she criticized the fact that the movement attributed to women the moral obligation to stand beside their husbands in times of adversity, while casting doubts on women's moral standards if they refused to do so. By criticizing normative gender roles based on her right to sexual fulfillment, she undermined notions of femininity, piety, and modesty as endorsed by the MB. While the MB acknowledged men's desires for sexual pleasure and their right to fulfil these, women were required to conceal their sexual desires to avoid being stigmatized as immodest, untrustworthy and, possibly, unfaithful. However, in Nenet's view, refusing to acknowledge women's right to sexuality was a heritage of tradition, a way to control women and their bodies. As she stated, in Sharia, wives have the right to be sexually fulfilled and therefore also the right to divorce their husbands if not. If her husband complied with Islamic religion, he would have recognized her right to be sexually fulfilled and offered her a divorce, freeing her from the humiliation and stigma associated with women who express such desires.

Women's right to work and the related implications for women's traditional role within the family, alongside women's right to self-determination, were other prominent topics of conversation among the Sisters. In their husbands' absence, many took up paid work outside the house to make ends meet. While working outside the family in addition to looking after their homes and children placed extra burdens on women, the Sisters acknowledged the sense of empowerment that came with autonomy and economic independence. Often, women's newfound sense of empowerment and their fears of losing it surfaced in conversations, as they expressed concerns about their ability to compromise with their husbands upon release from jail, since they had become accustomed to doing things on their own.<sup>35</sup>

Many women whose husbands had already been released from jail complained of being pressured to abandon work, newfound careers, and aspirations. They lamented the loss of freedom that they experienced as their husbands sought to re-establish their position of authority within the family and their traditional role as protector of and provider for women.<sup>36</sup> Often, women who refused to give up their jobs faced endless arguments with their husbands, who sought to undermine their wives' autonomy by demanding monetary compensation in return for spending time away from home or by placing unrealistic expectations on them that made it harder for their wives to manage both family and work commitments.<sup>37</sup> Often, women remarked that men underestimated how women with material means could "buy themselves off" the marriage.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, some women divorced their husbands when the husbands placed too many constraints on their personal ambitions and activism.<sup>39</sup>

After the uprising, and even more so after the repression of Islamists, the Sisters who refused to comply with the MB's traditional patriarchal structures and who chose to fight for their self-determination were discredited for promoting "faulty ideas,"<sup>40</sup> for being "masculine,"<sup>41</sup> and for "wanting to play the man's role."<sup>42</sup> This is not surprising, since many women who struggle for their rights and self-determination in the Middle East and North Africa are often discredited for promoting feminist ideas believed to be inauthentic to the region (Pratt 2013). Similarly, their husbands accused these Sisters of "being a feminist" as a way to silence them and their demands.<sup>43</sup> Such remarks compelled the Sisters to reflect more deeply on where they stood on feminism, whether feminism was something they needed, and whether it was compatible with their religion and culture. Several Sisters continued to believe that feminism was a concept alien to Arab Muslim societies because it epitomized a conflict between the sexes while Islam envisioned cooperation and mutual understanding. Nevertheless, many

Sisters claimed that the MB's approach to women rested on outdated traditions that needed changing in order to grant women greater equality and opportunities.<sup>44</sup> Notably, some Sisters saw no contradiction between feminism and Islam; rather, they wished for women to engage more powerfully in society to bring justice to their gender and to challenge what they believed to be privileges that men exclusively gave themselves in the name of religion. As Lamia stated:

Feminism is not in contradiction with Islam. ... I believe that Islamic laws have been made by men who interpreted Islamic texts from their own perspective, and have been inconsidered of women's needs and rights. ... Feminism, which is nothing more than women thinking about their rights and acting to obtain these, scares men because they fear that it will deprive them of their privileges. And this is important to understand. These are men's privileges, not rights.<sup>45</sup>

Islamist women's failure to address gender inequality within the traditional patriarchal family has frequently been flagged as the main limitation of their gender politics (Karam 1998; Shitrit 2016). However, Islamist women's politicization since the uprising has prompted them to reflect more forcefully on how being women deprives them of autonomy, rights, and dignity. Women have adopted a new gender politics, part of which has feminist overtones. These overtones have become evident in the present time of Islamist demobilization, as women begin to challenge men's privilege and position of authority within the sphere of the family, thereby generating new possibilities for Islamist feminist politics.

## **Conclusions**

This article has highlighted the coming into being of a young generation of Islamist women activists and how these women have reacted to the patriarchal tendencies of the MB movement since the 2011 Egyptian uprising and its aftermath. I have demonstrated that women's participation in the revolutionary struggle and the subsequent repression of Islamists fostered the development of a gendered awareness that has resulted in these women's adoption of a new gender politics. Although most Islamist women do not define themselves or their commitments as feminist, this gender politics has explicit feminist

overtones in the sense that it reflects Islamist women's adoption of feminist practice. These overtones have become evident in the current period of Islamist demobilization, as women have started to challenge men's authority and position of privilege within the sphere of the family. The long-term effect of this new gender politics will be significantly impacted by whether the MB will manage to exit the current state of repression and under which conditions. Nevertheless, the main contribution of the article is demonstrating that feminist subjectivities and politics are born out of revolutionary struggles, and that patriarchal Islamist movements are no exception to this trend. An equally important contribution is in showing the existence of diverse feminist positions among Islamist women, which I hope will prompt novel and challenging discussions about feminist politics and gendered change in Islamist movements.

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## **NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR**

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<sup>1</sup> Nour, interview, 2014. For the MB organizational structure, see Mitchell (1993 [1969]).

<sup>2</sup> This point was reiterated by several Muslim Sisters interviewed in 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Esmā, interview, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Eman, interview, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to the practice of killing animals by cutting their throat.

<sup>8</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Safiya, interview, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Leen, interview, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> A traditional female Muslim dress, consisting of a long loose tunic.

<sup>13</sup> Safiya, interview, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Lamia, interview, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Lamia, interview, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Lamia, interview, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Leen, interview, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Nour and Feyrouz, interviews, 2014; Lamia, interviews, 2014 and 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Feyrouz, interview, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Lamia, interview, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Lamia, interview, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Lamia, interview, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Feyrouz, interview, 2014; Nour, interview, 2017; Lamia, interview, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Lamia, interview, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Leen, interview, 2018.

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- <sup>30</sup> Nour, interview, 2017.
- <sup>31</sup> Dalilah, interview, 2017.
- <sup>32</sup> Reham, interview, 2018.
- <sup>33</sup> Nour and Lamia, interviews, 2018.
- <sup>34</sup> Nenet, interview, 2018.
- <sup>35</sup> Menna, interview, 2018.
- <sup>36</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.
- <sup>37</sup> Reham and Lamia, interviews, 2018.
- <sup>38</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.
- <sup>39</sup> Reham, interview, 2018.
- <sup>40</sup> Leen, interview, 2018.
- <sup>41</sup> Reham, interview, 2018.
- <sup>42</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.
- <sup>43</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.
- <sup>44</sup> Hessa, interview, 2018.
- <sup>45</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.

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