

Reconsidering rights, revisiting feminist critique: Women's Rights Discourses in Egypt

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Abstract: This paper aims at rereading some aspects of contemporary Egyptian feminist thought and action as they are portrayed and conceptualised in current academic history writing of Egyptian feminisms. Its main interest lies in how feminist critique has repositioned itself with the growing adherence to the human rights paradigm since the 1990s until today. While the 90s serve as an important juncture in the contemporary history of Egyptian feminisms, there has been little scholarly interest in and even less research on how activists have been actively conducting a feminist politics of women's rights. The paper explores this lack of interest in its connection to the rise of Islamic feminism, the critique of the global women's rights machinery from an anti-imperial feminist perspective as well as a critique of the secular, resulting in a binary positioning of 'Islamic' and 'secular' feminisms as operating markedly differently from each other. This paper discusses these lines of argument and suggests different readings for each of the points raised. In doing so, it offers a perspective for a possible alternative writing of contemporary Egyptian feminist histories to be taken account of in scholarly archives on what constitutes feminist knowledge, thought and action in the MENA. Based on the empirical example of two feminist non-governmental organisations in Egypt, this paper tracks itineraries of a feminist women's rights politics from the 1990s on and argues for the acknowledgment of human rights thought as an integral part of intellectual, political and activist history of Egyptian feminisms.

Keywords: Feminisms, Scholarly Archives, Secularism, Critique, Human Rights Politics, Egypt

Introduction

This paper aims at rereading some aspects of contemporary Egyptian feminist thought and action as they are portrayed and conceptualised in current academic history writing of Egyptian feminisms. Its main interest lies in how feminist critique has repositioned itself with the growing adherence to the human rights paradigm since the 1990s until today, and how this transition has been analysed and archived so far by feminist scholarship in and on the MENA. While the 90s serve as an important juncture in the contemporary history of Egyptian feminisms, there has been little scholarly interest in, and even less research on, how activists have been actively conducting a feminist politics of women's rights, both with respect to their conceptual understanding of rights as well as to their strategic usage of human rights discourse within the diverse spectrum of their manifold activities. This lack of interest can be partly tied back to the rise of Islamic feminism both as a new tool for Egyptian feminism as well as a growing

academic discourse concerning the MENA region and beyond from the 90s on. At the same time, these developments are doubled by a critique of the global women's rights machinery from an anti-imperial feminist perspective, supported by a critique of the secular, thereby contributing to the binary differentiation between 'Islamic' and 'secular' feminisms as supposedly operating markedly differently from each other. This paper explores and contextualises these lines of arguments and suggests alternative readings for each of the points raised. In doing so, it aims at fulfilling a three-folded task. Firstly, it discusses the apparent lack of interest in feminist scholarly research and asks for the significance of the resulting blind-spots for studying feminist human rights politics in Egypt. Secondly, it tracks certain itineraries of feminist critique in the language of human rights and highlights how these have changed and repositioned themselves since the 1990s until today, based on the empirical example of two feminist non-governmental organisations in Cairo. Lastly, this paper focuses on more recent academic debates about on-going struggles of women human rights defenders in post-2011 Egypt and discusses dominant recurring binaries in the study of feminist trajectories in contemporary Egyptian history writing.¹ By addressing these different points, this paper aims at offering a perspective for a possible alternative writing of contemporary Egyptian feminist histories to be taken account of in scholarly archives on what constitutes feminist knowledge, thought and action in the MENA. It argues for a more encompassing approach towards feminisms in the region and a simultaneous reflection on and adaption of academically backed archives of knowledge as circulating and referenced in current literature and research. Thus, it includes both a rereading of specifically contextualised expressions of feminist thought and action informed from a perspective on human rights as well as of academic debates and writings on contemporary feminist history in Egypt. I am aiming for a critical reflection on how we as feminist researchers contribute to building archives of knowledge, which not only serve as invaluable sources for gaining and expanding on received knowledge, but also themselves tend to create and uphold certain omissions and blind-spots based on specific paradigms, perspectives as well as structural and intellectual grids as they can be observed and traced across global inequalities in knowledge production and circulation between the Norths and the Souths. My rereading here can thus be understood as an attempt in identifying and establishing important counter-moments inhabiting a place at the borderlands in current historiographies of Egyptian feminism. It asks what new interpretative perspectives and material they can offer for anyone interested in attempting to

1. This article is based on the author's PhD about the history of Egyptian feminisms and their orientation towards the human rights paradigm since the 1990s, providing a large amount of empirical data about conceptual and strategical work and thinking of feminist activists in Egypt. See Sarah Farag, "Politics by Other Means." *Frauenrechte, feministische Kritik und zivilgesellschaftlicher Aktivismus in Ägypten.* Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Zurich, 2019).

write different accounts of feminist thought and action, both historically and in the present.²

On shifting grounds: Revisiting turning points in recent Egyptian feminist history

From a perspective on human rights, the 1990s mark an important historical juncture with the increasing political adherence to international human rights conventions and mechanisms for their enhancement and implementation across the globe. The previously side-lined 'women's issues' finally became accepted as an integral part of the human rights paradigm.³ Transnational feminism as a global activist network has fought since for the gradual expansion of the definition of women's rights as human rights, with successful milestones such as the inclusion of gender-based violence against women into international conventions and their Optional Protocols.⁴ Global structural and economic reorientations pushed for a more active role of civil social actors, leading to a mushrooming in the establishment of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in many different geographical regions, where this development was coupled by their own distinct political contexts. In Egypt, as elsewhere in the MENA region, these tendencies were equally mirrored. Building on the gradual restructuring of political parties due to the crisis of the political left after massive students' protests in the 1970s, and due to some legal changes in the registration of civil social organisations, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a surge in the foundation of independent NGOs.⁵ This restructuring of civil society however was simultaneously coupled by massive constraints for political and civil social freedoms, an increasing privatisation and a harsh structural adjustment programme, transferring the providing of basic services into the area of responsibility of the growing, yet heavily controlled private sector.

In the context of these developments, Egyptian feminisms were profoundly affected and started to reorient themselves, which led to several crucial changes. One is of structural nature. After a decades long ban on independent feminist organisations imposed by the Nasserist regime during the 1950s,⁶ the

2. Joan W. Scott, "History-writing as critique," in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Sue Morgan, Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow (London: Routledge, 2007), 19-39.

3. Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper, *Women's Rights, Human Rights. International Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

4. On the historic shift of conceptualising gender-based violence as a human rights violation as expressed in the Beijing Platform for Action and the Option Protocol No 19 of the CEDAW convention see Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence. Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

5. Islah Jad, "NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements," *Development in Practice* 17 (4) (2007): 622-9; Maha Abderrahman, *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Nadjie Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East. The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

6. Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

1980s not only finally saw the foundation of the first feminist NGO by Nawāl as-Sa‘dāwī, followed by the establishment of many other independent non-governmental and private voluntary organisations (PVOs). In addition, shifting political debates, the rise of political Islam and rapidly changing economic realities created different grounds and perspectives for feminist and gender politics. These included renewed struggles for a reform of the Egyptian Personal Status Law (*al-aḥwāl ash-shakhṣiyya*), fierce debates about sexual and reproductive rights of women and an increasing number of women joining both the formal and informal labour market, all of which clashed with a religiously framed, ideological call for women to return to the confined sphere of the private.⁷ In the context of and in reaction to these debates and the ongoing structural reforms affecting civil society, many feminist activists started to regroup themselves in the form of non-governmental organisations, which appeared to be promising new tools in granting more freedom and independency than the authoritarian structure of traditional political parties.⁸ By the beginning of the new millennium, the number of independent feminist and women’s rights organisations had increased rapidly, and continued to grow despite manifold political, legal and financial restrictions for civil social activities.

These profound changes in feminist organisation were coupled by important transformations on a conceptual level. It coincided with a shift in activist and intellectual terminology of what constitutes feminism, in order to distinguish more precisely between different perspectives and approaches. The hitherto generally used term *nisā’iyy*, indicating a broad variety of feminist and women-related concerns, was now set against the term *niswiyya* (or *nasawiyya*), pointing to feminism as structurally and politically critical interventions, while *nisā’iyy* came to signify more conventional approaches and identity politics with concerns exclusively centred around women.⁹ This change indicated the attempt made by feminist activists to distinguish between different, competing forms of feminist and gender politics in the context of rapidly increasing national and global instruments addressing gender inequalities across different societal realms. The terminological reappropriation towards the term *niswiyya/nasawiyya* is also linked to the growing global body of feminist literature and theory and the paradigmatic shift towards women’s rights at that time. However, the specific gender politics on a national and international level led to critical self-reflection of feminist thought and action and a distinct repositioning of activists’ own

7. Margot Badran, “Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 1 (1) (2005): 6-28; Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009).

8. Nicola Pratt, “Globalization and the Post-colonial State: Human Rights NGOs and the Prospects for Democratic Governance in Egypt,” Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Exeter, 2001).

9. Hala Kamal, “‘Travelling Concepts’ in Translation: Feminism and Gender in the Egyptian Context,” *Synergy* 1 (2018): 131-45; Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009).

orientations and politics vis-à-vis the global mainstreaming of women-related concerns. This reorientation from the 1990s on took several partly overlapping, partly competing shapes and manifestations. One is a specific structurally critical feminist engagement with global human rights. As the vast majority of the newly formed NGOs articulated their interventions and critique in a language closely aligned to the now internationally acknowledged human rights paradigm, feminist activists began to determine their own distinct approach towards it.¹⁰ As women human rights defenders, these activists have fought since on many levels for the adaption and recreation of political spaces to make their struggles and demands visible.¹¹ Another distinct development of feminist activism at that time led to different formations of Islamic feminism, both as local dissident struggles as well as a transnational movement.

Despite the clear shift towards the human rights paradigm, both conceptually in the intellectual work of feminists as well as strategically in the everyday structure of their activism, these developments have received little interest so far in the work of global feminist scholars. Studies on human rights and especially so on women's rights in non-Western societies remain dominated by a positivistic focus on the status of human rights and, even if critically challenged, a certain assumed antagonism between the abstract ideal of a universal thought of human rights and locally specific cultural values.¹² Another binary operation that persists in most studies on human rights is the transfer of this antagonism into mutually excluding modes of human rights theory and human rights practice.¹³ Closely related to this stems the assumption that organisations and activists operating with what can generally be subsumed by a rights-based approach work first and foremost on formal-legal technicalities when advocating for rights on both the national and the international level. Women's and feminist organisations operating strongly within the human rights paradigm are thus usually assumed to function in similar ways and to operate with comparable strategies. In addition, mostly with respect to the specific contexts of the MENA, there have been critical debates about the increasing professionalisation of the non-governmental sector, what Islah Jad called the NGOisation of the women's rights movement.¹⁴ This furthermore includes dependency from international donor interests with certain prevailing cultural binaries affecting the work of local feminist activists, mostly so with respect to the culturalisation of violence against women, as well

10. Farag, *Politics by Other Means*; Nadjé Al-Ali, "Gender and Civil Society in the Middle East," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 5 (2) (2003): 216-32.

11. Based on the UN-*Declaration on Human Rights Defenders* from 1988, the term started to be used more broadly among activists during the first decade of the 2000s, especially so with a focus on women human rights defenders.

12. For an important exception see Arzoo Osanloo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

13. Mark Goodale and Sally Engle Merry (ed.), *The Practice of Human Rights. Tracking Law Between the Global and the Local* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

14. Jad, "NGO," 622-9.

as the conflicted relationship between independent feminist organisations and the state with its own national(istic) interests in women's rights politics.¹⁵ In addition to these critical reconsiderations of what indeed constitute some of the major challenges for feminist activists, there has been a more general critique of the work of women human rights defenders in the MENA altogether, specifically so in light of post-revolutionary developments in Egypt – a debate, which I will discuss at the end of this paper in more detail.

So far, the 1990s are indeed seen as a crucial juncture for Egyptian feminisms, however, not with respect to the development of human rights thought. Instead, they are usually seen to mark the crossroads between secular and Islamic feminisms, whereby secular both refers to former modes of expressions of Egyptian feminism in a historical sense as well as to more explicitly secular or secularist notions of feminism. Islamic feminism, in itself a highly debated term, partly emerged as a reaction to changing political fields on a global and a local scale, partly as an answer in trying to reconcile the supposedly inherently opponent approaches of feminism and Islamism.¹⁶ It is important to keep in mind that it was the rise of political Islam in the 1970s which led to the reshaping of a historically specific meaning of the 'secular,' and provoked a fierce response from feminists to reassert themselves as secular vis-à-vis a rigid, Islamically based identity politics.¹⁷ According to Margot Badran, the rise of Islamic feminism occurred at a moment where the historical secular feminism seemed "to have reached an impasse. It had no new ideology or new tools, but this was what feminism needed."¹⁸ At this turning point in the 90s, Islamic feminism readily stepped in by providing innovative thinking and progressive tools. Interestingly enough, the other coinciding historical momentum in global feminist history – the rise of transnational feminism with the conceptual shift towards women's rights as human rights – is not seen as an equally important breakthrough in feminist politics. Instead, Egyptian feminist history is viewed at a crossroad when Islamic feminism started to focus on the practice of social justice by reinterpreting religious core texts, while secular feminism, although equally seeking new perspectives through the growing transnational women's human rights movement, is not seen as providing answers for the new millennium. Thus, while the rise of Islamic feminism created enormous waves of interest in academic discourse on women and gender in the MENA, women's engagement with the practice of human rights received much less attention. This development was further supported by the post-secular turn in feminist scholarship mainly based in the Anglo-Saxon hemisphere, which has been particularly fuelled by important anthropological interventions such as Saba Mahmood's ground-breaking rereading of the feminist

15. Azza Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (Basingstoke: Mac-Millan Press, 1998).

16. Badran, *Feminism in Islam*.

17. Badran, *Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s*, 6-28.

18. *Ibid.*, 13, with reference to Al-Ali, *Secularism*.

subject in terms of piousness and religious agency.¹⁹ The resulting paradigmatic shift led to a variety of detailed, nuanced studies about Islamic feminism in recent scholarship, taking carefully into consideration the situatedness and different contexts for the articulation of religiously framed feminisms. However, as a result of this shift, secular feminism remained locked in a forced opposition towards Islamic feminism, with little knowledge about the multitude and variety of its own activist and intellectual work, be it within the framework of human rights or something else.²⁰ Only few approaches have tried to grasp the complex positionalities of feminist critique beyond such simplifying binaries, and to bear in mind specific intellectual formations in historical perspective. Margot Badran actually not only highlights that so-called secular feminism has always been profoundly rooted in religious texts, but also how historical intellectual roots, rather than representing categorised feminisms apart, have always constituted each other from different angles, perspectives and political interests.²¹

Itineraries of a feminist politics of women's human rights

In contrast to widespread generalising assumptions, so-called secular feminist and women's rights activists operating within the human rights paradigm are far from constituting a homogeneous group, both with respect to how they refer to human rights conceptually and strategically as well as to their position towards secularism. Since the rise of non-governmental organisations in the 1980s and 1990s in Egypt, they have articulated their priorities and demands in very different ways. Some have focused on legal rights and the amendments of discriminatory laws within the Egyptian juridical system, some on transformatory social and political mobilisation able to change beliefs and behaviour that stem from gendered social norms. They have prioritised their practical and strategical considerations differently, and have developed context-based attitudes towards long- and short-term planning and alliances with civil social as well as governmental bodies. They conceive of gender first and foremost as a relational, interconnected category of social difference or, rather, as the main axis of inequality that needs to be addressed. In accordance with that view, they articulate their demands in either an inclusionary, intersectional manner or more exclusively focusing on concerns related to sexual difference only. The prioritisation of rights claims and the implementation thereof are both part of broader tactical and strategic planning. Some activists expand in large networks across the country but keep operating from the capital, others however focus on strengthening and supporting local partners. While some serve mostly

19. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press); Rosi Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," *Theory, Culture and Society* 25 (6) (2008): 1-24.

20. Sindre Bangstad, "Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism," *Theory, Culture and Society* 28 (3) (2011): 28-54.

21. Badran, *Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s*; Badran, *Feminism in Islam*.

as experts for women and gender, others engage as well in local activism and grass-roots initiatives. Their structure varies from participatory collectives to strictly hierarchical organisations, which mirrors how they deal with unequal power hierarchies and social axes of differences more generally. They all operate with instruments of international law, but acknowledge equally the legitimacy of sacred texts, both Islamic and Christian, while challenging normative religious discourse in different ways.²²

This article follows some of the resulting itineraries of feminist women's rights politics, based on the empirical examples of two highly experienced feminist groups in the Egyptian capital, *Mu'assasat al-Mar'a al-Jadida* (New Woman Foundation, NWF) and *Qaḍāyā al-Mar'a al-Maṣriyya* (Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, CEWLA).²³ While NWF was founded in the mid-80s out of the specific experiences of the political Egyptian feminist left at that time, CEWLA arose in the mid-90s as a grass-roots initiative out of an internationally funded project. Expanding on their own distinctive beginnings and activist orientations, they have remained among the most active feminist organisations in shaping women's rights politics in Egypt until today, and are among the most critical voices in challenging systems of inequalities across society. Their itineraries as women human rights defenders therefore provide highly telling examples for two important points this paper intends to make. One is the reorientation of so-called secular feminisms towards an inclusion of the human rights paradigm, even, as is the case with NWF, when they carry an inherently anti-imperialist critique at their core. Given that women human rights defenders have received substantial critique by anti-imperialist feminist scholars, a debate which will be discussed in detail in the last section of this paper, the case of NWF can provide important new insights. The second concern of the article is to show how a seemingly formally-legal understanding of human rights in fact can mean something entirely different, which can be seen clearly in the work of CEWLA. In addition, CEWLA's holistic understanding of human rights proves an interesting case with respect to the assumed binary between secular and Islamic feminisms. While CEWLA is mostly viewed as either being imbricated with Islamic discourse or successfully juggling between what are thought to be antagonistic points of reference (international human rights conventions vs. Islamic law), this paper intends to offer a more nuanced reading of CEWLA's work.

Contextualising feminist anti-imperialist critique: The case of *al-Mar'a al-Jadida*

The development of NWF, founded in 1984 as a non-governmental organisation in Cairo, highlights the reshaping of a feminist women's rights

22. Farag, *Politics by Other Means*.

23. For more empirical accounts of these two cases as well as other important feminist NGOs see *ibid.*

politics as an integral part of local intellectual histories of Egyptian feminism. As mentioned before, not much academic research exists on how civil society activists have actually operated both conceptually and strategically with international human rights over the last forty to fifty years. Between the latest detailed studies on secular Egyptian feminisms in the 90s and the 2010s, NWF seems to have gone through substantial changes as to how it refers to international human rights mechanisms and conferences.²⁴ From an initial reluctance or even open critique towards global women's rights conferences such as the Beijing women's conference in 1995, NWF serves since 2014 as the leading organisation for the Egyptian CEDAW coalition. In doing so, it works successfully on enhancing the political weight and visibility of the women's rights convention and on implementing it into all levels of national legislature and legal procedures.

The early beginnings of NWF are deeply rooted in the political context of the late 1970s and the 1980s, with the experience of the students' movement in the 1970s, the following crisis of the political left and the growing disillusion with the hierarchical structures of active political parties. Consequently, political activists attempted to tackle questions of social inequalities in what was seen to be the more flexible and holistic form of a non-governmental organisation. The early 80s witnessed the emergence of some of the most influential human rights groups, which, despite their political and structural critique, did not include the topic of women's rights as a core element for social justice.²⁵ It was at this conjuncture that a more specific feminist perspective on human rights was being articulated – one that was, in the case of NWF, firmly guided by existing political leanings towards socialism and Marxism. NWF counts until today as one of the most structurally critical feminist voices with an inherent anti-imperialist critique. Their socialist approach is expressed in countless studies on the economic situation of women across Egyptian society, the labour market with its legal regulations and the role of women in the informal sector.²⁶ Coupled with a focus on gender-based violence at the workplace, NWF offers a specific perspective combining issues of social justice and an encompassing structural critique with a clear orientation towards human rights conventions. By providing vast empirical data, it equally brings women's own demands for a better legal protection by the state to the forefront – in accordance with international conventions. While NWF's development since the 1980s might prove as an example of the "human

24. Al-Ali, *Secularism*, and Farag, *Politics by Other Means*.

25. Pratt, *Globalization*; Sarah Ben Néfissa and Nabil Abd al-Fattah (ed), *NGOs and Governance in the Arab World* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000).

26. <http://nwrcegypt.org/en/> Insights presented on NWF here are based on empirically collected material by the author between 2011 and 2014 in the form of interviews and participant observation at the NGO. In addition, NWF provided me with a range of own publications and studies, some of which are accessible online via their website. In addition, their extremely detailed and regularly updated website gives more information about their activities, programmes and positions on a variety of issues. For a more detailed account see Farag, *Politics by Other Means*.

rights turn"²⁷ Egypt has witnessed over the past decades, it shows much more than that. As can be clearly traced from the NWF's magazine appearing regularly since the mid-80s, its critique and self-understanding has always been rooted in a strong commitment towards social, political and economic justice, which is clearly reflected in the way they approach human rights thought conceptually. In terms of strategy, their distinct activist engagement with human rights politics started to take clearer shape with increasingly strong local and regional networks working towards a feminist human rights agenda from the 1990s on.²⁸

While Al-Ali's study on the 1990s was mainly focusing on secularism, the state, and individual activists' narratives of modern Egyptian feminist history, the rise of transnational feminism was partly covered. She portrayed the reluctance and worries expressed by some members of NWF about aligning themselves with the rising global women's rights machinery, a point mostly discussed in the context of the ICPD 1994 and the Beijing Conference in 1995.²⁹ Her research contains a very careful analysis of the many overlapping and intertwined modes of critique by some NWF's members of activist work in the social and political environment of Egypt at that time with its specific legal restraints on the civil social sector and the conflicting interests attached to accepting international funding and cooperating with international donor agencies. The question of how to stay independent as feminist activists, both from increasing state-driven women's rights policies as well as from global governance is one of the core concerns expressed by the interviewed members of NWF, which resulted in many debates, conflicts and even clashes among the activists involved. Al-Ali discusses these difficulties under the perspective of conflicting political and anti-imperialist self-positionings under conditions of post-coloniality. She sees some of the disputes among feminist activists as expressions of the culturalisation of political debates on the universality versus specificity of women's rights. Based on the history of the NWF, the activists' critique is read as an expression of anti-Western sentiments in the context of the first Intifada and the Second Gulf War, and the examples provided understood as a mirror of political culture in Egypt at the time. While I agree with Al-Ali's analysis, it is important to highlight that NWF's critique did not result out of conceptual concerns over international human rights conventions, nor out of a refusal for a supposedly Western-driven agenda behind the global women's rights conferences organised by the United Nations.

27. Abdelrahman, *Civil Society*.

28. NWF's own magazine, accessible via the organisation itself, appeared in different periodical intervals since its foundation in the mid-80s and covers since a vast portrayal of the NGO's own activities, strategies, thoughts and reflections on manifold feminist issues. Whereas earlier issues were more concerned with national and regional gender politics and respective NWF positions, issues from 2000s on focused specifically on developing and advancing different aspects in feminist theory in Arabic as developed from NWF's own perspective.

29. Al-Ali, *Secularism*; Sherifa Zuhur, "The Mixed Impact of Feminist Struggles in Egypt During the 1990s," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5 (1) (2001): 1-18.

In contrast, structurally critical feminist voices in Egypt like NWF immediately recognised the crucial moment for a feminist politics of women's rights and expressed their fear over the instrumentalisation of international conventions by nationalist politics, donor interests and global governance precisely out of their adherence to human rights thought. Simultaneously, they formulated their well-grounded fear of committing to such a global formulation of rights as a strictly formal and technical procedure without tying it back to the practice of social justice and without equally addressing constitutional, political, social, economic and cultural rights on the ground. While their critique might partly be seen as an expression of anti-Western sentiments, it is crucial to understand that this critique mostly results from both a radical perspective on social justice, which neither the global human rights machinery nor national politics in Egypt embraced, as well as from a trajectory of specific historical regional developments at the end of the 80s and the early 90s. In light of a generally voiced anti-imperialist feminist critique of human rights,³⁰ it is necessary to understand that NWF's own anti-imperialism and socialist critique does not contradict with human rights on a conceptual level. Therefore, any critique of women human rights defenders needs to take into careful consideration the specificities of actual local articulations of feminism with their own historic and intellectual positionalities.

Rethinking binaries in feminist human rights politics: the case of Qaḍāyā al-Mar'a al-Maṣriyya

The second empirical example this paper provides is the case of *Qaḍāyā al-Mar'a al-Maṣriyya* (Centre for Women's Legal Assistance, CEWLA), which was officially established in 1995 as a non-governmental organisation.³¹ Unlike NWF, its founding members were previously involved in internationally funded development aid projects and subsequently felt closely connected on a professional and a personal level to the neighbourhood of Būlāq, an impoverished area in Greater Cairo. CEWLA started as a small grass-roots initiative working with specific problems brought forward by local women, who had been in close contact with some of the founding members of the NGO for many years. Starting from a needs-based approach, CEWLA first worked on providing women with legal help in obtaining official papers, filing complaints, resolving disputes on inheritance, guardianship or divorce, and on teaching small reading and writing classes for illiterate women. Via their active participation in various local and national campaigns, CEWLA gradually diversified its portfolio with respect

30. Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi, "Beyond the Woman Question in the Egyptian Revolution," *Feminist Studies* 37 (3) (2011): 683-91; Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

31. <http://www.cewla.org/> Insights and knowledge gained on the work of CEWLA as presented here are based on empirically collected material by the author in form of interviews and participant observation conducted at the NGO between 2011 and 2014, completed by readings of their publications and studies published since the 1990s. For a more detailed account on CEWLA see Farag, *Politics by Other Means*.

to topics covered by their activities as well as to the geographical scope of their interventions. Soon, its members became equally active in establishing a sustainable network of fellow grass-roots initiatives across the country, with a strong focus on the politically and economically neglected rural areas of Upper Egypt. Maintaining a low hierarchical structure, they are interested in strengthening local capacities and providing trainings to small organisations with limited resources, rather than creating their own local branches outside the capital. With the main focus on legal assistance to women provided by qualified lawyers until today, CEWLA can easily be seen as a women's rights NGO with a foremost formal-legal understanding of human rights. Just as the majority of officially registered women's and human rights organisations, they are highly active in a number of international, regional and national cooperations mostly on issues concerning violence against women, and are among the most outspoken voices during the annual meet-ups of the UN-Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). On the one hand, this focus on legal rights stems from CEWLA's own history, being founded by feminist lawyers mainly responding to specific concerns brought forward by local women, most likely problems with local authorities, legal documents, and legal family disputes. On the other hand, the NGO's women's rights politics has evolved since into a complex set of manifold activities, many of which go clearly beyond the confines of the political possible for civil social actors in Egypt. Since their work as civil social actors must strictly adhere to the non-political, feminist activists are usually forced to deal in a fine-balanced way between legal technicalities and political struggle.

With respect to Islam and human rights, CEWLA generally either counts as a prominent actor within the scene of contemporary Egyptian feminism in successfully operating between two antagonistic poles or, on the contrary, serves as an example for secular feminism's imbrication with Islamic discourse. Either way, the complex work of CEWLA remains captured in the binary frame of secular human rights versus Islamic normativity. In 2008, CEWLA promoted a highly politicised campaign dedicated to demonstrate the compatibility of CEDAW and Islamic law. With the help of Amina Nuseir, professor of Islamic philosophy at al-Azhar University, the campaign showed a 95% fit of CEDAW with Islamic law. Members of CEWLA interviewed by me stressed the highly political character of this intervention and its specific context, where an NGO-led campaign on reforming the Egyptian Personal Status Code kept clashing with the upheld politicised binary between international rights conventions and Islamic law.³² Thus, the aim of their campaign can be seen as deliberately feeding into this polarised controversy, well-aware of its simplifications. Referring both to international human rights conventions and religious sources, which in their case always includes Islamic and Christian normativities, is a

32. Interviews conducted by the author with different members of CEWLA in 2014 at their organisation in Bulaq, Cairo.

common strategy for CEWLA, as it challenges the hegemonic interpretative paradigms with respect to all possible foundational sources. This approach is reflected in many of their different activities and campaigns, but mostly so with respect to reforming the Personal Status Law. This one specific campaign from 2008 was, among their various and often decades-long initiatives, a first and foremost political intervention, with little conceptual weight for CEWLA itself.³³ Interestingly enough however, it caused different reverberations. Other scholars read this campaign quite to the contrary as a historically significant shift in the “social lives and institutional mediations of ‘Muslim women’s rights’.”³⁴ From this angle, CEWLA’s action is seen as an example for a more general trend of women’s rights politics being relocated in religious normativities. Abu-Lughod ties the intention behind their campaign furthermore to the fact that CEWLA operates as a grass-roots organisation and is thereby confronted with “problems and concerns brought to them by the ordinary poor women, men, and youths.”³⁵ CEWLA’s reference to religious arguments hence is regarded as stemming from the ‘ordinary,’ supposedly more religiously inclined citizens of Upper Egypt, where the NGO is present with their grass-roots initiatives. While in itself a problematic point, this view not only fails to grasp the aim of this campaign in its wider context, namely following a deliberately political strategy from a well-experienced feminist NGO navigating through the narrow spaces of the political possible. In addition, it reinforces a recurring dominant interpretative paradigm when focusing on so-called secular feminist NGOs, where any reference to religion is seen as an aberration and a giving-in into an Islamic hegemonic paradigm. CEWLA is among the most critical feminist voices in Egypt, and one of the very few remaining until now in the current political situation. They practice what can be called an inclusionary, relational and contextual feminism, and thus are able to resonate on different levels, and in different locations. This does not only apply to the question of the secular versus the religious, but more generally of anchoring their feminist standpoints across other social axes of difference, such as class and level of education. While some members of CEWLA might describe themselves as mostly secular, others would clearly define themselves as religious, or as drawing on a religious normative framework for their arguments. Instead of categorisations, CEWLA rather refers to manifold and equally valid sources for generating inclusive and multiple feminist knowledges, which have to be understood in their contextuality. Hence, their approach is not even about religion per se as a normative framework to be challenged, changed or upheld. Rather, CEWLA’s intersectional, inclusive perspective on gender inequality can be understood as the overall strategy, where religious beliefs and normative

33. Farag, *Politics by Other Means*.

34. Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Active Social Life of Muslim Women’s Rights: a Plea for Ethnography, not Polemic, with Cases from Egypt and Palestine,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 6 (1) (2009): 11.

35. *Ibid.*

frameworks are only one of many elements in seriously acknowledging women's everyday life struggles and experiences. Any simplification of feminist women's rights politics stems from the aforementioned assumptions about an overall homogenic field of activism of so-called organised, secular feminism. More importantly, it proves of little knowledge and even less acknowledgement of the actual itineraries of a feminist human rights practice, political work and intellectual formations as part of a multifaceted feminist history.

Reconsidering rights, revisiting feminist critique

In the context of the Egyptian revolutionary upheavals in 2011/12, recent debates from the perspective of anti-imperialist feminist critique of human rights have argued how feminist movements had basically completely failed their expectations.³⁶ The arguments put forward in this critique questioned the extent to which feminist activists had been able to create a feminist movement resonating throughout society and produce a socially relevant meaning of feminism in general over the last decades. On the one hand, this perspective stems from a profound critique of the specific developments of the formal organisation of women human rights defenders, highlighting how feminists, more experts than activists, had remained stuck in administrative processes of non-governmental organisations and thus had failed to connect to larger social movements. These lines of argument refer to the increasing professionalisation of NGOs, with a shift from activism to expertise and the provision of services, the elitist status of (secular) feminist organisations in the MENA due the origin in middle- to upper-class upbringings of the majority of their members and to the at least partial collaboration with the state and international donor agencies.³⁷ On the other hand, this debate specifically ties in with a more general critique of transnational feminism and human rights mechanisms as conflicted by global governance, geopolitical interests and neo-liberalist mentalities.³⁸ Such perspectives also include theoretical debates about how to configure and use legal mechanisms provided by human rights frameworks in a way able to capture the complexities of inequality and difference on both an individual and a structural level. However, what seemed to be an immediate expression of frustration over the less than welcoming outlook of post-2011 Egypt developed into a more encompassing anti-imperialist feminist critique and an overall evaluation of the work of women human rights defenders in the MENA. While the above mentioned points of critique have all received a substantial amount of scholarship engaging in different theoretically and empirically based positions against or for some of

36. Abu-Lughod and El-Mahdi, *Beyond the Woman Question*.

37. Frances S. Hasso, "Empowering Governmentalities rather than Women: the Arab Human Development Report 2005 and Western Development Logics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 63-82.

38. Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America. Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Leela Fernandes, *Transnational Feminism in the United States. Knowledge, Ethics, and Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

these arguments, the resulting generalising critique of human rights politics has been refuted altogether in recent scholarly work.³⁹ It not only portrays, as Hoda Elsadda argues, a locked binary of universalism against cultural specificities, but grossly neglects how human rights struggles have aroused as inherent parts of local intellectual and activist histories. As the empirical example of NWF clearly shows, the NGO's position is shaped by a sharp anti-imperialist critique itself, and is well aware of the different constraints attached to its ways of working and navigating under the given political circumstances. However, it also highlights that there is not only no contradiction between this critique and a clear adherence to the conceptual thought of human rights, but how it stems from NWF's very own specific history and positionality within secular Egyptian feminism. Yet, the ahistorical position of generalising anti-imperialist critique of rights assumes a juxtaposition between a seemingly Western-dominated human rights agenda and local histories, where activists' adherence to what is culturally seen 'not theirs' can mean nothing else than opportunistic political or economic gains.

One counter-argument developed in this recent debate has been that, even when activists are critically aware of global human rights mechanisms, they simply do "not have the luxury of non-engagement in highly volatile and fragile contexts."⁴⁰ By this, the authors refer to the necessary contextualisation of rights struggles, which must be understood within the specific scope and against the background of their own possibilities, limitations and challenges. Furthermore, it is noted that in highly volatile contexts, activists might sometimes act eclectically, pointing to the fact that every means in overcoming gross social injustices is being mobilised, without having the luxury of refuting an important political tool on the basis of ideological afterthoughts. The authors thus highlight how human rights politics, although usually caught in highly disturbing contradictions, is always also a strategic tool, which activists are relying on, even if it is only to gain political leverage. The arguments briefly summarised here all highlight the necessity of careful contextualisation and acknowledgment of distinct genealogies of critique, which might appear very differently in various spatial and temporal zones. However, while I completely agree with Tadros and Khan here, both the examples of NWF and CEWLA raise an even more important point. They show that the activists' engagement with human rights is neither just a strategic tool, nor is it solely a position out of political necessity. On the contrary, it is first and foremost a strong conceptual belief which leads to the adherence towards human rights, understood as one possible paradigm in achieving social justice. Such a positionality is, especially in volatile contexts, not an easy choice to make. NWF and CEWLA's critical and holistic approaches to human rights have given state

39. Hoda Elsadda, "Travelling Critique: Anti-imperialism, Gender and Rights Discourses," *Feminist Dissent* 3 (2018): 88-113; Mariz Tadros and Ayesha Khan, "Challenging Binaries to Promote Women's Equality," *Feminist Dissent* 3 (2018): 1-22.

40. Tadros and Khan, *Challenging Binaries*, 20.

authorities many endless occasions for vilifications, abuses and threats over the past decades. In the contemporary context, critical Egyptian activists are forced more than ever *not* to engage in human rights politics, without having to fear for their own or their families' safety. Precisely in violent and non-democratic contexts, it is thus more than wrong to assume that human rights-based activism is anywhere close to compliance, and especially disturbing if this view is fuelled by a certain dogmatic understanding of what constitutes feminism. Scholars interested in human rights struggles thus need to seriously acknowledge both the possible gains and losses attached to activists' engagement in human rights. Herein lies one of the highly problematic points in generalising human rights struggles and criticising their outcomes as limited and failed.

The other is, again, the apparent lack of knowledge about local histories of activism. Feminists have carefully carved out a multitude of strategies and initiatives over many decades, with results or outcomes being impossible to anticipate and sometimes even turning into unexpected, contradictory or contrarious dynamics. Despite this complex political and intellectual engagement, human rights thought and activism from a feminist perspective so far are rarely viewed in light of the manifold political struggles for social justice in the context of the MENA countries, shaped by global developments. Conceptually, the demands of the Egyptian feminist movement even before its more formal visibility at the beginning of the XXth century, already are close to what constitutes the core of human rights thought. Both secular and Islamic feminists in fact have operated with their very own, distinctive understandings of human rights from their specific perspectives. The concept of human rights has become an integral part of the intellectual and political history of contemporary Egyptian feminisms, as elsewhere on the globe. Hegemonic interpretative binaries as deployed in a universalising anti-imperialist critique of rights as well as assumptions about separate genealogies of secular and of Islamic feminisms do not only produce far too rigid classifications of forms of feminist critique. They furthermore ignore local (self-)conceptions and political dilemmas by simply referring to ideologised assumptions instead of looking at contextual factors and positionalities. As feminist scholars, we thus need to carefully reconsider our own positions in contributing to and building upon archives of knowledge, and remain self-critical in challenging ourselves to constantly excavating areas on the borderlands of what currently counts as the acknowledged, globally circulating canon of scholarship and knowledge production.

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العنوان: إعادة النظر في الحقوق ومراجعة النقد النسوي: الخطابات المتداولة عن حقوق المرأة في مصر

ملخص: يهدف هذا المقال إلى إعادة النظر في بعض جوانب الفكر والفعل النسوي المصري المعاصر كما تم وصفها وتصورها في كتابة التاريخ الأكاديمي الراهن للنسويات المصرية. ويكمن الهدف الرئيسي في دراسة كيفية إعادة النقد النسوي لتوقعه في سياق، أخذت فيه منظومة حقوق الإنسان، وبشكل متزايد، مكانة بارزة، منذ تسعينيات القرن الماضي إلى اليوم. وبينما تشكل فترة التسعينيات هذه منعطفًا مهمًا في التاريخ المعاصر للحركات النسائية المصرية، لم يهتم البحث الأكاديمي الا قليلا بكيفية تدبير النشاط للسياسات النسوية لحقوق المرأة. ويستكشف المقال ضعف الاهتمام هذا عبر ظاهرة بروز الحركة النسوية الإسلامية ونقد الآليات العالمية للدفاع عن حقوق المرأة كما تم تأطيرها من زاوية المنظور النسوي المناهض للإمبريالية ونقد العلمانية الذي ينتج عنه تعارض بين النسوية "الإسلامية" و "العلمانية"، ونقد آلية حقوق المرأة العالمية من منظور نسوي. ويناقش هذا المقال خطوط الجدل هذه مع تقديم قراءات مختلفة لجميع النقاط التي أثرت. وهكذا، فإنه يوفر سبلاً لكتابة بديلة للقصص النسوية المصرية المعاصرة التي يجب أن تؤخذ بعين الاعتبار عند بناء أرشيفات علمية حول الفكر والفعل النسويين في بلدان منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا. وبناء على دراسة حالة تخص منظمين نسويين غير حكوميين في مصر، يتتبع المقال مسارات السياسات النسوية لحقوق المرأة منذ التسعينيات، ويدعو إلى الاعتراف بفكر حقوق الإنسان باعتباره جزء لا يتجزأ من التاريخ الفكري والسياسي والنضالي للنسوية المصرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسويات، الأرشيفات المعرفية، العلمانية، النقد، سياسات حقوق الإنسان، مصر.

Titre : Reconsidérer les droits, revisiter la critique féministe: Discours sur les droits des femmes en Egypte

Résumé: Cet article propose une relecture de certains aspects de la pensée et de l'action féministes égyptiennes contemporaines, telles qu'elles sont décrites et conceptualisées dans l'écriture actuelle de l'histoire académique des féminismes égyptiens. Le principal objectif en est d'étudier comment la critique féministe s'est repositionnée dans un contexte où, des années 1990 jusqu'à aujourd'hui, le paradigme des droits de l'homme a pris une place de plus en plus grande. Alors que les années 90 constituent un tournant important dans l'histoire contemporaine des féminismes égyptiens, les chercheurs se sont peu intéressés à la manière

dont les activistes ont mené activement une politique féministe des droits des femmes. Par conséquent peu de recherches ont été produites sur ce sujet. L'article explore ce manque d'intérêt à travers les questions de la montée du féminisme islamique, de la critique des mécanismes mondiaux de défense des droits des femmes telle qu'elle a été formulée à travers une perspective féministe anti-impérialiste et de la critique du sécularisme qui aboutit à une mise en opposition de féminismes "islamiques" et "séculier." Cet article discute de ces lignes d'argumentation et propose différentes lectures pour chacun des points soulevés. Ce faisant, il propose des pistes pour une écriture alternative des histoires féministes égyptiennes contemporaines qui devraient être prise en compte lors de la constitution d'archives savantes sur la pensée et l'action féministes dans la région MENA. Sur la base de deux études de cas portant sur deux organisations non gouvernementales féministes en Égypte, cet article retrace les itinéraires d'une politique féministe des droits des femmes à partir des années 1990 et plaide pour la reconnaissance de la pensée des droits humains comme partie intégrante de l'histoire intellectuelle, politique et militante des féminismes égyptiens.

Mots-clés: féminismes, archives savantes, sécularisme, critique, politique des droits de l'homme, Egypte.