

## A TALE OF TWO CONTRACTS: TOWARDS A SITUATED UNDERSTANDING OF “WOMEN INTERESTS” IN EGYPT

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I am sitting on a plastic mat on the dirt floor of the largest room of a two story unpainted brick house, sharing a lunch meal of lentils, molasses, dry bread and green onions with Um Sayed and some members of her extended family, her daughter, Um Mahmoud, and her granddaughter Karima. As we casually talk about Karima's marriage, consummated four weeks ago, Um Mahmoud proudly recounts, for the third time, the particulars of the fight that took place over the value of Karima's marriage inventory, her *ayma*. Um Mahmoud explains how she insisted that the *ayma*<sup>1</sup> be valued at 4,000 pounds<sup>2</sup>, citing in great detail its various items, whereas the groom's family, in particular his older sister, protested, insisting that the maximum her brother would agree to was 2,000 pounds. Um Mahmoud stood firm on her demand and after several weeks of negotiations – during which the threat of canceling the wedding loomed – the groom, a semi-skilled worker, succumbed and both he and his uncle, as guarantor, signed on a 4,000 pound *ayma*. The groom's sister, Um Mahmoud reports in a victorious, self-congratulatory tone, was so angry she did not even come to the wedding.

Although I had heard this story for the third time, its importance to my research had not yet quite sunk in. I had heard about the *ayma* before, but had largely dismissed it as a formality. Munching on a piece of dry bread dipped in molasses, I casually asked the women whether the *ayma* was an important component of marriage negotiations in this community in general, or did it assume a significance in Karima's case for specific reasons. As I did not write an *ayma* myself

when I got married eight years ago, I continued, I did not quite understand why Um Mahmoud made such a fuss about it, and I wondered if they could provide an explanation. The mixture of shock, pity and disbelief that my harmless question elicited from the three generations of women sitting around me was a turning point in my research. Um Mahmoud's reaction was the most severe:

What! You did not have an *ayma*? How is this possible? Are you living in another world? ... Do you not know your rights as a woman? The *ayma* is the only way to protect a woman from men and from time, *el ayma tedman ha' el sitt min el regalla w-el-zaman*. When you get old, who will feed you? Your husband will find himself a pretty, fair new bride and kick you out of the house, *yezátik*. Is there a house without an *ayma*? You were a fool, *moghaffala*, they sold you cheap ... If a woman does not have a *ayma* she is considered married for free, *itgawwizit bi balash*, and people would scorn/belittle/humiliate her, *yeaayrouha* ... It is not your fault, maybe you were young and naive. [Um Sayed was clearly desperately groping for explanations for my disgraceful behaviour, as in fact she knew from a previous discussion that I was married at 28, quite old by community standards.] But what about your parents, what is their excuse to throw you like that, *nasek mosh haram aleehom yermouki*? You must go and make a *ayma* immediately. Give your husbands some drugs, *birsham* [I presumed she meant to make him drowsy], and let him sign a *ayma* ... You must protect yourself by a *ayma*, a *ayma* ensures/secures a women's rights, *el ayma betsoon haq el horma*. Men are not to be trusted. A man is to be trusted as much as a sieve is to be trusted with water, *ya meamen lel rigal, yameamen lel maya fel ghorbal*.

## Introduction

This paper is about the *ayma*, most closely translated as the marriage inventory. It is also about how poverty and gender intersect; how socio-economic location partly shapes one's perceptions of, and responses to, gender inequalities, and what this means for feminist activism. The data presented in this chapter is based on interviews and participation in the daily lives of 36 “poor” women in four low-income neighborhoods in Cairo<sup>3</sup>. The data suggest that the *ayma*, although ignored by both researchers and activists (“native” and foreign

alike), is an essential aspect of marriage negotiations among the women I interviewed, and arguably in other low-income neighborhoods in Cairo as well.

By exploring this particular practice, the aims of the paper are three fold, all of which seek to contribute directly or indirectly to debates on gender and the indigenization of knowledge debate. First, I aim to describe an important practice in marriage negotiations, which has not been the subject of previous anthropological study, highlighting an indigenous local discourse surrounding it which reveals female discontent and attempts at curbing male power. Second I use the example of the *ayma* to raise theoretical questions regarding women's agency, consciousness and responses to gender inequalities. I specifically challenge universalist assumptions in feminist scholarship about women's acceptance of male dominance, their internalization of their relatively subordinate positions and their presumed passivity in the face of oppression. Despite emerging empirical evidence to the contrary, this view is quite entrenched and "continues to hold sway" in *both* western feminist discourse as well as in the work of some third world scholars writing about their own cultures (Agrawal 1994; Mohanty 1985). Thus, as has been suggested by some scholars, "indigenous" contributions to specificity may not necessarily contrast with "non indigenous" generalizations (Morsy et al. 1991: 92).

The *ayma* very vividly illustrates the mistrust and suspicions that characterize gender relations in the study community, specifically as they relate to marriage. It also illustrates the ways in which certain groups of women attempt to mitigate some of the acknowledged perils of men as husbands, and expand their options and bargaining power in their marriages. The practice of the *ayma* sheds light on how wives seek to secure themselves and their children financially in a specific socioeconomic and historical context where men are increasingly either unwilling or unable to provide for them. While a "culture of silence", and a "silent endurance" (see Khattab 1992), may accurately describe Egyptian women's responses in some contexts, a "culture of protest" may nonetheless prevail in other arenas and contexts. The practice of the *ayma* clearly demonstrates that not all categories of Egyptian women can be characterized, as they have been by some Egyptian feminist writers, as

unaware that they are being oppressed in the first place ... as grooves in a wheel ... dolls that have learnt how to perform certain roles and who have neither the consciousness nor education that can enable them to begin to question and challenge their surroundings.

(Sahar el Mogy in Hagar 1994: 226, translated from Arabic)

Third, by contrasting the practice of the *ayma*, with the “new marriage contract” campaign, initiated by middle and upper class feminists in Egypt several years ago, I raise several theoretical and political questions about the role of the “feminist movement” in Egypt<sup>4</sup> in perpetuating unequal power relations between women. Juxtaposing two equally “indigenous” discourses and strategies related to marriage and gender relations raises questions about what constitutes “authentic” or “indigenous” knowledge and points to the need to de-construct both the concept of “indigenous” and that of “women”. These questions lead me to argue for a more situated analysis of gender relations and “women’s interests” in Egypt, as well as more concerted efforts at forging vertical coalitions amongst women across both class and educational lines.<sup>5</sup> Such efforts would contribute to both reformulating the existing body of knowledge and theory regarding gender relations and women’s agency, as well as strengthen feminist activism in Egypt.

### The “Study Community”

The paper is part of a broader anthropological study that investigates the ways in which women, at different points in their life cycle, perceive, talk about, experience and negotiate unfavorable relations in their daily life, both in the family and in the informal labor market. The study was carried out over 15 months between July 1995 and October 1996 in four low-income neighborhoods in Cairo. The broader study was based on interviews, informal discussions and participation in the daily lives of 87 women and 12 men in these neighborhoods. This “sample” was not selected to be representative of the neighborhoods, nor did I attempt to carry out a geographically focused study. Rather, the group of people on which the broader study is based constitute what may be termed a “purposeful” sample. I initially selected a few women to reflect particular patterns of female employment that I was interested in: waged work in the informal

economy, and home-based sub-contracting. It is through the introductions of these few early key informants to their relatives, neighbors and members in their range of employment, market, and spirit possession networks that I ended up with this “sample”. Although my interviewees resided in four different geographical neighborhoods, I refer to them as a “community” or a “study community” nonetheless, because they were all linked to each other through various informal networks.

This paper is based on interviews and participant observations among only 36 of the women in the larger sample, as well as some of their male relatives and several lawyers. “Low-income” is of course a general description that does not do justice to socio-economic differentiation and diversity of lifestyles within neighborhoods. However, the differences in family incomes and lifestyles did not vary significantly amongst the 36 women I interviewed. The majority of women were working in the informal economy<sup>6</sup> either as unskilled wage laborers in workshops, or as home-based sub-contractors. Depending on the type of piece work, and its regularity, a pieceworker can earn between 2-4 pounds for a ten hour working day.<sup>7</sup> An unskilled female wage laborer can earn between 3-6 pounds for a ten hour working day. There were also a few women who were self-employed as small-scale vendors. The occupations of their husbands varied, but most were closely tied to the informal economy, largely as unskilled, sometimes, casual labors. There were also a few skilled craftsmen whose incomes were higher. The irregular nature of employment, which meant that it was difficult to assure a fixed monthly income, however, was one of the main features of the economic lives of these families. Only three husbands were employed as lower level bureaucrats (guards and mailmen) in public sector companies, and thus had fixed and regular incomes.

The women ranged in age between 18 and 60. These were all Muslim and were mostly illiterate or had completed no more than primary school. Two had finished a high school diploma, and two had completed a preparatory degree. Most women lived in nuclear households with their children; only four women lived in an extended household with the parents of either the husband or wife. Twenty-eight of the women were renters and the rest owned their apartments. Those who were renting were typically renting two rooms in a larger building and

shared a latrine with three or four other families. All households had access to electricity, but access to clean water was less universal. Ten of the women did not have a water tap in their rented rooms, and either used a public tap or bought water from neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Context: Marriage Transactions and Negotiations**

My aim in this paper is not to provide a comprehensive account of marriage negotiations in the study community, capturing all the subtleties and complex dynamics of such relations, but rather, to focus on a specific practice directly related to my main theoretical concerns. More comprehensive accounts of marriage in low-income communities in Cairo, have been provided in several other studies, mainly generated by foreign researchers (see for example Singerman 1994; Rugh 1985). The role of marriage in the Middle East as an idiom for negotiating political and economic conflicts and expression of competition in the wider society has also been well illustrated by several studies (Rugh 1985; Tapper 1991; Eickelman/Piscatori 1996). Nonetheless the following brief description of marriage transactions among my interviewees provides a context for better understanding the practice of the *ayma*.

Marriage negotiations in the study community typically underwent four stages. The first stage, the formal declaration of intent, is signaled by both families getting together and reading the opening verse of the Koran, *irayet el fatha*. This is considered an informal engagement, and is usually referred to as *khutuba*, engagement. The reading of the *fatha*, which usually takes place usually in the bride's family's residence is often preceded by many negotiations, regarding the timing of the three following stages: the formal engagement party, *shabka*, the official religious ceremony, *katb el kitab*, and the consummation of the marriage, *el Dukhla*.<sup>9</sup> The financial commitments of both families are worked out, and agreed upon, at this stage, although they may remain the subjects of disagreements and renegotiations for many months afterwards.

The formal signature of the marriage contract and the religious ceremony, *katb el kitab*, sometimes takes place at the same time as the *shabka*, the formal engagement party, and sometimes at the time of the

consummation of the wedding, *laylit el dukhla*. In situations, where an engagement is expected to be long which is becoming increasingly common, as when the families need time to amass the necessary “marriage capital”, or because they want to wait for a girl to complete her education, there is a preference for signing the marriage contract at the time of the shabka, as this enables couples to associate more freely (see also Singerman 1995). The engagement party is usually paid for by the bride’s family and the wedding party by the groom’s family, although both families sometimes share the expenses of both events.

It is noteworthy that discussions between families take on straightforward financial overtones, from the very first stage of marriage negotiations, with terms like buying and selling, *bayi’ha* and *shariha* used to express degrees of commitment to a marriage. Typically a groom must provide the marital home, and a present of gold, referred to as a *shabka*, and the bedroom furnishings.<sup>10</sup> The average acceptable *Shabkha* in the community studied ranged between 500-1,000 pounds, and typically consisted of one or two 21 carat gold bracelets and a gold wedding band. A particularly expensive type of *shabkha*, the unattainable dream of all the women I talked to, was known as *shabka shabah*, literally “ghost shabkha”, and consisted of two thick and elaborately decorated golden bracelets costing about 1,200 LE each. The name ghost, “shabah” is particularly interesting to note as it derives from the same nickname given by Egyptians to the top of the line Mercedes car in Egypt (costing about 600,000 pounds), the ultimate status, prestige and wealth symbol of the nouveau riche. While acquiring a “ghost” Mercedes may be a sign of social mobility and prestige for Egypt’s upper classes, acquiring a “ghost” *shabka* is a marker of social mobility and status distinctions amongst lower class families.

In addition to the *shabka*, the groom is typically expected to provide an apartment, or more commonly a room or two. This is not always possible, however, given the high costs of housing in Cairo,<sup>11</sup> and new couples sometimes start the first years of their married lives in the parental household of the groom, or, more rarely, in the parental household of the bride. The groom is also expected to provide the bedroom furnishings, and cotton for upholstery of sofas and chairs, if there is a parlor or living room. The actual material for the upholstery, is usually the responsibility of the bride. The furniture for rooms other

than the bedroom and kitchen equipment is open to negotiation between the bride and groom, but, is increasingly becoming the responsibility of the bride as part of her trousseau, *gihaz*.

The dower, *mahr*, whereby the groom's family pays the bride's family an agreed upon sum of money, has been documented as part of financial arrangements of marriage among Muslims in several other communities in Egypt (see Rugh 1985; Singerman 1995). However, it is noteworthy that the *mahr* was not prevalent in the community I studied, suggesting that it may be in fact a much more fluid and historically specific institution, *despite* its religious basis, than is commonly assumed or suggested by anthropological studies in Egypt<sup>12</sup>. Only a few women, usually older ones who got married in rural areas, reported that they received a *mahr*. Many women explained that the *mahr* was part of the marriage negotiations of financially better off people, *el nas el mabsuta*, but it was not part of the negotiations of the very poor, *el nas el ghalaba*, like themselves. The more common arrangement in the study community was that the groom (and/or his family), would directly purchase some of the furnishing and equipment of the marital home, as well provide the *shabka*. No additional sum of money was normally provided for the bride.

### The Marriage Inventory: “An Ayma Handcuffs a Man”

Within the context of marriage negotiations described above, the marital *ayma* emerged as a critical component. As the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter reveals, the *ayma* is an issue that I stumbled upon in my discussions and I was unprepared to deal with how emphatic women were about its value. Although my fieldwork demonstrates the centrality of the *ayma* in marriage negotiations, it has remained largely unexplored in depth in anthropological studies on the family by both indigenous and non-indigenous researchers (see for example El-Messiri 1978; Rugh 1981), including recent ones addressing marriage arrangements in Cairo in great detail, such as Singerman (1994).

The *ayma*, is used to specifically refer to a written document on which all items of furniture and supplies that a bride takes to her new home are recorded and itemized, stipulating that these are the sole property of the bride. These items include the goods she brings to the

marriage, those her husband brings, and those items they receive jointly as gifts. The *shabka* is also sometimes included in it.

Mutually agreed upon in advance, often after tough negotiations, it is signed by the groom, before or on the day of the *katb el kitab*, as well as by two witnesses who act as guarantors, in case he defaults on any commitments. The negotiations center on the monetary value of the *ayma*, with the bride's family usually inflating it's value. By signing the *ayma*, a husband officially declares that he has received all these items for safe-keeping, *amana*. However, they remain the property of his wife which she can claim back anytime she wants during marriage or in the event of a conflict, a spouse's death or a divorce. This stipulation is enforceable both legally, as well by community arbitrations as will be discussed below. Once signed, the *ayma* is carefully guarded by women, and is usually in safekeeping with the bride's family, often the mother, to ensure that the husband does not have access to it.

There is some variation in how an *ayma* is formalized and the types of items that are included in it. Variations appeared to be based on either socio-economic standing or regional origin.

Most of the women in the community studied, tended to include equipment and furniture as well as the value of the gold of the *shabka*. Some women, particularly those who were relatively less well to do, included breakable and exhaustible items like glasses, china sets, and bed sheets, whereas others confined their *ayma* items to durable goods and furniture. Several women in the sample, who identify themselves as *masriyyin* (original dwellers of the city), not *fallabin* (migrants from lower Egypt), or *Sa'ayda* (migrants from Upper Egypt), emphasized, with a note of contempt, that they would never include the value of the *shabka* into the *ayma* and that it was only the *fallabin* who did that. In most *aymas*, each item is listed in detail and is assigned a monetary value, which is often inflated. The value of all the items are then added up to make up the total value of the *ayma*. A few families preferred not to assign a monetary value to each item, but simply described the item in detail, noting such things as the type of wood used and the brand of the implement, explaining that this protected them against inflation. Once the *ayma* is acted upon in case of a marital dispute, a monetary value can be assigned to the items, based on current market prices.

The value of *aymas* in the community varied tremendously, from a modest 50 Egyptian pounds, to 5,000 pounds. Some of this variation is, of course, a reflection of the date of marriage, since I interviewed women who were married within a span of 40 years. However, it is also important to note that the value of the *ayma* is not necessarily a good indicator of socio-economic status, as in many cases, some of the items included have not actually been provided, or their value has intentionally been inflated. For marriages occurring within the past two years, a typical *ayma*, which included a gold *shabka* of 40 grams of gold, was about 2-4,000 pounds.

The *ayma* is usually negotiated formally by men, generally fathers, uncles or older brothers of the bride, but informally it is the women, generally mothers, aunts or older sisters of the bride who decide on the items to be included and on their value. As Um Nasra put it, “When it comes to negotiations over an *ayma*, it is the women who needle and prompt, and the men who do the formal talking: *el-sittat bt wiz w-el rigalla bitihakim*.”

The *ayma* is not an Islamic convention, and although it has legal standing as will be discussed later, it has no explicit basis in state legislation, but is based on customary law, *'urf*. The history of the *ayma*, when and how it was actually introduced is difficult to trace.<sup>13</sup> Although women were not aware of the history of the *ayma*, many, but not all, of the older women I interviewed (in their 60s) recalled having a *ayma* in their marriages, but were not sure whether their own mothers also had one. Although the importance of the *ayma* was uncontested by all the women I interviewed, as an item of negotiation, it appears to have taken on a new significance in more recent marriages in the community.

The *ayma* appears to be used in various ways and gains different meanings in specific marriage negotiations. Discussions surrounding the *ayma* were sometimes in effect being used to screen potential grooms, or to improve a family's social status by showing off the “value” of their daughter. The greater the value of the *ayma* that a husband signs on, which is always publicly declared, the greater the status of the bride and her family in the community. Negotiations regarding the *ayma* thus partly serve to create or reinforce rankings and distinctions amongst families. The *ayma*, however, also appears to play an important role as a form of insurance against women's vulnerability in

marriage, which is the aspect most relevant for my interests in this paper. The next section will elaborate this argument.

Marriage negotiations, of which the *ayma* was an essential component, operate within the framework of specific rights and obligations conferred by prevalent gender ideologies. Moore (1994) terms these local, customary and standard understandings of the rights and needs of different types of people, “local theories of entitlement”. She argues that these are fluid, always subject to contestation, as well as “resources which are drawn on in the process of negotiation” (Moore 1994: 104). Moore’s argument is well illustrated by the practice of the *ayma*. The *ayma* appears to have gained a particular importance in more recent marriage negotiations in the study community, particularly over the past decade. Discussions with several generations of women suggest that their strategies for pressing claims and gaining entitlement from men are changing.

‘Local theories of entitlements’ within marriage in the community studied, appear to be changing – and thus giving more centrality to the practice of the *ayma*, partly in response to broader socio-economic changes in society and family structures. Some of these changes relate to the dramatic rise in the cost of living over the past decade which has been unmatched by male wages.

Partly as a result, there are indications that female-supported families are increasing. Conservative estimates suggest that at least 18 percent of households are mainly financed by a woman (Fergany 1994). In-depth research in urban communities indicate that these may reach 30 percent (EQI 1987; El-Kholy 1996). These developments pose a challenge to one of the material basis of patriarchal ideology in Egypt.

Woman and men’s relationships to marriage thus appear to be changing. Women are realizing that men may no longer provide the financial security needed. The increased emphasis on the *ayma* in recent marriages may be an indication that women are both conscious of these developments and actively seek to mitigate their options. In a context of poverty, divorce also poses a financial burden on the wife’s family as a divorced woman is expected to go back to her parents and becomes once more their financial responsibility. The insistence on the *ayma* is thus strongly supported by a social and family structure that is trying to rescind the cost of divorce.

My data suggest that women in the study community realize that

they are disadvantaged in the marital union. These feelings are exacerbated in the current context where male wages are generally not enough to sustain a family. As men lose one of their main markers of masculinity as defined by prevalent gender ideologies, my fieldwork suggests that they respond in different ways. Some men simply withdraw completely from any financial responsibilities in the household, *el rigalla khal'a*, was how some women expressed it, and retain their limited income for their own purposes, such as drinking or smoking. Alternatively, women reported that men often asserted themselves through being more violent during the common disagreements and conflicts over finances, as well as more sexually demanding and abusive.<sup>14</sup>

Some studies in other parts of the world have suggested a link between increased domestic violence and women's lack of access to cash due to rising poverty. In her study of a low-income district in Ecuador over a ten-year period (1978-1988), Moser shows that 48 percent of her sub-sample of women reported an increase in domestic violence during this period. Her interviewees made an explicit link between increases in prices and their lack of access to cash, reporting being physically or emotionally abused by their husbands when forced to ask for more money.

Personal status laws in Egypt grant men a range of rights over women in marriage which expose wives to various sorts of vulnerabilities. These include men's rights for unilateral divorce, the right to marry up to four wives, and the right to forcefully return a wife to a marital home, the home of obedience law, *bayt el ta'a* (see NGO Platform 1994, 1995; Egypt's Report 1995; Zulficar 1994).

These rights and obligations, however, gain specific meanings and are contested differently in different socio-economic and historical contexts.

Women in the study community appear to be taking explicit measures to "up the stakes" of being abandoned, unprovided for, or mistreated in their marriages. Some of the powers of men that a *ayma* aims at restricting are the threat of divorce, the threat of being thrown penniless out of the house, and the threat of a second wife. The *ayma* was also used to pressure a husband to take marital conflicts more seriously and attempt to resolve them, as well as to increase a wife's ability to demand a divorce should she so desire. The *ayma* seems to

be a powerful mechanism for negotiation partly because men are particularly susceptible in an economic context where it would be difficult to replace the items on the *ayma*, and so a husband's economic situation could deteriorate markedly should a woman reclaim her *ayma*.

The strong words that women used to express why and how the *ayma* works to control and check male power, reveals that the *ayma* provides a local *discourse* of male disempowerment and female power. It reveals quite clearly some of women's perceptions about marriage, and the need to reduce men's control within it. Amal, newly married, talks with great pride about her *ayma*.

My *ayma* was large, it was for 7,000 pounds. I have *hand cuffed/tied up* my husband with it, *kattiftu biha*. We put things in it that were not even there, like the television and a video. And he signed on them. This way he is *restricted/controlled/condemned*, *makhoun*, he cannot play with his tail, *yil'ab bi-daylub*. [This is an Arabic idiom generally implying illicit extra-marital affairs, or get married and get *dura* (co-wife) to live with me.]

Karima, 32, married to a grocery shop owner and with three pre-school children, generates income through sewing shoes at home. She explains why her *ayma*, which she is guarding carefully since her marriage five years ago, is important:

It is important so that he does not throw me out to my father's house after he takes what he wants from me, *ghiyitu* [meaning sexual pleasure]. I have *a hold on him* with an *ayma*, but without an *ayma* there is no rope with which I can tie him, *mafsh habl rabtab bib*. Any time he can tell me go out with your *galabiyya* [traditional dress for some women in low-income areas]. A *ayma* *protects a woman's rights*, *bitihfaz ha' el sitt*. Otherwise how can a woman ensure her rights, *tidman ha' aha izay*? Men, as a kind, cannot be trusted, *sanf el riggala malush aman*.

Shocked that I could even ask whether she had an *ayma*, Laila, whose parents migrated to Cairo from lower Egypt when she was a few months old, confirms that she wrote an *ayma*, emphasizes its role in protecting women's rights in marriage, and details some of its items. Her comments highlight the link between the *ayma* and a very com-

mon form of female protest, referred to as *ghadab*, *ghidbit*, which literally means angry but refers also to a woman deserting the marital home and going to her parents home until some form of reconciliation takes place. This practice of *ghadab* was frequently used by women to publicly express their grievances and demand that relatives and neighbours intervene to resolve a conflict. The homes of parents were often nearby in the community, so this form of temporary desertion of a marital home caused minor disruptions to work schedules or child care.<sup>15</sup> The existence of an *ayma*, however, increased a woman's ability to engage in this type of contestatory behaviour. Laila explains:

How can a girl marry without an *ayma*, if she does, she can be told goodbye by her husband [i.e. be kicked out of the house] any second. He would have no incentive to try and get her back from her parents house when there is a conflict and she is upset, *ghidbit*. The *ayma* is much more important than the deferred dower *Mo'akbkhār*<sup>16</sup> for safeguarding/ensuring a woman's rights, *daman ha' el sit*, to restrict/control a man, 'alashan el ragil yeb'a mahkum. On my *ayma*, which was for 3,500, I wrote all the things that both he and I got, from the bedroom, to the aluminum sets to the spice rack ...

Emphasizing the importance of the *ayma* in ensuring that your husband does not throw you out and sell your belongings, Laila then told me the story of her neighbor, Um Mohammed, whose husband divorced her without informing her, *ghiyabi*, when she was in the village visiting her family. When she came back, she found that he had sold most of the furniture, had married someone else, and was now living with her in another community. She issued a complaint and her husband was arrested. He returned some of the furniture, but was not able to provide the rest or to pay the remaining value of the 4,000 LE *ayma*, on which he had signed. He received a three-month prison term. While this only partly helped Um Mohammed, it nonetheless sent a strong message to other men in the community, argued Laila emphatically, about what they should treat their wives.

As I talked to more women and observed discussions about marriage arrangements, I began to realize that the *ayma* was indeed a critical component of marriage negotiations, and an important tool for women to secure their marriage, ward off the looming threat of divorce, and secure themselves financially. Reducing the husband's

options in terms of taking on a second co-habitating wife was mentioned several times as one of the situations where an *ayma* can be invoked. On the surface, this was singled out as the main source of resentment: not that a husband could take another wife, but that the co-wife could be made to share the house. Um Samir explains:

I do not care if he married someone else as long as he does not bring her here to use my *gibaz*, the things on my *ayma*, and as long as my husband is making my life comfortable [meaning largely financially], *mi’ayyishni ’isha Hilwa*. With an *ayma*, it is more difficult for a man to remarry, because he can find himself penniless, *’ala el balata*, if he has to get the furniture and equipment for another house.

On probing further, however, it became clear that in fact, the *ayma* is used as a strategy to realize women’s desire to deter a husband from taking a second wife, co-habiting or otherwise. Women realize that finding another apartment or room and furnishing it is so expensive, that a man can rarely marry a second wife unless his first wife accepts co-habitation, hence they stress on this issue. Women clearly believe the *ayma* serves as an important deterrent against polygamy. Although polygamy is legally allowed, in practice its prevalence rate is lower than 2 percent in Egypt.

In the study community, there was only one polygamous marriage. Could these strategies be working? The significance of the *ayma*, however, goes beyond attempting to get a better deal if divorce occurs, providing economic security for the future, or warding off the threat of a divorce or a co-wife. Perhaps just as importantly, it is used as a *bargaining chip*, throughout the marriage. It enables women to monitor their husband’s behaviour, and ensure that they do not default on their main responsibilities as economic providers. Mayada’s grandmother, a woman in her seventies, explains,

the *ayma* is important not just to ensure a woman’s rights if there is a divorce or a dispute, but it is also important to *correct a man if he becomes deviant*, *etawag* [literally bent], or *mosh mash’i ’alatul*, not walking straight.

On probing what *it’awag* meant, it became clear that it centered on the man’s responsibility to provide for his household, *yekafey el bit*.

Mayada's husband's behavior was pointed out as an example of inappropriate behavior that reference to the *ayma* was able to address. Even though Mayada is recently married and is pregnant with her first child, her husband, Ragab, has stopped providing for her and spends a lot of his time gambling and drinking. Mayada and her husband had a fight last month, during which he told her that if she did not like his behavior she could leave. Mayada's entire extended family intervened, insisting that Mayada be divorced, because her husband's behavior was unacceptable, and demanding that he pay them the value of the *ayma*, estimated at 10,000 LE, almost double the real value of the furniture and equipment listed on it. After a few days of negotiations and discussions, Mayada's husband came to his senses, *'il*. He now gives Mayada money regularly and no longer spends all his wages on drinking. The family knew that Ragab had a reputation as a gambler, which is one of the reasons they had insisted on a large *ayma*.

It is noteworthy however, that part of the reason why the *ayma* was effective in the above account is partly because Mayada and her husband were living with her extended family of 14 other people, and that the entire family was united in its decision. The *ayma* is not always as effective. Clearly the *ayma* is not an effective tool for all women. The structure of the family was one of the factors that determined the relative power of the *ayma*. Other factors, such as the nature of the relationship between the two families, as well as the personal attributes of a wife (such as beauty, or a good reputation) were also important factors in determining how successfully an *ayma* could be invoked.

Reda, originally from Tanta in Lower Egypt, expressed deep sorrow for me because I did not have an *ayma*, and thus no security in my marriage. I was living *barakawi* (from *baraka*, meaning as a fatalist relying on good luck, with no strategies or plans for the future), and this is the worst situation a woman can be in, she emphasized. Reda views the *ayma* as a way to wear a man out, make his throat dry, *tinashif ri' elragil*, so that divorce is not that easy for him. She was married two years ago and her *ayma* was valued at 2,500 LE. Although she has had no disputes with her husband so far, so that the question of the *ayma* never arose between them, she explained that it was important to her sister Somayya who got married 6 years ago, and whose husband divorced her last year because they were unable to

conceive. She took back much of the furniture and equipment, most of which he had provided.

Amal, 27 years old, and divorced last year, also recounts how the *ayma* enabled her to pressure her husband into divorcing her. She had signed her marriage contract 2 years ago, but the actual consummation of the marriage, the *dukhla* was scheduled for a year later to give her husband time to accumulate the necessary financial resources for the marriage. Her husband, however, had accepted to sign on a large *ayma*, when they signed the marriage contract, although they had not yet provided most of the items listed. Although he was a skilled carpenter, he had been out of work for a few months and was in the process of looking for a new job. He assured them that he would provide Amal with a full *gibaz* as soon as he starts working. Amal explained that her mother insisted that he nonetheless sign an inflated *ayma* so as to secure Amal's future, particularly since her groom was not previously known to them; he was a Cairene, not an upper Egyptian like themselves and they did not know his origins. He had seen Amal briefly while she was visiting one of her relatives, when he was fixing some window shutters for them. Amal's relative explained to me in private that his proposal for marriage was accepted quickly by both Amal and her family, because she was already 25, and was not only unengaged, but she was also not getting many suitors.

Six months after signing the marriage contract and *ayma*, Amal's husband began going out with another woman in public, no longer gave Amal any presents, and began maltreating her and hitting her. After various attempts at reconciliation, Amal's parents insisted that he divorce Amal, but he refused unless he was paid 1,000 pounds in return. It was at this point that Amal and her mother went to the lawyer and issued a complaint in court, presented a copy of Amal's original *ayma*, and accused her husband of selling the items on it, a criminal offense known in the legal system as *tabdid manqulat*. Um Amal recalls:

When he was unable to produce the items on the *ayma*, the judge sentenced him to 6 months imprisonment. He then entered into negotiations with us, and we struck a deal, whereby we agreed to give up our rights, *nitnazel*, if he divorces Amal immediately. This process took about six months and we paid 200 pounds for the lawyer. If it was not for the *ayma*, we would have never

been able to make him divorce Amal, and she would have remained at his mercy and miserable, *missa”ha el dabab*.

Although of utility as a bargaining chip within marriage, a woman has to choose her battles carefully so as to decide strategically *when* the *ayma* should invoked or used. Once the *ayma* is presented to the court, the original document must be submitted (as will be discussed later), and once a settlement takes place, a woman loses recourse to her *ayma* for use in future marital negotiations, should she decide to continue with the marriage. Some women thus prefer to settle out of court by means of *taradi*, without giving up their *ayma*. As an insurance policy for securing women’s rights in the conjugal union, clearly conceived of as an essential part of life, but nonetheless as a high risk proposition, the *ayma* thus has some inherent limitations.

The *ayma* was only practiced among Muslim women. I was told that Copts did not have an *ayma*, partly perhaps because divorce is generally not allowed by the Coptic church and marriage is considered a sacrament, rather than a contractual arrangement as is the case in Islam. Another reason may be that the underlying property regime in Coptic marriages is that of a joint property of spouses, whereas in an Islamic marriage, separation of property/goods, known legally as a *dhimma maliyya munfasila*, is the underlying principle. This difference adds a layer of complexity to understanding women’s options and reveals how, even within similar socio-economic locations, there are some variations in men’s and women’s negotiating mechanisms due to variations in the marriage practices of different religious communities. Since the *ayma*’s value, however, goes far beyond the fear of divorce and is used more broadly to contest certain actions by husbands throughout a marriage, more research is needed to investigate more carefully Coptic women’s marital strategies.

The narratives and accounts related above suggest that the *ayma* may play an important role for ensuring that a wife is not thrown out of the house penniless, deterring a husband from taking a second wife and enabling a woman to terminate an abusive marriage. Its stipulations are enforceable through both informal and formal mechanisms. In order to better understand how the *ayma* is enforced legally, I conducted interviews with two lawyers from the community, who had personally arbitrated several cases related to the *ayma*. I also spent

several afternoons in one law office in the community and was able to observe several women who came in to get legal assistance on issues related to the *ayma*. Interestingly, the discussions with lawyers revealed that the *ayma* falls under commercial transactions and contracts and is part of the criminal law, rather than the personal status law which regulates marriage and divorce. Mr. Mahmoud explains:

*Ayma* cases fall under the same category as defaulting on a commercial transaction such as writing an invalid cheque. Thus it is treated as both a criminal offense, which can result in imprisonment, as well as a civil offense which results in a fine. This is unlike the deferred dower, *mu'akkhar*, which is only a civil offence and thus does not entail imprisonment.

Women can raise a complaint through two mechanisms: either issuing a written complaint at the police station, or a direct appeal in court. It is considered a “*Gunha*”, “*khiyana*” or “*tabdid amana*”. As a legal document, the *ayma* falls under safekeeping contracts, *'uqud al amana*, stipulated under clauses 340 and 341, in the criminal laws, and is thus considered a direct criminal offense, *gunha mubashra*.

The legal enforceability of the *ayma*, through resort to civil, not criminal law is crucial to note as it highlights some of the institutional basis of gender discrimination as manifested in the various laws, and women's pragmatic attempts to cope with such institutional biases. Unlike other elements of the marriage contract, such as the *mahr* and *mu'akkhar*, which are also enforceable but only through the judicial system as they are items of personal status laws (and thus entails a drawn out, and complicated process of court proceedings) the *ayma*, as an item of civil law, can be settled much faster at the level of the police.

The other lawyer I interviewed confirmed the legality of the *ayma*, as a commercial transaction, and, revealingly, expressed his sympathy for men as he saw the *ayma* as a sword, *sayf*, which married women dangle over their husbands' necks:

I see many court cases related to *ayma* complaints. If problems occur in a marriage, it is common for a wife to say that her husband has destroyed – *baddid* – the furniture, and a lot of times, what is written on the *ayma* is not actually there. Usually the courts respond by issuing a sentence for imprison-

ment [from 6 months to three years] if the husband does not produce the furniture or its value. The legal procedures are usually quick, and do not take more than two to three months. I usually sympathize with the men, however. If I was asked, I would say, ban the *ayma*, it is not a good 'urf. I usually sympathize with the men, because I know that many of the complaints raised by women are not real, they are fictitious, driven by ulterior motives, *kaydiyya*.

This view was echoed, but in more subtle terms and couched in academic language, in the November 1996 issue of a widely read middle class social magazine published in Arabic, *Nuss el Dunya*. In an article titled: "*The ayma is a useless piece of paper and the law is clear*", the writer, a man, probes into the legality of the *ayma*, from an Islamic *fiqh* point of view, and from a legal point of view, using sophisticated legal language and resorting to examples from Islamic history and the Koran.

After his extensive review, the writer concludes that the *ayma* has no basis in either Islamic *fiqh* or in civil or criminal codes, and calls upon the courts to rethink its legality. He argues that it creates a lot of problems in marriages and is a burden on the court system. Although he does not articulate it outright, the writer was clearly arguing for rejecting the *ayma*'s legal enforceability. His conclusions and recommendations are quite dangerous from the point of view of the women I talked to for whom the *ayma* was indispensable both as an insurance policy and as a negotiating lever.

It is interesting to note, however, that this article did not elicit any reaction from women's rights activists in Egypt. This contrasts with another recent newspaper article questioning the right of female professors to supervise academic dissertations by male students, on the presumed grounds that in Islam women have no right of supervision or guardianship, *wilaya*, over men. This latter article was the subject of several published responses by feminists, and the source of public debate amongst women's groups, some of whom are academics or are in supervisory positions themselves, so that they were also directly threatened by the article. The article on the *ayma*, however, which is potentially more threatening to lower-class women, went unnoticed. The practice of the *ayma* is more limited among the middle and upper classes – it is not part of our daily realities as relatively well off profes-

sional women with an independent income, so that the issues surrounding it were invisible to us.<sup>17</sup> In fact, had I read that same article two years ago, before my fieldwork, I suspect the article on the *ayma* would not have attracted my attention either. This type of myopia is noteworthy, has important implications for the success of feminist activism, and raises important questions about who sets the feminist agenda, and whose discourses are hegemonic? The question raised by Nelson (1985) in the context of development discourses in Egypt, “Whose Knowledge Counts?” remains salient with regards to feminist discourses as well.

As suggested earlier, the stipulations of the *ayma* are enforceable through both legal measures, and informal community arbitration, negotiations, and, sometimes intimidation. I am not trying to suggest that the *ayma* is always an effective deterrent for abuse in marriage, nor that it works well for all women. However, even in cases where a husband uses force, family pressure or intimidation to avoid enforcement of the stipulations of the *ayma*, or in cases where a woman cannot afford to pay for legal assistance or for whom a divorce is a much worse option than remaining in an abusive marriage, the *ayma* still offers a significant “indigenous” discourse of female discontent regarding marriage arrangements. Although indigenous, it is a discourse that does not derive its basis from either Islamic laws nor from other, equally indigenous, discourses put forth by upper class feminists in Egypt.

Both legal and community mechanisms for enforcing an *ayma* appear to be currently working well for some of the women in the study community. There are possible limitations to the *ayma* as a deterrent or form of insurance, however, which must be considered. These are partly related to the possible breakdown and fragmentation of the normative pressures and moral community needed for its, as well as the possible challenges of its legal basis by emerging conservative forces.

Although set in an urban context, most of my sample consisted of first or second generation migrants to the city, who still maintained close knit relationships with relatives and had brought with them to Cairo many of their customary forms of conflict resolution. As families disperse into more distant communities in search of employment or housing over the years, some of these relationships and structures

may become more fragmented and forms of customary pressure by family elders may break down. The possible erosion of the social and legal basis of the *ayma* offers a concrete basis, arguably affecting the perceived interests of a broad segment of Egyptian women, around which participatory politicization and mobilization of women can take place.

Women's presentation of the rationale for the *ayma* using the seemingly unambiguous term for rights, *ha'*, which is the same term used by women activists in Egypt and internationally, is significant, as it illustrates how conceptions of rights are socially and historically situated and are linked to both discursive elements as well as to constructions of meanings and identities (Fraser 1989; Moore 1994; Nicholson 1994; Molyneux 1998). The use of the same terminology of rights and interests between different groups of women does not imply the same content and understandings of such interests. The following section elaborates on this point by illustrating the contrasting agendas and tactics of different female constituencies in Egypt.

### **“The Ayma Is Like a Contract”: Contrasting “Indigenous” Tactics**

“The *ayma* is like a contract, it regulates/has a hold on a groom” (*El ayma zay el á'd, bitimsik el áris*) was a phrase I heard repeatedly during my fieldwork. Since the *ayma* was clearly seen and presented by women as a “contract”, whose aim is to safeguard and ensure “woman's rights”, *haq el marraa* (including the right to request a divorce, ward off the threat of an unwanted divorce or ensure that a man does not default on his responsibilities, *yit'wig*), it is interesting to juxtapose it with the “marriage contract” campaign.

The marriage contract campaign was initiated by a prominent feminist lawyer during the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994. An example of organized action by several women's groups in Egypt, the campaign aimed at increasing women's leverage within their marriages, by promoting the concept of marriage as a contractual arrangement, and emphasizing that as a contract between two parties, its terms, conditions, rights and obligations should thus be specified and agreed upon in advance.

A draft of an “ideal” marriage contract was drawn up and was discussed extensively in public fora, with a view to achieving its accept-

ance by the Ministry of Justice as the basis of future marriage legislation for Muslims. The terms of the “new contract” reflected the legitimate priorities, and anxieties of middle and upper class Muslim women in Egypt, and included new issues such as: the right for married women to travel out of the country without the husband’s approval (which currently is not allowed by law), the right of a woman to divorce herself, the right to work and the right to continue a higher education after marriage. The contract stipulations may also be used to limit a husband’s rights, as recognized by *sharia* laws. For example one could stipulate no polygamy as one of the conditions.

The new contract was eventually rejected by the government, critiqued by the religious establishment, and failed to receive much support from the public, both men and women. The reasons varied, from charges that it “legitimizes the forbidden and forbids the legitimate”, is contrary to *sharia*, to arguments that some of its stipulations, such as women’s rights to work or travel abroad are harmful for the family, or not necessary since they are not questioned, such as the right to education (see Karam 1996). Other reasons voiced in public seminars I attended were that such a contract has overly materialistic undertones, which threatens the harmony and symbolic meaning of marriage.

What is germane to my purposes here, however, is that despite some obvious links between the marriage contract and the *ayma*, there was no reference to, or discussion of, the *ayma* at all during the campaign. Attempts to justify the “new marriage contract” to the public were largely based on excellent historical research. The research demonstrated that the idea of a contract with detailed stipulations of rights and duties of husband and wife was not an alien concept and that it had historical precedent in the practices of Islamic dynasties in Turkey and Egypt. There was no attempt, however, to link the proposed contract with current practices and marriage arrangements among the majority of women and men in Egypt, which have a clearly contractual and financial nature. In retrospect, I can now recognize that this made our campaign much weaker and prevented us from recognizing *both* similarities and differences across class boundaries, which could have strengthened the campaign by mobilizing a broader constituency of women.

A survey was conducted among low-income women to elicit their

responses to the suggested contract, hoping to increase the campaigns' base of support. However, none of the survey questions addressed what lower income women's actual concerns were nor what their marriage negotiations actually entailed, so as to build on them, and take them into account. The campaign, and the research on which it was based, had undoubtedly laudable aims and was a worthwhile effort. Nonetheless, its approach was a top down and myopic one that did not allow for an understanding or appreciation of the diversity of lower-income women's perceptions of their rights within marriage, their own ways of articulating these rights, or their strategies for promoting their perceived interests. This suggests that the national identity of a researcher (or activist) is not automatically linked to the production of more "authentic" or "indigenous" knowledge. As Morsy et al. argue emphasizing the impact of colonial domination and intellectual dependency, the production of knowledge,

is the output of people whose thought patterns reflect the 'truths' of their social milieux. To the extent that indigenous anthropologists [and I would add women's rights' activists] social milieux are not simply and purely, 'indigenous', neither are our thought patterns nor the 'truths' of our scientific productions.

(1991: 92)

As mentioned earlier, the language used in marriage negotiations in my sample, was openly contractual and based on material calculations. Literally the terms selling, *bay'ha* and buying, *sharia*, were used to describe relationships in which a groom is serious about wanting a particular bride/family, versus one who is not serious/committed. This language is not commonly used outside this context and is considered quite "improper" among more upper class Egyptians. In fact, in one of the many public discussions of the new marriage contract at a posh hotel in the center of Cairo at which I was present, one of the major criticisms voiced was that the contract was based on "western", "materialistic" notions, and that it took out all the "love" and "emotion" out of marriage, reducing instead to the domain of cold calculations, and market transactions, which is not at all what marriage is about in "traditional" Egyptian culture.<sup>18</sup>

An effective response of course, but one which was not voiced,

would have been to point out the class bias inherent in this particular view of Egyptian marriage, by highlighting the largely material considerations and dispositions which characterize the marriage negotiations of, arguably, a large percentage of families in Egypt. It would have been worth noting that the *ayma*, is so overtly a financial arrangement, that its stipulations fall under commercial laws. Clearly, marriage gains different meanings among different classes. There is not one “indigenous” meaning of marriage, but several distinct, possibly overlapping ones.

Azza Karam (1996), in her excellent recent study of middle and upper class women activists in Egypt, notes how the new marriage campaign was discredited, arguing that this was partly due to the lack of dialogue and alliance building between different groups of indigenous “feminists” (which she categorizes as “secularist”, “Islamists”, and “Muslim feminists”) to safeguard women’s rights. While I agree with Karam’s call for horizontal coalition building, my data suggests, that it may not be enough. Given the class/educational disparities in Egyptian society, which as seen above generate different, but possibly overlapping perceptions of gender needs, rights and interests, it would seem crucial to strengthen activist campaigns not only through cultivating horizontal links, but also through forging more *vertical* coalitions, alliances and linkages, *across* class and educational lines. (N.B.: I am not underestimating the difficulty of such an effort since low-income women may not always have their own organizations and representatives to facilitate such linkages.) Such efforts would significantly enrich the current debates about women’s rights and priorities for change. By taking a “grounded” approach to theoretical production, such efforts would also contribute to broader theoretical debates on women’s consciousness, agency and the dynamics of gender relations in different contexts.

Politically, efforts to forge vertical coalitions may also increase the chances for the success of some campaigns by rallying more public support, could result in the politicization and mobilization of a broader and more diverse constituency of women and men, and more importantly, carries the promise of encouraging the emergence of local leadership in different low-income communities, who can begin to articulate their own concerns more vocally and publicly. It seems to me that actively seeking to establish such shared platforms may be the

only way that we could move from the “gender activisms” (see Badran 1993, 1995) of today, to a social *movement* with a strong mass base that can challenge the many forces and mechanisms contributing to not only patriarchy but social inequality more generally in Egyptian society.

Bourdieu’s stinging analysis of the possibilities of social change and his cynical view of the potential of organized resistance, while uncomfortable for many feminists, is nonetheless relevant in this context. Bourdieu “stresses the struggle among the privileged themselves and the relative inability of the oppressed even to enter into the ‘dialogue’ among more privileged groups” (Risseew 1991: 77). This was clearly the case with the marriage contract that we were promoting presumably on behalf of all Egyptian women. What this suggests is, as middle/upper class feminists in Egypt with “orthodox” qualities of class and education, we need to seriously rethink the possibility that we may be ourselves perpetuating power inequalities. Our power as activists trying to improve the situation of women and challenge gender inequalities, over the women on whose behalf we often speak, can perhaps be captured by Lukes’ three dimensional view of power as a “latent” force, one which is exercised by the fact that we are

controlling the agenda, mobilizing the bias of the system, determining which issues are key issues, indeed which issues come up for decision and excluding those which threaten the interests of the powerful.

(Lukes 1986: 9-10)<sup>19</sup>

It seems to me without necessarily intending it, we may be implicated in reproducing inequalities between women by privileging our own voices, forms of knowledge and discourses and by deciding which issues to include and which issues to exclude. By doing so we may be not just marginalizing the knowledge, priorities and discourses of other groups of women in Egypt and weakening the impact of our campaigns, but we may also be blinded to understanding what shapes these alternative discourses. In the case of the *ayma*, it is partly a context of general impoverishment for both men and women, as well as a context in which women have relatively less opportunities for financial security and ownership of economic assets. For most of the women in the study community, the items on the *ayma*, were the *only* property

or economic asset that they owned, or would ever hope of owning in the future. Incorporating these broader issues of poverty and economic vulnerability into our feminist practice and theories is one way forward to make social theory more relevant and address one of the identified sources of the “crisis” of social science in the Arab world, that is “the missing link between societal problems and intellectual production” (Morsy et al. 1991: 85).

## Conclusions

A detailed and sensitive examination of the *ayma*, paying particular attention to the local idioms underlying it, through which women express ideas like resentment, discontent, the need to curb male power, and rightful entitlements, and the lines of argumentation through which they make claims over men, has revealed a striking awareness amongst women of certain aspects of gender-based oppression. The literature on gender relations in Egypt is still so influenced by the image of the “corporate” family, where “male dominance is matched by female accommodation, male authority by female obedience” (Rugh 1985: 75), and undifferentiated “family strategies” (Ibrahim 1980), that highlighting a local, historically specific, and arguably also class bound discourse about women’s rights, entitlements, and perceived self-interests, is an important finding. It is a finding that seriously questions the ahistoric usage of the concept of patriarchy and the common assumptions about women’s passivity, which as discussed earlier, are reflected in the writings of both Egyptian and non Egyptian researchers and activists.

Arguing for a more nuanced and situated understanding of gender relations and women’s interests, this paper shows how, although women in the studied community used the same terms for women’s rights, *haq el maraa*, that more upper class and intellectually inclined feminists use, they often attached different meanings to this term. This finding touches upon one of the main tenets of the post-modernist critiques to feminist scholarship whose theoretical and political foundation was based on an essential and universal category of Woman. Butler argues that the term women “designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category” (Butler 1992: 16). I do not subscribe to the

notion of “undesignatable differences”, as it implies that all differences amongst women have equal weight for their identities and their ability to achieve their “human capabilities” (see Nussubaum 1995). I do, concur, however, with the need for some deconstruction of the universal “woman” in order to identify the most salient differences, *and* similarities, amongst women in different contexts. My particular concern, given the Egyptian reality where the majority of women and men belong to lower income groups, is in differences along *socio-economic* lines. As analytical constructs, both the category of “women” and “indigenous” needs to be deconstructed along these lines.

The paper has demonstrated that a common sex does not imply common interests, *even* when similar terminologies for expressing these interests are used by different groups of women. Any claims about women’s interests thus need to be conceptualized very carefully. As Molyneux argues, women’s interests are historically and culturally constituted, as well as related to specific socio-economic locations.

Claims about women’s interests need to be framed within specific historical contexts since processes of interest formation and articulation are clearly subject to cultural, historical and political variance and cannot be known in advance.

(Molyneux 1998: 10)

Or, as Nicholson, arguing for more nuanced “coalition politics” within the feminist movement elegantly puts it:

Maybe it is time that we explicitly acknowledge that our claims about women are not based on some given reality but emerge from our own places within history and culture; they are political acts that reflect the contexts we emerge out of and the futures we would like to see.

(1994: 103)

Furthering our understanding of the complexity of gender relations and women’s responses to gender inequalities in various contexts, requires a conscious effort to abandon abstract notions of “universalism”, without abandoning a basic commitment to values of justice, equity and human freedom (Kandiyotti 1994). In-depth, contextualized research which is both self-reflective as well as sensitive to the

perceptions, thought categories, language and local idioms used by women and men in various settings presents an opportunity for generating knowledge about gender that can escape the traps of both western ethnocentrism and indigenous elitism.

The point is not to expropriate other people's issues, or use research results to speak on behalf of others, for that is never an innocent act as it serves to strengthen the position of the speaker, and can create a backlash for those on whose behalf she speaks. The point is to start a process, a broad-based movement that moves beyond identifying particular products and using those to advance certain positions, to creating a critical consciousness about gender inequality.

## Notes

I am deeply indebted to Magda Al-Nowaihi for her careful review of the transliteration. I am also grateful to Hania Shalkany and Nadia Wassef for their comments on an earlier draft.

- 1 The word *ayma* is derived from the classical Arabic word *qa'imā*, which means list or inventory.
- 2 One U.S.\$ is equivalent to 3.4 Egyptian Pounds.
- 3 The diversity and heterogeneity of Cairo's low-income residents, based partly on their geographic origin was captured in my "sample" as will be explained later.
- 4 For a description of the various women's groups and "gender activisms" in Egypt see NGO platform of action documents 1994, 1995; Badran 1993; Ilbaz 1997; Al-Ali 1997; Karam 1996.
- 5 I write this paper as a researcher as well as an active feminist and a development practitioner in Egypt. I thus consider myself fully implicated in any questions that I raise about feminist activism in Egypt.
- 6 The concept, measurement and role of the informal sector has been the subject of much debate in Egypt and internationally. Despite its inadequacies, I adopt the definition of the informal sector as consisting of those workshops employing less than 10 employees and which are generally not subject to formal laws or regulations (see Rizk 1990). Recent research suggests that depictions of the informal economy as a source of high earning, skilled

jobs with possibilities for upward mobility may be an accurate depiction of some male occupations, but may be seriously misleading picture of female employment in the sector, see El-Kholy 1996.

7 For a detailed analysis of the social organization of piecework, see El-Kholy 1996.

8 If one were to take into account local ranking and socio-economic classification systems, the women in my sample would predominantly be considered by others in the neighborhoods, and would consider themselves, as *nas ghalaba*. *Ghalaba* (sing. *ghalban*) comes from the Arabic term *gholb*, which connotes fatigue as a result of daily struggles for survival as well as endurance despite difficult circumstances. As used by community members, however, *ghalban* implies two important characteristics. On the one hand, it denotes toiling to make ends meet, and on the other, it implies certain favorable moral qualities such as kindness, lack of greed, and lack of deviousness and corruption. This double meaning of the term is interesting and suggests a belief that despite their poverty, *el nas el ghalaba* are still honest. Deprivation has not driven them to corruption, cheating or stealing. Many times, I heard people use the term *ghalban* with pride. *El ghalaba* was often used to denote the *working poor*, that is those who may have steady jobs but whose incomes are meager and/or whose job conditions are difficult. Some of those who were considered *ghalaba*, also worked as casual irregular labourers, *urzu'i*. Derived from the Arabic work *ris'*, god given livelihood, the term connotes lack of security, precariousness of livelihoods and a certain degree of fatalism. *Urzu'i* is a more specific occupational category which refers to a wide range of jobs in which employment is of a casual nature with no assurance of a regular or future income.

Some of the better off interviewees considered themselves as *masturin*, literally “covered” but implying that what comes in as income goes out in expenses and that there are no extras to cover any emergency situation, such as a sick child. It also implies lack of security for the future, or the ability to engage in the prestigious and status providing act of giving charity to others. This term contrasts sharply with *mabsut*, literally happy, which is used to refer to those who are financially well off, often skilled craftsmen, *sanay'iyya*, or wholesalers/merchants, *tuggar*. In addition to

wealth, the term also indicates security due to a regular income and lack of vulnerability. Existence of substantial savings or investments, often in the form of real estate, as well as public displays of charity, are an important distinguishing characteristic of this category in the community. None of my interviewees would be considered *mabsutin* in the local sense. The women I interviewed and spend extended periods of time with were engaged in daily struggles to cloth, feed, educate, and seek medical care for their families. In many ways, their livelihoods reflected a general state of poverty as a result of the overall deterioration in the conditions of life in Egypt over the past decade. Most were recent (first or second generation) migrants to the city.

Fergany (1997) comparing national income and expenditures surveys between 1990 and 1995, shows that conditions of life have deteriorated at a alarming rate during this period. Real family incomes have fallen on average by 14 percent in urban areas and 20 percent in rural areas, prices have increased by 170 percent in rural areas and 160 percent in urban areas, and malnutrition among five year old children (as measured by stunted growth) has increased by 5 percent during this period.

- 9 Sometimes these stages are condensed into three, with the *shabka* merged with either the *fatha*, or with the *katb el kitab*.
- 10 These arrangements relate to first time marriages, “virgin” marriages. Particularly if a woman is divorced, the arrangements are often quite different. She is likely to be denied a *shabka*, and the financial expectations of the groom are usually less.
- 11 By the early eighties rents on newly constructed apartments had skyrocketed. One estimate suggests that by the early eighties, 30 percent of the income of couples within the lowest quartile of income distribution in Egypt went into rent (Abt Associates 1981). Moreover, the strategy of “key money”, whereby landlords ask new tenants for exorbitant amounts of money before renting out a flat has become a rampant practice. One study shows that both the occurrences and the amount of key money have increased at a rate of 30 percent annually (Abt Associates 1981).
- 12 The *mahr* is an Islamic convention with a fixed meaning according to *sharia* laws, stipulating that the whole *mahr* should go from a groom’s father to the bride herself. Marriage transactions in the

Middle East have thus been rigidly conceptualized as a form of “dower” in comparative anthropological theory (Goody/Tambiah). In practice, however, the *mahr* appears to gain different meanings in different settings suggesting that it is not a fixed institution, but one that is historically specific and fluid. Depending on the specific context, marriage payments in the Middle East may incorporate aspects of both dower and bride price. Moors (1991) illustrates this argument based on her comparison of the changing meanings of marriage and the *mahr* in a village in Palestine in the 1930s and the 1980s.

- 13 On possibility is to go back to court records and see when the first cases of the *ayma* were arbitrated.
- 14 For a discussion of how some women may be articulating their protest and grievances against what they perceive to be unjustified demands on their sexual services, see El-Kholy 1997.
- 15 Based on research in a low-income neighborhood in Cairo, Watson (1992) provides some detailed examples of the process of women’s temporary desertion of the marital home as a conflict resolution between husband and wife. See also, El-Kholy (1997) for a discussion of the strategy of *ghadab* in the context of women pressing for the education of their daughters.
- 16 The deferred dower, is a sum of money that is written into the Muslim marriage contract and which the bride is entitled to incase of divorce.
- 17 Another study is needed to determine the prevalence of the *ayma* among the middle and upper classes in Egypt. However, none of the women from this background whom I knew, either socially or professionally, had written a *ayma*. The 6 key Egyptian activists and researchers who led the marriage contract campaign were all married except for one, but none had written an *ayma* (Personal communication with Iman Bibars, and Hoda El-Sadda, two of the six activists).
- 18 This particular view of marriage in itself raises interesting questions about the middle class “domestication” of women and about the dependency of middle class women on men and the naturalization or “euphemization” of that dependency as “romantic love.”
- 19 Lukes builds on the view advanced by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1970).

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