

THE GENDER DIMENSION OF THE AUTHORITARIAN BACKLASH IN EGYPT

The campaign against the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during its short-lived rule instrumentalized the notion of gender equality for political purposes – namely demonizing the Brotherhood and the subsequent overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi. Narratives were constructed along the dichotomy of emancipated Egyptian woman and oppressed, traditional women. However, there has been a rapid de-politicization of the discussion on women's role in society following Morsi's ouster. The author argues that the absence of a debate on the patriarchal structures of the political and military forces that have substituted Morsi's rule reveals the hollowness and political nature of these gendered discourses.

Liina Mustonen*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Spring 2015

* Liina Mustonen is a PhD candidate in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the European University Institute, Florence. She conducted her fieldwork in Egypt between 2010 and 2014.

The Egyptian revolution in 2011 was followed by landslide electoral victories of the Islamists in the 2012 elections; the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafist Al-Nour Party became the most important political players. Even though the Constitutional Court dissolved the Parliament just before the presidential elections in June 2012, the victory of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi made the continuation of the Islamists' rule possible. President Morsi governed Egypt for one year until he was ousted from power, amidst large-scale demonstrations, by the Egyptian military in July 2013.

While the Muslim Brotherhood gathered a large amount of votes arguably through its support channels reaching out to the poor and marginalized, many liberal and secular-leaning Egyptians were dispirited about the new rulers from the outset. As in some other transformative contexts, the role of women, as seen through the dichotomy of modernity and tradition, dominated the battleground between Islamists and more liberal and emancipated Egyptians.¹ Various information channels portrayed Islamists as barbarians with a plan to take Egypt back to “the dark ages.”² The propaganda against the new rulers was especially vehement among liberal and secular women capitalizing on the imagery of an emancipated Egyptian woman. This article suggests – in light of the propaganda against the Muslim Brotherhood that builds on the binary opposition between emancipated women and traditional Muslim women and the de-politicization of the discussion on women's role following Morsi's ouster – that a complex set of political interests is tied to these gendered representations making it hard for gender theorists to grasp.

Research on Gender in Muslim Societies

It is important to bear in mind that the use of the category “women,” not to mention “Muslim women,” is always arbitrary.³ Yet, a large bulk of research is based on these categories. In the Egyptian context, research that concentrates on the category of “Muslim women” and “Muslim women's rights” not only neglects

1 For Iran see: Zohreh T. Sullivan, “Eluding the Feminists, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran,” in Lila Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998). For a more general discussion see: Valentine M. Moghadam (ed.), *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies* (London & New Jersey: Zed Books LTD, 1994).

2 This was a repeatedly heard claim among a certain segment of the Egyptian society before and during president Morsi's presidency. President Morsi's rival candidate in the 2012 presidential elections, Ahmed Shafiq, claimed that Muslim Brotherhood will take Egypt back to the dark ages. “Shafiq says ‘secretive’ Brotherhood will lead Egypt to ‘dark ages’”, *Al Arabiya News*, 3 June 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/06/03/218226.html> ; See also: Mahmoud Salem addressing the sentiment of the Egyptian liberal segment. He points to out that the situation in 2013 was a product of the past – ignored by many. “The Horror,” *Daily News Egypt*, 11 February 2013, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/02/11/the-horror/>

3 Lila Abu-Lighod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 88.

Christian women but also many other women who do not situate themselves within that category.

Margot Badran uses the categories of “feminism” and “gender” to depict the actions and events initiated by Egyptian women during the campaign for independence at the beginning of the 20th century. She describes feminism in the Egyptian context as “the awareness of constraints placed upon women because of their gender and attempts to remove these constraints and to evolve a more equitable gender system involving new roles for women and new relations between women and men.”⁴ Hence, Egyptian feminism at the beginning of

“The often-mentioned causes of anxiety among liberal circles during Morsi’s presidency included discussions on the use of the veil, lowering girls’ marriage age, and even the necrophilia law.”

the 20th century can be understood in terms of the categories of suffrage, women’s employment, and education. Badran continues by stating that this feminist discourse of upper- and upper middle-class Egyptian women was not “Western” but an indigenous Egyptian discourse that challenged patriarchy and colonial domination.⁵ Often depicted as the pioneer of Egyptian feminism, Huda Shaarawi remains one of the key figures of this prevailing narrative on feminism in Egypt. Despite all the achievements of the Egyptian Feminist Union under Shaarawi’s lead, Sania Lanfranchi points to the difficulties Sharaawi faced as a wealthy, Egyptian, upper-class woman while trying to reach out to the people beyond her own class. Her access was hindered by “social barriers of upper Egyptian society,” which impeded her from properly addressing the situation of the people.⁶ Yet, Badran contends that today’s feminists view their feminist past as an “indigenous” key component of the country’s history.⁷ Shaarawi’s unveiling upon her return from Rome in 1923 is an often-told story and a point of reference for Egyptian women. Yet, the narrative on Shaarawi’s unveiling seldom mentions that she only uncovered her face.⁸

The use of women’s head veil (*hijab*) and face veil (*niqab*) has been of increasing interest to researchers, and its use is often discussed in the context of women’s

4 Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 19.

5 Badran (1995), pp. 24-25.

6 Sania Sharawi Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil: The Life of Huda Shaarawi Egypt’s First Feminist* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2012), pp. 33-98.

7 Badran (1995), p. 24.

8 Badran (1995), p. 92.

emancipation. While some Egyptian activists and feminists, most notably Nawal El Saadawi, have a critical view on the use of the veil, Leila Ahmed's research on the resurgence of the veil in Egypt depicts a more nuanced picture of the meanings the veil has gained in different historical contexts.⁹ Starting from the days of British occupation in Egypt, Ahmed describes the process of unveiling as a response to Western domination and hegemony. The Western meaning of the veil as "a sign of the inferiority of Islam as religion, culture, and civilization" took over the veil's prior meanings, such as the separation of a "God-given gender hierarchy."¹⁰ Interestingly, Leila Ahmed explains that with President Anwar Sadat's *Infitah* policies and the concomitant support to religious organizations (including the Muslim Brotherhood), "the entire era of Muslim women going bareheaded was being quietly erased from Muslim memory, and even Muslim history."¹¹ Yet, Ahmed concludes: "The veil of the post-1970s era is distinctly not the veil of pre-colonial times" and hence does not point to the same gender hierarchy or gender segregation.¹²

"Those of us who have visited Egypt know that the revealing outfits worn while clubbing had already been confined to the private sphere before Morsi's election."

Aside from discussions on the veil, in recent years we have witnessed different approaches to theorizing women's role in Muslim societies. Different socio-political contexts pose a challenge to feminist theory that focuses on emancipation and agency. Pious Muslim women and Islamists' piety movements constitute an unintelligible social phenomenon that comparative theoretical engagements often fail to grasp and

Western feminists' concepts find hard to explain. Some see Islamic feminism as a better analytical tool to understand Muslim women's practices, a form of explanation that uses categories originating from the experiences and actions of the women themselves.¹³ In her recent book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, Lila Abu-Lughod points out that she witnessed the biggest changes in the Egyptian Bedouin villages in the 1980s coming through Islamic revival, and not through the globally dominating women's rights discourse. Her story of a girl who could use the knowledge she

9 One needs to be aware that El Sadaawi's views are more differentiated as she is critical towards any kind of intervention on women's bodies and thus for instance denounces women's make-up as the "post-modern veil." Sophie Smith, "Interview with Nawal El Saadawi (Cairo, 29 January 2006)," *Feminist Review*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (March 2007), pp. 59-69.

10 Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 44.

11 Ahmed (2011), p. 47.

12 Ahmed (2011), p. 212.

13 On Islamic feminism see: Margot Badran, "Understanding Islam, Islamism, and Islamic Feminism," *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 47-52.

had gained from religious training against arranged marriage illustrates how Islamic feminism can be applied.¹⁴

Yet, some scholars criticize this increasing focus. Haideh Moghissi sees Islamic feminism as a totalizing concept, challenging those scholars who see it as the only “home-grown, locally produced, and culturally appropriate frame for feminist activism in Muslim-majority countries.” She argues that “agency against domination” needs to be preserved in feminism. Further, she explicates that true agency should not only comprise *acting by women* but *acting for women*.¹⁵

Nadje Al-Ali’s research findings from the 1990s, in turn, show that some Egyptians considered the *nouveau-riches* and Westernized Egyptians as *khawagat* (foreigners), just like tourists.¹⁶ This notion is a good starting point for the analysis of the heated debates that preceded President Morsi’s overthrow in July 2013.

It was not only the rhetoric and the appearance of some Islamist rulers with long beards and white *galabeyas* that appeared threatening to some Egyptian liberals. The lifestyle of the new rulers also differed considerably from the lifestyle of the previous rulers, exemplified by Hosni Mubarak with his unveiled half-British wife Suzanne Mubarak, and their designated heirs Gamal Mubarak and his young, blond, curly-haired, celebrity wife Khadija El Gammal. Against this backdrop, women who associate their “Egyptianess” with the public representation of the Mubarak family felt their lifestyle, identities, and economic interests threatened. Hence, an analysis of the discourses of those women who capitalize on the imagery of liberal emancipated Egyptian women can shed light on the discord over gendered identities preceding the Summer 2013 military coup d’état. At the center of the debate is a gendered representation of “the Egyptian Identity.” However, an analysis of the deployment of the category of gender during Morsi’s presidency and in its aftermath discloses the secondary position of the category gender itself. Thus, a proper analysis has to go beyond the category of identity, since identity politics is often instrumentalized to mask certain ideologies. As sociologist Sinisa Malesevic puts it: “ideology’s power is rooted in its implicit collectivist clarion-call to group solidarity.”¹⁷

Women’s Emancipation – A Weapon for Political Gains?

The discourses preceding the downfall of the first democratically-elected president in Egypt, building on the dichotomy of traditional vs. emancipated woman,

14 Abu-Lughod (2013), p. 210.

15 Haideh Moghissi, “Islamic Feminism Revisited,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2011), pp. 10-19.

16 Nadje Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the Stage in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 4-48.

17 Sinisa Malesevic, *Identity as Ideology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), pp. 4-11.

materialized in harsh rhetoric. The often-mentioned causes of anxiety among liberal circles during Morsi's presidency included discussions on the use of the veil,¹⁸ lowering girls' marriage age, and even the necrophilia law.¹⁹ The legitimate state-sponsored art circles worried about the potential lengthening of ballet dancers' dresses, the destiny of the institutions of high culture, and more importantly their own position in that institution.²⁰ These were all concerns that had long been considered *passé*, reactionary, or residue left over from the Middle Ages among certain liberal circles. Yet, irrespective of the plausibility of the threat, the correctness of the information, or the credibility of the source, these concerns entered the media sphere and public discussions.

“Article 2 of the Egyptian constitution stated that principles of the Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation and defined Islam as the religion of the state long before Morsi’s election.”

Lifestyle magazines, the mouthpieces of a certain liberal segment of Egyptian society, target the upper echelon of Egyptian society and illustrate the dichotomous use of the term “gender” well.²¹ In contrast to the discussion on the resurgence of the veil, instead of *hijab* or *niqab* trends, these magazines showcase trends for fashion-conscious club-goers. The reader can choose between “the bad girl” and “the good girl” looks. Given the traditional woman's role the Muslim Brotherhood supposedly advocated, it seems inevitable that

the club-goers' imagery of Egypt was endangered. Yet, those of us who have visited Egypt know that the revealing outfits worn while clubbing had already been confined to the private sphere before Morsi's election. Hence, we feel impelled to ask why, in this context, who rules the country even matters. The question is about a complicated set of interests embedded in the gendered representation of the club-goer.

The articles following Morsi's election in July 2012 vehemently begin to articulate the interests of those who subscribe to a specific imagery of Egyptian identity. One magazine refers sarcastically to the use of the traditional face-cover (*burqa*

18 “Many Egyptian Women Fear for Future Under Morsi Government,” *Al-Monitor*, 29 July 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2012/07/the-egyptian-woman-after-the-rev.html#>

19 Michael Collins Dunn, “Anatomy of a Hoax and Media Credulity: The ‘Egypt Necrophilia Law’ Story,” *Middle East Institute Editor’s Blog*, 27 April 2014, <http://mideasti.blogspot.ch/2012/04/anatomy-of-hoax-and-media-credulity.html>

20 The new Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Minister of Culture, Alaa Abdel Aziz, dismissed the head of the Cairo Opera House, which caused uproar among the cultural elite. “New culture minister fires head of Cairo Opera House,” *Ahram online*, 28 May 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/72539.aspx>

21 The names of the Lifestyle magazines are not mentioned in this article.

or *niqab*), pointing to its advantages including the ability “to blend in with the upholstery,” and the diminution of female duties that normally cover the pages of the magazine such as tips for make-up and hair.²² Elsewhere one can read that the revolution had “turned into something really ugly,” and how Egypt had “lost its humanity” with the mere election of the Muslim Brotherhood.²³ A few months into Morsi’s presidency, in an article titled “Misfit – strangers in our own country,” the arguments undermining the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood become substantiated. The following lengthy quote illustrates this well:

Religion imposed on my daily life and on all my choices in this country is simply suffocating. For example stating that Egypt is a Sunni Islamic country governed by Sharia laws is against everything I believe in.

As a woman, I am growing Islamophobic, Yes, I admit! I feel uncomfortable with all those beards driving taxis, buses and minibuses, walking down the streets and in malls or working at cashiers and in public service offices! They stare at me because I look foreign to them and to their beliefs! They ooze hostility and a false sense of superiority! The thought of bearded police officers and flight attendants is not helping with my new phobia! The women have also changed! The veiled ones have become patronizing and self-righteous!²⁴

In light of the reading on the uproar about religion, we can remind ourselves that Article 2 of the Egyptian constitution stated that principles of the Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation and defined Islam as the religion of the state long before Morsi’s election.²⁵ A similar column a few months later in the same magazine again relies on a culturalist agenda by constructing binary categories around the notion of Egyptian identity. According to that article, Egypt has been invaded by the “other” who does not share the same degree of emancipation: “Those bearded hooligans have taken over our country, our lives and our happiness. They are hungry animals waiting for their prey (us) to fall, and we are falling one by one.”²⁶

A few months later, the editorial board and the readers of lifestyle magazines celebrated Morsi’s ouster. In July 2013, with the help of the Egyptian military, “the emancipated woman” momentarily triumphs over “the traditional Egyptian woman.” Yet,

²² *Cairo*, August 2012.

²³ *Cairo*, July 2012.

²⁴ *Cairo*, October 2012.

²⁵ More on the role of Sharia in the Egyptian constitution see: Nathan J. Brown, “Egypt and Islamic Sharia: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 15 May 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/15/egypt-and-islamic-sharia-guide-for-perplexed>

²⁶ *Cairo*, February 2013.

despite the deep patriarchal grip of the military in the aftermath of the coup d'état, the rapid de-politicization of the debate indicates the superficiality of the gender causes. A quote in the pages of one lifestyle magazine illustrates this well: "Don't obsess about politics. Finally the *Ikhwan* buddies are gone, so what's there to worry about?"²⁷

"While a certain patriarchal system can cause uproar due to political factors, other patriarchal systems remain in disguise for the very same reasons."

While the patriarchal society was fought in culturalist terms during President Morsi's ouster, the inherently patriarchal institution, the Egyptian Armed Forces, seldom enters the debate on women's emancipation. Moreover, the question of whether women's emancipation is related to the veil, or more precisely to its removal, should be approached from a critical perspective. Nevertheless, the upper echelon of Egyptian society seemingly makes this connection:

"Lately, a lot of Egyptian women, especially in the upper social class have been taking off their veil, getting back to enjoy more freedom. Young women in politics, art, business, marketing and lots of other fields are taking off their veil for good."²⁸

Conclusion

The debates on women's role discussed in this article can hardly be analyzed in feminist terms. Moghissi's criticism of Islamic feminism as a totalizing concept is poignant here. It does not take into consideration the type of discourse presented in this paper. Moreover, the abovementioned discussion illustrates the arbitrariness of the category "Muslim Women." Yet, the discourses preceding the overthrow of President Morsi carry a certain resemblance to the interventionist discourses that are based on the notions of (often Western) moral superiority. Abu-Lughod critically reflects on this sort of gendered Orientalism – in Edward Said's tradition – that presents Muslim women "as culturally distinct, the mirror opposites of Western women."²⁹

The upper echelon of Egyptian society on the pages of the lifestyle magazines made use of its self-perceived superiority. Hence, while a certain patriarchal system can cause uproar due to political factors, other patriarchal systems remain in disguise for the very same reasons. The abrupt de-politicization of the Egyptian upper echelon

²⁷ "*Ikhwan*" refers to the Muslim Brotherhood: *Cairo*, August 2013, p. 19.

²⁸ *Cairo*, October 2013.

²⁹ Abu-Lughod (2013), p. 88.

that vehemently argued for Morsi's ouster discloses the secondary position of the category gender whilst indicating how gendered notions can be applied to defend an exclusionary imagery of Egypt available to a certain segment of the society. The frequent dichotomous references to "us" and "our Egypt" versus "the hooligans," "*hijab* wearers" or "the dark age" are being deployed here to support certain power relations. Hence, a complex set of interests was embedded in the gendered representations of Egyptian identity before Morsi's overthrow.