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## Against All Odds: A Legacy of Appropriation, Contestation, and Negotiation of Arab Feminisms in Postcolonial States

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## VIEWPOINT

# Against All Odds: A Legacy of Appropriation, Contestation, and Negotiation of Arab Feminisms in Postcolonial States<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Arab feminists have always faced challenges related to the burden of colonialism, accusations of westernization, isolation from their cultural heritage, and elitism, but the biggest challenge of all has been the fact that their activism and their entire lives have all been in the context of authoritarian postcolonial states. This article engages with a persistent challenge to Arab feminists that questions their impact, their awareness of their cultural and societal problems, and undermines their achievements over the years. It constructs a narrative of what feminists have achieved against all odds, within the constraints of authoritarian postcolonial states that have politically manipulated and appropriated women's rights issues. It sheds light on how Arab feminists contested power, negotiated with power, won and lost battles, but have persisted and still do. A survey of key trends in Arab feminisms is attempted, with a focus on Egypt and brief references to Arab countries.

**Key words:** feminism, Arab feminisms, Arab women, modern Egypt, gender and state, postcolonial states, women's movements

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### Introduction

For the last few years, since the tumultuous wave of revolutions that shook the Arab world in 2011, and the direct and oftentimes violent confrontations with state structures, I have been very preoccupied with the question of how feminists negotiate power, or, how Arab feminists have managed their relation with modern postcolonial nation states. The opening up of political spaces brought about by large scale protests and activism enabled revisionist analytical rethinking of positions, self criticism, and much soul searching by feminists and other social and political activists about the impact, or lack, of years and years of activism and oppositional politics. Younger women, empowered by the revolutionary possibilities in the air and feeling confident in their power to effect change, questioned the effectiveness and value of feminist movements. Additionally, feminists with a history of activism disagreed on whether women's activism in Egypt could be described as a movement. These and many other related discussions foregrounded one key issue: that many of the critical appraisals of women's movements in Egypt and the Arab world do not take into consideration the realities and processes of power; rather, they focus on the end result such as the success or failure of women obtaining a specific right or demand.

Arab feminists have always faced challenges related to the burden of colonialism, accusations of westernization, isolation from their cultural heritage, and elitism. However, the biggest challenge of all has been the fact that their activism and their entire lives have all been in the context of authoritarian postcolonial states. This point was brought home in the immediate aftermath of revolutions that, despite the violence and tragic consequences, had opened up political spaces for

oppositional activism and negotiation with state bodies and restored confidence in people's agency and ability to effect change. In the context of relative political liberalization, feminists were at the forefront of political movements for change. If we acknowledge the obvious facts that authoritarianism is not good for any body, especially women, dictatorships by definition are inimical to social movements, and collective action or new ideas can potentially lead to change and shake the status quo or hegemonic power structures, then we might be able to assess and understand what Arab feminists have accomplished (or not) in a new light.

This article engages with a persistent challenge to Arab feminists that questions their impact, their awareness of their cultural and societal problems, and undermines their achievements over the years. I construct a narrative of what feminists have achieved against all odds within the constraints of authoritarian postcolonial states that have politically manipulated and appropriated women's rights issues. In other words, I will shed light on how Arab feminists contest power, negotiate power, win and lose battles, but have persisted and still do. I attempt a survey of key trends in Arab feminisms with a focus on Egypt and brief references to Arab countries. While there are important differences in context and processes between Arab countries, I argue that the Egyptian story is an Arab story with important variations, or at least a story that resonates with many Arab stories. Importantly, this article is grounded in my research on women's movements in the Arab world and beyond, as well as my experience as a feminist activist involved in the women's movement in Egypt for more than three decades.

## Beginnings

The emergence of the "woman question" in the Arab world began against the background of colonial domination and the initiation of the modernization project at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Historians of the Arab world note how the "backward status of Arab women" was used by colonialists as a stick to beat Arab societies (Sayigh 1981) and how many early reformers internalized this colonial discourse putting the burden of Arab "backwardness" on the shoulders of women. Qasim Amin (1899) argued the backwardness of women in Egypt was an obstacle to progress and that improving their status, which meant liberating them from the burden of tradition and superstition, was a prerequisite for national independence from colonialism and for becoming a modern nation. The link between women's liberation, national liberation, and the modernization project has always been a double-edged sword. Bettering the status of women as a condition for modernization was behind Amin's call for the education of women. At the same time, women in the Arab world were burdened with the impossible task of simultaneously being both the icons of tradition and the trail-blazers of modernity; or to use Najmabadi's insightful phrase, to be "modern but modest" (1991, 49). It also meant that any discussion of women's status in society inevitably became a discussion of something else: national identity; national independence; the relation with the west; the necessity or lack of safeguarding cultural specificity; how to emulate the western model of modernity while fighting western colonialism; and so forth. Needless to say, this symbolic dimension of the "woman question" complicated women's liberation struggle.

What did women do vis-a-vis the ambivalence in modernist discourse? What were the strategies that women resorted to? To begin, many women embraced modernist discourses about gender roles and division of labor, or what feminists have labeled domestic ideology. A glance at the magazine *al-Fatah*, the first women's magazine published in 1892 and owned by a woman, Hind Nawfal, provides a fairly good overview of how women appropriated yet contested modernist discourses on gender. The magazine propagated the view that women were responsible for their own advancement and it was conditional on their becoming good managers of their households and their families. Household duties are valorized and put on an equal footing with duties of political leaders or

managers of companies. In this sense, embracing domestic ideology becomes a strategy to ensure worth and status for women. At the same time, the magazine presented its readers with news and biographies of prominent women who have distinguished themselves in the public sphere, hence supporting their aspiration to acquire more roles outside their homes (Nawfal 1892).

It is important to highlight that modernist discourses did not go unchallenged. As an example, Malak Hifni Nasif's was one of the voices to critique modernist discourses on gender of the *nahda* reformers. She refuted Amin's call for the unveiling of women as a condition for their emancipation and argued instead for prioritizing access to education so women can make informed choices as regards their lives and bodies. She lambasted the *nahda* reformers for propagating a "pseudo *nahda*" and exposed the double standards that were implicit in their views and practices (Nasif 1910). Also, the magazines and journals published in the last two decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon published numerous articles by women writers who argued for their right to education, employment, and participation in the public sphere. Women challenged misogynist ideas implicit and explicit in the discourses of some *nahda* reformers whose modernist views on gender roles were not always conducive to women's quest for freedom and equality.<sup>2</sup>

### **Women and National Independence**

Feminist movements in the Arab world were integral partners in national independence movements and struggles against colonialism. This partnership is acknowledged as a key feature of Arab women's movements and one that is persistently highlighted in mainstream literature as to why some women's movements gained legitimacy. In Egypt, women participated in the 1919 revolution against British colonialism. The sixteenth of March is celebrated as Egyptian Women's Day, which marks the date of women martyrs shot by British soldiers during demonstrations in 1919. Women's participation in the 1919 revolution accorded value and legitimacy to the nascent women's movement in Egypt.

Empowered by their participation in the 1919 revolution, the Women Committee was formed in the Wafd party. The period from the 1920s to the early 50s is generally acknowledged as vibrant in the history of the women's movement. The Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) was founded in 1923. This union mainly consisted of members of the women's committee in the Wafd who decided to establish an all women organization and depart from the Wafd party because the Wafd's disregarded the opinions and demands of the women's committee. The EFU played an important role in raising awareness, lobbying for the advancement of a women's rights agenda, and mobilizing resources and public opinion to advocate for national independence. Members of the union assumed radical positions on national independence, democracy, and Arab solidarity. The EFU publicly rejected the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, which did not resolve the issue of independence and the full withdrawal of British troops from Egypt.

The participation of women in national liberation movements in Arab countries has been acknowledged and documented (Arenfeldt and Golley 2012). Furthermore, Arab women's rights activists agreed to give precedence to national independence over their demand for rights. The classic example is Algeria. In 1958, as a reaction to a call by French colonialists to Algerian women asking them to burn their veils in a public square and chant Algeria is French, Algerian women wore veils as a symbolic confirmation of their national identity and immersed themselves in the struggle for independence postponing their struggle for gender rights. However, the downside is women's participation in national independence movements did not translate into an acknowledgement of their demands after independence in postcolonial nation states. In fact, and with reference again to the Algerian case, despite women's huge sacrifices in the war of liberation, they were asked by their comrades to return to their homes. Bearing in mind significant variations between Arab countries,

women were not recognized as equal partners in the process of constructing modern nation states (ibid.).

### **State Feminism in Postcolonial States**

State feminism in the Arab world usually has negative connotations and is generally seen as one of the obstacles that have impeded the formation of strong feminist movements. This is not universally true, as state feminism in Scandinavian countries, for example, denotes a reformist agenda adopted by the state to rectify gender inequality in state structures and mechanisms by enacting gender sensitive laws and increasing the number of women in public office. State feminism is regarded by many in a positive light, despite recent criticisms by feminists. Historically, state feminism in the Arab world is a phenomenon of the 1950s and 60s, which is the beginning of independent postcolonial states. However, state feminism in the Arab world brings to mind words like cooptation, appropriation and manipulation. Why?

In an article on state feminism in Egypt, Mervat Hatem describes the role of state feminism in the 1950s and 60s as paradoxical (1992, 232). On the one hand, much was achieved: the 1956 constitution guaranteed equality before the law and no discrimination based on gender, race, language, religion, or belief and granted women political rights. Labor laws were modified to enable working women to perform their reproductive roles. On the other hand, the Personal Status Laws (PSL) were left intact, meaning that patriarchal domination of women in the private sphere was left unchallenged. This created a bizarre situation where women attained equality in the public sphere but were subject to the authority of male members of their families in the private sphere. The classic Egyptian story that captures this anomaly is the story of an Egyptian woman minister, member of the cabinet, who was traveling on official business but was detained at the airport because her husband decided to ban her from traveling. The second important problematic feature of state feminism in the Arab world is that it was supported by a postcolonial state that deliberately and effectively “demobilized Egyptian feminist organizations” (Hatem 1992, 233). Postcolonial Arab states, with variations but without exception, developed into authoritarian postcolonial states that clamped down on dissent and all forms of opposition movements, instituted one-party systems, and nationalized social movements.

Again the classic Egyptian example of the tension between feminist organizations and the postcolonial state is the story of the Egyptian Feminist Union founded by Hoda Shaarawi in 1923. As mentioned earlier, this was an independent feminist organization, which advocated for a political and social agenda. In 1956, the EFU was dissolved by orders of the Revolutionary Council Leadership and replaced by the Association of Hoda Shaarawi, a charity organization that provided social services; it was no longer allowed to pursue a political agenda nor practice activities of a political nature. This new state of affairs resulted in the expulsion of many feminists from public life. Some were able to withdraw quietly and refocus their attention to apolitical public service; others paid a high price for their independence. Doria Shafik, for example, paid a heavy price for publicly objecting to the dictatorial nature of the new political order. In 1957, she went on a hunger strike at the Indian embassy in Cairo to protest against what she described as the dictatorial direction of the Nasser regime. She was banned from public life and put under house arrest. Her life ended tragically with suicide (Shafik 2014). However there are three important points to remember: (1) many feminists seized the opportunities opening up for women to rise and pursue successful careers that at a later stage, when the political sphere opened up slightly, were able to return to public life armed with expertise and authority they gained over the years; (2) other feminists worked within state structures and accommodated the political restrictions; and (3) all the achievements of state feminism are based on the work of independent feminists, their demands, their programs, and their ideas.

From the 1990s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, state feminism went through a new phase, a type of mutation manifested in the establishment of National Councils for Women headed by the “First Ladies.” These new structures came in response to new international developments regarding the role of governments in supporting women’s rights agendas as well as local developments in policy and political ideology. In the next section, I examine the conditions that led to these formations.

### **The Internationalization of Women’s Rights**

The historical roots of the internationalization of women’s rights extends back to 1975 when the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) declared 1975 as the “International Women’s Year.” The First World Conference of Women in Mexico City was held in that same year and 1976-1985 was announced as the UN Decade for Women. The UN also dedicated a voluntary fund to support this declaration. In 1979, The General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Second World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985 was described by many as “the birth of global feminism”(United Nations 2019) as it situated women’s rights agendas at the center of world politics. The Beijing Platform for Action adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women declared women’s rights as human rights, and more importantly, committed states to specific actions to guarantee their compliance with the agreed resolutions. The strategic objective H.1.b in the Beijing Platform for Action, committed governments to create a national machinery, where it does not exist, and strengthen, as appropriate, existing national machineries, for the advancement of women at the highest possible level of government; it should have clearly defined mandates and authority; critical elements would be adequate resources and the ability and competence to influence policy and formulate and review legislation; and among other things, it should perform policy analysis, undertake advocacy, communication, coordination and monitoring of implementation (United Nations 1995). The formation of National Councils of Women, or other forms of national machineries to promote women’s rights in the Arab world, happened against the background of these global trends in international politics. While the scene in the Arab world is diverse, one common feature has been that these international organizations were headed by First Ladies, princesses, or prominent members of the ruling elite.

There is a vast amount of scholarship assessing the impact of the role of the UN and the internationalization of women’s rights on women’s movements all over the world. Elisabeth Friedman (1999) distinguishes between the term “internationalism” and “transnationalism.” According to Friedman, internationalism “particularly addresses the interaction between states, often to the exclusion of non-state actors” (359). Transnationalism on the other hand is used to characterize regular activity crossing national borders that involves non-state actors (Risse-Kappen 1995, 3; quoted in *ibid.*, 359). A question arises: to what extent has this development (i.e. making women’s rights issues an important component in international politics or interstate relations) been good for women? This question remains a matter of contention and much debate.

Sylvia Walby (2002) argues that the integration of feminism in the international discourse of human rights, with the emphasis on the responsibilities of states to protect those rights as a prerequisite for inclusion in the international regime of “civilized states,” led to positive measures undertaken by states in support of women’s rights agendas. Walby foregrounds how feminists worldwide used this development to lobby their governments. She says that in this international regime, “the nation-state has been the subject of a successful pincer movement by feminists organized at both grassroots and trans-national levels” (550). Feminist researchers also shed light on how participation in these high profile UN conferences helped them legitimize their demands and mobilize resources

and strengthen local women's movements (Friedman 1999). On the other hand, feminists note the complex and mixed effects of the internationalization of women's rights and have also drawn attention to potential negative consequences, namely the manipulation of international mechanisms by political leaders with detrimental effects on women's movements, the unequal distribution of resources and social capital, and the divisive effect of negative perceptions of foreign funding in local contexts (Alvarez 2000).

How do these debates play out in the Arab world? It is noteworthy that Egypt and Tunisia were amongst the countries that proposed the UN dedicate a year to the discussion of women's rights agendas in the international arena. This opportunity was seized by women rights activists who participated in international conferences, joined international networks, and consolidated transnational alliances. International forums and meetings also became platforms for lobbying governments in the Arab world. Examining processes of political change in Egypt, Mona El-Ghobashy (2008) argues that the internationalization of the political regime in Egypt since the mid-1990s was a key factor that afforded "activists and ordinary citizens unexpected political leverage in their asymmetric share of public power with the executive" (1593). El-Ghobashy points out that despite the absence of democratic governance, the Egyptian state was a signatory to human rights conventions and bilateral treaties, which imposed international legal commitments. She furthers that integration in the international standard setting regime created a space for rights activists to use the concept of the rule of law to contest state violations of rights.

In addition to committing to international conventions, Egypt invested in being recognized as an important player on the international scene and a modern nation worthy of a seat in the "global club of civilized countries." One of the persistent tropes in Egyptian mainstream media has been the necessity of safeguarding the "image of Egypt," which is a narrative about an imagined civilized and modern state who is an important player in international politics. Hence, the internationalization of Egyptian politics plus the projected self-image of a modern state afforded rights activists disproportionate powers vis-a-vis state representatives in international forums as they invoked the standards of the rule of law to challenge violations and argue for rights. I argue elsewhere that this imagined role of Egypt as a key player in international politics and membership in the international club of civilized nations was a key factor in the negotiations over Article 11, or the "women's article" in the Egyptian constitution endorsed in 2014, and was acknowledged by many feminists as a positive step forward in enabling a women's rights agenda (Elsadda 2015).

There are important stories yet to be told and documented about how feminists have made use of international forums to further their agendas in local settings. One such story took place in 1985, right before the Nairobi conference. In May 1985, the Supreme Constitutional Court in Egypt ruled that Law 44/1979 (Jihan Law) was unconstitutional on procedural grounds. The Jihan Law introduced some basic amendments to the PSL that regulated polygamy, facilitated women obtaining divorce subsequent to a husband's taking another wife, and most importantly provided protection for divorced women who had custody of the children by giving them the right to occupy the marital house for the period of custody. In a country with a major housing problem, this was a very important measure to protect women and young children from the adverse effects of divorce. The Jihan Law indeed was unconstitutional because of the circumstances of its approval in parliament.<sup>3</sup> However, it was directly linked to the President's wife's influence and a manifestation of a state feminism that had become extremely unpopular and vulnerable to opposition. Yet, the *substance* of the Law was aligned with the demands of women rights activists and addressed inequitable legal issues that had an adverse impact on women's daily lives and women rights activists saw the annulment of the Jihan Law as a setback to women's rights.

With the possibility of annulment, women rights activists formed the Committee for the Protection of the Family and Women to lobby parliament to endorse the Jihan Law and avert annulment. The Committee first met in the Association of Hoda Shaarawi, which was chosen for its

historical and symbolic value. The Committee made an effort to mobilize women by announcing times and dates of meetings in newspapers and by publishing the committee members' demands and advocacy articles in newspapers and magazines. However, the committee was subjected to a vilification campaign by conservatives and was not always successful in finding locations for large meetings and members had to organize meetings in houses. Notwithstanding, the efforts of the committee were relatively successful: Law 100 of 1985 was passed with very similar articles to Law 44 that was annulled, but with a compromise to appease conservatives.<sup>4</sup> The point to note here is the Women's Conference in Nairobi (1985) was the main reason for expediting the process of the (previously) annulled Law 44 going back to parliament to be passed in record time. The annulment would have been a sign of a lack of commitment on the part of the state to furthering women's rights agendas and a possible embarrassment on the international stage.

Going back to the National Councils of Women (NCW) in Arab states, they soon become the twenty-first century mutation of state feminism. Theoretically per UN directives, states are required to ensure the autonomy of national machineries by providing the necessary resources and legal structures. In authoritarian postcolonial states' practice, these bodies gradually became arms of state manipulation over women's rights issues. Because most of these councils were headed by First Ladies, they were intolerant of dissenting voices and were exclusionary rather than inclusionary. In Egypt, it gradually became clear that the primary goal of the NCW was to nationalize women's rights agendas, making it the prerogative of council members to act as the sole representatives of women's rights issues in local and international forums.

How did feminists interact with NCWs? Again, we find ourselves in a very varied and complex scene. Bearing in mind the already existing diversity in ideological and political positions amongst feminists, we can discern a wide spectrum of positions and interactions ranging from a radical standpoint that rejected cooperation under any circumstance to the other end of the spectrum that focused on accommodation. Between these two positions, are forms of interaction based on assessments of the political context at any given moment, appraisals of potential losses and gains, and decisions to cooperate based on campaign or project issues. It is these stories that need to be documented and written.

In the years since 2011, the NCW in Egypt became a site of contestation not just between feminists and the state, but also between state institutions due to interstate divisions, power struggles, and the rise of Islamist parties and their entrance into formal politics. While I will mention some key features very briefly for the purpose of shedding light on how feminists interact with the state, this is another story that remains to be written. In March 2011, feminist organizations came together and formed the Coalition of Egyptian Feminist Organizations (CFO). The main aim was to ensure that the voice of feminists was heard and noted by revolutionary groups and state actors. One of the tasks undertaken by the CFO was the reformation and restructuring of the NCW to make it more autonomous (independent of state control), in harmony with independent feminist organizations, and effective in pursuing and implementing gender sensitive policies within state institutions. Meetings were held with state actors and a proposal was submitted to the cabinet. It was a moment when CFO meetings with the cabinet to lobby for the reformation was possible because the political sphere was open and accommodating to dissenting voices, which enabled the CFO to voice their views in the media and wider audiences.

However, these efforts to reform were stalled and did not materialize. In the second half of 2012, the NCW became a target for attack by the new Islamist political elite and efforts were made to take over the institution with the view of Islamizing it. A struggle ensued between the then NCW members and Islamist state actors. In October 2012, the NCW issued a statement rejecting the 2012 draft constitution written by a constituent assembly with an Islamist majority ("Egypt's National Council for Women Rejects Constitution Draft"). Under normal circumstances, this dissent of the NCW would be unthinkable and must be understood as a concrete example of the divisions and

conflicts between state institutions. At the time, this position was in harmony with the position of feminist organizations and the non-Islamist political parties and movements in the country, and was consequently welcomed and endorsed. Events, however, took an unfortunate turn on all fronts and tensions between independent women's organizations and the NCW rose in regards to its role of becoming the sole representative of women's issues locally and internationally, as well as its role in the nationalization of the women's movement.

### **Transnational Arab Feminisms**

I would like to focus on the distinction made above between "internationalism" and "transnationalism," where transnationalism characterizes non-state actors, women rights groups, and independent feminists working together across borders. Long before the UN and the internationalization of "rights talk," Arab women forged alliances with feminists and feminist organizations all over the world. Much has been written about Hoda Shaarawi's participation in the ninth Congress of the London-based International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) held in Rome in 1923. Also important to remember is that Shaarawi traveled wide and far, or sent delegates from the EFU, to meetings and conferences all over the world to make the case for the independence of Egypt, confront Zionist claims to Palestine, and establish links with feminists across the world. A trip to Berlin introduced Shaarawi to Sarojini Naidu, an Indian feminist who became Governor of Uttar Pradesh after independence (Lanfranchi 2012, 176-77). The two women exchanged experiences and learned from each other.

Transnational solidarity between feminists sharing experiences and strategizing together continues to be a very important aspect of Arab feminisms. These transnational encounters have not been without challenges and problems due to unequal power relations, colonial legacies, and regional and international disputes and rivalries. Nonetheless, it is possible to say that there are strong feminist networks and alliances in existence today that have succeeded in addressing and managing some of these older challenges. Transnational feminism has also benefited from the internationalization of women's rights because more platforms and opportunities for interaction and exchange are made available and possible.

### **Arab Feminists and Islam**

The Islamic feminism movement is generally acknowledged to have emerged in the 1980s, gaining prominence in the 1990s. However, if we think of Islamic feminism as a form of women's engagement with Islamic heritage, the production of knowledge that empower women, and arguing for rights from within an Islamic framework (i.e. one of the approaches undertaken by women to advocate for their rights), then we need to go further back in history. Aisha al-Taymuriyya (1840-1902), Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918), and Nazira Zein Eldin (1908-1976) are all women who engaged with Islamic texts and dictums regarding women with the view of challenging patriarchal interpretations that undermined women and consolidated male power. Even women who are perceived as representing the "secular" feminist movement, such as Hoda Shaarawi, argued for women's rights from within an Islamic frame of reference. In Tunisia, the reform of the Code of Personal Status was conducted with recourse to the premise that Islamic texts allow for multiple interpretations and are adaptable to changing historical conditions. In other words, the entire reform project was phrased and conceptualized from within an Islamic frame of reference. The same can be said regarding the reforms of the *mudawanna* in Morocco in 2004 (Charrad 2012).

Islamic feminism is and continues to be a highly contested label, as many of its key advocates and practitioners distance themselves from the label, problematize it, or qualify it. It has changed its meaning over the years and has many definitions and manifestations, almost as many as the women who engage with it. In her earlier work, Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2011) links the beginnings of the Islamic feminist movement with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979. Mir-Hosseini uses the term “Islamic feminist” to describe the “Islamist Iranian women who after the 1979 revolution played a crucial role in silencing other women’s voices” (4), meaning she identified Islamic feminists as supporters of Islamist agendas. In a later phase, she makes a distinction between “Islamic feminists” and “Islamist women,” arguing that Islamic feminists do not necessarily subscribe to political Islam, and more importantly, engage critically with Islamic texts and Islamist movements. Such engagement culminates in the Musawah movement in which Hosseini herself is a key member (*ibid.*). Further, Omaima Abou Bakr (2013), a prominent Egyptian Islamic feminist, defines the Islamic feminist movement as an intellectual and activist project that focuses on “the production of gender-sensitive knowledge within an Islamic frame of reference,” adding that “[b]esides critiquing patriarchal discrimination [in male mainstream jurisprudence], the ultimate aim is reform and reconstruction (3). It is this Islamic feminist knowledge production project that is now recognized as characteristic of the movement.

In the 1980s, women’s groups in Egypt were self-identified as secular. A more accurate term I suggest would be non-Islamist due to the many meanings and connotations of “secular” in the Egyptian context.<sup>5</sup> In preparation for the 1993 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the issue of how to frame women’s rights agenda (i.e. using a universal rights approach versus a rights approach compatible with Islam) was the subject of heated discussions amongst feminists. The consensus at the end was in favor of arguing for rights from within an Islamic/cultural framework. This was particularly the case with the task force that worked on proposing amendments to marriage and divorce laws in Egypt, a campaign that eventually led to passing Law 1 in 2000, which made it possible for women to obtain a no-fault divorce (*khul’*) and introduced a new template for marriage contracts with an appendix listing possible conditions to be inserted in the contract. The aim of Law 1 was primarily consciousness-raising. The ICPD, which convened in Egypt, was an important milestone in the history of the women’s movement in Egypt because it enabled public debates on gender rights, pushed rights agendas, and encouraged the formation of feminist groups. The overall experience, particularly the direct and confrontational encounters with Islamists in the NGO forum, convinced many feminist groups to rethink their positions vis-a-vis ignoring or disregarding the culturalist and Islamist discourses in their activism.

Hence, framing women’s rights agendas with reference to values and concepts in Islam has been a key strategy undertaken by women rights activists in their battle for rights. I argue the picture is blurred or distorted due to the large variations in the usage, meanings, and connotations of the terms feminism, Islam, and religion, as well as the conflicting, even adversarial, ideological positions pitting secular feminism versus Islamic feminism. Importantly, Mir Hosseini (2011) notes the rancor and anger often exhibited by radical voices from both camps vis-a-vis one another, despite the fluidity and transformations in the positions of many feminists’ responses to historical changes. Mir-Hosseini’s feminist views regarding the relations, tensions, and dynamics between feminism and religion have developed and changed along the years. Her more recent position calls for “a reconciliation and transcendence of the distinction” between secular feminism and Islamic feminism (*ibid.*, 11).

If one of the arguments for the importance of Islamic feminists in Arab societies has been that their references to Islamic values and concepts enable them to address larger audiences in their societies and legitimizing their work by virtue of its closeness to Arab cultures and values, then how effective has this approach been? This is a difficult question to answer, particularly as I have persistently blurred the boundaries between Islamic feminists and secular feminists. In certain

contexts, resorting to religious justifications often is very useful and is a strategy adopted by a diversity of feminists. However, when an Islamic feminist in Egypt challenges the core of patriarchal discrimination with solid scholarship and iron-clad arguments, she will be met with maximum aggression and may be dismissed or denied access to public platforms. History has shown that producing feminist theological knowledge is one thing, but having the authority and the power to disseminate this knowledge and be accepted by the mainstream is another. Similar to secular feminists, Islamic feminists are not looked upon favorably by orthodox and conservative religious establishments; they too are regarded with suspicion by authoritarian postcolonial states, who have consistently sought to manipulate the power of religion to their own ends. Like secular feminists, Islamic feminists are entangled in the complex circle of state, religion, and dictatorship.

### **Concluding Reflections**

I have attempted a brief survey of my experience with how feminists in Egypt have made use of the political opportunities presented to them. Important to this process is how they negotiated, accommodated, or confronted power by taking into consideration multiple key trends in the history of Arab feminisms. My aim has been threefold: (1) to highlight the variety and richness in direction and activism; (2) to invite a revision of some dominant stereotypical narratives about feminist activism that undermine much that was achieved; and (3) to shed light on an important variable that often gets lost in accounts, which includes how Arab feminists practiced and advocated for their rights in authoritarian contexts that are not by definition genuine supporters of rights and freedoms. In other words, Arab feminists, in their struggle for gender justice, did not only confront patriarchal prejudice and discrimination, but they did so in undemocratic authoritarian settings that are inimical to all forms of collective organizing and action.

In the aftermath of the wave of Arab revolutions in 2011, feminists in Egypt seized the opportunities that were presented to them consequent to the opening up of political spaces for mobilization and activism on the ground. They formed a feminist coalition; partnered with broader coalitions; joined new political parties and various initiatives; organized campaigns; organized and participated in street demonstrations; participated in negotiations with official bodies and state actors over legal reform and constitutional reform; lobbied members of parliament; and led media campaigns to raise consciousness regarding gender justice. Now, with the vilification campaign against rights groups and the closing down of political spaces that marks the current moment in Egypt, it is easy, and very common, to hear voices that question the ability of feminists to attain the goal of gender justice. Despite the fact that right now the light at the end of the tunnel is difficult to see, it is important to remember that gains have been achieved. There is consensus amongst feminists in Egypt that one of the revolutionary gains has been the breaking of the taboo about sexual violence. A law has passed criminalizing harassment, anti-sexual harassment units have been established in police stations, and the issue is no longer treated as a taboo but as a social challenge that must be addressed. Tunisia, the jewel of the crown in Arab revolutions, passed one of the most progressive anti-violence against women laws in the world.<sup>6</sup>

The history of Arab feminisms is a history of appropriation, manipulation, and negotiation with power in authoritarian postcolonial states. Arab feminisms, however, are not *in* crisis, as has been suggested in some forums, but are constantly operating in crisis mode, the modus operandi of feminists living under dictatorships. We have accumulated a lot of experience and skills in confronting challenges, accommodating setbacks, and surviving against all odds. To answer the question what can feminism accomplish, we must first acknowledge and recognize what feminism has accomplished, and under what circumstances. Understanding the past is a prerequisite for charting the future. And our past is, understandably, strewn with numerous losses and gains, achievements and setbacks, and

success and frustration. There is significant scholarship that documents women's movements in the Arab world, yet much remains unsaid and unwritten. These are the little fragments, the differentiated stories of state and non-state actors in local, regional, and international settings. Who said what and why? Why was one meeting successful? What made an international solidarity campaign successful, while another one failed? I make a case for the necessity of remembering, preserving our memory, both short term and long term memory. All things considered much has been achieved. I argue that feminism has been one of the most successful social movements in the Arab world, if not the most successful.

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## Notes

1. This article is adapted from a keynote address delivered at a conference at the American University in Beirut, "Feminism in Crisis? Gender and the Arab Public Sphere," on 19-20 January 2018.

2. A good example is Shibly Shimayyal, a reformist and medical doctor, who introduced social Darwinism to the Arab cultural scene through his translation of Buchner's commentary on Darwin. There was a fascinating exchange in the year 1886 between women writers and Shimayyal, as they challenged his views. He used pseudo scientific arguments that were popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to argue for the superiority of men over women and for undermining women's demands for suffrage and freedom (Shimayyal 1886).

3. The Jihan Law was passed by presidential decree during the period of recess of parliament and was not subsequently presented to parliament for endorsement as per constitutional mandate. In addition, the Law was not of an urgent nature, which would have allowed the President to use his exceptional power to pass a law during parliament recess period. Strictly speaking, it was unconstitutional.

4. While Law 44 allowed a wife to divorce her husband should he marry another wife without proving harm, which meant that marrying another wife was acknowledged as harm that did not need further proof. Law 100 stated that a wife had to prove harm related to her husband's second marriage.

5. Nadjé al-Ali has an important intervention in the use and connotations of the term secular in Egypt (al-Ali 2000).

6. For details about the anti-sexual harassment movement in Egypt post-2011 see Elsadda 2018 and Tadros 2016.

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