

The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood between violence, activism and leadership

By Erika Biagini

To cite this article:

Erika Biagini (2017) The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood between Violence, Activism and Leadership, *Mediterranean Politics*, 22:1, 35-53, DOI: [10.1080/13629395.2016.1230943](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2016.1230943)

Abstract

On 25 January 2015, the fourth anniversary of the uprising that toppled Hosny Mubarak and brought the Muslim Brotherhood into power, Egyptian security forces arrested Aya Alaa Hosny in front of the Journalists Union in central Cairo. Aya is one of the spokeswomen and leader of the Women against the Coup (WAC), one of the most active women-only movements established by the Muslim Sisterhood following the Egyptian coup d'état in 2013. Since then, thousands of Islamist women and sympathisers have joined the Sisters in street demonstrations, human rights advocacy, and anti-regime protests, notwithstanding the high risk associated with political activism in a context of retrenched authoritarianism. This article offers a gendered analysis of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood by examining the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood, its female wing, post July 2013. Contrary to mainstream academic literature on Islamist women's activism, which considers Islamist movements' conservative gender ideology and sexual division of labour as an impediment to female political leadership, this study argues that Islamist informal networks can be conducive to female leadership under 'negative' political circumstances. As the case of the Muslim Sisterhood demonstrates, the repression of Islamists following the coup favoured the emergence of women's leadership, firstly within women-only movements and subsequently, as the very survival of the MB became increasingly compromised, in the MB movement as a whole.

Keywords: Muslim Sisterhood; Egypt; women's activism, female leadership

Introduction

As of late 2016, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) remains victim to one of the harshest crackdowns in its history. Since the staging of the military coup on 3 July 2013 thousands of MB members have been imprisoned (Stork 2015), hundreds of its leaders, including former MB President Mohammad Morsi, are currently facing the death penalty, while thousands of others have lost their lives.¹ The new law on terrorism General and current President al-Sisi passed on 16 August 2015² signals the intensification of the repression of the group, which has been on-going since the MB was re-designated as a terrorist organization in December 2013. Several commentators argue that the crackdown has severely compromised both the survival of the MB and its relationship with its support base (Mandour 2015) which, in turn, remains divided over what the best course of action for the movement should be (al-Anani 2014). This has pushed the leaders to “become more deferential to younger members, who are now driving the organization to an extent not seen before” (Brown and Dunne 2015:1). This newly emerged leadership includes members of the Muslim Sisterhood,³ the female wing of the MB movement.

Since 2013, the Sisters have been moving to the forefront of the movement in the attempt to rescue its members from regime repression while guaranteeing the survival of the MB. As violence has increased and more members have been jailed or killed, the Sisters have progressively replaced men in their positions in the organisation, thus emerging as leaders themselves in the struggle between the MB and the military government. They stand at the centre of these networks, guaranteeing the daily functioning and mobilization of the movement. They lead street demonstrations, are prominent members of anti-regime national alliances, have established ad-hoc committees of lawyers for human rights advocacy and for assisting prisoners, and coordinate the distribution of financial resources in support of the families and victims of regime violence. They have also established their own women-only movements through which they coordinate women and youth groups for sustained mobilization on the ground. The Sisters today are at the heart of the MB’s resistance against the authoritarian military regime in Egypt.

Women’s activism and leadership remain, however, hotly debated issues within Islamist movements as well as in academia. Islamists support a conservative gender ideology which places considerable emphasis on women’s traditional roles such as those of biological and cultural reproducers of the nation (Kandiyoti 1991; Yuval-Davis 1997; Karam 1998). From within this framework, women’s primary roles and responsibilities are understood to be

towards their families and communities and not in political affairs. Despite constituting a crucial asset for the growth and sustenance of the female social, charity and religious associations of the movement, women have been in fact systematically excluded from the highest political offices of MB organizations, with these positions considered a prerogative of male members. This overall situation has led a majority of scholars to consider women in Islamist movements primarily as objects of male activism rather than active political agents in their own right (Philbrick-Yadav 2010: 1-2).

Taking the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood's activism post-2013 as a case study, this article contributes to the understanding of how women mobilize to seize 'windows of opportunities' (Clark and Schwedler 2003) for increased activism and leadership in Islamist movements. The study borrows from the literature on gender and social movements and contends that negative Political Opportunity Structures (POS) are more likely to provide women activists in Islamist political movements with opportunities for increasing their activism, mobilization and leadership in meaningful political offices of the movement. Empirical research for this study was conducted in Egypt between 2013 and 2014 and consists of interviews with Muslim Sisterhood activists and leaders as well as participant observation of activities and meetings of the Muslim Sisterhood in Cairo.⁴

The article will first discuss the role of informal Islamist networks as sites for female leadership and that of negative POS in creating opportunities for women to expand their activism and leadership into male-dominated areas. The article then provides a brief overview of how Muslim Sisterhood activism adapted to changing POS in the years before 2013. In the final section, fieldwork data dealing in detail with Muslim Sisterhood activism and mobilization post-2013 is examined, elucidating how the Sisterhood have emerged as leaders of their own women-only movements first and subsequently, with the intensification of repression of the MB, of the Muslim Brotherhood movement as well.

Conceptualizing Islamist informal networks as spaces for female activism, mobilization and leadership

It seems that our ability to recognize women as leaders in Islamist movements is hindered not by the absence of female leadership but by that which comes to be understood as constituting leadership within those movements. Lack of female leadership is often associated with the absence of women from those political offices that are subjected to greater public scrutiny.

Yet, most of what constitute Islamist activism is exercised in less official spaces, and women are important actors within them. In order to appreciate the leadership contributions of Islamist women, greater attention should therefore be given to the context in which the activism of Islamist movements is carried out and to the functions that Islamist women's activism fulfils in respect to the overall capacity of the movement to operate.

According to Social Movement Theory (SMT), authoritarianism and the persistence of tribal loyalties are the two factors that most influence the behaviour of Islamist movements when compared to socio-political movements in western liberal contexts (Wiktorowicz 2004; Diani 2008, Durac 2015). Beyond the Orientalist biases that characterise elements of the theory, there are two important considerations that follow from SMT. The first is the reliance of Islamist movements on personal politics for the recruitment of members and the second is the extensive use of informal networks for the acquisition of necessary resources for mobilization such as money, personnel and supporters (Wiktorowicz 2004; Clark 2004a and 2004b; Diani 2008). It follows that Islamist movements depend extensively on mosques, charity circles, religious classes, private schools and clubs, student unions and professional associations as main sites for their activism. It is crucial here to note that these spaces are difficult for governments to control and furthermore provide Islamist movements with pre-existing institutional networks that can be employed as a substitute for Islamist movement organizations (IMOs) (Kurzman 1994; Wickham 2004; Clark 2004b).

Both authoritarianism and Islamists' reliance on informal networks have obvious consequences for how leadership comes to be exercised in these sites, which is also likely to remain informal. The constant threat of repression makes in fact visibility largely unwanted because this can compromise members' activities, and therefore, movement's objectives. Maintaining informality, on the other hand, is more than often employed precisely as a strategy to safeguard the leadership structure in place (Interview, Hefny 2014a). When observed closely, Islamist movements resemble in fact 'large, amorphous networks' that 'do not operate in hierarchical fashion with an identifiable leadership, system of order, or "direction." Rather [they] comprise numerous organizations (each with its own agenda), networks of participants and informal institutions' (Clark 2004b: 164). Finally, the constant threat of repression makes Islamist activist leadership transversal, again due to the fact that Islamist activism is exercised in every aspect of daily life and in continuous resistance to regime threats of repression and violence.

Such a 'large, amorphous network' relies extensively on the abilities of activists to forge, expand, bridge and mobilize resources for the movement's objectives (Della Porta and Diani

1999:127). Similar to activists in other movements, Islamists engage in processes of framing for this purpose. 'Framing' refers to the processes by which the leaders of a movement work to align the interpretative frameworks, beliefs, and personal goals of potential members with that of the movement for the purpose of recruiting new members who can be mobilized into collective action (Snow et. al 1986: 464 - 465). *Dawa* is central to the life of Islamist activists and contributes to the promotion of a new interpretation of faith as lived activism (Wickham 2004). *Dawa* is a process of framing.

Since the inception of Islamist movements, the main role of women has consistently been the transmission of Islamist values and ideology to their immediate communities, primarily to their families, other women, and the youth. Almost all studies currently available identify philanthropic associations, *dawa* circles, medical clinics, primary schools, universities and social clubs as major sites for Islamist women's activism (Mitchell 1993[1969]; Talhami 1996; Karam 1998; Clark 2004a and 2004b; Wickham 2004; Mahmoud 2005, Shitrit 2016). Women have therefore always been major contributors to the processes of framing, recruitment and mobilization. Clark's study of Islamist women's activism in Yemen points to this very fact. Clark observes how female *nadwas* (religious gatherings) function as broader sites for the recruitment and socialization of new members into Islamist movements, with female activists acting as intermediary leaders between potential members and IMOs (2004b: 171). Most importantly, Clark concludes, is that it is the informal context of *nadwas* which makes the most significant contribution to their success since informality renders a participant's association with the movement 'ambiguous' and therefore less risky (Ibid).

Women's main association with informal leadership positions remains also a major pattern across studies dealing with female leadership in those socio-political movements that do not necessarily support a conservative gender ideology (Robnett 1996; Payne 1990; Barnett 1993; Blee 1998). In her study of female activism in the Civil Rights Movement, for example, Robnett found that women constituted a large number of those informal leaders who sustained movement's mobilization in those local areas that the formal leadership was rather unwilling or unable to reach, a function that Robnett terms 'Bridge Leadership' (1996). Further studies testify to the central role of women in networks responsible for the organizing of strategic resources such as personnel, money, and information (Payne 1990; Barnett 1993). While gender identity therefore remain a major determinant of the roles and degree of power that women can aim to achieve in these movements, women are still likely to assume leadership positions albeit with little public exposure, and mainly within those informal environments that formal leadership structures cannot reach.

While the consideration of female activism in Islamist informal networks allows us to appreciate processes of female empowerment and leadership within what usually remain women-only domains (Philbrick-Yadav 2010; Jad 2011), broader changes in POS can better explain how women expand their sphere of influence into traditional male spaces.

Given women's increasing visibility in Islamist movements in the last two decades, political scientists have investigated at length what the likely contributory factors to women's inclusion in IMOs and political parties might be. The debate sees scholars divided into two main camps. On the one side are those who understand ideological moderation as a primary cause for female inclusion (el-Ghobashy 2005; Harnish and Mecham 2009). This approach has been criticized for fundamentally aiming to ascertain the democratic 'essence' of Islamists (Cavatorta 2007) in respect to their treatment of women. This is not only impossible to determine but also leads to sterile debates as different scholars continue to reach different conclusions (Ibid). Moreover, what appears to be ideological change can in reality be also a product of Islamists' strategic adaptation to the external environment (Schwedler 2006; Wickham 2013). As some scholars observe, Islamists' 'women's agenda' is in fact more than often re-framed to suit temporary needs rather than reformed to genuinely increase women's equality and power in Islamist movements (Cavdar 2011; Tadros 2013). On the other side, the argument is that the inclusion of women reflects Islamists' strategic choices, which are aimed at maximizing their interests and survival in the political system. Women are therefore more likely to be included to counter competition from leftist political parties (Talhami 1996; Jad 2011), to maximize Islamists' support in times of elections (Abdel-Latif and Ottaway 2007), or to guarantee Islamists' survival in times of repression (Talhami 1996; Bauer 2015). Such arguments are valid but also often lead to the denial of women's agency in the process of their inclusion. Among the few exceptions, there are scholars such as Clark and Schwedler, who argue that the increasing inclusion of women in IMOs can also be due to 'changes in political opportunity structures [...] unrelated to shifts in strategy and/or ideology [...] [that] consequently create space for increased activities that *women themselves seize*' (Clark and Schwedler 2003: 294 my emphasis). It follows that POS - that are those changes in the broader political context in which Islamist movements operate - can therefore create windows of opportunities for increased participation that women are able to seize because they already are influential activists within their own spaces (Philbrick-Yadav 2010; Jad 2011) and already possess a desire to increase their voice and activities in the movement (Abdellatif 2008: 18).

One should however recognize that while both positive and negative POS are likely to generate opportunities for women to increase their activism and leadership, negative POS seem more likely to allow women to expand their leadership roles in those IMO offices tasked with taking political decisions for the whole movement. Political parties are the interface of Islamist movements in the broader political system. Islamists may therefore feel more compelled to include women within its structure in order to enhance their democratic credibility. The same does not apply to IMOs offices dealing exclusively with the political affairs internal to the movement and its members. These remain less subjected to public scrutiny and pressure, thus favouring the resilience of a politics of obedience of its members towards the organization, its leadership and power structure as a consequence (Kandil 2015). This context makes it harder for women to challenge the existing gender order, particularly when this is sustained through the application of what are believed to be indisputable religious tenets. Including women to the Guidance Bureau, for example, would represent a breakthrough with those core ideological creeds informing Islamists' gender division of labour such as the principle of *Qawama* (stewardship), this sanctioning male guardianship (leadership) over women. The inclusion of women in party structures, on the other hand, can occur without necessarily leading to a real power-sharing on the part of male members with their female counterparts, the latter more than often assigned only marginal posts and roles within the party, and predominantly within women-only branches. This was the case in post-2011 uprising Egypt, when several influential Muslim Sisters took office in the MB-associated Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), but remained excluded from crucial offices within the MB such as the Guidance Bureau and the Shura Council, the MB's highest leadership bodies. This situation was reversed after the 2013 coup, when the repression of the MB compromised its survival, leading to an opening-up of opportunities for women to increase their leadership and influence in the movement as a whole, including the Guidance Bureau (Interview, Hefny 2014a).

In a manner similar to that occurring during revolutions and wars, when the gender order of society is temporary suspended (Kaufman and Williams 2010), threats to the MB's survival provoke a suspension of the gender structure normally in place in the Islamist movement (Shitrit 2016), thus allowing women to expand their influence and leadership in areas from which they had traditionally been excluded. What follows in this article provides a general overview of how changes in POS have affected the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood.

Muslim Sisterhood activism and leadership pre-2013

Father used to say that the woman is half of the society and she raises the other half. These days proved him right. If women 80 years ago weren't raised to be like that, they wouldn't have had the strength and confidence to stand up for themselves against society the way they are doing right now! A society that kills her son and her husband... and she is still standing, defending her freedom! This is not happening only because of today, but because for 80 years they have been taught to survive, and not in order to get a minister's chair, or for fame, but only for God's sake. (Interview, al-Banna 2014)

The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood was established by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Mirroring many other associations born in Egypt at that time, al-Banna sought to provide a culture-based nationalist model whose focal point for cultural, moral, political, and legal reform of society was 'firmly anchored in Islam' (Ghershoni and Jankowsky 1995:79). Al-Banna believed that reform should start with individuals' morals and values and only then progress onto the rest of society (Mitchell 1993). By virtue of their central role as educators and nurturers of the community, women had since the start a crucial role to play in the Brotherhood's reformist project. Already in 1932 al-Banna established the Institute of the Mothers of the Believers where the female family members of the Brothers were introduced to Islamist values and practices (Baron 2005: 209). This was done in order to provide the Sisterhood with all the necessary elements and skills to allow them to become primary educators of Islamist values for their families and societies.

The greatest contribution of the Muslim Sisterhood in this initial phase was to help the movement expand its female ranks by establishing and managing an extensive network of charity associations and medical clinics (Interview, al-Banna 2014). In 1937, al-Banna called upon Labibah Ahmad, an already-established activist in Islamic circles, to lead the first Sisterhood branches opened in Cairo (Baron 2005:209). Although the Brothers were to retain the final say on women's activities, the organizational structure in place in the female branches allowed the Sisters to grow throughout the years as influential female cadres within their own divisions. The Sisterhood operated a structure parallel to that of the Brotherhood and had their own Committee of General Guidance to supervise activities across the women's branches. This committee consisted of a female president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and twelve women elected by secret ballot, whose task was to advise the president on matters

related to charitable projects (Talhami 1996:48). By 1948, a year before al-Banna's assassination, the Sisterhood had expanded to include up to five thousands members (Baron 2005: 210).

From the 1950s onwards the Society fell under increasing state repression. During that time, the informal affiliation of the Sisterhood charity networks to the Society proved to be to the advantage of the movement. At that time, the Sisterhood operated as the Society of the Muslim Women (SMW) with Zeinab al-Ghazali as leader. Al-Ghazali had pledged alliance to al-Banna but maintained the two associations separate in order to safeguard her leadership (Talhami 1996:51). When, in 1948, the Monarchy dissolved al-Banna's Society and froze its assets, the SMW escaped the same fate. This provided the Sisterhood with a space to continue their activities and support the Islamist movement. This informal affiliation was to prove even more useful in the 1960s, when Nasser inflicted a further blow to the Brothers by jailing most of its members. Women then became the only point of contact between the male leaders in jail and the outer world. In fact, protracted repression allowed women to empower themselves not only as women (Gray 2012) but also as leaders. Scholars report how Al-Ghazali, already leader of the women's movement, acted for a few years also as leader of the Society of the Muslim Brothers in the absence of men (Talhami 1996:50).

During the 1970s, the MB's efforts were directed towards its own reconstruction. Women were asked to resume their traditional roles, a move supported by al-Ghazali (Karam 1998:211). After protracted repression, the movement needed to re-establish its presence in society. It was thought that women could best contribute in this regard by helping the movement expand its membership through charity and religious circles. During that time, the movement grew also within student unions and professional syndicates, where the Sisters found an – admittedly limited – space in which to become politically active (Karam 1998:89). The state's relative tolerance of MB activities during the 1990s encouraged the movement to engage in political participation at parliamentary level, which it did by entering into a system of alliances with other political parties (Wickham 2004; 2013). Islamist engagement with formal politics from the 1990s onwards has had the consequence of turning women's political participation into a crucial asset for the movement, with women's votes and recruitment of new voters becoming central to the Movement's operations (Abdel-Latif and Ottaway 2007; Abdel-Latif 2008; Blaydes and el-Tarouty 2009). This increased women's bargaining power for access to leadership positions vis-à-vis their male counterparts. As far back as 1992, Wafa' Ramadan staged a run for the professional syndicates in the face of strong MB opposition. Ramadan's candidacy provoked a lively discussion within the MB, which led to a

much-debated 1994 position paper in which the movement revised its official stand on women and political participation (el-Ghobashy 2005:382).

This boosted female political participation among ambitious Sisters, who could then enjoy the MB's official consent if willing to seek political office, as Jihan al-Halafawy (2000) and Makarim al-Dairy (2005) did. Many more women were to run in 2010, when the MB attempted to make use of the female quota system that existed at that time in order to boost its numbers in Parliament. In all cases, the regime responded to MB participation, including that of women, with strong repressive measures in what were considered profoundly rigged elections. Although the regime's efforts managed to prevent any Sister from obtaining office, the process gave women tangible proof of the considerable support they could enjoy from their local constituencies, thus strengthening their self-perception as capable leaders and political actors (a point raised in interviews with Hefny 2014b; el-Moniem 2014).

Following the 2011 uprising and the fall of the regime, political space in Egypt opened up for the Sisters for the first time in decades. 72 Sisters ran in the elections from within the FJP in 2011, a number greater than that of all the women who participated in all the other political parties combined (Reem 2011). Of the seven women who were elected to parliament, three were Sisters: Azza al-Gharf, Hoda Ghonia, and Siham al-Gamal. Three of the five women elected to the upper house of parliament were also Sisters: Wafaa' Mashoor, Nagwa Gouda and Susan Saad Zaghlol. Among these, Zaghlol deserves mention, being the only woman who managed to win a seat as an independent candidate. Many more Sisters took up positions in the numerous FJP branches that opened across Egypt, each of which featured a section dedicated to women.

It is however important to note that although this period of political opening (February 2011 - June 2013) allowed the Sisters to expand their roles, influence, and leadership in Egyptian public space as well as within the FJP, the same was not true for the main political offices of the MB movement, the Guidance Bureau and the Shura Council, which remained under the exclusive control of male members. Furthermore, the nature of women's activities within the FJP branches and within society remained largely the same; charity, education, and *dawa* being the main undertakings for the large majority of women activists in that period (Interview Hefny 2014a). It was only from 2013 onwards, with the increasing threat to the survival of the MB movement, that the Sisterhood's activism was to undergo a dramatic change, leading women to expand their activism, influence and leadership firstly in newly-created women-only spaces and then, as the repression increased, within the Muslim Brotherhood movement as well.

Muslim Sisterhood activism and leadership post-2013

The military coup that led to the ousting of the MB from power on 3 July 2013 signalled a turning point in the activism of the Muslim Sisterhood, one that can be said to have led to a ‘radicalization’⁵ of Muslim Sisterhood’s identity as political actors vis-à-vis the regime and the MB movement. Such a radicalization emerged in opposition to protracted regime repression and violence, as well as to initial attempts on the part of the MB to marginalize the role of women in this phase of resistance. Some important traits of this radicalization include (a) the establishment of women-only movements independent of the MB and with the Muslim Sisters as leaders and co-founders and (b) the establishment of a committee of female leaders, composed of selected Sisters, the purpose of which is to advise the MB’s Guidance Bureau on strategic political decisions related to alliance building and mobilization. The establishment of this ‘infrastructure’ for activism saw the Sisters’ independent identity strengthened in opposition to attempts at marginalizing them and helped reinforce Muslim Sisterhood’s leadership across the networks of which the Islamist movement is comprised.

The reaction of the Muslim Sisterhood to the ousting of the MB was immediate. On 28 June 2013, the National Alliance in Support of the Electoral Legitimacy (NASEL), an MB-led coalition of movements and parties of different political affiliations, called for a sit-in in support of Morsi in Rabaa Al-Adaweya Square in East Cairo. This was organised in opposition to a day of national protest against President Morsi on 30 June, called by the Tamarrod movement. On that occasion the MB instructed women not to take part in the protest in view of the possibility of a violent evacuation of the site by security forces. However, women defied MB orders and joined the sit-in en masse. As remarked by Aya Hosny, a current leader of a MS-led women’s movement, women believed that, as an integral part of Egyptian society as well as of the movement, it was their role to share in the struggle:

When the Rabaa sit-in was organized, the MB didn’t want women to go. They said ‘this sit-in will be only men’. What happened? We did not say “yes, ok, we will not go”. We opposed and we went! It is my role to be there! I am part of society and I am part of this group! (Interview, Hosny 2014)

Government institutions such as the National Council for Women (NCW) also criticised women’s participation in the sit-ins, accusing the MB of ‘using women and children as

human shields'.⁶ The Sisters considered this accusation a ploy of the old regime aimed at discrediting MB women as 'toys in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood' and at limiting their participation (Interview II Hosny 2014) and called on the NCW to issue 'an apology to all free Egyptian women who refuse to submit in the face of live bullets.'⁷

During the Rabaa sit-in the Sisterhood coordinated their personal networks in order to develop a countrywide female resistance movement. *Nisaa' did al-inqilaab*, Women against the Coup (WAC), was the first of a number of women-only movements established by the Sisters after July 2013 and remains to this days the most active in coordinating women's activities and mobilization across Egypt. The WAC was launched from the Rabaa al-Adaweya media-platform on 14 July 2013. Its founding statement makes clear the Muslim Sisterhood's desire to play an active role in the struggle as well as to hold onto the political achievements and freedom gained up to that point:

Women Against the Coup emerges as part of the continuous efforts of Egyptian women to play a significant and active role in facing all kinds of injustice in the political scene in addition to their usual role as nurturers of this nation. This movement comes as a natural reaction to the brutal coup d'état that wants to kill our new born Egyptian democracy. Not only that, it killed our women, our children, our husbands and our brothers. This movement aspires to unite women's efforts in an organized and effective manner with the purpose of restoring the will of the people that was exercised under the law and the constitution, and which is the return of Dr. Mohamed Morsi as a President of the Republic⁸

Its founding members are senior MS leaders, such as Dr. Hoda Abd el-Moniem, who is also a current NASEL leader, and Dr. Hoda Gonia, a former MP. Together with these are several other women who had remained active in informal female networks linked to the Islamist movement, an engagement that allows these women to assume more visible leadership roles. These include Aya Alaa Hosny and Maha Abu Azz, as well as middle-generation activists like Dr. Wafaa Hefny, the granddaughter of the founder of the MB movement Sheikh Hassan al-Banna. The establishment of the WAC constitutes a tangible demonstration of how women within Islamist circles are able to mobilize those resources under their control in a way that gives them more visibility and leadership. As Aya states:

[T]he movement that I established and I am working on at the moment, which is Women against the Coup, has not emerged as a consequence of an initiative of the MB leadership. The movement emerged out of an independent initiative. We were in

Rabaa and we were trying to find a way to help the revolution going on. We were a group of women and we were all against the coup so...the name comes without saying. (Interview, Honsy 2014)

Pre-existing MB women branches across the country were quickly turned into fully functional divisions of the WAC and from the second half of July 2013 women's mobilization occurred regularly across Egypt. Initially, women would partake in demonstrations in conjunction with men, who would usually be positioned at the extreme ends of the marches' cordons with women walking in between for security reasons. However, confronted with growing unrest, the regime decided to use violence against women as a strategy to contain MB mobilization and as early as the 19 July 2013 security forces carried out their first attack on the Sisterhood. On that date, three Sisters died of gunshot wounds in Mansoura; the youngest, Hala Abu Shesha, has since become an icon of the WAC resistance. Nonetheless, the regime's strategy could be seen as having attained its objective as the killing of the three women was to provoke disagreement among Brothers and Sisters within the movement. Male members accused the Sisters of putting both themselves and their men at risk by taking part in demonstrations and called for women to stay home (Interview, S.A. 2014). Furthermore, the regime's open attack on women led them to realize that there was going to be no special regard for the 'gentler sex' but that violence would instead be the norm should they continue with protest activities. As Aya remarked, 'in every country in the world women and children are red lines [...] that was a clear signal that made us understand that this coup will not spare women but that it will start targeting them' (Interview, Hosny 2014). Women decided to continue to mobilize, a decision demonstrating their leadership and determination to resist any attempt at repression or marginalization. Since then, the Sisterhood have organised women-only marches, the first of which was staged the day after Hala's death. This comeback was quite significant in that it constituted firstly a response to regime violence, showing that such violence would not succeed in intimidating women, and, secondly, a transgression of the will of MB male members, as women's participation and activism in street protests could only continue in defiance of constraints posed on their activism in both public and private spheres. As highlighted by this extract from Dr. Hefny's interview:

Women do not want to stay inside. They feel that they have voted and they want their votes. They have seen their friends being killed and violated in front of them. They

want justice. They are on the streets because they want to be on the streets and they won't leave them, whatever anyone does or says. This is a decision of the women [...] My daughter is nagging me every day to go on the street and my husband does not let me because on the 25th of January [2014] I was about to be arrested [...] but we would still go down when he is not around. (Interview, Hefny 2014a)

In 2013 and 2014, women's protests occurred on a daily basis. As a consequence, more women fell victim to violence. This occurred to such an extent that banners featuring women martyrs appeared increasingly frequently at women's demonstrations until nearly replacing completely those depicting Morsi. This also serves as an indication that the Muslim Sisterhood's mobilization was becoming increasingly gendered.

In the months that followed, violence against women served to motivate and sustain Sisterhood's mobilization in this repressive environment. Continued mobilization was made possible by the politicization of the issue of regime violence against women through several public activities and conferences organised by the WAC. During these conferences, WAC leaders reported detailed data on cases of violence against women and also invited the victims to share their personal stories as a way to delegitimize the regime and increase support for the WAC cause. Later in 2014, public conferences were to become increasingly crucial to women activists as WAC leaders started providing women with self-defence and human rights training. All the conferences I attended were also accurately recorded and then broadcast in order to gain wider support for the Sisters.⁹

Due to the growing number of HR violations and arrests in the months that followed, the Sisterhood felt compelled to enter into alliances with prominent leftist organizations such as the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre (HMLC) and the al-Nadeem Centre. Joint activities ranged from assisting prisoners to organising of hunger strike campaigns, as well as providing psychological assistance to victims of violence, and providing activists with training in HR national and international legislation. Key female leaders working from within both organizations made all this possible. The release of Abdallah Shami, one of the MB journalists arrested the day of the dispersal of Rabaa sit-in on 14 August 2013, was one example of successful cooperation between Dr. Hoda abd el-Moniem, Laila Soueif and Aida Seif al-Dawla (Interview, Hefny 2014b). These same women also created a cross-national team of HR activists and lawyers tasked with recording cases of HR abuses against MB and MS as well as with providing victims with legal assistance (Interview, M.A. 2014).

Engaging in this meticulous work of data-recording was considered crucial for women leaders as it provided the movement with the necessary tools to survive repression. As

articulated by Dr. Hefny, this had been a major role of the Sisterhood since the birth of the MB:

Once you know what is happening on the ground you can assist people with the help they need [...] the Sisterhood has been working since the beginning until now the same way, and it is also the main reason that allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to regain power during Sadat, what kept it from the time of Abdul Nasser until Sadat were the women [...] at the time of Abdul Nasser most of the women were not educated and they didn't have money, and so a lot of children of the people in prisons were lost. We are much better now [...] now, *alhamdulillah*, it is not happening. (Interview, Hefny 2014a)

By the end of 2013, regime repression had nevertheless managed to compromise the channel of communication between the MB male leadership and its support base, therefore also weakening the ability of the movement to constitute a unified front of resistance to the regime. It was also during this period that the Sisterhood, the largest pool of experienced MB cadres available at that time, filled in part the vacuum left by men and emerged as intermediary leaders between those in jail or on the run and the larger movement's network of women and youth. This situation, over the longer term, is what allowed the Sisters to expand their influence and leadership within the MB movement overall.

With the start of the new academic year in October 2013, more movements had emerged in universities. Many of these were led by female academics and students affiliated with the Sisterhood. These were the '7-AM movement', the 'Free of al-Azhar', 'Ultras Girls', 'Girls against the Coup', 'Students against the Coup', and 'University Professors against the Coup' (Interview, el-Moniem 2014). Student mobilization soon became so intense that the Minister of Education was forced to suspend classes altogether in April 2014, having previously attempted several other measures. These earlier strategies included calling upon university staff members to identify 'suspected' professors and students to be reported to security forces (Interview, C.C. 2014) as well as hiring private security companies to patrol universities.

The situation exacerbated further when broader political divides existing across Egyptian society started playing out inside universities as well, increasing rivalries among students groups and making it easier for security forces to repress and raid student activists (Interview, M.A 2014). It was in this period that MB student leaders started blaming the MB leadership for its inability to provide strategy and direction to address these difficulties (Interview, M.M. 2014).

By the summer of 2014, the most influential Muslim Sisterhood leaders formed a committee that, for lack of better alternatives, they called ‘The Committee of the Pragmatic Women Leaders’. This consisted of eight Sisterhood leaders who already enjoyed influential positions in their local districts [*sha’ba*], who after the coup had displayed considerable influence and leadership skills across women’s movements, and who were also regarded as influential leaders by youth groups for being able to be ‘pragmatic in the face of political differences’ (Interview, Hefny 2014a). Under the extreme repression of the period the ability of the MB to sustain a strong and extensive resistance movement was deemed crucial to the Movement’s success. The skills displayed by the women’s movement in this regard were believed to be necessary to maintain unity between the several MB-related movements operating on the ground as well as in forging alliances between groups of different ideological persuasions. Women took a leading role in these endeavours. As Dr. Hefny, one of its members explains it:

Because you have the political and you have the ground, you do not want the ground to come out of the hands of the political, so you have to keep them going together. So, if you say something and those people [youth] do not want it, it will be a big problem. So before we take any political decision we need to understand what the people want, and what the people are fighting for, and it is this committee that is keeping the balance, it is the women (Interview, Hefny 2014a)

This gave women an opportunity to increase their influence and leadership inside the MB movement and add it to that which they enjoyed within their own women’s movements. Furthermore, it allowed women to exercise their voices and opinions at the heart of those MB political offices from which they had previously been largely excluded, like the Guidance Bureau, the second most important political office in the MB. As pointed out always by Dr. Hefny:

After the coup women really have a say, even men are consulting with us on what to do, even the Guidance Bureau is counselling with us before taking decisions because they know that we felt better than them what should have been done (Interview, Hefny 2014a)

Several factors contributed to this development. First was the absence of men, which made of the MS the largest pool of cadres available and rendered the women’s committee increasingly

important in allowing the movement to organize its resources within a cohesive political strategy. Despite having suffered from heavy state repression as well, fewer women had in fact been arrested when compared to men. According to the September 2014 WAC report, 1558 Muslim Sisters were arrested and 85 killed between July 2013 and August 2014,¹⁰ a relatively lower number when compared to the total of 41.000 Egyptian political prisoners arrested over the same period, 29.000 of them believed to be MB members (Stork 2015). Second was women's deeper understanding of groups in society and their greater influence on the youth movement. This was largely a consequence of women's long legacy of activism in local communities and as educators of Islamist networks, rendering women best suited for bridging alliances across political rivalries, including merging the objectives of the support base with that of the movement and vice versa.

This committee had not yet been formally recognised as being part of the official structure of the MB organization when fieldwork for this research project was being carried out, but it was nonetheless fully functional and meetings were held weekly. There is no guarantee that it will be formalized in the future, but its importance lies also in that the MB male leadership recognises its existence and that it represents Muslim Sisterhood's continuing efforts to increase their influence, presence, and political role in the MB movement.

On 7 June 2014, in a further attempt to unite women's movements that had emerged up until that point into a single front of resistance, the Sisters established the Revolutionary Coalition of Egyptian Women (RCEW) (Interview, el-Moniem 2014). In addition to those movements mentioned so far, three others are members of the Coalition. These are 'Women against the Killing of Demonstrators', the 'Coalition of the Mothers of the Detainees', and the 'Rights of my Children' (Ibid). Of these, the 'Rights of my Children' is worthy of special mention. This grouping consists of the mothers of more than 100 MB children abducted by security forces in the Alexandrian district of Kom el-Dikka during the winter of 2013/2014 as a tactic to extort from their families information on the whereabouts of MB male leaders (Interview, M.A. 2014). Although the role of the Sisters by that time was becoming increasingly organizational and political as a consequence of the absence of several male members, the RCEW provided the Sisterhood with a further logistical tool with which to sustain MB mobilization in the streets throughout the years 2014 and 2015.

Conclusion

The initial argument made in this article was that negative Political Opportunity Structures (POS) are more likely to provide women activists in Islamist political movements with opportunities for increasing their activism, mobilization, and leadership, rather than periods of relative political stability. As the case of the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood demonstrates, women have been able to expand their presence within the ranks of the movement at different historical junctions, but it is only when the survival of the Muslim Brotherhood came to be under threat that they managed to increase their influence within those meaningful political offices of Islamist Movement Organizations regarded as male-only domains. The emergence of the Muslim Sisters into the ‘Committee of the Pragmatic Women leaders’ for assisting the Guidance Bureau in its political decision-making, testifies precisely to the role that negative situations, such as harsh repression and violence, can have in creating additional opportunities for influential female cadres to expand their presence into spaces which are not necessarily women-only areas. In a manner similar to that occurring during revolutions and wars, when the gender order of society is temporary suspended, negative circumstances provoke a suspension of the gender structure normally in place in the Islamist movement, thus allowing influential women cadres to expand their influence and leadership in areas from which they are traditionally excluded. Given the crucial role that the Sisters are currently playing in the struggle, one relevant question for the future remains: will the MB male leadership be willing to enter into a fairer power sharing with their women once repression eases? This is difficult to ascertain now, and past history would suggest that this will not be the case. But what is certain is that women have broken the barrier of fear in great numbers, and are growing progressively more aware of their strength and capabilities as women. This will make increasingly difficult for the male leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood to contain women’s growing role within the movement in the future.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to Dr. Paola Rivetti for reading through the several drafts of this manuscript, and to the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. I am also immensely grateful to all the women who opened their doors and hearts to me during my fieldwork in Egypt. The writing of this paper would have not been possible without their help.

Disclosure statement:

The author has no potential conflict of interest to declare

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Personal Interviews

I Dr. Hoda Abd el-Moniem, Muslim Sisterhood senior leader, HR lawyer and leader in the NASEL, Cairo, 7 June 2014

II Aya Alaa Hosny, official spokeswoman and leader of the WAC movement, Cairo, 7 June 2014

III Dr. Wafaa Hefny, granddaughter of Sheikh Hassan al-Banna, Muslim Sisterhood district leader and WAC leader, Cairo, 19th of June 2014 (a), 20 September 2014 (b)

IV M.A., human rights activist affiliated with the Muslim Sisterhood, Cairo, 16 June 2014

V S.A., Muslim Sisterhood youth member, Cairo, 26 June 2014

VI M.M., Muslim Brotherhood youth member, Cairo, 29 June 2014

VII C.C., Muslim Brotherhood Professor of English Literature at Cairo University, Cairo, 3 April 2014

VIII Sanaa al-Banna, daughter of Sheikh Hassan al-Banna, Cairo, 19 June 2014

¹ ‘All According to plan: the Rabaa Massacre and the Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt’, *Human Rights Watch Report*, 2014

² ‘Egypt’s Sisi approves anti-terrorism law setting up special courts’, *Reuters*, 16 August 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/16/us-egypt-security-lawmaking-idUSKCN0QL0TU20150816> (accessed 20 October 2015)

³ From now I will use the terms Muslim Sisterhood, Muslim Sisters, Sisterhood, MS, or Sisters, interchangeably.

⁴ Given the current political situation in Egypt, for which MB members are routinely subjected to scrutiny, repression, and violence, only the names of these women who wished to have their identities revealed will be used in this paper. In all other cases, only the initials of their names will appear.

⁵ Here the use of the term radicalization is not to be intended as the adoption from the part of women of militant activism, neither violent or radical ideology, but it only refers to ‘the strengthening of the gender identity of the

Muslim Sisterhood as independent political actors vis-à-vis the Egyptian regime and the male dominated MB movement’.

⁶ ‘The National Council for Women denounces use of children at pro-Morsi sit-ins’, *al-Haram*, 2 August 2013, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/78142.aspx> (accessed 29 October 2014)

⁷ ‘*Nisaa’ did al-inqilaab: Isaa’at al-Tallaawy limu’atasimaat Raabi’a, qurbaan tuqaddimuhi lisaydatiha Suzaan Mubaarak*’, Women against the Coup: al-Tallawy offends the Rabaa protesters... paying lip-service to her mistress Susanne Mubarak’, *el-Mokhales*, 2 August 2013, available at <http://elmokhalestv.com/index/details/id/66845> (accessed 4 April 2014)

⁸ ‘*al-muw’tamar al-taa’sisiyy al-auwali liharakat nisaa’ did al-inqilaab*’, ‘First Conference of the Women against the Coup Movement’, *YaQiyyn TV*, 14 July 2014, min. 1.09, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHfPEZZe_34 (accessed 6 April 2014), the author thanks Shaima Omar and Shaima Magdy for helping with the transcript and translation of this speech.

⁹ *RASSD* and *YaQiyyn* are among the common channels where MS videos were broadcast

¹⁰ ‘*anthaakaat did almarrat: yyum 100 taht hakm al-Sisi*’ - ‘Violations against women: 100 days under the rule of al-Sisi’, (Muslim Sisterhood report presented by Aya Alaa Hosny at a conference of the WAC held at the premises of al-Istiqlal Party, Cairo, 2 September, 2014) [*unpublished*] The report does not include the numbers of al-Azhar female students arrested or killed since the start of the 2014/2015 academic year.