

Gendered Politics of Alienation and Power Restoration:

Arab Revolutions and Women's Sentiments of Loss and Despair

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Abstract

From the start of the Arab revolutions in late 2010 a connection between the law, state, political economy, gender norms and orientalist ideology has formed the foundation of women's systematic exclusion from politics. This article offers a gendered political reading of the concept of alienation by unmasking the processes that created the ideological and material conditions of externalising women's revolutionary acts, estranging their political involvement and exposing them to various forms of violence. The article suggests that gender normative ideology's characterisation of women's images, roles and acts during and after revolutions corresponds to the most profound form of alienation. The article proposes that the externalisation, subjugating of women and objectification of their revolutionary acts are modes of alienation are necessary conditions for the reconfiguration of power dynamics to restore authoritarian states' power. The sphere of politics, the article insinuates, not only relates to political activism and conflict between revolutions and counter-revolutions, it is also a battlefield for the (re)production of gender normative knowledge.

Key words: Gender normativity; regime restoration; revolution; alienation; women; activism

Introduction

Despite changes over the last few decades in the Arab region concerning women's rights and political participation, to varying degrees from one country to another, the states' governing principle values men over women. This principle can be clearly seen in women's legal status. For example, guardianship provisions give male relatives authority over women: male relatives have the right to determine women's choice of study, marriage, mobility, and so on (Jabiri, 2016 & 2013). Furthermore, citizenship laws often treat women as secondary citizens, as such laws not only prevent women from passing their nationality to their husbands and children, but also construct women as subordinate subjects (Joseph, 2000). This is in addition to a whole set of decency laws, modesty laws and customary practices that attribute honour and public morality to women's acts and behaviours, policing women in both the public and private spheres (Jabiri, 2016; Hélie, 2012; Hoodfar and Ghoreishian, 2012).

There are extensive examinations of the processes of perpetuating women's subordinate position in relation to culture, religion, nationalist movements, and the state's alliance with tribes and other conservative groups (See: Al-Rasheed. 2013; Charrad, 2000 & 2001; Joseph, 2000; Kandiyoti, 1991, 1992, 2001; Hatem, 1995). Less consideration has been paid to how the state and its apparatuses mediate the realisation of women, as a category, through the production of gender normative ideology – where women are depicted as minor subjects and, ironically, also symbolise public modesty and honour (Hélie, 2012; Hoodfar and Ghoreishian, 2012) – as well as the extent to which these processes have aimed and contributed to estranging women from politics.

Whilst women's historical role in politics and revolution in the region cannot be denied, their limited gains – whether in terms of low representation or restricted rights – raises questions around the efficacy of gendered political processes in pushing women away from politics. I engage with this question through examining the concept of women's alienation and estrangement from their political roles in the Arab revolutions. I look at how political processes and forces are gendered, and how alienation is used in the reshaping and reproduction of the social norms that govern women's lives and activities during and beyond revolution.

Feminist scholarship has examined the post-revolution processes and shifts that exposed women to various forms of violence and the marginalisation of their agendas (El-Mahdi, 2012; Al-Ali, 2012 & 2014; Kandyoti 2011, 2012 & 2013; Johansson-Nogués, 2013; Amar, 2012), I, however, take a relatively neglected point of departure, especially *vis-à-vis* the estrangement of women from politics for the purpose of restoring power by examining processes of alienating women through the objectification of women's acts and contribution to revolution-making, and strategies of state and its counter revolution's allies to galvanise the public and reproduce gender normativity. I particularly take the case of Egypt to examine processes of excluding women political activists through three modes of alienation. This includes the externalisation, subjugation, and objectification of women's revolutionary acts-that moulded women's power and needs as distinctly different from those of men, justified and legitimised, different forms of violence against women.

The three modes of alienation developed, refined and adapted from Karl Marx theory of alienation, for the purpose of scrutinising the ways in which gender norms and

relations were key to constituting women's basic relationship with the revolution, along with the unique conditions under which the alienation of women from politics intend to restore old power hierarchies and structures. Examining Egyptian women activists' estrangement from politics through the concept of alienation contributes into the politicisation of the construction and reproduction of gender norms and locating violence against women activists within political practices of restoring power. So rather than examining cultural and social processes that construct gender normativity, I, by relating to Marx theory of alienation, bring new accounts of how the sphere of politics not only relates to conflict between revolutions and counter-revolutions, it is also a battlefield for the (re)production of gendered knowledge. By this, I aim to show that gender norms and relations are not only shaped by politics but also somehow constitute a crucial part of the region's politics and order.

This article is based on and heavily influenced by my own activism in the Arab region, particularly over the last four years, when I worked closely with women's activists in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Jordan. Over that time, I participated in several conferences and workshops in the region, which included, three workshops and trainings for Egyptian women's rights activists; and two regional trainings held in Tunisia and Egypt in cooperation with the Centre for Arab Women Training and Research (CAWTR). In addition, I participated in several regional meetings on women in post-revolution societies. In March 2015, I led the Arab Women's Network's (Roa'a) delegation – composed of activists from Jordan, Bahrain, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, and Syria – to the United Nations' 59th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

Alienation, Politics and the Reproduction of Gender Norms

In Marx's conceptualisation, alienation is the process of workers' objectification within the production process, where the 'object which labour produces stands in opposition to the worker as an alien thing' (Marx, 1967: 58-59). In the capitalist system, alienation is about disconnecting workers from power politics: the system treats the worker as a thing, turning him/her into a commodity, a valueless self, to the extent that 'the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under domination' (*Ibid.*: 78).

For Marx, alienation is insidious and dangerous because it makes 'all of this appear normal and even natural' (Kain, 1993: 124). Alienation of the worker from his/her product and production activity, which in turn alienates him/her from his/her human nature, may not appear to him/her as a form of oppression or domination. In this sense, the oppressor is unlikely to be identified, as no one observes that alienation is the product of a particular form of power relations and human interactions. Hence, Marx uses the concept of alienation to disrupt the normalised relationships within labour production process (*Ibid.*).

Socialist and Marxist feminists have adapted and developed the normalised relation between the oppressed and the oppressor in Marx's theory of alienation (Klotz, 2006; Foreman, 1977; MacKinnon, 1989 & 1982; Jaggar, 1982; Kain, 1993). Socialist feminists, such as Anna Foreman (1977), have tried to unmask the question of women's oppression by positing femininity, in and of itself, as a form of alienation. Hence, the realisation of women's selfhood is a mode of alienation that results in women's agreement with their modes of objectification (*Ibid.*). Marxist feminists, on the other

hand, have provided a theoretical framework for women's oppression by questioning whether the relationship between sexuality, house-work (as forms of labour), domination, and the objectification of women is a form of alienation (MacKinnon, 1989 & 1982; Jaggar, 1982; Kain, 1993).

Feminists' work on alienation – although limited to house-work, child-care, sexuality, and property rights – has allowed for new conceptualisations of, and engagement with, the concept in other areas where domination is used to estrange women from their own activities, subjugate them, and objectify their sense of self. As such, I develop a gendered political reading of alienation by examining how women's relationship with politics (as a form of production process) is normalised as something irrelevant to women's nature and interests, and hence foreign to them. I scrutinise how women's role in the Arab revolutions is normalised through alienation to serve authoritarian states' power restoration. I suggest that the gender normative ideology's characterisation of women's images, roles and acts during and after revolutions corresponds to the most profound form of alienation.

However, all of this begs the question: to what extent can politics be treated as a production process and women's engagement from politics as a form of labour? Marx suggests that the alienation of workers from their products aims to disconnect them from their power over their products and the reproduction process as a whole; a process that disengages workers from their fellow workers and their own human activities and keeps wealth and politics concentrated in the hands of a bourgeois group. By the same token it is possible to suggest that if women's role in politics (be it in the form of protesting, voting, membership in political parties and unions, etc.) is recognised and

not estranged, such could result in women gaining power over their actions and selves, accessing leadership positions, reforming laws, and so forth. This could eventually lead to an alteration of the masculine order. Therefore, change at the level of who actively contributes to political processes is crucial to who has access to resources and control over material conditions, and vice versa. Such a transformation may not only have implications for gender relations, but also for the political order. Hence, externalisation and exceptionalism of women revolution-making, the first mode of alienation, is a necessary condition for excluding women from politics to serve the authoritarian state's restoration of power.

One of the significant points to make here is the more women are active, as I will examine in details, the harsher are the strategies used to alienate them from their activism through subjugating them to various forms of violence, the second mode of alienation. This mode of alienation aims to push women to a state like the workers/product relation, wherein 'the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess' (Marx: 78, 1967), a relationship that is shaped by the exploitation of the worker. For Marx, exploitation forms the foundation of labour power and workers' alienation, where the worker is exploited by his/her own activity (control of workers' creativity, time and physical energy)(Ibid). Women's active role in revolutions resembles the object of labour, and consequently, alienation can be useful to shed lights on the ways by which women, instead of seeing the results of their active political role in the revolution, the world of politics, and indeed the revolution that they contributed into its creation, are somehow become more alien, less belong to them as their own, and hence they become less influential and more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Accordingly, the greater women's active role in politics the more they are

subjugated and exposed to violence. In this mode, sexual assaults, and other forms of violence, against women political activists that are examined in this article, are meant to contain women's revolutionary acts and exclude them from power politics.

Objectification in Marx theory means the more value the worker creates and produces 'the less valueless, and the more unworthy he becomes....the more ingenious labour becomes, the less ingenious becomes the worker and the more he becomes nature's servant' (Marx, 78, 2009). The direct relationship between worker and the labour is the production of the worker's self. The production of workers' self as a machine, for Marx, is an essential element of labour power and control over the means of production. In this process, the worker is not only foreign to his/her product and exploited by it, but also alienated from his/her human activity and fellow humans. Similarly, it is possible to insinuate that women's relationship with the revolution, is produced through normalisation of politics; as something irrelevant to women's nature and interests, and hence foreign to them. In this sense, women's role is more intrinsic, as more related to their natural characteristics, and thus different from that of men. The objectification of women's act of revolution- the third mode of alienation- works to reproduce gender norms to alienate women from their humanity, as they less belong to the world of politics, to maintain control over the revolution and its results.

In addition to using the three modes of alienation to elucidate and uncover the processes that created the ideological and material conditions of women's alienation, estranging their political involvement and exposing them to various forms of violence, the other significant aspect of using the concept of alienation is related to what Marx incites us to think of alienation as illusory and, thus, not an expression of reality. Hence,

bursting the illusion surrounding women's political roles and contributions, and thus identifying modes and strategies of alienation, could have severe implications for authoritarian regimes and institutions, particularly when the realisation of self as active and valuable transforms into a means for political and social change (Marx, 1967; Ollman, 1971). Consequently, using alienation as a theoretical framework not only provides a better understanding of the revolutions' results, but can also offer guidance in gendering politics, politicising gender normative ideology and baring the reasoning and justification of discriminatory laws and gender based violence practices, as based on religion and culture.

Women's Sense of Loss and Despair

Before the revolutions, the region was going through a 'crisis of authority' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 274): authoritarian regimes still dominated power, but were no longer believed to be serving the people's interests. This crisis of authority was brought on by decades of dictatorship and neoliberal policies of privatisation, which had led to a concentration of wealth and pushed the majority deep into poverty; foreign interventions, the United States-led coalition and war against terror, which legitimised the invasion of Iraq – one of the most powerful countries in the region – and resulted in its destruction; and a lack of both regional and international political will to achieve a *just* solution to Palestinians. Under such political and economic conditions, any attempt at change was suppressed before it could mature and, sometimes, buried before it was born. This crisis lay in the fact that, as Gramsci put it, 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276).

The start of the Arab revolutions was very promising; it led to the overthrow of the dictatorships in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia. But perhaps more importantly, revolution promoted the slogan of ‘justice, freedom, and liberty’ and consequently encouraged the duplication of the revolution in other countries in the region. For women’s rights groups, in particular, the revolutions were not only about regime change; these momentous occasions also implied the voicing of women’s concerns and the genuine consideration of equality. Many women activists had hoped that their long sought change was now closer than ever. One activist from Egypt shared her thoughts with me during the revolution: ‘The change we have seen is unimaginable. What we have been longing for is coming true. What has happened in Egypt will certainly be echoed elsewhere in the region.’ A Tunisian activist stated: ‘We are living a dream. Our voice is so loaded that no one will ever dare to disregard it again.’ As women rejoiced in the atmosphere of change and a profound sense of hope for a better future, no one expected or anticipated a reversal in the spheres of political activism and women’s rights.

Four years later, we have seen the revolutions’ dramatic turn toward the antithesis of their demands and slogans: people have been forced to choose between military rule and the Islamic extremism of Da’ish, and such choices have unleashed turmoil across the region and drastically altered women’s sentiments towards the revolutions. On 16 April 2015, Khadija Besikry – the well-known Libyan writer and activist who participated in Libya’s revolution from the start, mobilising people through her poems, writings, and activism – wrote on her Facebook page:

I apologise to you. For every word of hope I wrote, I apologise. For every dream, I dreamt and shared with you, I apologise. For your illusions, I apologise. For my belonging, adoration and love for this country, I apologise. For all my desires, I apologise. For my life, I apologise.

On 24 January 2015, the political activist Shaima' Al-Sabagh was gunned down in a peaceful demonstration honouring the martyrs of Egypt's 25 January revolution. 18 activists, including Azza Soliman, stepped forward to provide witness testimony as to the unlawful killing of Al-Sabagh; however, when these activists volunteered their testimony to the police, they were quickly turned from witnesses into defendants. In March 2015, Egyptian women's organisations and activists put out a statement in support of Soliman and the 17 other wrongfully accused political activists, imploring: 'Do not persecute hope.' Egyptian activists see the persecution of Azza Soliman – a representative of women's voices in the revolution – as a silencing and betrayal of women's demands after their crucial role in the revolution. Zeinab Al-Mahdi, the young Egyptian activist, who had repeatedly described the revolution as: 'my first love'. Zeinab, who lived the revolution from day one and was emotionally connected to every aspect of those 18 days in Tahrir Square, was so disappointed and enraged that she committed suicide in November 2014 with the words: 'There is no justice, and I realise that. Victory is not coming. We are deceiving ourselves so we can survive' (Ayman, 2014). Zeinab's reaction to the loss of her first love was extreme. However, hers was the strong statement of a jobless, lower-class woman who had truly believed justice was within her grasp; when suddenly left with no option, she refused to be alien from her first love and chose to protest one last time with her own life.

One feels the sense of loss in both Khadija's and Zeinab's words and the Egyptian women's statement; the same sentiment can also be felt when speaking to diverse women, and people generally, from such post-revolutionary contexts, whether at a conference, in the streets or public transport, in shops, on social media or in newspapers.

Many people, whether in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya or elsewhere in the region, now make comments such as: ‘democracy does not suit Arab people’; ‘the Arab spring was rather an Arab autumn’; or even that the revolutions were nothing but a ‘Western conspiracy’. Such expressions beg the question: what has alienated and estranged the people of the revolution to such a degree that they now oppose their own revolution? How has the revolution been so diverted that it has become independent of its people, as ‘a thing lying outside of their control’ (Marx, 1967, p. 87)?

One way of answering these questions is to look at the ways by which states and counter revolution forces have played off social norms to galvanise public opinion against the revolution-makers. As Gramsci posits, hegemony does not only establish its order by force or from outside; instead, hegemony is established from within, by creating a common sense and consent to its ideology (Gramsci, 1971). As Bayat (2015) further explains, hegemony can only succeed in authoritarian states ‘by weaving its logic — through norms, relations, and institutions — into the social fabric’. In this vein, I aim to examine the extent to which the recalling and reproduction of gender normative ideologies was part and parcel of restoring the hegemonic social and political order in Egypt. To put this into more concrete terms, in what follows, I discuss the three developed gendered modes of alienation: the alienation of women’s act of revolution through the externalisation and exceptionalisation of these acts; the alienation of women through their subjection to sexual and physical violence; and the alienation of women from their human activity and essence through the objectification and commodification of women and their bodies.

Mode of Externalisation and Exceptionalisation of Women’s Revolution-Making

There is not a clear trajectory for the ways in which women were estranged from political participation and engagement with the revolutions. At various stages of the revolutions, women were central and gender norms used to create public discontent with either the revolution itself, the old regime, or Islamic parties. However, the centrality of the women's question in the political sphere could be understood as no more than 'moments within' the phases of changeable politics.

At the outset of Egypt's revolution, women on the frontlines were portrayed as 'Westerns' and 'foreigners' with respect to Egyptian culture and society. State-owned TV stations and controlled newspapers depicted women revolutionaries as 'prostitutes' who joined the revolution in order to have sexual relationships and behave 'immorally' according to Egyptian culture; even some celebrities helped to propagate this message. In the first two weeks of the revolution, state-owned TV channels aired programmes with celebrities – such as actors, actresses and football players – who accused men and women of going to Tahrir Square for sex and drugs. The TV presenter of the 'Cairo Today' programme described male revolutionaries as physical and political *mukhanathin* (mollycoddle or effeminate men). Analytical programmes on Egyptian TV often and repeatedly asked their guests questions about the extent to which women who demonstrated and camped in tents in Tahrir Square were Egyptian.

For years, state-owned and regulated media had systematically denied the people's voice and backed the regime (See Matter, 2011 & 2011; Peterson, 2011). During the 18 days of revolution, such media continued to suppress the people's voice through narratives that dehumanised and externalised the act of the revolution (Hamody &

Gomaa, 2012). Moreover, by playing the moral and gender ideology card, the regime intended to alienate women's revolutionary acts from Egyptian culture as a whole, demasculinise men and, hence, alienate people from the revolution. The act of revolution was portrayed as an act of immorality that society should condemn.

As the revolution progressed, the number of women exceeded all expectation and the revolution gained both military and international support, the media shifted its discourse. Now women were being portrayed as partners in the revolution, but gender was still present in every aspect of this representation. Women's participation was always depicted in relation to men. Media headlines included titles such as 'women supported men' and 'women stood behind or beside men', emphasising their roles as mothers, wives, and sisters over their involvement as citizens. In this narrative, a woman 'is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her... he is the absolute – she is the other' (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 16).

For women's act to be seen only as relative to men is an act of alienation and estrangement intended to bring women closer to gender normative roles and keep them removed from politics. Whilst women's participation could not be ignored, it could be located within a particular framework of gender normativity. When the United States and the military turned their support to the revolution, the regime had lost its strongest allies and regime change was imminent. Therefore, the celebration of women's participation was part and parcel of the political shift at this stage of the revolution.

Another aspect of the gender discourse was displayed through the picture of Mubarak and his sons dressed in women's garments in social media and newspapers. This widely circulated image was intended to mock Mubarak and his sons: Mubarak had been relegated from the strong man to a 'lowly' woman; he no longer had anything to do with the position of power. Besides downgrading Mubarak from his political status, the image also had patronising and disciplining purposes. It showed men who abuse power as detached from masculinity, associating them instead with femininity as a form of punishment aimed at perpetuating the supremacy of men. In this logic, femininity represented immorality, corruption, and abuse of power. Such a representation resonates with ideological gender normativity, depicting the masculine as uncorrupted, competent and honourable, while the feminine embodies the converse. Deeming women's interpersonal relations as inferior and degrading their political roles aimed to disregard all the peculiarities of women's abilities – as both humans and citizens – and reinstitute women's alienation from power politics.

In the first phase of the revolution, the representation of women and gender roles used soft means to reproduce gender normative ideology, whether through attempting to demoralise the revolution by externalising women's act of revolution or celebrating and exceptionalising women's participation. Women's participation was exceptionalised through describing it as something 'new', a form of 'awakening', or the tendency to limit women's contribution to a few exceptional heroines (Al-Ali, 2013; Abu Lughod, 2011; El-Mahdi, 2012), which coincided with and echoed orientalist discourses and alienated other women from their own forms of resistance and contributions to the revolution.

According to this logic, the activity of producing the revolution was seen as first belonging to men and then to particular, individual women. While these discourses might seem contradictory, in fact they normalise women's essence and nature as incompatible with politics and revolution-making. Hence, acts of externalisation, exceptionalisation and celebration were no more than forms of estranging women from their own history of struggle, potentialities, abilities and human essence. This discourse negates women's activism in Egypt throughout history, as well as denies their significant contribution and role in the struggle for independence, within the nationalist movement and beyond in Egypt (see among others Al-Ali, 2000; Badran, 1996; Baron, 2006; Lewis, 2012).

Mode of Subjugating Revolutionary Women

The transition period – after Mubarak's resignation through the first presidential election in 2012 – was a time of hostile and hard forms of alienating women. The shift from soft to hard means was clear through the emergence of systematic sexual violence against women in protests. In this period, there was an informal alliance between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which was ruling Egypt, and the Islamic Brotherhood Party, which was expected to win the first post-revolution presidential and parliamentary elections. During this time, women protesters were targeted by the police and security forces, and subjected to forms of violence that varied from verbal harassment, physical and sexual assault, and accusations of performing immoral acts (Nazra et al., 2014, p. 11). Islamic parties legitimised these brutalities against women through the discourse of the Egyptian people's morality and religiosity.

The military and Islamic parties were clearly in agreement in arguing that women protesting was causing a decline in public morals, which was embodied by the ‘virginity tests’ and brutality of security forces against women protestors. In March 2011, 17 women protesters, including female journalists, were described to the public as ‘strangers to the Egyptian community’ (Baha’Iz Al-Arab, 2014). In order to justify the security forces’ acts of sexual harassment and assault, these women were forced to submit to virginity tests. A SCAF senior general stated about the women: ‘The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square’ (Ibid.). This statement held several political and gender normative implications. Firstly, by describing activists as girls rather than women, the military intended to influence the public to view women as minors and, hence, imply that acts of protesting were merely acts of naiveté. Secondly, the statement ‘they are not like your daughters or mine’ was intended to send a strong message to Egyptian families: women who protest lack morals, and it is a family’s responsibility to discipline their daughters. Therefore, these 17 women did not hail from respectable families or fit the image of good daughters, so they deserved to be disciplined and tamed. The statement sought to remind families to adhere to their responsibilities, toe the military line and suppress women. Furthermore, this statement also reiterated the Mubarak regime’s discourse of externalising women’s act of revolution in order to tighten security measures, justify sexual assaults committed by the security forces, and limit the act of protesting to those who lacked morals and decency. De-moralising women protesters in this way was intended to denigrate the act of protesting itself. The political sphere had changed and this change needed to be understood by people. Therefore, SCAF’s ultimate goal was to end street protests and rationalise and legitimise their atrocious actions against those who did not comply.

At this stage, the state and SCAF aimed to alienate women protesters through the systematic abuse of their bodies. However, acts of sexual harassment, rape and abuse were not done merely to punish women activists; these acts were also a direct threat to other women and intended to shift women's role from active participant to passive victim. Alas, women's act of revolution has now become something to avoid simply to stay alive and escape punishment. By 2014, in addition to hundreds of sexual and physical assaults by individual men or the security forces, NGOs had documented 500 cases of mob sexual harassment and rape in Tahrir Square and other political spaces. Many such mob attacks were videoed, and some were aired live on television (International Federation for Human Rights, 2015, p. 6). In January 2013, the activist Azza Balbaa shared her opinion: 'What happened was not merely sexual harassment; it was an intentional move to scare women from political life and from Tahrir Square' (Nazra et al., 2014, p. 3).

The purposefulness of these attacks is clear from their collective/mass form, which were frequently described by survivors as follows: during protests, an individual man would start both verbally harassing and physically attacking a female protester, then other men would join him and form a circle around the woman; some of these men would try to convince the woman that they were there to protect her and push her away from the crowd, but would then physically assault her themselves (Ibid.). Videos of sexual harassment and rape would sometimes show more than 20 men simultaneously assaulting one woman. Such videos also showed people passing by assaults without intervening and police ignoring women's cries for help. Some women also accused the police of directly participating in such acts (Ibid.).

Unfortunately, sexual harassment is not a new phenomenon in Egypt. However, the escalation of this harassment during the protests in Tahrir Square, particularly during the SCAF rule, gave the attacks more of a political tone than just simply sexual-related crimes. There are several issues that show the link between the use of gender normativity, sexual harassment and power restoration. First, perpetrators systematically instrumentalised the concept of protection in order to trick women. In ‘ordinary’ harassment scenarios, male witnesses – despite being complete strangers to the woman involved – often take on the role of protector and intervene. This is part and parcel of the Egyptian popular symbol *ibn el-balad* (son of the nation). Sometimes, even if a man himself practises harassment, he will not tolerate or remain silent when witnessing harassment by another man. Hence, victims of sexual harassment in Tahrir were deceived by the invocation of the concept of protection, as the women believed that such was integral to men’s masculinity; failing to provide women with protection, it was thought, challenged the essence of men and the values associated with masculinity.

Taking all this into consideration, can we now consider that these acts form the basis of a transformation in masculinity, or that Egyptian ‘masculinity is in crisis’ (Amar, 2011)? In this case, the answer is certainly no, as these ‘un-masculine’ acts somehow related to gendered state violence against women. They were deliberate and intentional acts of abuse on behalf of a regime looking to punish women. The perpetrators were merely gangs, like actors, who enacted the regime’s desire of pushing women away from politics. Masculinity is not the concern here, particularly the one represented by the image of *ibn el-balad*. The regime used sexual harassment as a political tool to punish women, alienate their political participation and, perhaps most importantly,

transform the image of the revolution from peaceful to aggressive; thus, making it alien to the general public. This case reconfirms that gender norms can be played off by states; the state is unconcerned with protecting some features of masculinity when its political and economic interests are at stake. In such a situation, the state bypasses or even sacrifices some of its own gender norms to reinforce those that suit its current politics.

Second, the videos' clarity of picture, sound and meticulous filming – perpetrators' and victims' voices and faces were clearly recognisable – was meant to frighten women and precisely convey the price a woman might pay if she participated in protests. Ironically, but given the political nature of the act not surprisingly, even though perpetrators' faces were clearly visible in these videos, only one person has been prosecuted for these crimes as of May 2015. Although there were a few official statements by presidents Morsi and Sisi, or announcements of pending investigations, as of May 2015 no man has been brought to justice for participating in mob assaults.

Punishing women and giving license to perpetrators to harass and rape with impunity gave the message that women were to blame and intended to push Egyptian society to further limit women's movement. Four young activists in Egypt told me that their family members (fathers, brothers, mothers, grandparents, etc.) began further restricting their movement after these attacks were shown on television and widely circulated on social media. An activist from Alexandria said, 'those of us who persisted in our act of revolution were seen by the public as seekers of sexual harassment, as if it was something we wanted, and so instead of blaming the criminals we were held responsible.' Another activist said that her neighbour gave her the following an

unsolicited advice: ‘You should stop going to Tahrir Square. You know if you go to the protest you will be sexually harassed, and yet you still go. How should people understand this other than you want to be harassed?’

Some families, as a measure of precaution, arranged marriages for their daughters or forced them to leave university. According to Azza Soliman, the director of the Centre for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance (CEWLA), CEWLA documented numerous cases of early and forced marriages of young women protestors and activists, which their families had justified under the rubric of protection. Therefore, sexual harassment was not only a heinous crime in and of itself, it was also a strategy of estranging women’s political roles to transform the image of women from political activists into victims of sexual harassment; it both punished women who continued to protest and threatened those who even thought about following in their footsteps. In this sense, women’s sexual situation in the revolution ‘resembles that of wage workers who are alienated from the process and product of their labour’ (Jaggar, 1982, p. 309). Hence, women were forced into being preoccupied with how to stay alive, protect their being, and ensure safety from sexual harassment; for some, this preoccupation has become so central to life that all other demands or rights are seen as luxuries, exemplifying women’s alienation from politics and their own potentials; a status that is similar to the exploitation of worker by the labour power.

In a different vein, mass acts of sexual harassment have served orientalist cultural arguments: such incidents are used as evidence of the aggressive nature of Arab men and the passive victimhood of Arab women, suggesting that ‘people of the region were not ready to govern themselves in a civil democratic fashion’ (Amar, 2012). Crimes of

sexual harassment, together with the unrest in the region, as a whole, reinvigorated orientalists to rethink the notion of ‘Arab revolution’, question whether the region was ready for democracy, and doubt the applicability of the Western model of governance to a region with no history of civilised movements. Consequently, such acts were used to depict Arabs or Muslims as uncivilised, demonise the revolution and relocate the people’s power; orientalists deemed Western democracy and rule of law to be irreconcilable with the ‘barbaric’ nature of ‘these’ people. In this sense, acts that served to help restore the old regime’s power and alienate the people from their revolution also, simultaneously, aided the orientalist discourse in its dehumanisation of the people of the region.

Mode of Objectification of Women’s Act of Revolution

After Mubarak’s resignation, a trend appeared of pointing to women’s rights as part of Mubarak’s socially corrupt policies. Such accusations were particularly directed at Mubarak’s wife, Suzanne Mubarak, as laws related to the family, women’s parliamentary quotas, and the National Council of Women’s empowerment programmes were attributed to her. Such a trend both denied the history of women’s struggle and activism in Egypt and linked women’s rights to the old regime (Al-Ali 2012, 2014); such a linkage was intended to mobilise Egyptians against the notion of women’s rights and estrange gender equality from the new era of the revolution.

In its manifesto, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) – the Islamist party that won the first parliamentary and presidential elections after the overthrow of Mubarak – indicated that a return to family values was one of its core principles (FJP’s Manifesto, 2011), as the imbalance between women’s rights and family duties was attributable to

the ‘systematic corruption’ of the family during the Mubarak era (Al-Azbawi, 2012). This statement held numerous practical implications for women; first amongst them being a potential reform of the family law, which could have catastrophic effects on the age of marriage, custodianship and divorce laws, particularly *khulu* (divorce initiated by women). The message that this manifesto imparted was that social corruption, immorality and the absence of family values were all associated with women’s rights. For the Party, no women’s rights should surpass their family duties and ‘Islamic values’.

In its first few months in office, the Party made a noticeable and symbolic gesture: it removed the picture of Doria Shafik, a feminist activist crucial to the mobilisation for universal suffrage in the 20th century, from civic education text books (Tadros, 2013). Based on their understanding of religion, it was clear that the Party planned to undermine women’s role in politics and reinstate the centrality of their family roles as part of its overall agenda of implementing *sharia* law, which around 41% of the Egyptian public voted for in the first parliamentary election. Egyptians were portrayed during this time, in both the national and international media, as ‘religious by nature’ (FJP Manifesto, 2011, p. 25). Such a depiction meant to naturalise the election results and the presumably inescapable trajectory that the revolution was taking.

Women and their roles were integral to the process of naturalising Egypt as an Islamic nation, even though neither Islam nor Islamic discourses had been prevalent in the revolution or revolution-making. Likewise, women’s rights and the fear of retrogression were part of the counter-Islamist movement established to take down President Morsi. After a conflict between the SCAF and Freedom and Justice Party

over institutions and decision-making, the media suddenly adopted a feminist approach to women's rights. In 2012 and 2013, women and the counter-Islamist movement – including old regime supporters, business men affected by the Party's economic policies, and the military – demonstrated dozens of times demanding the preservation of women's rights.

The relationship between the women's question and politics is clearly very complex. The centrality of women's issues in the *Tamarod* (rebel) movement, which continually emphasised the Freedom and Justice Party's intention to reverse women's rights, along with the extreme forms of physical and sexual violence experienced by women in the 30 June demonstrations, could shed light on some of the contradictions related to the use of women's rights and bodies in different political phases. In this instance, while women's rights were politically and discursively central, women's bodies were exposed to extreme forms of violence. Furthermore, it is also interesting that after the 2014 presidential elections, there was no longer a need for the women's liberation argument; instead, modesty and morals returned to dominate discussions on women's rights.

As can be seen, claims for a return to family values or demands for women's equality have both been part of political agendas that were rejected or welcomed based on particular political events and purposes. Indeed, as opposed to the previously claimed 'religious nature' of the Egyptian people, their 'new' characteristic has now emerged as 'military sympathiser by nature' or having an 'incontestable loyalty to the military'. At this stage, when the military sought to usurp and delegitimise President Morsi, the media did not criticise or challenge women's acts – such as dancing in the streets, protesting with men, or taking off the *hijab* – but instead cheered them on. Such acts

were seen as forms of resistance against the Freedom and Justice Party's attempt to Islamise Egypt; issues of morals or Egyptian values and traditions were not mentioned. This shows that shifts in the media's representation of events, particularly in relation to gender, are directly linked to the media's changing relationship with the state.

In an article published in Al-Monitor in 2014, 'Did the election spark "dancing revolution" in Egypt', Wala Hussein concluded:

The dancing scenes by Egyptian women to the tune of national songs in front of polling stations can be explained in several ways: they can be a substitute for demonstrating, which has become a crime; they can also be a way to taunt political rivals; they can serve as a tool to mobilize women because women imitate each other by nature. Thus, group dancing quickly spread as a contagion at the polling stations.

Here, Hussein suggests that women's dancing is a political act representing the post-revolution era. In other words, dancing replaced demonstrating and was meant to encourage women to take to the streets in support of President Sisi; but most importantly, Hussein points to dancing as an act of political cunning. Mariz Tadros also emphasises this point: she describes women's dancing as to 'spite the brothers' (Tadros, 2014). This act of political cunning was intended to redefine the 'spirit of nation', in contrast with the Muslim brothers. In this context, such a contrast could only be shown through women, as they are uniquely capable of performing the act of cunning, a traditionally feminine trait. Here, the use of women's bodies through the act of dancing was meant to symbolise the new spirit of the nation, affront the brothers, show support and sympathy with the army, and signal a 'social contract with El-Sisi' (Ibid). For women to show their sympathy and political support through dancing, rather than through the ballot box, was certainly intended to relocate and transform women's position from political activist to dancer, from active participant to sexual commodity.

Undoubtedly, this shift in image had practical effects on women's political participation. A week after the presidential election, I held a focus group with women from the Egyptian Women's Voices Organisation – a small charitable organisation based in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Cairo, which mainly provides women with small credits – as part of a study I was commissioned to do for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development on 'Women's Economic Participation, Agency, and Choice in Egypt and Jordan'. In the focus group, women repeatedly spoke about how it had become increasingly difficult, even non-desirable, for them to express interest in politics, participate in demonstrations, or vote in elections. One woman said this was due to: 'The embarrassing behaviour of women and all of the dancing that women did at polling stations.' In what was intended as a funny comment, another woman spoke about how boys now mock each other by saying, 'You, who your mum participated in the elections'; this statement should be understood as 'your mother is a dancer'.

Both projects – applying *sharia* and de-Islamising Egypt – show the significance of gender discourses, as well as how gender normative views change and are instrumentalised to mobilise the people. Whilst both projects have supporters, they still only represent particular segments of Egyptian society. However, the media, military and state officials attempted to galvanise public opinion through the women's rights question and characterise people as either 'religious by nature' or 'loyal to military'. This shows that claims that culture and religion are the bases for women's acceptable practices or rights are clearly defunct. **Instead**, it appears that gender normative ideology played a crucial role in the politics of the counter revolution and regime restoration. Furthermore, it confirms the relationship between power politics and the reproduction of gender norms.

The image – dancers of the election– constitutes another aspect of alienating women’s political acts; women were commodified, treated as an object, and their act of revolution objectified as divergent from men’s human activity. Thus, such image cannot be seen outside the alienation and estrangement of women from politics. However, in this vein and political phase, women’s essence of humanity was alienated. The objectification of women and their role in politics meant to separate women from the entire process of revolution-making and relocate their position outside humanity. In other words, women’s interests and roles in political processes are shown as more intrinsic, as related to their natural characteristics, and thus different from that of men. By so doing, regimes and non-state actors aimed to isolate those who continue to rebel against the state and objectify acts in which it is possible to reproduce gender normative knowledge about women. Such objectification was intended to influence public opinion, making the public intolerant to those who continue to speak of change and revolution.

Conclusion

I argued in this article that the reproduction of gender norms was a necessity for the restoration of old regimes of power, and hence forms the foundation of the region’s political order. Rather than offering a cultural and religious construction of gender norms, I attempted to uncover the political, ideological and material conditions that sought to exclude women from politics by repudiating their roles in the revolution-making. Through offering a gendered political reading of the concept of alienation, I examined political practices of gender normativity, during and in the post-Arab revolution in Egypt, through which order is restored and maintained. I have argued that

the alienation of women from their own revolution, which – even albeit taking on different forms and trajectories – was consistent throughout.

I introduced three modes of alienation- externalising and exceptionalising, subjugating of revolutionary women and objectification of their acts that regime and counter-revolution deployed to disconnect women from politics: distinguishing ‘good’ women from the ‘bad’; allowing the punishment of those deemed alien to women’s ‘culturally authentic’ acts; and forcing women closer to the idealised normative image of femininity, which, consequently, pushed women away from politics, deprived them of celebrating their role in revolutions, and disconnected them from their own contribution to revolution-making. By tearing women away from the results of their revolution, their capacities, ideas, power, and purpose in life is objectivised.

Whilst forms of alienation differed in various political phases and often contradicted each other, the intent of each form of alienation was to show a defect, a mistake in women’s acts, and thus establish the supposedly ‘correct’ characteristics of women protesters based on women’s intrinsic nature. Through this, gender normativity was reproduced to serve the political class(s)’s specific interests, determining the linkages between the alienation of women from politics and the alienation of the revolution from its people, and the entire sphere of politics.

One of the central arguments of this article is that the regime and counter-revolution had played off gender norms in a way that they were unconcerned with protecting normative masculinity and femininity when political and economic interests are at stake. In such situations, as I have shown in the cases of women dancers of the elections and the de-masculinisation of the image of ibin elbalad in mop sexual assaults, state sacrifices some of its own gender norms to reinforce new ones that suit its

politics. Consequently, state's discourse of the proclaimed gender norms, as derived from religious and cultural values, is actually quite fragile, and could be contested, particularly during crisis and in a time of political disruption. As strategies of alienation instrumentalise gender normative ideology – alongside other ideologies – in non-static, sometimes contradictory, forms and practices, it is important to continually develop the capacity to confront contradictions and deconstruct these fluctuating processes of reproducing knowledge about women. In addition, it is also necessary to expose hegemony's means of alienating people through turning their lives to the abstract; where merely staying alive becomes the purpose of existence, rather than 'life being an opportunity' to desire, hope, work, and demand change.

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