"We Are Not Feminists!"

Egyptian Women Activists on Feminism[1]

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Introduction

Experimental and post-colonial anthropology has increasingly problematized the "pursuit of the other" (Visweswaran 1994: 20), power relations between researcher and informant as well as representation. Attempts to decolonize anthropology have been particularly notable with regard to feminist scholarship, which, by its very definition, needs to continually challenge the very notion of the canon. Nevertheless, not every feminist scholar doing research in the Arab world is as conscious of power relationships between cultures (colonizer/colonized) as s/he might be of power relations within culture (male/female). Therefore, an analysis of "positioning" is a key to understanding how many feminist ethnographers theorize.

A new kind of feminist scholarship related to the "wind of cultural decolonization" (Morsy/Nelson/Saad/Sholkamy 1991) has taken different directions. One manifestation of this kind of research is marked by the various ways in which female ethnographers confront their biases as western women, feminists, or belonging to a particular class, religion, etc. Many anthropologists have pointed out that fieldwork is situated between autobiography and anthropology (Hastrup 1992) and that it connects a personal experience with a general field of knowledge. Fieldwork is not the unmediated world of "others", but the world between ourselves and the others. The concept of "intersubjectivity" – the relationship between the researcher and the re-

search community, the politico-cultural worlds to which each belong, and the ultimate purpose of the research project (Sayigh 1996: 2) – is addressed by many feminist researchers.

The move to decolonize anthropology also induced more and more "indigenous" female scholars to do "home-work", or "anthropology in reverse" (Visweswaran 1994: 102). While "home-work" is still largely unaccepted by the mainstream canon, it is becoming very clear that the cultural insights, language-skills and motivation of many indigenous female anthropologists subvert some of the cultural stereotypes, generalizations and misconceptions brought forth by earlier conventional Western scholarship.

At the same time as indigenous researchers have increasingly entered and contested the field of anthropological knowledge production, a growing number of "hyphenated" researchers, "hybrids" or "halfies" have not only challenged the canon but also notions of "Western" vs. "indigenous" scholarship. The term "halfie" has been coined by Lila Abu-Lughod to categorize "people whose national or cultural heritage is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage" (Abu-Lughod 1991: 140). While I refuse to be labeled "halfie", I am certainly facing the dilemmas that Abu-Lughod associates with being "halfie" and feminist:

> Halfies' dilemmas are … extreme. As anthropologists, they write for other anthropologists, mostly Western. Identified also with communities outside the West, or subcultures within it, they are called to account by educated members of these communities. More importantly, not just because they position themselves with respect to two communities, but because when they present the Other they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception.
>
> (1991: 142)

In previous research, I experienced the shifting boundaries between "self" and "other", between my own identity and the identities of the people I studied: what had started out as an endeavor to understand what it means to be a woman in Egypt and in the Arab world became a project where I learned as much about myself. However, more often than being a source of "self-knowledge", "mediation" and "bridging",

the experience of being "here and there" poses great dilemmas and conflicts for the researcher (see El-Kkoly / Al-Ali 1999).

Hyphenated identities enact an often violent struggle between two or more worlds. Nasser Hussein's description of post-colonial identities certainly rings a bell:

> Hyphens are radically ambivalent signifiers, for they simultaneously connect and set apart; they simultaneously represent both belonging and not belonging. What is even more curious about a hyphenated pair of words is that meaning cannot reside in one word or the other, but can only be understood in movement.
>
> (1990: 10)

The attempt to negotiate the terms between shifting alliances results in the feeling of being "born over and over again as a hyphen rather than a fixed entity" (Trinh 1991: 159). Being an Iraqi-German doing research in the Arab world suggests more than an accidental academic trajectory, since the very subject matter of my Ph.D. dissertation is related to this "hybrid subject position" (Visweswaran 1994). In my research among secular-oriented[2] Egyptian women activists, I have been particularly interested in exploring the intersections and contentions of gender and national identity. Because the Egyptian women's movement is often accused of being "westernized", women activists are constantly challenged to reassert their "authenticity" without giving up their struggles and visions, as well as their links to regional and international organizations.

The issue of "hybridity" is problematized by Sayigh who questions the effects of prolonged exposure to a specific culture:

> While culturally enriching, hybridity perhaps induces a half-conscious adoption of the research community's ethos; and this, while enhancing rapport, may block off certain questions and inquiries.
>
> (Ibid. 1996: 2-3)

In my view, it is not only important to acknowledge our "positionality", that is the different components of our identities, presuppositions and political orientations that we bring from our home(s), but as

Lindisfarne (1997) and Sayigh (1996) point out, we must also recognize that our research community will have an impact on the ways we see and think about the world. Lindisfarne, for example, explains how her fieldwork in Syria shaped her "political voice" and identity (Lindisfarne 1997), which in many ways parallels my experiences in Cairo. My political commitment to feminism and my attempts to counter dehumanizing depictions of "Arabs" in the western media developed and grew while living and doing research in Cairo. Only later, throughout my recent fieldwork, did I also become sensitive to sweeping generalizations concerning "the West" which have become part of my battles and research agenda.

Feminism as the Other

Imagine a woman who does not correspond to common ideals of beauty and does not even make an effort to hide her unattractiveness with make-up. Aside from her physical shortcomings, she has a personality problem. She is loud, shrill and terribly aggressive. She goes around fighting everything and everyone, especially men. She hates them. All of them. Most likely she is a lesbian. In any case, she is obsessed with sex.

You are not wrong in guessing that I am describing a feminist – to be precise, a western feminist. Cliches and stereotypes of this sort are prevalent among men and women all over the world. You might ask yourselves why I would invoke such a crude image of a western feminist when writing a supposedly academic paper about indigenous knowledge and feminism in Egypt. I suggest that there is a relation between the stereotype described and the way many Egyptian women activists define feminism.

Egyptian feminists, whose activism has been historically rooted in nationalism, have always run the risk of being stigmatized as anti-religious and anti-nationalist. In recent years, women activists have been increasingly accused – particularly by Islamists and conservatives, but also by leftist-nationalist voices – of collaborating with "western imperialism" by importing alien ideas and practices and circulating them throughout society. In light of these very intimidating charges, it is not surprising that many women activists internalized these accusations, and themselves equate feminism with a Western

concept, alien and alienating to their social, cultural and political context (Al-Ali 2000: 47).

The resistance of many Egyptian women to identifying themselves with feminism is not only related to its negative image in society, but is also linked to the conviction that it detracts from such "larger issues" as imperialism, class struggle and Zionism. In this view, feminism is perceived to divide women and men in their common struggle against these forces. Nevertheless, many women activists in Egypt are engaged in producing knowledge of and attitudes towards "feminism". My chapter does not simply focus on the widespread construction of feminism as a western phenomenon or even conspiracy, but addresses other current interpretations among Egyptian women activists. In particular, I would like to share with you some insights of women who attempt to overcome the devastating rhetoric of "us and them" that dominates issues of both knowledge and identity formation in contemporary Egypt.

Experience and Knowledge

Another reason for starting my paper with a cliche is my interest in debates about the origins of knowledge, and especially the relationship between knowledge, experience and identity. We all know about stereotypes and their effectiveness, which resides in the way they invoke consensus, reproduce certain power relations, and create difference. The consensus invoked by stereotypes is generally accompanied with negative evaluations, which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society.

Stereotypes – whether about "the Orient" and "Muslim women" or "the Occident" and "western feminists" – do not only invoke people who do not belong and map out the boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behavior, but they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where "in reality" there are none. Furthermore, the dichotomies of East vs. West, indigenous vs. alien, etc. which are often linked to particular cliches, actually reproduce the hegemonic discourse of Orientalism instead of subverting it.

The line between ordering our complex reality in terms of stereotypes and what we call common-sense is often very thin and blurry. Both are an effect of hegemony which defines the boundaries of the

thinkable and, therefore, limits discursive possibilities. However, what is "common knowledge" among some people might not be taken for granted by others, and vice versa. This problem becomes evident when we meet each other in everyday situations and talk about ordinary things. It often occurs that the most controversial issues are related to some vague feelings and reactions deeply rooted in the specificity of our historical and cultural experiences – such as those triggered by the word "feminism".

The relation between experience and knowledge has been central to various academic critiques towards the notion of universal, objective and rational knowledge. Whether articulated in terms of phenomenology, postmodernism, feminism or postcolonialism – and I do recognize the differences among and within these schools of thought – knowledge has been separated from "the truth". Subjectivity, partiality and relativity are catch words which were coined to destabilize eurocentric and androcentric mainstream thinking in the humanities and in the social and natural sciences. Implicit in these various epistemological debates is the recognition of the social and cultural construction of reality and the political nature of all knowledge (Smith 1987; Haraway 1988; Liz/Wise 1990; Longino 1993; Dominguez 1994; Charles/Hughes-Freeland 1996). Associated with this view is the idea that "knowledge is produced by social agents who occupy particular social locations and it is shaped by the conditions of its production" (Charles/Hughes-Freeland 1996: 25).

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Among the various contributions of contemporary feminist thought to epistemological debates, "feminist standpoint theory" has been one of the most distinct and controversial approaches (Longino 1993: 201). This particular theory revolves around the privileging of the knowledge of women as a social group. It rests on the premise that "oppressed groups are epistemologically privileged in that they have more direct access to accurate knowledge about the conditions of their subordination" (Griffin 1996: 180). In other words, knowledge is given directly by experience and, to put it bluntly: if you do not have the experience, your knowledge is less valid. However, another supposition of feminist standpoint theory is that the very knowledge of women has been

systematically ignored or invalidated by the dominant institutions of knowledge re/production (Smith 1987; Hill Collins 1991). For feminist politics, this both challenges the distinction between abstract theory and concrete praxis, and implies that women's experiences form an important part of feminist analysis (Lather 1990).

During the past decade, much of feminist theorizing has paid considerable attention to differences within the concept "woman" and to the problem of constructing an identity as women. While Dorothy Smith[3] seems to assume the existence of a common universal woman's standpoint, other feminist standpoint theorists, like Sandra Harding and Liz Stanley, argue that universalization is not intrinsic to the theory (Longino 1993: 205). Since differences among women with regard to class, race, culture, etc. have been generally acknowledged, I do not want to belabor the dangers of essentialism. What is most significant here is the problematic conceptualization of experience as "authentic truth" that provides evidence for identity, difference and agency. Implicit in this approach is the epistemological position that "reality" is immediately knowable, without the mediation of concepts or theory since experience produces knowledge directly (Charles 1996: 6).

Recently, some feminist scholars pointed to the dangers of ignoring the constructed nature of experience. Joan W. Scott (1992: 25), for example, argues that "experience" has to be problematized by asking how subjects are constituted in the first place, how one's vision is structured, and what roles language and history play. In other words, Scott suggests that the concept of experience has often been used in a way that resulted in essentializing identity and reifying the subject. Her project, in contrast, is to analyze the ways in which experience itself is constructed through discourse.

My research attempts to examine how the discourses to which particular women have access influence their experience of the women's rights struggle in Egypt. While not representing easily separable and identifiable strands, the dominant discourses of social change in Egypt have generally been labeled nationalist, modernist, socialist, developmental and Islamist. Since the context of this paper is my larger research project on gender and national identities among secular-oriented women activists, I have chosen to leave out the various Islamist discourses concerning feminism.

"Feminisms", according to Deniz Kandiyoti (1996), "are never autonomous but bound to the signifying networks of the contexts which produce them." In this sense, I will attempt to outline the discursive context of secular-oriented women activists in Egypt today. However, as Dorothy Smith argues, feminist researchers "should never lose sight of women as actively constructing, as well as interpreting, the social processes and social relations which constitute their everyday realities" (Stanley/Wise 1990: 34). It is important to stress that the activists do not just mobilize pre-existing discourses to make sense of their experiences, but also develop new concepts, discourses, approaches and visions throughout their struggles.

Al-Haraka Al-Nissa'iyah or Al-Nassa'wiyah?

Identifying localized knowledge and problematizing "experience" involves a consideration of language, that is, the specific words available to articulate what I broadly define as "feminism"[4]. The actual Arabic terminology used when the women's rights struggle is addressed varies according to ideological outlook and political affiliation. All terms seem to carry "heavy baggage", and I would like to start this part of my paper by quoting Marlyn Tadros, a feminist and human rights activist who expresses the difficulty of choosing the "right" words:

> There exist different words for feminism in Egypt. This is problematic. '*Tahrir al-mar'a* [women's liberation] has a horrible connotation to many people. They associate it with promiscuity: she has to go out until midnight to be a free woman. The term was used in the past. … *Al-haraka al-nissa'wiyah*" [the feminist movement] is very elitist. Very few people would understand it. It is only used with educated leftist people. … There is a book by the Tagammu called 'Naqd Al-Haraka Al-Nisswaniyah.' Usually *nisswaniyah* [women's] has a rude connotation. Men use '*niswan*' to undermine women. … Whether '*nissa'iyah or nassa'wiyah*': even the '*haraka*' puts people of guard: '*eh, da, sitat fi haraka*?' [what's that, women in movement?] It tends to be exclusive. Men get very offended. … Normally I use '*qadaya al-mar'a* [women's issues]. But all of these terms have horrible connotations. If you say '*qadaya al-mar'a*, of course you get all kinds of comments. If you use '*wada' al-mar'a* [situation or

status of women] you are actually just making people feel safe. This is the status of women and it has a less threatening connotation. *'Wada' al-mar'a* is also more narrowly defined. It mainly addresses women's legal rights.

This particular quote reflects a very sad reality: women activists constantly have to be on the defensive against a vast number of charges ranging from being "loose women" to paying lip service to "the West". The attempt to legitimize and justify their outlooks and activism is at the center of many debates and can be detected in the various trends I am going to present. Moreover, the diverse terminologies used have roots in historical discourses, but are also shaped by ongoing activities and debates (Al-Ali 2000:47-48).

The term "*al-haraka al-nissa'iyah al-misriyyah*" (the Egyptian women's movement)[5] is generally evoked concerning the past. As a member of the radical leftist women's center *Ma'an* (Together) put it:

Historically, the women always used '*al-haraka al-nisai'yah al-misriyah*' [the Egyptian women's movement]. It was a politicized women's movement from the 20s to the 50s. It represented the nationalist's women's point of view. From Huda Sha'rawi to Inji Aflatoun, women were interested in how to develop the law, how to create new social, economic and political relations. In all of this, they were trying to see how changes for women were going to improve the whole situation and all of society.

Implicit in this seemingly historical account of the Egyptian women's movement is a whole range of information concerning this particular activist's positioning within the contemporary context. Stressing the close link between the beginning of the women's movement and "the nationalist view", this activist alludes to an attitude, in which "*tahrir al-mar'a*" (women's liberation) is part and parcel of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle.

This perspective can be traced back to what has been called the "national liberation discourse", in which women are dealt with as part of the struggle for economic and political decolonization (Hatem 1993: 42). Many women I interviewed agree with the writer and activist Latifa Zayyad, who holds the view that every important feminist movement, or feminist, reached certain rights only in collaboration

with the nationalist movement: "the woman who binds herself to a national movement requires rights and requires influences; the one who does not is easily excluded."

While early feminists like Huda Sha'rawi struggled with "a West" perceived to be outside the Egyptian nation (British colonialism), contemporary struggles with "*al-hagma al-thaqafiyya*" (the cultural attack) and "*imberiliyya*" (imperialism) are of a far more complex nature. When asked about the actual meaning of imperialism, women activists affiliated with leftist organizations often allude to U.S.' policies which are seen to promote both Egypt's dependence and capitalist expansion. Many women mentioned the IMF and USAID, as well as multi-national companies and enforced privatization in relation to capitalist expansion. Zionism and normalization with Israel are also perceived to be part of "imperialist hegemony" (Al-Ali 2000: 48).

Several women referred to "western culture" and its attempt to undermine local cultures as posing a threat to Egypt. Mass consumption, "McDonaldization", disrespect for the family, promiscuity, the AIDS epidemic, and drug addiction are reported to represent the characteristics of "western civilization". It became obvious to me that, in this context, discussions about "the West" often revealed and concealed discourses about social classes and malaise within Egyptian society. Some consider the "nouveau riche" and "westernized Egyptians" *khawagas* (foreigners) just like the tourists who roam the country (ibid.).

In response to my question of what is unique about Egyptian culture, Latifa Zayyad said:

> There are so many things that are unique about Egyptian culture. The answer to your question is: what is so beautiful about American culture that you want to make it the only culture? Racism? Loneliness? Absence of human relations? Technologies?

Other women were more cautious with their generalizations about "the West" and differentiated between government politics and people. Many women stressed that they refer to the United States and not Europe when talking about imperialism.

Coming back to the activist I quoted with regard to the historical women's movement, it is obvious that, aside from her nationalist

leaning, she also subordinates women's rights to a wider struggle for social justice. She describes the women's movement from the 20s to the 50s as a politicized movement concerned with the liberation of the whole society. Here, this activist differs with the majority of – who, for lack of a better term, I would call – "leftist nationalist women". Most women I talked to distinguish between the beginning of the movement associated with Huda Sha'rawi, which they consider elitist and bourgeois, and the period of the 40s and 50s, which is generally seen to involve radical middle-class women. According to Latifa Zayyad:

In the 40s there were new forces which came into play. This part of the story is usually dismissed, because it denoted a radical change and gave the national fight also a social level. What we fought for was not only national independence but also social justice.

In most of my interviews with the members of the *Ittihad Al-Nisa'i Al-Taqadummi* (The Progressive Women's Union), the Nasserite party, and the leftist women's center *Ma'an* (together), the term "*al-haraka al-nissa'iyah*" (the women's movement) links the struggle for women's rights to the general political struggle for social justice – sometimes explicitly expressed as class struggle – and democratic rights. These women distinguish "*al-haraka al-nissa'iyah*" from the recently coined term "*al-haraka al-nassa'wiyah*" (the feminist movement) which they perceive as reducing women's issues to the struggle between men and women.

The Marxist-feminist 'Arab Loutfi told me:

We mainly use '*al-haraka al-nissa'iyah*' [the women's movement] as a terminology in our analysis, because '*nassa'wiyah*' [feminism] rings different bells. As a word we use '*nissa'iyah*', because we think definitely that the social and class struggle is very important in seeing women's oppression. We see it in the context of a complex social, historical and economic struggle. This is not related to the relation between women and men.

Many members of development-oriented NGOs, like *Rabtat Al-Mar'a Al-'Arabiyah* (the Alliance of Arab Women), share a similar outlook concerning "*al-haraka al-nassa'wiyah*". According to Fatema

Khafagi: "it merely addresses the patriarchal system and does not address economic and political issues."

Egyptian women activists who opted to consider themselves "*nassa'wiyat*" (feminists) – like members of the group *Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida* (the New Woman's Research Centre) – stress that they initially entered the struggle for women's rights as political activists in a wider sense. All the founding members of *Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida* were involved in the student movement of the 70s and were members of the political left. When they originally came together in the 80s, they were united by vague notions regarding the importance of "women's issues" and the women's movement in Egypt. After more than a decade of internal debate, research, campaigning and activism all these women moved away from their initial position of considering the women's rights struggle as secondary to the wider struggle.

However, all *Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida's* members emphasize their concern with issues such as poverty, illiteracy, democracy and human rights. They reject the routine and traditional accusation of merely being engaged in a struggle against men. Amal Abdel-Hadi, a member of *Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida* explained:

> Feminism is a perspective: a man can be a feminist. There are women in the women's movement who are very reactionary. They only do charity work and are not embracing a holistic perspective. There are men who are advocates of women's rights.

Another widespread perception is the "foreignness" and linked "corruption" of the concept of feminism. The majority of both development-oriented NGO members and leftist women perceive "*nassa'wiyah*" (feminism) as a western concept. In their view, feminism imposes certain issues, like sexual freedom, abortion, circumcision or wife battering, for example, which are perceived to be insignificant in the Egyptian context. One activist told me that she, like others, would generalize about western feminists, because

> this is how things have reached us. The only attempt in the feminist line was taken by Nawal El-Saadawi who was not very popular.

The idea of feminism being western is vehemently rejected by those activists who chose "*al-haraka al-nassa'wiyah*" as the most appropriate term for themselves. Hala Shoukrallah, one of the founding members of the women's group *Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida* explains:

The whole notion of feminism being Western reflects the lack of basic concepts, which is related to the general crisis of intellectuals. There is a lack of understanding that feminism is a way to look at power structures. Feminism is often considered to be a bourgeois concept, linked to foreign funding. We are perceived to be a women's organization that works only on abortion and wife battering. It is disturbing for others if we work on labor laws, for example.

While some Egyptian "*nassawiyat*" reject the notion of feminism as a western movement and approach, a number of other feminists distance themselves from "western feminism", by making claims to authenticity and rootedness in Egyptian culture. Some women told me, that, while they are seen as too radical in the Egyptian context, they would be considered as too conservative by western feminists. "Our struggle is not about hating men, nor is lesbianism an issue for us". In this sense, even some Egyptian women activists who consider themselves feminists appear to have appropriated the stereotype I evoked earlier. Only very few stress the existence of different tendencies and schools of "western feminism". Nevertheless, most feminists feel compelled, especially in public, to not totally break with "nationalist discourse" as this would totally delegitimize their activities in Egypt today. Those who dare are a minority. Mary Assad, a feminist who has been active since the 50s told me:

I work on women's issues, because I happened to be the 4th girl in the family and I was unwanted. Since I was a little girl I always felt the oppression. I felt very vulnerable. My real experience with oppression started from there. But I got an idea about feminism through my contacts with western feminists. One thing we have in common is that we women have always been defined by men. I still get very angry if anyone tries to define me. A sense of identity is very important for any human being. I am struggling so that women define themselves. Gender oppression is as bad as racial oppression, if not worse. Of course, I can dialogue with western feminists. Anyhow, it is not very clear what is Western feminism. It is certainly not one thing. In 1975, I attended the

women's conference in Mexico. There were lots of radical feminists who would not even listen to the Mariachi, because they were all men. Since then they have mellowed down a lot. And there are many different trends.

This voice represents an exception among the 80 women I have interviewed. Nevertheless, I have sensed that the more recent experiences related to international conferences had a constructive impact on many women activists. A number of women told me that they have gained strength and confidence throughout the preparations for the ICPD and Beijing. Despite the many criticisms towards the preparations and actual conference proceedings, most women also perceived both the ICPD and Beijing as turning points in their personal and political development. Encounters with feminists from all over the world, in some cases, led to an increased awareness that, worldwide, there exist many different movements with distinct approaches and agendas. Some women revealed to me their surprise that, despite all the differences, similarities and solidarities can be found across cultural borders (Al-Ali 2000: 50).

The experiences related to the international feminist community also resulted in the questioning and reconceptualization of the traditional public versus private dichotomy. Despite obvious differences between liberal pro-government and leftist opposition women, a common discursive universe exists. The apparent common ground concerning the public versus private sphere has its roots in the historical male-created modernist discourses and the more recent development discourse.

According to Mervat Hatem (1993: 42), both nationalist and liberal-modernist discourses only focused on women's rights in the public sphere as part of the process of creating new societies. They accepted "women's public space, where they were expected to pursue public activities like education, work, and some form of political participation, especially suffrage" (ibid.: 40). In both cases, women's rights within the "private", family sphere were not only ignored, but also considered as standing outside the legitimate struggle for women's rights.[6]

Personal forms of subordination, patriarchal domination and oppression within the home still remain "taboo issues" among the majority of women activists in Egypt today. However, those women who bring up such issues as women's reproductive rights and domestic

violence have succeeded in raising awareness about the existence of previously disregarded forms of oppression.

A tremendous amount of work remains in order to convince the majority of the urgency and significance of certain issues. If nothing else, these issues have been put on the public agenda and can no longer be completely ignored. Even if most activists perceive the issue of "women and violence", for instance, as secondary to problems of poverty and illiteracy, they have been forced to seriously consider it and take a position. This increased awareness of domestic violence has changed the way many activists experience their own and other women's situations in Egypt which, in turn, has increased their knowledge about "*qadaya al-mar'a*" (women's issues) as well as what their own struggle entails.

While many activists still hold on to established discourses of social change, there is a tendency to question former certainties. The original modernist discourse of social change promotes women's liberation as a direct consequence of modernization, that is technological progress and the development of socio-economic and educational arenas. On the other hand, socialist discourse in its initial form views women's liberation as a direct consequence of the abolishment of economic exploitation. Today, most women express their shift in outlook concerning the links between both modernization, socialism, and women's liberation.

Farida Naqash, a prominent literary critic and member of the *Ittihad Al-Nissa'i*, told me:

> Ten years ago I rejected the concept of feminism totally. Human socialist struggle, I thought, would emancipate women. However, it has been proven that even within a socialist system, there still are cultural ideologies marginalizing women. Now I am a feminist in this sense: it is not enough that women take part in struggle against imperialism and economic exploitation, there has to be another struggle for improving women's image and role in society.

Some activists mentioned the marginalization of women in international political struggles like in Algeria, Palestine and the former Soviet Union as the main reason for reconsidering their original approach. Others declared that the crisis in socialist ideology after the breakup of the Soviet Union provoked them to be more concerned

with women's issues. Sometimes, this crisis of ideology results in a degree of confusion concerning the particular meanings attached to various concepts:

We see that *abawiyah* [patriarchy] is a by-product of the economic system. But it is so dominant and domineering, so powerful in the superstructure that it even effects the infrastructure. So when we discuss items we use '*haraka nissa'iyah*', but we call ourselves '*nassawiyat Marxiat*'; we are Marxist women fighting patriarchy; the point is that sometimes when we discuss with Europeans, it mixes them up; there are differences of definition.

Disappointment in the actual implementation of socialist values and the general crisis of socialist ideology are not the only reasons for questioning the earlier certainties. Many women confessed that their personal life painfully showed them that "there is something called 'women's issues'," which has to be tackled independently of the general struggle for social justice. The awareness that even "progressive" men oppress women – either within the context of party politics or within the institution of the family – is a turning point in the lives of many activists.

"Reality is stronger than all theories," is how a member of the *Tagammu* party and the *Ittihad Al'Nissa'i Al-Taqadummi* started her personal account of disillusionment:

I will give you an example of my life: I was married for twelve years. My husband was a progressive political activist and we were together in the Tagammu party. Then I decided to get a divorce. If he had wanted to divorce me he could have done it without my knowledge for five pounds and then sent me a paper. However, my wanting a divorce was a struggle. I got it after three months. Actually I got it after five years and three months, because when I first told him he traveled away and did not return until five years later. He told me that I must be kidding when I asked for the divorce. He said that I was psychologically disturbed and needed therapy. Then he left. When he came back after five years, I did not want to live with him anymore. After three months I got a divorce, but I had to give up all my rights and property. He took everything: the apartment, the furniture, even the gifts I had received from my friends.

Accounts of personal hardship, struggle and challenge constitute an prominent element in my interviews. Instead of the slogan "the personal is political", most respondents formulated the relationship between their personal lives and their political outlooks and activism as a dialectic. In this dialectic, women tended to start out their political activism by viewing men as partners, as comrades. They rarely questioned their secondary roles within political organizations as well traditional roles within the family. The accumulation of discrimination and humiliation over the years provoked many women to search for new explanations, visions and solidarities. New concepts entered their discourses, such as *abawiyah* (patriarchy), which allowed for ways to explain many of the contradictions which were previously ignored. Whether conceptualized as *nissa'i* or *nassa'wi*, the particular experiences of what it means to be a women activist in Egypt have changed considerably during the last decade.

The category "woman" allows activists to explain their exclusion from and subordination within the leftist political movement as a consequence of their gender. Although acknowledging differences among women concerning class, religious and political affiliations, etc. womanhood becomes significant as a method of distinguishing women from men in political struggle. Thus women activists counter criticisms that leftist men raise by replacing an objective understanding of oppression with a subjective one rooted in experience.

Conclusion

Standing in front of the bookshelves of "Silvermoon", my favorite feminist bookstore in London, I am always reminded that I cannot just lump together tendencies and approaches as different as radical feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, existentialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, postmodern feminism, and other assorted hybrids which are produced by women all over the world. Without doubt, there were times when North-American and European feminists appropriated the term "feminism". This, however, never negated that no other women's liberation movements emerged in various societies and cultures. Today, the existence and diversity of feminisms worldwide can no longer be ignored. In feminist scholarship, the acknowl-

edgment of and engagement with a multiplicity of feminist activisms and perspectives indicates a process of flowering and maturing.

The homogeneous category "western feminism" raises many questions. An interrogation of its content – like the content of any cliche – shows that its "reality" is invented anew every time it is deployed for this or that purpose. I have tried to show how stereotypical representations of "man-hating lesbians" have not only become "common knowledge", but have also entered the discourses of identity and difference of many Egyptian women activists. As I have pointed out earlier, the role of stereotypes is to create boundaries and to make firm and separate what is, in reality, fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit. This holds true for both Egyptian men and women who stereotype women activists in order to show their "otherness" and "marginality," as well as Egyptian feminists who use stereotypes to distance themselves from "western feminists".

It has become clearer since Edward Said's "Orientalism" that stereotyping is actually part of a political ploy: it uses available cultural categories to gain symbolic advantages for the self and to handicap the "other". Occidentalism, like its orientalist counterpart, is shaped by political contingencies which seek power and influence (Carrier 1995). Historically, so-called "westerners" have been more powerful – and hence more able than people elsewhere – to construct and impose images of alien societies. Nevertheless, essentialist definitions of "the West", and categories such as "western feminism", are actually manifestations of the very same process, that, in Said's words almost two decades ago, seeks "to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is closer to it and what is far away" (Said 1978: 55).

Epistemological debates about the specificity of knowledge, whether gendered or localized, have been the theoretical frame of this paper. Feminist standpoint theory has sought to provide an account of knowledge rooted in women's concrete experience. But, experiences are rooted, at least to a certain extent, in *a priori* knowledge. Thus, the jump from knowledge to "truth" will always be partial and exclusionary. However, Egyptian women activists do not just mobilize pre-existing discourses to make sense of their experiences. Discourses are produced by actors, and are at the same time productive of those ac-

tors. Some activists are engaged in developing new discourses, which either reconstruct experience or make knowable experience which was previously unknowable.

While academic approaches to knowledge constitute one of the less accessible debates for feminist activists, they are crucial to feminist politics and greater efforts should be made to bridge the gap between feminist philosophizing and activism. Another task for all researchers – not only halfies – is to overcome long-established binary oppositions between "indigenous" and "western" bodies of knowledge. Knowledge, theories and concepts are being produced in Latin America, South-East Asia and Africa and not only in Europe and Northern America. At a time of interpenetrating communities and power relations (Narayan 1997) "the West" has far from ceased to pose concrete threats and encroachments. However, notions of "indigenous" or "authentic" knowledge remain meaningless and narrow-minded as long as they do not self-critically tackle the relative lack of actual theory building from within the Arab world and persist to be locked into "what the other is."

Notes

1 This chapter ist based on a larger research project about the Egyptian women's movement and the political culture it is embedded in. See Al-Ali 2000.
2 A "secular-oriented" tendency refers to the belief in the separation between religion and politics, but does not necessarily denote anti-religious or anti-Islamic positions. Secular-oriented women do not support *shari'a* as the main or sole source of legislation; rather they also refer to civil law and human rights conventions, as stipulated by the United Nations, as frames of reference for their struggle. See Al-Ali (2000) for more detailed discussion.
3 One of the original standpoint theorists, the sociologist Dorothy Smith advocates an alternate sociology that begins with "insiders knowledge", that is, personal knowledge of one's own lived experience. She tries to show how sociological concepts are expressions of social relations, that are coined by men who, since its beginning, have been dominating the discipline of sociology.
4 For the purpose of my analysis I have chosen to use "feminism"

as a conceptual framework in its broadest possible sense: it denotes both a consciousness and a social movement. It is based on the awareness that women suffer discrimination because of their gender. Awareness of injustice, however, is not sufficient. The other aspect of "feminism" is found in the actual attempts to change these inequalities and remove constraints placed upon women in favor of a more equitable gender system. I perceive any groups or individuals who try to alleviate the position of – or change ideas about – women as "feminist".

5 My research findings diverge from Margot Badran's conceptualization of *Nissa'iyah* in her recent work *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* (1995). She states that with the creation of the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1924 "women for the first time in a highly public and unequivocal way used the adjective *nisa'i/yah* to signify feminist instead of the ambiguous 'women's'." All my respondents translated *nissa'i/yah* as "women's" and referred to the new term of nassawi/yah as feminist.

6 In this respect, modernist and socialist discourses parallel Islamist discourses of women's liberation. While I am focusing on "secular-oriented" women in my research, both in my readings and in the few interviews with Islamist women, like Zeinab Radwan, I detected a similar approach of restricting women's rights to what is perceived to be the "public sphere".

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