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The American University in Cairo

School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

Navigating Multiple Sites: Religion and Women's NGO Activism in Cairo

A Thesis submitted by

Emma Sundkivst

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Gender and Women's Studies
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has been approved by

Professor Martina Rieker
Thesis Adviser
Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

Professor Mulki Al-Sharmani
Thesis Second Reader
Social Research Center

Professor Tina Jaskolski
Thesis Third Reader
Desert Development Center

Professor Martina Rieker
Department Chair

Nabil Fahmy, Ambassador
Dean of SPA

ABSTRACT

In this project, I explore and problematize the demarcation of religious versus secular based women's activism in Egypt. In doing so, this thesis accompanies the body of literature that contests liberal feminists' assumptions that Islam and gender justice are incompatible and that Muslim women's lives are linked to religious and cultural factors only. Through fieldwork at the Cariene women's NGO, Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), this thesis reveals that women's rights work can operate within frameworks, which are rooted simultaneously in liberal secular ideas, and Islamic discourses of gender justice. CEWLA is an organization that aims to establish equity among citizens and runs myriads of right based- and development driven projects. The center bases its mission and objectives on the international human rights conventions of which CEDAW is a significant reference. However, the organization systematically engages Islamic discourse throughout their work. The deployment of religion encourages dialogue and provides a space where discourses of women's rights work, gender justice, and Islam can convene and be debated. This thesis argues that the members of CEWLA navigate among the multiple discourses at play in women's right work and the Egyptian society. Since religion is a vital discourse on which people's social imagination is structured, it becomes axiomatic for CEWLA members to deploy religious knowledge. Through analyzing how CEWLA recognizes the complex and non-clear cut religious and secular dimensions in Egypt, I locate the deployment of religious discourse within the wider debate on women's right work and gender justice in an era of transnational feminism.

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I.	INTRODUCTION

Within an era of global feminism, in which ideas and practices travel across the world with various objectives, reflection on the relationships between Islam, gender justice, and women's activism continues to be crucial. A large body of work has problematized these relationships over the past decade (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2010; Brown 2007; Chowdhury 2009; Lazreg 2002; Mahmoud 2000, 2009; Mohanty 1992, 2003; Ong 1999; Scott 2007). However, liberal feminist scholarship in both local sites and the mediatized global public sphere continues to struggle with religious based gender rights discourses. These scholarships follow the dictum that Islam and gender equality is incompatible and that Muslim women's lives and rights are only due to religious and cultural factors. Consequently, alternative ideas of gender justice are marginalized.

Through field study, this thesis is accompanying the body of literature that contests above assumptions by exploring how women's activism in Egypt can work within frameworks, which are rooted simultaneously in liberal secular ideas, and Islamic discourses of gender justice. This literature contests the normative assumption of "secular" versus "religious" women's activism, which has created a hegemonic picture of two camps each working against the other's respective idea of gender justice.

A productive venue for the objective of this thesis is to explore women's activism through the work of the Non Governmental Organization (NGO) Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA). CEWLA is a well known organization that has been operating since 1995, located in one of Cairo's many informal areas, Boulaq Dakrour and Ard el-Lawaa. While they initially provided women with legal awareness and assistance, the organization soon realized that the problems the citizens faced reached far beyond lack of

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legal knowledge. CEWLA has since then expanded their work tremendously and their projects are today divided into three different sectors: social development, advocacy, and combating gender-based violence. With the objective to establish equity between citizens and to assist marginalized groups in society, of whom the majority are women and children, CEWLA runs programs such as psychological counseling, democracy awareness, legal reform advocacy, and computer and literacy training. The programs are today not only directed towards women, but towards families as a whole. One member told me that the organization has recognized that, in order to improve the situation for women, they cannot put all resources on women alone, but most also include men and the families. Many of their programs are operating within the community in which the main office is located, but their work also reaches out to the areas of Upper Egypt.

The organization espouses the international human rights conventions and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations against Women (CEDAW) is a main reference. However, my experience with CEWLA reveals that their work requires negotiation within and across various frameworks. The findings from both formal and informal interviews and conversations with several members from their different branches highlight the myriad and imbricated positions towards women's rights in the Egyptian society, particularly in relation to Islam. Behind agendas, frameworks, advocacy for law reforms, goals and funding proposals, this thesis asks how the organization's members' everyday lives are situated within their profession, or what the anthropologist Lila Abo-Lughod (2010) would call it, "the active social life of women's rights". This project's fieldwork is conducted during the critical, however, inspiring months following January 25th Revolution. The situation at the center, and the work CEWLA performed, was obviously inspired by January's events. Since this project aligns with a moment of visions, hopes, and uncertainty regarding

Egypt's future, the atmosphere these bring about emerges saliently from members at CEWLA.

This historical moment also poignantly elucidate the clearly marked distinction between women's activism in popular public debates. In the current media coverage and social media analysis of the 25th January Revolution in Egypt, its aftermath, and the ongoing falter transition to a new political order, we can discern how religious versus non-religious ideologies are posed against each other. The warnings and concerns, from liberal and leftist strands of feminism, of the Muslim Brotherhood's possibilities of framing the new Egypt and manifesting Shari'a that would restrict women's rights and take the Egyptian women's movement back several decades dominate public debates. The women's movement is frequently presented as a homogenous group of women with ideals deriving from liberal secular feminist thought, challenging Islamist's gender ideologies.

Additionally, in academic writing, women's NGO work is pegged between debates and tensions whether or not they are secular oriented, if they can achieve political and social change or just maintain the status quo, and if they represent the interest of the masses or just liberal economic orders (Abdelrahman 2004; Badran 2009; Nefissa et al 2005; Sogge 1996; Kothari 1999; Deneoeux 2005; Moghadam 2009). Feminist research that seeks to understand women's activism within civil society should not distance itself from these debates as they are closely linked to the ways in which various orientations of feminisms manifest themselves. However, instead of getting caught up in the polemic over who is right and who is not, the focus of this thesis lies in how a particular knowledge construction is maintained. Therefore, this study looks at the ways in which a prominent NGO in Cairo opens up a dialogue between women's rights work and religion, and in particular Islam.

To reach the objective of problematizing the distinction of the binary secular versus religious based women's activism and the aphorism that Islam is not compatible with gender justice, I seek to answer how CEWLA's deployment of Islamic discourse and language can provide a deeper understanding of varying women's activism in Egypt. In order to explore that question I initially need to identify more in detail of how the organization uses religious knowledge in their work. When are religious frameworks and arguments used in order to guide CEWLA's different projects, and from where do these religious understandings derive? How are these religious frameworks used along with other frameworks? How significant is religion for the organization in order to reach their overall objective and what are the benefits and constraints in using this knowledge?

In title of this thesis "navigating multiple sites" refers to the different fronts or battlegrounds, if we like, within civil society. Within these sites, CEWLA contests prevailing discourses with help of various strategies that engage religion. Since religion is an integral element of the Egyptian society, members of CEWLA perceive religious knowledge axiomatic within their work. All of them agree that Egypt is a country in which large segments of the population are closely linked to Islam, or Christianity, and their religious lives.

Therefore, the thesis is an opportunity to reveal that the members of a particular orientation of women's movement—NGO work—have a much more fluid way of using various frameworks and embodying and transferring the objectives of the NGO on the ground. By focusing on their deployment of Islam, this thesis critically investigates the attempts of categorizing women's activism into Islamic or not, and the production of supposedly clear-cut gender ideologies among Egyptian women's movements. It further

opens up questions about what religion and religious practice actually imply, especially in relation to the "secular".

Research Purpose and Significance

The vast production of literature about women's rights and gender justice in relation to Muslim women and their societies reveals the tremendous interest of the topic. However, this rich body of work should not be perceived as an indicator of the topic as overplayed since the economical, political, and social contexts within which discourses of women's rights and Muslim women travel are in constant change. These transformations make transnational feminism, which is developed in order to recognize differences among women and visible through transnational spaces like the UN and the call for women's rights as human rights, constantly face new challenges. Chandra Mohanty (2003) believes that the prominent ground on which to mobilize feminist practice today is an anti-capitalism and anti-globalization transnational feminist movement. Such movement can with feminist theory and practice elucidate the extensive negative effects these systems have on women's lives, especially the marginalized poor, colored, and women in the Third world/South[1]. Another challenge for transnational feminism is to find the ability to actually commit to the premise of recognizing differences among women. How one should relate to and analyze women's explicit various conditions and possibilities, identities, goals, and desires over how to shape their lives is still debated (Ericson and Faria 2011; Mendoza, 2002; Mohanty 2003). These conversations circle around the relationship between gender justice, rights, culture, and hegemonic international discourses and have opened up new trends and questions within which "Muslim women"

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[1] Chandra Mohanty (2003) chooses this terminology along with Two-Third World to avoid any static use of language when indicating a distinction between geographic areas.

occupy a unique space. One of these trends, which seems to respond to new local demands and a growing international appeal for Muslim politics, is found in local and global networks and NGOs' use of religious knowledge within women's activism. This trend points to a consensus within international discourse of human rights, feminists, and local women's rights projects that women's rights and Islam must be reconciled, which is, to echo Lila Abu-Luhghod (2009), phenomenal and worth continued exploration. It shows explicitly how diverse women's activist projects are, but it also manifests the complexity of the relationship between "secular" and "religious" based activism.

To investigate how CEWLA's deploy Islamic discourse and language can provide a deeper understanding of varying women's activism in Egypt, the thesis employs a theoretical framework of civil society along with feminist critique of women's rights work. With focus on how religion is utilized, the thesis elucidates the relationships between employment of religion, political, and local conditions in relation to the broader international discourse of women's rights.

Conceptual Consideration

The thesis utilizes a vocabulary in which many concepts are loaded with history, context, and debates. In order to position this work within the myriad of definitions these concepts contain, this section outlines a conceptual consideration. The categories that I spell out is the use of "Muslim societies" in favor over other similar terminologies, "Muslim women", one of today's most popular reference, "secular" versus "religious", which I understand as discursive traditions as opposed to binary definitions and finally "activism" within NGO work, which should not equated with social movement activism as I will explore further below.

Among post-colonial feminists, liberal feminism is accused of still neglecting diversity within and among countries in the Middle East and for producing Orientalist knowledge about the region (Abu-Lughod 2001). People, groups and movements' interests and external and internal political and economical forces have moreover seldom been recognized as a source for change. "Muslim societies", a term which this thesis uses, is hence problematic in the sense that it seems to exclude features like non-religious people within a nation of a majority Muslim populace, or indicates that religion is the only identity reference within these cultures. However, with this awareness it is a concept that as opposed to other terms like "Islamic" allows for people themselves to define their own reality and is hence a term that subscribes to individuals owns agency within their societies (Bayat 2007; 2).

Similar complexity occurs in the term "Muslim women". Women in Muslim societies exhibit diversity across religious affiliation and conviction, class, gender roles, interests, familial relations, ethnicity, political adherent, and so forth. These differences are both shaping the consciousness of self and the perception of others. "Muslim women" can have various identity references, which also can change at different historical moments, and so can their religious conviction. "Muslim women" include the political Islamist to the secular and non-religious person and the myriad of various positions in between.

Anthropological studies have tried to conceptualize Islam in order to find a framework for studying the religion. Launay argues that as Islam is not a product of any specific local community, but a global entity, the challenges for anthropology is to:

> Find a framework in which to analyze the relationship between this single, global entity, Islam, and the multiple entities that are the religious beliefs and practices of Muslims in specific communities at specific moments in history (1992; 6).

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One possible way of pursuing that task is to employ Talal Asad's (1993) conception of Islam as a discursive tradition and consequently recognize that power must be included as a strategy to elucidate how some discourses are made possible and others obsolete. Talal Asad's critique towards most of the earlier attempts in conceptualizing Islam is that they are done in a western tradition of thoughts. Religion as a category of an "autonomous essence" which is transcultural and transhistorical mirrors the liberal idea of religion. In the construction of the western, modern, secular society religion was redefined and placed separated from all sites of power such as law, politics, and science, something we cannot find before the nineteenth century. To study Islam out from this Christian-Euro centric understanding of "religion" is hence of limited value, or rather impossible according to Asad (1993). Islam should rather be understood as historically evolving set of discourses that have come alive in the practices and institutions of Islamic societies and must hence be understood as deeply imbricated in the material life of those inhabiting them (Asad 1986).

Asad (2003) further explains that the "secular", as part of the doctrine "secularism", is formed by concepts, practices, and sensibilities and cannot be thought of as something within which "people gradually emancipate from the controlling power of religion" and then eventually achieve a secular form (Asad 1999). He further argues that religious symbols can be deleted from this imagined secular space for the reason that they are embedded in people's everyday life. The doctrine of secularism has rather entailed administrative intervention into religious life so as to construct "religion". In the Egyptian case, the state has "through its religious institutions redefined the location and modalities of proper religious practice as part of creating a modern polity" (Mahmood 2005, 77). One of the imagined proper religious practices was that religion should be domesticated and restricted to the private sphere, which is in particular interesting for any study concerned with the Egyptian Personal Status Law

(PSL), based on Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*. What becomes clear with this conceptualization of "religion" and "secular" is that secularism cannot be understood as practiced in a single way. Even if it is defined in the narrowest sense—the separation of religion and state—this has taken various manifestations even in Europe and the US.

This analysis of "religion" and the "secular" is useful for this thesis in the sense that it points to the non clear-cut relationship between the two terms and that the ways in which we understand and define the concepts today are not neutral or ahistorical. The fluid relationship between "religion" and "the secular" corresponds to the work on the ground from CEWLA. Saba Mahmood (2005) further applies this conceptualization in her argument that the Egyptian state is liberal-secular. This would be contested by many for the reason that the Egyptian state violates the principal division between religion and state—the fundament in the normative model of secularism—by financing management of religious institutions like al-Azhar, or allowing Islam in the administrative structure and policies. Mahmood argues that the model of secularism that Egypt employs differentiates from the late-liberal western model. The Egyptian state has been deeply involved in the administration of religion and has widely intervened into religious practices of the Egyptian populace. These transformations since the colonial time cannot be argued to indicate something else than a secularization of the state institutions.

Islam and religion are, based on these discussions, used continuously throughout this work, but without any added attributed values. To view Islam as a discursive tradition also makes it possible to, as Charles Hirschkind argues:

..distinguish between the instance and language use that is integral to material organization of Islamic social forms, grounded in durable and slow-changing historical structures and those rhetorical performances isolated from these Islamic traditions of reasoning and argumentation (1996; 4).

This means that when using terms like religious or Islamic in rhetoric or arguments, it is with the awareness that these are discursive traditions and that the participants of this study are the social agents of determining what they imply.

I now turn to the concept of activism which describes the thesis' position towards the form of activism that CEWLA and its participators perform. Activism is today commonly addressed as collective action within social movement theory (Della Porta 2005; Bevinton and Dixon 2005; Melucci 1998; Buechler 1995). In that sense, activism is something that is organized among members who identify shared interests, beliefs, and visions on either a national or international basis, often interlinked (Kirk and Sikknink 1998). It can take place in the form of a symbolic action and in the cultural sphere and on the state and political level (Melucci 1998). The most visible and theorized activism today, termed as new social movements, are global justice movements, feminist activisms, environmental and peace movement, and anti-globalization/capitalism movements.

Social movements emerge, according to Tarrow (1994), when contentious politics, or confrontations by ordinary people with elites, authorities, and opponents, become mounted, coordinated, and sustained against the powerful actors. A sustainable confrontation requires dense social networking, effective connecting structures, and legitimate action-oriented cultural frames and it is during these conditions *only* we are inside a social movement (Tarrow 2011). Hence, the fundament of a social movement is collective actions of a vast number of individuals, which preferable grow into a mass mobilization and that can manage to maintain a sustained activism.

Activism can also be located outside of the organized social movements. A broader definition of the concept recognizes activism beyond the meaning as in relation to a formal organization or movement, or rooted in larger political and economical forces. Yvonne Braun (2008) critiques the false hierarchies of "legitimate" activism that is reproduced by scholars, mainly western, by their assumptions that women in the global South perform activism rooted in basic needs (survival) as opposed to women in more industrialized countries whose activism derive from strategic needs (rights). The hierarchy limits the way we understand activism and social actors, which results in a possible negligence of the actions that do not fit these methods of analysis. Activism needs to be conceptualized in a way in which it can be located in individuals' everyday actions that foster new social networks and power dynamics (Deborah Martin et al 2007). The activism on a "small" scale precedes the more organized political one that might lead to an established formal organization or network, but is often overlooked as it is located in limited geographical space. Nonetheless, it can be in its full capacity of producing progressive change for women's lives. The meaning of activism is hence much more than arranged protests, humanitarian intervention, or participatory research, performed by middle class Egypt. As an American activist himself expressed, "activism is based on the misconception that it is only activist that do social change—whereas course class struggle is happening all the time" (Bevington and Dixon 2005; 196-197).

However, the activism performed by NGOs or transnational networks should not be conflated with above described social movements. Even though both of them can have social change as goal, the goal alone cannot be a reference for identifying a social movement. Social movements should rather be acknowledged on their actions they routinely engage— contentious politics—with states, multinational actors, and international institution. NGOs, on the other hand, are the main actor within civil society, which in liberal political thought is the

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ultimate structure towards a self-governing subject, and NGOs are encouraged by states and international institution to "cover up" for diluted states. Tarrow (2001) identifies the difference between NGOs and social movement within their behaviors, especially in the relationship to the state and other private or national institutions. NGOs and INGOs are engaging to a wider extent with the same kind of actors in order to advance their members' national or international goals and to provide services to citizens whereas transnational social movements engage with states, multinational actors, and international institution through contentious politics. This analysis derives from the idea that NGOs/INGOs are operating independently from the state, which I explore later as contested, especially in Egypt where civil society and the activity of NGOs have been extremely controlled by the former regime.

A more unambiguous distinction is the fundamental infrastructure between NGOs/INGOs and social movements. The main activity of the former is to run funded projects of various sorts, some service oriented, others advocacy or development driven. Whatever kind of project that is in play, it is, as opposed to the idea of social movements' activity, restricted to a particular time period. Although NGOs and INGOs can confront states, such as compiling reports over the effects of certain state policy, and have social change as the main goal, this project will never sustained longer than what the donor has financed for. An infrastructure of this kind also limits the ability to expand. However much they proliferate, NGOs cannot act as mobilizing agents and expand constituency, or approach social, political, and economical concerns on the macro or national level (Jad 2004). Because of this organizational structure, along with the political idea of thought, which NGOs derives from, it is misleading, or rather impossible, to view them as social movement actors.

However, it is not impossible for several women's NGOs, which together practicing a "range of activities… to better circumstances of women's lives", to form a women's movement (Ray and Korteweg 1999; 48). To recognize such constellation as a women's movement, a movement is conceptualized as a mobilization to demand certain interest or social changes in favor for, in this case, women. It must also possess some form of capacity to effect change in either legal, political, social, or cultural domains. A large number of NGOs would then gather on the basis of a common goal, but without an agreed agenda or a central coordinating body (Jad 2004). The women's NGOs together with other actors from the Egyptian civil society can therefore be argued to represent an Egyptian women's movement.

Accordingly, even though the members of CEWLA would be considered activists even by a narrow definition, the form of activism the organization alone performs should not be conflated with the one run by social movements. This is not to say that members of CEWLA cannot be active in social movements on a personal level. From my experience with the organization I became aware of that several of the participators had social and political activities outside of their professional role at the organization.

Research in Revolutionary Times: Acting Quickly in Midst of Emotions

While writing the thesis proposal, obtaining knowledge about NGOs in Egypt, and trying to map the field of women's movement in the fall 2010, I was simultaneously meeting and interacting with activists, fellow students, and members of organizations. We often discussed the current Egyptian political climate in relation to women's activism. One topic that often was brought up in particular was a new law, which would increase the Ministry of Social Affairs' (MOSA) distribution power of foreign funding. MOSA already controlled the majority of the financial aid and Egyptian NGOs could not receive funding without the

ministry's approval (Abdelrahman 2004). This new law was going to close all the doors for foreign funding agencies to work directly with local NGOs and was basically going to eliminate what remained of the Egyptian civil society.

I remembered and thought about these conversations when the field work with CEWLA started after January 25th Revolution in the middle of February 2011. How would I manage to cover all the changed conditions in which the organization now performed their work, and capture the emotions, hopes for the future, and all other aspects this big historical moment brought to the organization, in research that was not structured to do so? I decided to stay with the original research questions even though it was tempting to change the whole project and solely focus on the revolution's impact on the NGO and women's activism. The problem solved itself as the revolution was constantly present throughout the fieldwork and became naturally embedded in the interviews, some more emotional than others. In the first phase of most interviews, in which I presented myself and the research objectives, the revolution was not mentioned. However, it did not typically take long until the conversation slipped into talks about the new Egyptian society and its impact. In other interviews, the whole conversation started off from an ongoing debate, mentioned in the news that same day, and the interview developed from there.

As I did not interact with CEWLA before the revolution, it is hard to say if the friendly, joyful, and warm atmosphere inside the organization's offices is a constant, or if it was due to the current inspiring moment, but I was stunned by how my translator and I were met by the entire staff. Even though the interviews were not always scheduled in advance, they always arranged a meeting with one of the different branches' directors and we were always welcomed to just drink a cup of tea and chit chat with the secretary, who was the former

director of a project addressing child abuse. Due to the rather chaotic state of the country, much of CEWLA's projects were on hold and the absence of running workshops or seminars made the members available and more than happy to give interviews. This was on the one hand positive as my access to the organization was broader, but on the other negative as there were no seminars or workshops to attend, which was the initial intention.

Our recurring visits at the organization soon developed into a friendly relationship between me, my translator, and the staff and we exchanged stories and experiences both from our personal lives and the current events in Egypt. We assisted them with smaller tasks, such as finding academic articles for their new projects about domestic workers' rights and they, on their hand, gave advice for future employment opportunities.

In terms of the NGO's activity, I soon realized that it was limited. The projects in progress covered very specific topics related to revolutionary times, which varied from week to week. Before the referendum on March 19, 2011, regarding the constitution, their focus was to quickly provide the population with knowledge about the constitution, encourage people to use their right to vote, and to reach out with this information to the most marginalized communities in the country. The week after the referendum passed, the organization's advocacy branch had put all projects about lobbying for reforms of the Egyptian Personal status law on hold, and would now instead focus on developing political awareness programs before the approaching parliament and presidential election in the fall 2011. Nonetheless, the current reorganization of CEWLA's projects did not affect my research negatively. It rather gave an interesting sense of how they functioning in an abnormal situation on a day-to-day alert.

Methods

In order to explore how members of CEWLA employ religion in their work and how the organization in general uses religious discourses, I have undertaken both interviews and content analysis of the organization's reports and publications. The thesis is based on a total of eleven recorded interviews with six employed members at CEWLA. The interviews are between thirty minutes up to two hours and most of them are semi-structured, open ended interviews, but a few are also informal and loosely structured conversations. In addition to the formal interviews with one member at a time, sometimes a visit to CEWLA ended up in an unstructured group discussion with 2-4 members. This gave an opportunity to see the staffs' different opinions on several topics. These conversations supplemented the formal interviews and provided a deeper understanding of CEWLA's work, especially in relation to the current situation during the revolution.

CEWLA as an organization and the interviewed participators will be explored more in details later, but a brief outline in this section provides a sense of the kind of projects pursued by the organization and its employees. CEWLA has divided its activities into three main departments or programs—advocacy, social development, and combating violence. I met with at least one member from each department, but they were also from different programs within these. Seham is a lawyer and works within the advocacy program where she develops and writes proposals for legal reforms within the Egyptian PSL. She also has a "hotline" of legal awareness and assistance. Wisham works with counseling programs and provides, among others, therapy and counseling to girls that have married their cousins they have had involuntarily intercourse with. The combating violence programs also run projects on sensitive topics such as female genital cutting and one way of providing people with information about this practice is through theatre plays. Sherif is the director of the social

development program which, among others, conducts social research over a wide range of topics such as the economic and physic costs of divorce in Egypt.

These sorts of published reports were also provided to me by the members. CEWLA has published a rich body of literature together with UN organs, but also with Al- Azhar. Many of them address issues of the PSL and interpretations of Islamic law in relation to these concerns. Much can found on their website and Internet, but the material they provided gave an easy access to this collection and showed what they believe are important topics for me to engage with. To complement the interviews, I content analyze this material and other sources they have available on their website. As CEWLA is a prominent NGO in Egypt, they are often seen in public media and discussions over gender topics. Journal articles and public interviews and statements therefore also function as a source for my analysis.

Feminist Research: Situated Knowledge

Particular attention in this thesis is put on the ways in which the relation between women and Islam is presented and analyzed in feminist research and practice. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) is crucial in the way we today perceive the earlier knowledge production of the "east" and deconstruct the binaries "east" and "west". Post-colonial feminists also owe Said a great deal for the tool he provided which facilitated the move beyond stereotypes of Muslim women and gender relations in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 2001). A criterion to detach from the dichotomies of "east" and "west" and the negative portrayal of Muslim women, or from the global South in general, as only passive, salient victims under patriarchal cultures or religions, and instead explore and analyze women as active, creative, resourceful, and with agency, is partly located in identifying theories and methods suitable for the particular research. The latter has considerably more space to recognize that women, men, gender,

patriarchy, culture, religion, and societies are complex and over time and space changeable, and therefore presents a more realistic picture of "reality" with better potential for social change.

How to avoid methodologies that emanate from privileged male, western perspective has been crucial within debates over feminist methodologies. The literature has for two decades discussed the importance of methodologies that challenges androcentric science and the importance of science to release itself from the scientific knowledge that yields in sexist results (Harding 1991, 1997, 2008; Haraway 1988; Gluck and Patai 1991; Fonow 2005). These quandaries circled partly around how the modern vs. tradition binary variously shapes research projects that reinforce the hegemonic status of positivist science which represents itself as value-neutral, apolitical and universally rational (Harding 2008). The myth of the objective researchers was challenged and the conclusion was that knowledge is situated and partial and research has political interests, which became one of the foundations of stand point theory (Harding 2008; Wickramasinghe 2009; Harding and Norberg 2005; Haraway 1988). Standpoint theory does not just underlines the importance of the female subject position of history because of her particular perspective on reality, but also the scholar's inclusion of her own perspective into the analysis. If knowledge is situated and research political the route to "validity, methodological rigour, and credibility" is the researcher's account of her own positionality (Wickramasinghe 2009; 55).

The process of engaging with narratives and other conducted data, and then throughout the project transform this information into knowledge is for a feminist researcher a trajectory full of responsibility that plea for ethical and political reflection. Reflexivity which is "a tendency of feminists to reflect over, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of

the research process" (Fonow and Cook 2005; 2218) can facilitate the research to achieve the scale of objectivity that is possible. Reflexivity should hence be incorporated in the development of research question, engagement with literature and theory, the interaction with subjects, as well as the writing process.

However, to take account for one's positionality is a chore conflated with reflection over a complex self. A researcher, as a social subject, is a "complex web of interests, identification, and impositions that are related to another" (Wickramasinghe 2010; 146). In addition, being a researcher from the global North in a post-colonial context brings further aspects to take into account and in need of reflection. This is not to suggest that scholarship made at "home" automatically has better chances to overcome essentialist tendencies. Abu-Lughod (2001) points to the tricky situation for many Arab feminists from the region for whom not just "tradition", but also Islamism, is seen as a threat to women and how this can be reflected in reproducing terms that Edward Said has called the dogmas of Orientalism. These challenges, along with stand point theory may take into account diverse identity politics and ethical issues of difference and intersectionality (Wickramasinghe 2009). Being cognizant of the ethical issues of difference and intersectionality can help overcome the essentialism of a singular standpoint.

My own positionality has circled around my familiarity and employment of critique, along with my own position, towards civil society and NGOs within the discourse of women's rights. Keeping these feminist research principles in mind helped me understand how the interaction with members of CEWLA, who are passionate in their work and convinced they are doing the right thing, put me in an ambivalent position. While recognizing that the members of CEWLA I interviewed, but with whom I also have established social

relationships, are interlocutors of these processes I critique, they have simultaneously been the agents in pushing me into challenging my own stand points as they reveal the not straightforward route of women's rights work. The idea that I am, due to my training in feminist theory and critique, equipped and capable for questioning the NGO world and civil society differently than many of its own participants got seriously interrupted as they are not just aware of the limitation of civil society, but are also the agents of negotiating the power structures of which they are in the midst. Hence a significant reflection for feminist research is that feminist researcher cannot perceive themselves positioned outside of sites of power and normative structures because they employ critical theories and discourse analysis. Therefore, my own reflection also came to include attention towards possible tendencies to take for granted that I cannot get trapped within the very discourses I critique—"governance feminism" pointing to how educated professional women that have had time to reflect and analyze the reality and through their awareness seek to speak for others. In this process, Gayatri C Spivak's demonstration that social theorists may be complicit to the very modes of cultural dominance they seek to deconstruct by assuming a subaltern "unified repression" (1988; 84), is of valuable account.

Chapter Outline

The thesis is structured in 6 chapters including several subheadings. The second chapter is concerned with the sites in which women's activism travel—transnational feminism, NGO work, and civil society. To conceptualize these sites includes a discussion regarding the debates over the trend of engaging Islamic knowledge into women's NGO work and gender politics. This way of performing women's activism is critiqued from various angles and CEWLA's work can bring a substantial perspective to these debates. The second part of the Chapter 2 reviews NGO work and how literature over Egyptian women's activism tries to

distinguish women's NGOs into secular or religious based. In terms of civil society, I find

Gramsci's theory of civil society and hegemony useful in order to capture the complex

relationship between CEWLA and the Egyptian state. In chapter 3 a comprehensive

presentation of CEWLA is provided. The aim is to situate CEWLA within the Egyptian NGO

scene as well as arguing why the organization is a productive choice for the objective of this

thesis. The chapter also contains a presentation of the members interviewed and their unique

positions within the organization. Chapter 4 moves on to the conducted field study regarding

CEWLA's engagement with Islamic religious knowledge in relation to human rights

discourse. In this chapter, I discuss the literature on Islamic political thought and human rights

as compatible and read this analysis into the work of CEWLA. The chapter further includes

the complex function of the state as an actor on civil society, which reveals that parts of

CEWLA's work have been focused on challenging the hegemonic religious discourse that the

former regime produced. In the following Chapter 5, I move away from CEWLA's approach

to the state and the formal legal system and towards the organization's work within the

communities. I examine more in detail the ways in which CEWLA negotiates the many

discourses in play in the community and how these discourses form the conditions under

which CEWLA work. Through navigating among discursive spaces and make use of various

frameworks and strategies, of which religion is one, CEWLA generates changes on the

ground and questioning the social imagination among people. The concluding chapter 6

discusses the reasons to why CEWLA make use of religious knowledge in their activism. The

thesis provides a wide and nuanced sense of the various sites in which CEWLA operates, and

discusses the structures of power at play within these. This creates an understanding of the

significance of employing religious discourses in the organization's work. Accordingly, the

chapter is arguing that attempts of categorizing women's activism in "religious" or "secular"

based activism foreclose a comprehensive picture of the political and social context of Egyptian society and the complex realm of civil society. Women's activism must rather be explored and analyzed with a nuanced understanding of "secular" and "religious" since such approach reveals that, whereas CEWLA espouses international human rights conventions and does not pursue any form of advanced role of religion within the Egyptian society or legislation, religion is, yet, an indispensible feature in their every-day work.

II.   CONCEPTUALIZING SITES FOR WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

In order to situate CEWLA's work within the local and global discourses of women's rights work, this chapter critically engages with spaces in which this orientation of women's activism travel—transnational feminism, civil society, and NGO work. The aim of this chapter is to illuminate how the local and global elements of these sites are shaping the context within which CEWLA operates as well as how the organization negotiates the conditions they create. To understand the complex relationship between local and global processes, along with the Egyptian political context, is vital for the main objective of this thesis—to problemataize the distinction between "secular" and "religious" based women's activism. The chapter begins to discuss the debates that are taking place around the initiatives to deploy Islamic language as a route to gender justice that currently travel in the site of transnational feminism. Following, Gramsci's theoretical approach to civil society and its (inter)relationship with the state provides an analytical tool that can explore CEWLA's complex approach to the state. The last part of this chapter discusses women's NGOs and movements in Egypt within the debates of categorizing these into "secular" and "religious" based. The rich body of literature concerned with Egyptian women's activism can today question the attempts of categorizing by historizing the concepts of secular versus religious and contextualize the use of the binary.

Transnational Feminism and Muslim Women's Rights

UN conferences on women fueled a mobilization across borders and women's networking groups throughout the world formed various alliances in a global public space. Scholars have pointed to how transnational feminism in this sense was forging a better understanding of how women's lives are shaped in a context in which global and local places are very much integrated but simultaneously remain stratified (Mc Laughlin 2004). In other words, transnational feminism is very much about identifying, recognizing and framing common interests and values across *differences*, the key factor to recognize since the abandonment of "global sisterhood". A question to answer, then, is how the space of transnational feminism is impacted by the broader international politics and the neoliberal economy embedded in national and supranational levels of society? How do these factors influence the framing of the alliances? Where does difference have a place within these processes?

No one can discount transnational feminism for its work in making women enter realms that were previously male dominated and challenging the masculine field of international relations through theory and practice. Neither can we neglect the benefits that feminist networking has given local women's groups. However, feminists would do well in keeping a critical eye on the ways in which transnational feminism is used as an analytical or practical tool. Strictly, transnational feminism can be argued to stand for the myriad of various feminisms throughout the world, which in various forms bring their respective feminist demands beyond communities and boarders. It can also refer to the mobilization against the downsides of capitalism and globalization and the studies on how the macro-level of economies impact women's lives on the micro-level (Mendoza 2002; Moghadam 2009; Mohanty 2003). Simultaneously, transnational feminism is the every-day embodiment of various agendas on the ground, performed by the interlocutors of transnational feminist

practices. Due to its various connotations, the term is hence an open category. By critically engaging with its political effectiveness and definitions, deficits and shortcomings can be identified, which—in turn—can facilitate the ongoing debates of how to improve feminist projects across borders.

Islam and Muslim women occupy a unique space within transnational feminism and have sparked an intense debate within women's rights discourse. In this first part of the chapter I would like to focus on the contemporary polemic over the relationship between religion, women's rights, and gender justice. To spell out these discussions are significant for the understanding of the imbrications between the frameworks CEWLA uses in their activity and to explore the relationships of the local and global in which women's rights travel. Initially, the chapter outlines how women started to participate with Islamic discourse in relation to feminist consciousness, which became a crucial part of women's rights discourse in Muslim societies.

Women entering the space of Islamic religious knowledge can be traced back to the 80s, even though imbrications of feminist consciousness and Islam can be found in the beginning of the twentieth century according to some scholars (Mir-Hosseini 2006; Badran 1995). Throughout Muslim societies and countries in the Middle East, Asia, and beyond, the question that inspired was how a woman who desires to live as a practicing Muslim, but at the same time enjoys equality and justice, should relate to her religion? For many women, the abandonment of their religion was not an option (Anwhar 2005). With a belief that Islam is preaching justice and disdain misogyny, and the awareness that sacred texts had been interpreted through a patriarchal lens, women started to reclaim their religion by, among other strategies, rereading and interpreting the Quran. Such a task was difficult in societies in which

androcentric structures were deeply imbedded. Along with questioning readings of the Quran, women were required to problematize the commonsense of "truths" that were holding up their identity and society. This was done in a myriad of ways throughout the Muslim world since there exist a rich variety of religious practices, beliefs, philosophies, and life structures. Also, because of the diverse social and political climate in Muslim societies, women were required to proceed with their activity in various forms (Afkhami 1995).

This way of thinking—a gender discourse with feminist aspiration, but within an Islamic discourse—has partly been labeled "Islamic feminism" within academic literature. However, few of the women that this literature refers to would accept this label. Since the late 80s, there has been a huge body of activist and academic literature produced, which could possibly be divided into a philosophical and an activist character. Individuals have utilized "Islamic feminism" as both a political vehicle towards social change, but also as intellectual process without any particular political objectives. One of the major technologies used in order to expose the embedded inequalities in the interpretation of Islam and uncover the egalitarian message is a re-reading of the Quran from a female perspective. As feminists strongly have argued is the female subject of prominence because of her particular perspective on reality (Harding 2008). This was the conviction even for "Islamic feminists" and an exegesis of the Quran from a female perspective would surely result in a new understanding of the message of the sacred text and come to terms with the stereotypes often found in male interpretations (Wadud 1990).

Another strategy, often along the re-reading of the Quran was to provide alternative interpretations of Hadith and Sunna, and finally to clearly mark the distinction between Shari'a, and Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*. As the latter is a human construction that has been

subject for change and human reasoning, influenced by local and historical particularities since Islam emerged, reforms in *fiqh* is not to change Shari'a as many of the opponents would argue, but to reform the human interpretation of the law (Mir-Hosseini 2006).

Within academic literature, the imbrications of religious belief and feminism have been viewed with enthusiasm, skepticism, and ambivalences. Whereas some do not see any obstacles of conflating a feminist subject with religious practice and gender justice and recognizes the discourse's dynamism and heterogeneity (Badran1996, 2001, 2005, 2009; Foley 2002; Ong 1996), others claim that this form of struggle cannot be attributed as feminism since there are embedded inequalities in religion that never can be "reformed" away (Winter 2001; Majid 1998). There are those who question its effectiveness and possibility to include the diversity of Muslim women as all do not use Islam as an initial identity marker (Moghissi 2011). Scholars have also questioned the productivity of such approach as it will not be able to disentangle itself from controversies over the accurate interpretation (Kandiyoti 1991, 2011; Balchin 2003, 2011).

Over the years, the concept of "Islamic feminism" has been revisited, redefined, contested, and abandoned, and just recently been extensively questioned by its earlier stalwarts. Due to new constellations of networks and global associations, Margot Badran (2011) recently introduced a new concept of "Muslim Holistic Feminism" and refers to the emerged movement of Musawah. She argues that Musawah is communal, exclusive, and holistic because it only addresses Muslims as opposed to earlier forms of "Islamic feminists" that have had fluid relationships with "secular feminists". Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2011) argues that due to the concept's entangled relationship to political and identical disputes and contestations, it can no longer provide any sort of analytical or descriptive function. The two

concepts of feminism and Islamic, each of which are already loaded with different connotations and subjected to various discourses, together form a never ending debate of its implication. Vigorous attempts to find the accurate definition of "Islamic feminism" in order to encapsulate the myriad of women that in various ways seek gender justice within Islam, have maintained simplistic perceptions of where the demarcation should be drawn. Binary concepts, as Tadro puts it,

> Conceal the ambiguities and fluidity of identities, strategies of engagement and framing of ideas. This is not to suggest that ideological projects are not important, only that the ways in which actors exercise their agency vis-à-vis different audiences and context does not fit so neatly into one of two binaries (Tadros 2010; 8).

Besides the complexity of naming certain practices and defining their boundaries, Islamic knowledge integrated with women's activism has also fueled a debate over the trend of conflating religious discourse and human rights within gender politics. Regardless of organizations' affiliations with a local or global religious network they interact with religious clerics and institutions in order to frame projects and agendas regarding gender equality, often within the discourse of rights. In terms of CEWLA, without any official collaboration with religious networks, they systematically interact with religious authorities and other important actors on civil society in order to produce an alternative Islamic discourse. This is done for both an educational purpose and towards social change through legal reforms.

Abu-Lughod (2009) locates this strategy within the development of local NGOs more intensively highlighting of the Muslim identity of women. Even though she welcomes the initiative to perform feminist activity within Islamic knowledge, she urges us to reflect over how this translates into local contexts of Muslim societies. Her analysis starts off from the critique towards many of today's human rights projects as imperial initiatives, haunted by a

colonial past in the vein of "white man saving brown women from brown man". The civilizing mission of the colonial power recently reentered the international politics, however, in modified form and used in the justification of imperial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002, Mamhoud 2006, Mohanty 2011). Human rights projects have also been subjected for doubts over their potential of being able to solve the issues of power structures within the societies they aim to aid, as well as the new form of "feminism governance" that is practiced through the myriad of NGOs operating in favor for women's rights. The internationalization of women's rights, which in Egypt is most explicit within civil society and the NGO world, enables educated, elite women trained in gender consciousness, to speak for women less privileged. She asks how the projects of delivering Muslim women's rights through Islam differ from these structures and if they have managed to escape the frames of global feminist governance closely tied to professionalization.

One example of how Islamic feminism manifests itself within the discourse of women's rights in a Muslim society is the home-grown group of women that since 1993 calls themselves Sister in Islam (SIS) located in Malaysia. They profile themselves as:

> Muslim women committed to promoting the rights of women within the framework of Islam. Our efforts to promote the rights of Muslim women are based on the principles of equality, justice and freedom enjoined by the Quran as made evident during our study of the holy text (www.facebook.com/pages/sisters-in-islam).

They represent a feminist activity which embraces liberal thoughts of question, but within a cultural context which requires communitarian values and local sensitivity of how to negotiate gender inequalities. A significant part of their work engaging dialogue with Islamic clerics' and is hence producing some sort of sisterhood with men. This communitarian way to engage with family law has helped men acknowledge women's exploitation (Ong 1996).

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Following SIS's initiative the global movement of Musawah started in 2009. With CEWLA's director in the policy making body of Musawah, CEWLA will play a crucial role for implementing Musawha's plan of action in Egypt. This includes the work of making other NGOs in the country familiar with Musawah's framework and how one utilizes it in order to push the government to implement the declarations of CEDAW. Musawah hence combine discourses of human right together with the conviction that Islam is the source for justice and equality within the family (http://www.musawah.org/).

Abu-Lughod (2009) does not question the indigeneity of these projects, yet, even if they are based on the idea to speak for women "from within", we need to problematize mainly two components within the projects. To begin with, Musawah and SIS are receivers of mainly westerns funds and this make them enter economical, social, and political circuits, which are not always unproblematic. Abu-Lughod believes cautions over how western financial aid is put into Muslim reform projects needs more attention. In other words, despite these projects' claims to be indigenous, they are not isolated from the hegemonic discourses and power relations. Neither are they secluded from the strong links to liberal political economy to which women's rights are connected (Merry 2006). The second thing Abu-Lughod finds problematic is the usage of rights as a framework to bring justice to Muslim women, and how the sense of rights is framed within this framework. She wonders if any legalistic frameworks, even ones deriving from Islamic knowledge, can deliver justice to the complexity of women's lived sufferings. In this critique, she is referring to her decade long fieldwork in rural areas of Egypt. The women she has met through the years are the imagined receivers of the social changes these rights projects aim to deliver. Abu-Lughod asks who is in the position to perceive women as solely legal subjects without considering them subjects of the global political economy. I find her analysis compelling because she indirectly addresses the more

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deep rooted structural injustices that are a result of the former regime's maintained neo-liberal economical politics during the last two decades and how women's lives and gender justice have become affected by these politics. To what extent the right based projects actually can change women's lives under these circumstances is an important question to ask.

From another angle, Hania Sholkamy (2011) criticizes the same trend of employing religion into women's rights activism, but has a rather different focus than Abu-Lughod. Sholkamy argues that the instrumentalizaiton of religion, and in particular Islam, that is practiced by feminists and activists within women's rights as route to social change is highly problematic for several reasons. Sholkamy distinguishes between religion as a faith and religion as political and believes the latter should be avoided in feminist projects due to the problem of contesting other religious interpretations that would not do justice to gender relations. Religion should not be the arbitrary instrument for achieving justice and equality. She also addresses how religion, once used in political activities, is standardized, packaged and bundled into homogenized entity, which do not invite for reflection or overview. The reason to why this strategy nevertheless is espoused by women's rights activists is, she argues, simple: "…if people are driven by faith, let us use religion to drive towards social and political change" (Sholkamy 2011, 48). Sholkamy further recognizes that the trend of employing religion into gender projects is hard to resist for the participators within women's activism, but believes this global enthusiasm for shaping a "safe Islam" will backfire on Egypt since this processes favor conservatism and religiosity that in time might turn into the hegemonic way of dealing with politics. As individuals have various identity markers and many do not chose religion as the main navigator in life, the use of religion in politics is an exclusive project that results in identity politics.

Sholkamy (2011) seems to believe that religious discourse can be separated from the political sphere in Egypt and that the prospects for this project to succeed are disturbed by women's activists when employing Islam in their work. A major problem with such analysis is the fact that the vast majority of women's activist projects in Egypt seek social change through legal reforms in the Egyptian family legislation. The PSL is based on Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*, and is therefore difficult to approach without bringing in Islamic knowledge. This fact challenges Sholkamy's distinction between religion as faith and political since the Egyptian context is much more complicated than such clear marked demarcation. CEWLA engages with religion when advocating for legal reforms and this is one of their main projects in which they cooperate with Islamic scholars, imams, and other religious authorities. Without this strategy, it would be hard to pursue the work they do. As I describe, CEWLA's engagement with religion is not as one-dimensional as Sholkamy portrays it. It is rather an integrated part in the struggle of producing an alternative understanding of Islam in the midst of hegemonic religious discourses produced by the former regime and other actors. Confronting or challenging these discourses with "secular" ideas of equality and justice alone has probably limited potential to gain legitimacy and consequently success. Rather than packing Islam into a standardized entity, CEWLA's work opens up a space in which reflection and overview of religious discourse is encouraged.

Corresponding to Sholkamy's concern that religious discourse as a route to social change is identity shaping and exclusive comes from Mustafa's (2011). He alerts an Islamization of women's rights. With a long experience of women's rights in Egypt as the Project Manager of the German Technical Center's (GTZ) project, Promoting Women's Rights in Egypt, he has noticed the shift towards the significance of religious discourse within women's rights projects, in particular within the debate on reforms in the PSL. The

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compromises and confrontations between the state, religious authorities, and women's rights activists bring into play the notion of an Islamization of the discourse of women's rights, or human rights as a whole. Mustafa means that since the 1980s there have been attempts to show how some concepts of human rights are compatible with Islam, and, therefore, we need to realize that there is an ongoing Islamization of the discourse itself. The author seems to define "Islamization" as when Islam becomes the norm according to which other discourses, in this case the human rights discourse, must adjust itself.

In academic debates, a comprehensive content analysis is occurring in which the literature examine the transformation of human rights as the standard to which Islamic political thought is compared. Mahmood (2003) has noticed that there is a tendency among Muslim intellectuals to use the liberal ideals of human rights and democracy as the norm to which Islamic legal thinking must prove its compatibility. While her argument will be elaborated more in detail later in this thesis, her argument is highlighted here in order to stress that it is not necessarily principles of human rights that has to verify that it coincides with Islamic thought, but rather the other way around.

Nonetheless, Mustafa makes a good point that the Egyptian state has been promoting several reforms in favor for women, such as the *khul'* (divorce initiated by the woman), and the criminalization of female genital cutting. He is correct that these rights are much more cultural-religious sensitive as opposed to social and economical rights, of which the Egyptian state has continued to neglect. While the author describes this behavior as a paradoxical move from the state, it could also be argued that it is actually more consistent with how the former regime has tried to response to the international community's hegemonic stance on what rights that should be promoted in the Arab world. A more critical analysis of the premises on

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which international human rights are based and the dominant language that travels within the international community, dominant normative values are elucidated. The global significance of a modern female subject that rest on concepts of autonomy, individualism, equality, choice, and bodily integrity, is used as indicator to measure how civilized a country is in order to set up its policies towards that country (Norswourthy 2002). The reform of *khul'* most be put into the context of the former government's view on family law reform as a "means of modernizing the country, enhancing the development process, and maintaining the support of international organizations that generously fund the country's various development projects" (Al-Sharmani 2009; 92)[2]. In Morocco, scholars who have analyzed the family reform in 2004, claim that this was a top-down project (Bukens 2003; Elliot 2009). The Moroccan King's final ratification of the new family law, including the withdrawal of reservations to CEDAW, was done in order to maintain fruitful international relations with the US and EU.

To recall Abo-Lughod's concern over western donors who put money into Muslim reform projects, the polemic over what the engagement of Islam within women's rights indicates, or will result in, should be analyzed in the backdrop of post-9/11. Since then, there has been a rapidly increased interest in finding, shaping, and promoting "moderate Muslims" as a strategy against "the extremists". In 2003, the White House initiative Muslim World Outreach (MWO), funded mainly by USAID aimed at transforming "Islam from within" (Mahmood 2006; 323). It sets up programs which provides training of Islamic preaching, establishing Islamic schools that counter the "fundamentalist" rhetoric, and media production

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[2] See al-Sharmani (2009) for further discussion on additional factors that motivated the Egyptian government to implement the *khul'* law. Among others she addresses the extensive mobilization of women's rights groups since the 80s and their participation in the family legislation reform process.

with various broadcasted radio and TV-program and Islamic talk shows. Saba Mahmood explains:

> The multilayered project has a singular objective; to foster what is now broadly called "moderate Islam" as an antidote and prophylactic to fundamentalist interpretation of Islam" (Mahmood 2006; 331).

In reports published by the conservative think tank Rand Cooperation, the "traditionalists" are identified as the main threat to the values of democracy in our contemporary world. A group of divulge individuals are further labeled moderates and perceived as the best partner to the help the US to foster an enlightened form of Islam (Mahmood 2006).

To summarize the discussion regarding local initiatives of bringing a feminist consciousness, there is an overall concern that a transnational appeal for Muslim politics is shaping these local projects. While Sholkamy (2011) seems concerned over how this will shape an exclusive, and in the worst case hegemonic, way of dealing with politics in favor for conservatism, Moustafa (2011) is more of the opinion that this is already happening. According to him, the human rights discourse has for two decades tried to show its compatibility with Islamic political thought. Abu-Lughod (2009, 2010) does not judge or put any attributed values to the use of Islamic discourse in women's rights projects as such. Instead, she acknowledges that to recognize the need of reconciling Islam and women's rights is phenomenal. In her critique, she rather points towards how "governance feminism" now also seems to penetrate these initiatives. Like the critique of many women's rights projects in which educated professional women are speaking for imagined beneficiaries of their right projects, this also counts for women with Islamic knowledge. She also questions the effectiveness of the use of rights towards justice as there will always be "incommensurability between everyday life and the social imagination of rights" (Abu-Lughod 2009). She asks

how the projects that, by engaging Islamic knowledge, claim to be more "from within" and isolated from the more mainstream projects, are actually different when it comes to the dominant and hegemonic structures within the territory of rights.

Reading this critique in terms of the work of CEWLA, this thesis recognizes that as an NGO within the complex space of the Egyptian civil society, the organization is not isolated from the global elements which influence the agenda over how to shape local initiatives regarding gender justice. CEWLA receives funding from prominent western donors and has extensively established networks with other transnational actors. However, the activity of CEWLA brings further perspective to the above discussions considering the organization's vast variety of operating programs. Additionally, CEWLA projects, in particular regarding legal reforms, must be understood within the local conditions. Sonbol states:

> Since these societies subscribe to discourses that rely on the Shari'ah as the source of family law and gendered conduct, any approach to legal change that does not take the Shari'ah as a starting point in Muslim societies has little potential for success (Sonbol 2007; 60).

PSL in Egypt is based on *fiqh'* and the members of CEWLA clearly state that in terms of reforms, they must consult with experienced people so that the reform has a possibility to be approved. In this process CEDAW is the road map and guiding principles for determining what reforms to propose.

Women's Non Governmental Organizations

In the previous chapter, NGOs were discussed in relation to activism and it was clarified that there is a distinction between social movements and activity taken place within civil society. With this conceptualization in mind, this section moves forward to the debates over women's NGOs distinguished as secular or religious as well as from what arguments these definitions

derive. A short historical retrospective will initially explain the current wave of established

NGOs that have taken place the last decade within the Arab world and Egypt.

The mushrooming of established organizations, their diversity in activities, and the large

amounts of funds mirror their significant presence in the region. However, the intense

academic debates and the controversial relationship to the state and liberal political orders

maintain questions about democracy, governance, and citizenship. What fueled the rapid

increase of NGOs divides academics, but in the Egyptian case, the donor's shift from funding

the state to funding actors on civil society is a potential explanation. Within the development

discourse during the raise of neo-liberalism and its anti-statist logic, the state was blamed to

fail in several economical responsibilities. The dominant model of development in the 80s

was therefore to favor the free market, monetary stability, and limitations of the state, which

moreover was the main feature of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) (Abdelrahman

2004).

The flourishing of women's NGOs can, along with the above analysis, be understood as

a result of the recognition of women's rights within the human rights discourse. During the

first half of the 90s, women's marginalization gained attention through several international

conferences and campaigns addressing gender-based violence, women's rights to

development, and other activities which made women's issues more visible than ever before

(Afkhami 1995; Chen 1995; Merry 2006; Moghadam 2005; Peters and Wolper 1994).

Conferences under the UN developed platforms with recommendation, and the adopted

resolution at Beijing 1995 calls states to implement and promote a policy of "gender

mainstreaming" at all levels. Big international funders from US and Europe reentered the

Egyptian civil society and allocated their development aid through the popular development project performed by NGOs.

The diversity and types of NGOs cannot be stressed enough. To make sense of this myriad of activities, the academic literature has tried to differentiate between NGOs and common categories, which are: service oriented NGOs, advocacy groups, and NGOs that are organizing the society in order to identify problems and their possible solutions (Milani 2005). NGOs are also analyzed within religious frames (Abdlerahman 2004; Hafez 2003, 2011; Singerman 2009; Bayat 2003; Benedetti 2006).

In terms of religious NGOs, or movements, the Islamic women's organizations interspersed in the larger Egyptian Islamic revival have been a significant characterizer of the Egyptian civil society for the last decade. While their objective and purpose varying, they can be viewed as an integrated part of the developed religious ethos or sensibilities within Muslim societies. Many are performing similar activities as NGOs not encouraged by the Islamic revival, such as literacy programs, health care, legal reforms proposals, however, out from an Islamic teaching framework. There are various attempts to sort and differentiate these organizations from the ones fueled by the language of women's rights as human rights in UN conferences and funded by western donors. A categorization of Egyptian women's NGOs and activism into secular versus religious based has been the dominant method. Azza Karam (1998), for instance, argues that through a categorization of women into *Islamist feminists*, *Muslim feminists,* and *secular feminists* we can discern differences and compare women's initiatives. Through these categories she then describes how they differ in attitudes towards gender relations and what framework they use to support their standpoints.

Al-Ali (2000) reads this categorization as problematic for the reason that her ethnography of several women's NGOs elucidates how religious guidelines can exist even among women who claim they are secular. Instead of imagining boundaries between secular and religious, the positions should be conceived in terms of a continuum (Al-Ali 2000). This problematic understanding of religious subjectivity is further elaborated by Hafez (2011) who challenges the binary of representations of subjectivities engaged in religious practice and secular endeavors, deriving for the universal distinction of religion as a separate category from other spheres of social life. However, whereas it is recognized that religious and secular selves are not clearly demarcated, the discourses that guide women's NGOs are still traced. The reference that often determines "religious" versus "secular" based activism is the framework that is used in order to structure the various projects. Al-Ali suggests that for secular female NGO activism, Islam is not the "only source of values and axis of orientation" (Al-Ali 2000; 142). The secular female activists in her study do rely more on international human rights conventions and a personal civil law, and oppose the implementation of Shari'a.

Margot Badran (2009) subscribes to this definition and clarifies that as opposed to secular feminists who draw guidelines from multiple discourses like nationalism, Islamic modernists, and human rights, Islamic feminists use a single dominant discourse which is based on the Quran. However, the two modes, notwithstanding the differences, are interconnected as feminist manifestations in Egypt are complex due historical, political, and social changes. With large contributions to the body of work over Egyptian women's activism through ethnographies and analysis, these attempts of categorizing the myriads of projects seems more and more misleading. By challenging the imagined demarcation between "secular" and "religious" activism by tracing their historicity and by problematzing the Egyptian social and political context, Saba Mahmood (2003) and Sherine Hafez (2011) both

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emphasize the difficulties of realizing an analysis of Islamic female participator of the Islamic revival through the category of religion alone. The Islamic women in Hafez's work with the organization al-Hilal, are utilizing liberal "secular" values in their development projects and the author argues for the concomitance of the binaries of religion and secularism in women's religious activism. Her work tells that the activism itself can be guided by more than just religious discourse even though the female participators commit themselves to Islamic activism.

CEWLA is not part of the Islamic revival and was not established in order to promote a religious ethos in Egypt. Rather it is an organization that emerged along with the popular call for universal women's rights. The very element that motivated CEWLA is hence clearly distinct from many of the Islamic women's organizations. However, the ways in which the organization operates indeed problematizes earlier attempts of categorizing women's NGOs and movements based on utilized framework. In order to explore the work of CEWLA, a nuanced understanding of "secular" and "religious" is needed. Similar to how Mahmood and Hafez could not use religion as a category alone, so too cannot "the secular" as a category explain the work of CEWLA.

Civil Society

CEWLA is operating within the debated realm of civil society in Egypt, a contemporary political and academic buzzword that lacks clarity. Civil society has for a long time been used as a form of panacea for social and democratic "problems", and is associated with virtues such as community, volunteering, and active citizenship. However, this idealized realm of civil society is also put into question (Foley and Edwards 1996; Pratt 2005). Whereas the concept is vague and suffers from definitional fuzziness and is manipulated by various

political camps, it should be credited for calling attention to neglected dimensions of modern societies (Foley and Edwards 2001; 5). Further, subscribing to that civil society is a form of shift of power from a diluted state to self-regulating citizens, and in which civic activities of various sorts are expected to cover up retreated states (Sogge 1996), I am arguing that civil society as a conceptual framework should be used in order to disclose how it manifests itself and the effect it has on communities and peoples' lives.

One of the contestations regarding civil society, which should continue to be problematized, is the assumption that it is an autonomous equal sphere in which citizens perform activities isolated from state power. In this perception, NGOs play the role of good governance on a field of basic liberty and freedom of expression and assembly with the authoritarian state on the opposed side (Pratt 2005). However, literature debunks how organizations rather collaborate and interact with the state on several levels, using foreign aid to finance local government programs (Abdelrahman 2004; Mohanty 2011). The more optimistic stance towards civil society can often be traced to liberal political thought. Scholars anchored in liberal theory equalize the concepts of "active citizenship" (Yuval-Davis 1997) and a "third sector" of associationalism with civil society and view these as vital aspects of democracy (Abdelrahman 2004). In these spaces, autonomy and voluntarism are supported against state control and societal responsibility (Rose 1999). The fatal problem with this model is the negligence of the power relations and class divisions within these spaces. The liberal idea that all members of a society act out from the same conditions regardless of class, gender, religion, ethnicity, age, and other social differences has been questioned for decades, many from a feminist perspective (Fraser 1990; Ryan 1992; Pateman 1990; Yuval-Davis 1997). A more organic relationship between the state and the civil society can be found in theorists like Gramsci and Bourdieu. The civil society is for them a dynamic space in which

exercise of power and other mechanisms can be located. Gramsci's notion of civil society is the most applicable model in order to understand the work of CEWLA considering the particular context of Egyptian civil society and the relationship with the state.

Gramsci's Civil Society and Concept of Hegemony

Gramsci (1971) has been credited for his complex model of the civil society, a space described as a marketplace of ideas in which the state strives to maintain its power, but also where social creativity and alternative social orders can emerge. His theory is therefore commonly used in analysis of the Egyptian civil society (see Abdelrahman 2004; Bayat 2007; Pratt 2005; Singerman 2006).

In Gramsci's theory the state acts on the two floors of civil and political society. The state contains the government, police, courts, and army and the civil society is describes as economical and institutional organisms like education, religious systems, clubs, cultural media, and political parties. In order to obtain recognition from larger segments of the population than just its own, the ruling elite must create an image as appealing to the ruled. This is done through the production of what Gramsci calls hegemony, defined as "the spontaneous consent given by the great mass of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (Gramsci 2001; 145).

Abdelrahman (2004) uses Gramsci's theory to understand the Egyptian civil society. In particular, she uses his term of "passive revolution" in order to explain the attempts by the state and the Islamists group to enforce ultimate hegemony. Hegemony and hegemonic discourses are created by the rulers through the myriad of institutions, which are also viewed as consensus of the elementary principles that found a discourse (Abdelrahaman 2004). The hegemonic discourse secures the acquiescence of the ruling classes and the consent of the

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subordinated classes to accept their subordination as normal, but also shapes individuals in society to reproduce these prevailing norms (Femia 1987).

To make citizens reproduce norms in favor for the ruler is what Foucault (1977) captured in his concept of "regimes of truth" and theory of governmentality. Construction of normalized discursive ideas of how to think, act, and talk—regimes of truth—are penetrating every aspect of life and mind through habits, customs, and ceremonies. This is the state's devising apparatus to make citizens govern themselves that corresponds to the interest of the state. Gramsci (2001) further explained that to the extent that the intellectuals fail to create this hegemony, the state falls back on its coercive methods of the political floor and disciplines those who do not consent. People are hence not ruled by the coercive apparatus alone, but through ideas, which implies that the rulers must indispensably be challenged with the same.

Except for the ruling elite and the hegemonic discourse, counter hegemonies also emerge in this space and challenge the power of the state. Hegemony necessitates counter hegemony and these two are seen as "simultaneous double movements" that reciprocally shape one another (Persaud 2001; 49). Gramsci's definition of counter hegemony implies that:

> It is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's life, but of renovating and making "critical" and already existing activity (Gramsci, quoted in *Marxism and Ideology*, J. Larrain, 1983; 84)

A practical element of producing counter-hegemony is hence to reframe an existing discourse and expand, or add to, that set of truth. This can be read in to the way in which CEWLA work with the already existing religious discourse within the personal law in Egypt. Instead of abandon the legislation, they opening up for other interpretation of the current law and hence working within it.

Gramsci's notion of civil society should further be perceived as a realm in which the state with its institutions, along with all sort of organized groups of people with diverging interest, ideologies, and goals, struggle for their respective discourse. The concept of civil society is hence less "idealized" as it recognizes the space as not necessarily democratic and non-violent. The civil society can be as much equal and free, as authoritarian and oppressive, depending on the prevailing economical, political and social structures (Foley and Edwards 1996).

Egypt and Familial Ethos

The hegemony exercised by the state in Egypt is a form of nationalist-patriarchal discourse along with corporate and economic structures of the public sector. This ideology of nationalist and patriarchal structure is grounded in the perception that "the regime is the only valued representative of the nation's interest and that the security of the nation's interest, and therefore the regime's, is politically superior to any other" (Pratt 2005; 126). Before the January 25th Revolution, this hegemony has, shortly put, been challenged by student movements in the 1970 and 1980 and sporadic labor strikes. Additionally, the *Kifeya* movement along with other actors performed demonstrations in relation to the presidential election in 2005. The regime has responded in a combination of coercion and consent with the technique of allowing restricted space of resistance and promoting ideologies that foster loyalty and trust in the nation, but simultaneously minimizing divisions and contradictions (Singerman 2007).

However, what can be regarded as one of the more extensive and serious counter hegemonies, challenging the former regime, is the Islamic social movement. In the early 1990s, the Islamic movements controlled large parts of the civil society in Egypt. Through

da'wa (call to Islam) and associational work the activism penetrated all sections in society

such as mass media, formal education, and community social service. The Muslim

Brotherhood controlled major professional unions of doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, dentists,

and college professors and their students (Byat 2007).

Alternative venues for Islamic movement activism were also in the informal sector of

familial and kin relations. Through these networks the Islamic movement mobilized women

and men, gained financial support, and could penetrate the activism to everyday habits such as

expressing political statements, dress codes, and educating their children. The focus on

familial structures was also explicit in the adherent gender ideology, although with varying

characteristics, that promoted complementarity gender roles, motherhood, and "Islamic

patriarchy" (Singerman 2006). In the midst of the Egyptian state's attempt to uphold its own

discourse in order to create a docile subject, "familial relations and networks in Egypt attempt

to create a climate or environment promoting solidarity, order, and reciprocity" (Singerman

2006; 13). This environment generated a counter public in Fraser's (1991) understanding and

is what Singerman calls the "familial ethos". Drawing from Gramsci's counter hegemony and

a Foucauldian vein of discourse on collective life, Singerman argues that due to the modalities

of power sited within the family where politics occur, the family must be added to the theory

of civil society. She asks how it is possible to not include the family as an analytical category

within the analysis of civil society when it is so clear what an influence the family has in

Egypt and within the region. She says:

> One cannot but note that kinship is still the primary foundation of political rule
> in Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Oman, Somalia etc.,
> and family politics play a predominant role even within secular or nationalist
> regimes such as Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Syria, Libya etc. Clearly,
> politics at the elite level is infused with kin relations, as the rise of Gamal
> Mubarak in Egypt and Bashar al-Asad in Syria demonstrate. Why is it, then, that

most scholars consistently fail to see significance of the family and deny it place within civil society? (Singerman 2006; 7-8)

It is within informal networks that CELWA performs much of their work and on a daily basis interact with the structures and norms of the familial ethos. In terms of religious deployment, the participators talked about how religious arguments are used within familial disputes, particularly when it comes to treatments of one's wife and Islamic principles of divorce and inheritance. To include the familial ethos within civil society is significant for the prospects of capturing the many sites in which CEWLA tries to produce awareness and create harmony in order to improve women's situations. To understand the familial ethos relationship to civil society, Singerman (2007) further refers to legal pluralism. Legal pluralism:

> …is a situation in which two or more legal system coexist in the same social field, where legal system is defined as the system of courts and judges supported by the state as well as non-legal forms of normative ordering (Merry1988; 870).

As will be elaborated later in the thesis, CEWLA has found the site of the familial ethos in which an alternative normative ordering is already at play. The organization uses the legal pluralism in order to incorporate their principles of rights, deriving from their framework. The members of the organization explain how CEWLA many times is solving issues with families from outside of the state controlled legal system and that religious language are often used along with principles of human rights.

In this chapter, different sites of women's activism has been illuminated, discussed and analyzed, which will in the subsequent chapters facilitate to capture and understand the imbricated use of different frameworks within CEWLA. The aim has been to critically engage with debates over transnational feminism, civil society and the categorization of women's NGOs in Egypt, and to open up perspectives that CEWLA's work brings to these debates. The

next chapter is focused on CEWLA as an organization in order to give a comprehensive picture of the objectives, projects, and methods employed along with a presentations of its interlocutors.

III. CEWLA: BEYOND LEGAL AWARENESS

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the organization of CEWLA and to discuss how the organization's situates itself within the vibrant context of Cairene women's NGOs. The chapter also presents the interviewed participators, presents their position within the organization, and in what projects the interviewees are currently working. The objective is to explore CEWLA's unique position within transnational feminism. Additionally, to discuss the organization's role within international women's rights work that has been in play over the last two decades. Finally, the chapter discusses why CEWLA is an interesting actor to look at for this thesis' obejctive—to explore the relationship between religion, women's activism, and gender justice.

Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance

In 1995, a legal awareness project for women was developed by UNICEF together with four Egyptian female lawyers. Following this project, these lawyers, of which one is CEWLA's current Director Azza Suleiman, decided to continue legal rights organizational work and started CEWLA. Since then, the small center has expanded and is today operating in Upper Egypt and two informal districts in Cairo located next to each other—Boulaq Dakrour and Ard el-Lewaa. CEWLA's mission is to address violations of women's rights and enable women's legal, social, economic, and cultural rights (www.cewla.org). These missions are pursued with practical methods like the promotion of legal reforms, women's empowerment, and combating gender-based violence. Additionally, CEWLA also runs more development

oriented projects, which are working beyond the right based perspective stated on their website (Abu-Lughod 2010).

Boulaq Dakrour, in every day speech "little China", and Ard el-Lewaa are two of greater Cairo's informal areas and home to for over five million people. The process of urban informalization began in the sixties and seventies. During this time, Cairo, as well as the other major Arab capitals, witnessed the emergence of a peripheral form of urbanization by private actors. This urbanization developed outside and regardless state's building laws and regulations, especially for what concerned the prohibition of converting agricultural land into housing plots. Informality has been the solution to the housing needs of lower and middle classes and, according to a recent study published in 2000, informal areas represented at the end of the nineties about 53% of the built residential surface of Greater Cairo and hosted 62% of its inhabitants (Kipper 2009).

Perception about the informal areas as chaotic, unsecure, poor, resort for fundamentalists, and an economical burden for society, promoted by media and emphasized by government and policy makers has been contested by authors such as Singerman (1996). Singerman shows a dynamic and diverse characteristic of these neighborhoods, hosting population from a wide range of different sectors. Boulaq Dakrour and Ard el-Lewaa, and other informal areas, do not host only the urban poor, but also middle class young, educated families, university students and public sector employees in search of an accommodation at reasonable prices. The expansion of residential informality is a global phenomenon and not due only to rising poverty levels, but has been fostered by the combination of a series of deliberate policy choices as well as of market dynamics, which were not properly readdressed. In Egypt, studies also show that areas most residents perceive their neighborhood as relatively

safe environments, with occasional nuisances such as traffic accidents, hustling, or harassment. This is evident in the freedom of mobility for women and children, the unlocked doors and windows, and the types of accidents reported (Kipper 2009).

CEWLA is located on one of the wider streets of Ard el-Lewaa, locally called *sherah el-magnona*—the crazy woman's street. Even if the street is relatively wide for the area, the vegetable and chicken vendors, cars, tuk tuks, donkey carriages, and lots of people make the street crowded, still, in a friendly way. CEWLA's premises are located on the second floor in a unmarked building called "the tower".

Since its founding, CEWLA has expanded both the numbers of approached topics and target groups. Through their early legal awareness projects, the organization soon discovered the extensive marginalization of a large segment of the population. When the organization started to encourage people to litigate, they realized that citizens lack the legal documents needed for such purposes. Consequently, CEWLA began projects that would help these individuals obtain birth certificate and IDs. This process was rather complicated since many of these individuals' parents did not even have marriage contracts. Each case took between 3-5 years before the documents were in order. However, through such projects, CEWLA worked closely with the community and obtained broader experiences and knowledge. Simultaneously, CEWLA gained trust from the people. This trust facilitated CEWLA's work extensively since the organization could identify new problems that the citizens faced and develop new projects in order to meet the people's needs.

CEWLA is in the responsible hands of a council of six boards of trustees. The President of the board is Fatima Al Khafaji, who has long experience of development and women's issues. The organization's Director, Azza Suleiman, is also well known in the transnational

realm of women's NGO and a member of the prominent network Musawah. CEWLA's administrative tasks are divided by three units. The International Relations unit handles the connection with contemporary and potential donors and is responsible for the relations with local and global organizations and networks. The Administrative and Financial Affair unit builds the organization's financial rules and regulation in accordance with the accountant standards. It is responsible for the follow-up process of the boards of trustee's records and the operating programs. Additionally, the unit controls the connection ties to MOSA. The Information unit deals with the organization's work as sources for research, studies, archives, and information stores regarding women and children. It is also the public information unit, which operates relations with the media.

CEWLA's projects are implemented by three main programs: social development, combating gender-based violence, and advocacy. To name a few of CEWLA's projects, the center provides computer and literacy courses for adults, democracy and political awareness projects for the youth, counseling for women and families. The organization also develops and writes proposals for legal reforms, mainly within Egypt's family legislation. The center runs workshops, roundtables, seminars, and trainings for decision makers, religious authorities, and for other organizations and individuals. In other words, their work is extensive and diverse, which makes their role in society multifaceted. The social development department can be viewed as a link of information from the grassroots to policy makers while the advocacy projects' perform more of an activism towards legal reforms. CEWLA conducts their own social research and cooperates with scholars and universities. Moreover, they publish reports and documents about different matters and provide a space in which various actors can discuss these topics in public. To pursue the organization's objective, CEWLA employs methods that are inventive and varying. Among others, CEWLA uses media of both

radio and TV. The center provides training and education to youths and public employees and educates teachers in adult teaching techniques. In order to attract as many as possible and simultaneously achieve sustainable results, CEWLA carefully chooses what methods that should be used in each situation and location. For instance, when addressing topics such as female genital cutting in Upper Egypt, the organization uses theatre plays, which address the physical harm this practice can cause girls and women. One CEWLA member said that this is a fruitful method to attract people's interest coincidentally as mediating the important information.

By describing itself as a grass root, human rights oriented organization that advocates for women's empowerment and equality, CEWLA follows the dominant language within international women's rights discourse. CEWLA is one of hundreds of organizations in Egypt with similar profile. Akin to CEWLA, many of these organizations view state legislation as a promising venue for creating positive changes for women. This makes women's NGOs put major focus on advocating for legal reforms. The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) is one of the prominent NGOs espousing a right based framework and the international human rights. The organization uses the liberal language of women's rights as human rights and views law as the institution through which women's status in society will be enhanced. On their website (2011) ECWR states:

> …Improving the monitoring of human, legal and political rights of women and working on women access to comprehensive justice and political empowerment is of special importance to measure accurately Egypt progress toward fulfilling its commitment in the field of human rights and gender equality. (www.ecwronline.org)

As opposed to some other women's organizations, ECWR accepts funding from, among others, USAID. Since the war on Iraq, CEWLA, along with other NGOs, has chosen not to accept funding from US government institutions. Furthermore, ECWR assisted the National

Council for Women (NCW) before the election in 2000, in order to support female candidates (Zuhur 2001). ECWR is further one of few women's organizations mentioned at the NCW's website (Abu-Lughod 2010). The direct collaboration between state feminism and some women's NGOs has created a divide split among Egyptian women's organization. While some organizations claim that the most pragmatic way of combating atrocity of women's rights is to work within the patriarchal structure of the state itself, others view this cooperation as an extended arm of the state. For these critical NGOs, the state continues to underpin the structural gender injustices in the Egyptian society and demobilizes the women's organizations' initiative through its strict legislation that monitors the civil society (el-Mahdi 2009). NCW has received vast critique for not representing the Egyptian women's needs. Instead of encouraging a women's movement in Egypt, NWC is argued to havd used its authority to form a women's movement that would suit the state's interest.

CEWLA has a careful approach towards the Egyptian state and state feminism. Even though they engage with state officials in educational manners and train government representatives in human rights, al-Azhar is the only state institution with who CEWLA systematically cooperates.

New Woman Foundation (NWF) takes on a rather different stance than ECWR. Instead of pointing their projects explicitly towards development, they are more research oriented and create a space in which the organization launch campaigns and conduct studies. The center facilitates for, and support, women to organize themselves and provides trainings for other community based organizations. Since the organization has an outspoken feminist profile and does not hesitate to file petitions against the state, it is considered one of the more radical

NGOs in Egypt. In their objective description they include economical and cultural rights as significant for women's equality, which is absent in ECWR's self-description.

Another research oriented organization is the Women and Memory Forum (WMF). WMF is a center for academics, activists and researchers that are concerned with how Arab women are negatively represented in the cultural sphere. The participators work towards providing an alternative historical knowledge from Arab women's perspective. Through this method they hope to change dominant and negative images of women in society which "can be used for raising awareness and empowering women" (www.wmf.org). WMF has carried out conferences, publications, film shows, workshops, and collections of women's oral history. They have organized commemorative conferences on pioneer Egyptian women and are re-writing fairytales through a women's perspective to challenge the prevalent representation of women. As most other organizations, WMF relies on foreign funding from the private sphere, However, the center avoids state connected donors.

Empowerment, expressed in various forms, is continuously returning as a main objective among women's NGOs. In women's rights discourse, this has become a global buzzword. However, the concept of empowerment has at the same time been questioned by critical voices. The critical voices argue that empowerment derives from a liberal understanding of a self-governing subject and often fails to address the substantial problems women are facing. The Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW) is working to empower women economically, politically, socially and legally. For ADEW, the route towards women's empowerment is through micro-credit loans, legal documents, literacy courses and life skills training (www.adew.org). ADEW started the organization by providing women with micro finance loans within a Cairene garbage

community in Muqattam. Today, ADEW has fifteen offices in five different areas in Cairo and has 200 employees. Additionally, the organization addresses domestic violence and has organized women's shelters and launched awareness campaigns. To address domestic violence through such methods is to follow the UN framework, which has become a global trend among women's NGOs (Abu-Lughod 2010).

In order to work together with other organizations, many women's NGOs are also members of networking groups. In such groups the NGOs can discuss and develop common goals and interests. Network of Women's Rights Organizations (NWRO) is an association for NGOs working in the field of women and family rights. The network was formed in 2005 with the initiative to gather shared visions and build a framework for action among those concerned with family legislation. NWRO's ultimate vision is a conscious society, established on the values of citizenship, social justice, and human dignity, which respects women's rights and the family. They seek to build an effective, coherent and powerful alliance of NGOs, in order to create an enabling legal environment to maintain justice and women's rights, especially in the area of personal status and family affairs. For CEWLA this is a space in which the center can interact with organizations interested in the promotion of reforms in Egyptian PSL, and exchange ideas and experiences in this process.

The vast majority of women's NGOs in Egypt is established in order to implement justice through a right based framework and motivated by international human rights conventions. The majority is also driven by terms like empowerment, development, and equality. However, they form a vibrant scene of women's organizations. Different ethical convictions and self-images guide the organizations when they negotiate the international

space of women's activism. These various self-images are also delineating various stances towards the Egyptian state and international donors.

For this thesis' objective, the ways in which CEWLA addresses women's lives and women's familial relations, and the deployment of religious knowledge, make the organization an interesting actor to explore. Since CEWLA systematically engages with al-Azhar, it is a promising source for the objective to understand the use of various frameworks within women's rights work. In 2008, CEWLA published a report in cooperation with the prominent scholar Dr. Amna Nosseir in Islamic philosophy at the al-Azhar University and UN. The report (CEDAW and Islamic Shariaa, 2008) argues that Shari'a is to 95% compatible with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2010) visited CEWLA during her fieldwork on "the social life of women's rights", in order to clarify the ways in which religion has gained terrain within women right's discourse in Egypt. Her conclusion is that CEWLA's employment of religion is a response to the broader political and cultural climate in Egypt today and to people's general reserved stance towards conventions developed in a western context. CEWLA's publication regarding CEDAW and Shari'a was an attempt to contest the assumption that CEDAW aims to destroy the construction of the family and undermine religion. For these reasons, I chose CEWLA as my research base in order to more extensively explore how the organization and its members experience the deployment of religion, why they make use of a religious framework, and from where their particular religious discourses derive.

Actor in Global Civil Society

CEWLA also operates as an actor in global civil society and transnational feminist networking. CEWLA is well known among organizations and women's activists groups in the region and beyond. Their name circulates throughout UN reports, global networks, seminars, Internet forums, media, and other activities about women's rights and lives. Director Azza Suleiman is, together with prominent scholars and activists, a member of the highest policy-making body International Advisory Group at Musawah. Musawah is a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family, profiling itself as a network that "pluralistic and inclusive, bringing together NGOs, activists, scholars, practitioners, policy makers and grassroots women and men from around the world". They hold the principle of Islam as the source of justice, equality and fairness between the spouses.

In attempts to form a similar family legislation in countries of the MENA region, CEWLA's networking includes collaboration with women's organizations in Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, and other countries in the region. CEWLA interacts with activists and members in these countries to exchange ideas and strategies within their common field of interests and projects. CEWLA further links these regional initiatives to the space of transnational feminist networking when attending global seminars and conferences. The experiences and knowledge obtained from these gatherings are then linked back to CEWLA's domestic activities within the local communities of Egypt. In this function, CEWLA is a networking connection for local participants and NGOs, regional women's rights activist, and global discourses regarding gender politics and women's rights.

Transnational networks are argued to ground their alliances on shared values or action plans that in turn often are guided by the international norms developed by states. The

international human rights convention is an example of such international norm through which transnational networks found legitimacy for creating coalition for action and social change. Transnational networks function as a promoter of international norms and can, in some cases, teach these norms to reluctant states (Thomas 2002; Keck and Sikkink 1999). Corresponding to this analysis, CEWLA's feminist transnational networks use CEDAW conventions to find legitimacy to pressure states to take action towards discriminations and abuses of women's rights. Simultaneously, CEWLA and other actors come together and form various networks based on shared values and beliefs. CEWLA has established connections with groups like Musawah originating from Malaysia, and Diakonia, a humanitarian organization initiated by four Swedish churches on a missionary project. Musawah is concerned with Muslim family law and Diakonia with development. Since the two groups have clearly distinct goals, they frame their plans of actions differently. Notwithstanding strategic differences, CEWLA and these groups have been able to locate shared values among each others. The overarching values within CELWA's large network are therefore not always clear-cut and straight forward. Moghadam (2009) differentiates between feminist movements, Islamist movements, and global justice movements and identifies their varying characteristics due to shared values, objectives, and frameworks that guide the projects. My study, so far, shows that these categories set up by Moghadam are more misleading than forging an understanding of various transnational networks. CEWLA is a good example of how complex transnational networks can be structured and points to how demarcation of this kind is futile as the exceptions too often seem too many.

CEWLA's role in global civil society is further reflected in their connection to donors from Europe and the US. CEWLA was able to expand their projects when they got their first foreign funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). With this

capital, they could start legal awareness programs in 18 other governorates around the country. Additionally, they completed the first map of the neighborhood of Boulaq. CEWLA's projects are today financed by several other donors like the Ford Foundation and Dutch Oxfam, among others. Ford Foundation profiles itself as promoter for democratic values, poverty reduction, international cooperation, and human achievements. Their explicit approach towards women may be exemplified by their programs on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Oxfam Novib (2011) states at their website that:

> Justice is that all people, regardless where they are born or live should have the possibility to build their own independent livelihood. Therefore is support to development countries a matter of justice. (http://www.oxfamnovib.nl/)

Foreign funding raises questions about an organizations' autonomy and the donors' role as stakeholder within the global capitalist economy. Since foreign donors always have priorities associated to their funded projects and certain conditions that must be signed by the organizations in order to receive aid, an NGO's ability to autonomously frame their projects is arguably restricted (Abdelrahman 2004). According to some critical voices (Marcussen 1996, Kothari 1988) foreign funding (mainly from global North) enables these donors' to exert power over recipients, which give them structural influence within these societies. Noha, who is responsible for CEWLA's international relations, refers to the organization's donors as reliable partners with whom CEWLA shares the same goals. However, even though negotiating is sometimes necessary, she does not perceive the donors as superior, or as someone who is determining their projects. She describes CEWLA and NGOs in general as the bridge between actors on "the outside" with the aim to reach the Millennium Development Goals, and the people in need on "the inside". When I asked her how she felt about the speculation of international donors as determining the frameworks and agendas of NGO work in contexts unfamiliar to those donors, she responded that such character of the donor will

reflect quickly on the organization. I referred to a Swedish women's organization that has

contact with several local NGOs in Egypt and which has a clear objective to promote and

advocate for a legislation that is not influenced by religion. The Swedish organization has the

strong conviction that women's emancipation will only be reality with a complete "secular"

law. I asked Noha for her opinion about donor organizations that try to set the agenda for a

society very different from their own. She knew about the organization I talked about and said

that some donor organizations do not have a good reputation. The recipient NGO of such

donors would not survive in the community very long. The Swedish organization could

probably be an instance of that, but she was not sure.

The counterargument to the critical voices of donor dependency is based on the liberal

economy idea of the free market and that access to a vast variety of alternative donors brings

negotiating power to the NGOs. An instance of such an approach would be that CEWLA is

careful from who they receive financial aid. Noha said that the red lights for CEWLA are US

governmental donors, like USAID, and Jewish, or Israeli organizations. However, every new

donor is carefully examined in terms of from where they receive money, what other projects

they fund, and what aims and objectives they pursue. To not receive money from US

governmental institutions is a democratic decision made by the organization's staff and the

board of trustees. The decision is made due to the ongoing war in Iraq. Noha explained,

without any details of exactly what year, how the American Embassy in Cairo contacted the

organization and offered financial aid. Before the war in Iraq, CEWLA had received funding

from the embassy, but US current foreign policy changed these conditions. At the same time

as the offer from the embassy, MOSA had rejected several of the center's proposals.

Consequently, CEWLA went through a difficult economical period when salaries were cut

and staff had to leave. Despite the hard economical condition, the majority of the members

voted "no" to the offer. Even though they needed every dollar, Noha wrote an email rejecting the money.

Since CEWLA already embraces international human rights frameworks, pursues the donors' objectives, and fulfills the conditions for receiving aid, their projects are probably independently delineated just as Noha says. While CEWLA is a well known organization with long-time experience and presence within their community, the situation is certainly different for a smaller organization with other guiding frameworks, rather than the hegemonic ones. The strong position CEWLA has within Egyptian civil society and among international donors definitely enables the organization's ability to say no to donors who do not correspond to the organization's self image. Again, these are not the same conditions in which smaller organizations are operating. CEWLA's ability to make funding choice is still conditioned and situated within the structure of the global capitalist economy, developmental goals, and power relations. Their possibility to choose among donors is only within the frames of current interests of the donors. An NGO's autonomy, according to Robert Hyden (2002), is a mirage that obscures the interests of powerful states, national elites, and private capital. CEWLA and its donors is as much a consequence of deeply unjust structures within and between states and a mirror of the current global political climate. CEWLA's experience of a space of choice would probably change significantly if it took on a more radical approach towards contemporary political economical processes, or challenged the liberal language of human rights. It is the rules of liberal political economy that set the conditions for actors on global civil society. The normative values deriving from liberal political thoughts are hence marginalizing alternative ideas of social justice and equality.

Members of CEWLA

The director of CEWLA is the Egyptian lawyer Azza Suliman, who also is one of the co-founder of the organization. The center's staff is predominantly women from their late twenties and forties. There are many lawyers at the center, but also members with degrees in literature, language, and computer science. Usually, the center attracts many volunteer workers both from Egypt and beyond, but as the situation during my fieldwork was abnormal due to the revolution, there was only one Egyptian law student volunteering at the time.

My initial contact was with Sherif, the director of the social development program, and he gave an introductory interview with foundational information about the organization and its objectives. He then offered to put me in contact with the directors of other programs and projects. However, Sherif remained my main contact and informant during fieldwork and was the person who mainly arranged meetings and interviews. The director of the organization, Azza Suleiman, was unfortunately not available as she travelled most of time during the period of the fieldwork. I saw her only once during an interview, but never got a chance to talk to her directly.

After the first meeting with Sherif, I was able to approach the main questions of this project with him and other members. In total, I met with six participants from all different programs and sub-projects within these. After two interviews with Sherif, I met with Gawaahar, a lawyer who was currently starting up a new project about domestic worker rights, ran by the advocacy program. She had also been directing legal training for community mediators in areas of Egypt where disputes are solved outside of the law. CEWLA trains both mediators, and lawyers in communication skills, how to solve disputes in a peaceful way, and human rights. In addition to a formal interview with Gawaahar, I helped her in her search for

articles and reports concerning domestic labor situation in Egypt and we interacted several times during my visits at the center.

My third informant is Noura. She has been a lawyer for eight years and is the assistant director of the combating violence program. At the moment, she is the manager of a project for abused women and deals with sensitive topics such as domestic violence, topics that many people have difficulties to talk about in public. The combating violence program also runs projects that facilitate for women to pursue a divorce by helping women to get an employment and secure economic wellbeing. One reason for staying in an un-happy marriage is because many women would be stranded without their husband's financial support and CEWLA aims to prevent such situation. During our conversation, Noura expressed conviction that CEWLA makes progress in society, even though it sometimes feels like they are pushing a big rock. Wisham graduated from a language program at Aswan University and has been with CEWLA for one year. She is working in the counseling projects within the overarching combating violence program. I made two interviews with Wisham, but met her at several time under informal conversations at the center's premises.

As briefly introduced, Noha is responsible for international relations and translation. She started as a volunteer, and got employed a few years ago. She writes all the funding proposals, maintains contact with their donors, and translates report and documents to the other staffs. Seham Ali, a dedicated and professional woman with a lot of knowledge, is the last informant I met during one interview. She is also a lawyer and has been at CEWLA for a couple of years. She works within the advocacy program, which is lobbying for legal reforms, but she also has a "hotline" for legal assistance and awareness. As my research demonstrates, these participants mirror divergent stances and experiences towards Islamic discourse and its

role within the organization's work, and reveal the diverse characteristics within the organization as a whole.

Locating CEWLA within Women's Activism and NGO Work in Egypt

CEWLA emerged in 1995, the same year as the fourth world conference on women took place in Beijing under the UN. The adopted resolution at that conference calls on states to implement and promote gender mainstreaming at all levels, the practical tool to encourage gender equality, social change and empower women. Women's rights as human rights were recognized within the international community during this decade and took us to a new era of NGO activism and stimulated western feminism to move beyond its domicile (Abu-Lughod 2011). Egypt has been well integrated in this development and the women's rights language gained national terrain during the preparations and hosting of the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the participation with delegates in Beijing the year after. The conferences, however, fueled disputes over the ways in which these transnational spaces were used in order to promote Western agendas and on what premises the concepts of justice, rights, and equality were grounded (Ong 1996). A universal feminist project based on these western-originated concepts was subjected to critique by feminist theorists, minority groups, and religious communities.

In Egypt, the debates manifested themselves as polemic over how gender justice should be approached that still could be perceived to derive from an Egyptian authentic perspective. Al-Ali's (2000) study of secular women's activism in the middle to late 1990 reveals how the activists were pegged between political and cultural discourses and blamed, by mainly "Islamists", to embody an extended arm of western interests. Ali argues that the activists' attempts to fit into a picture of an authentic Egyptian culture only reinforced the "Islamists"

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false idea. The US historian Margot Badran (1995) contests the accusation of feminists and women's movements in Egypt as western by pointing to the country's history of feminists activism interconnected and shaped by the independence and liberal movements in the 1920s and the formation of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), headed by Nawal el-Sadaawi. She argues that to anchor feminism in a certain location is a political project deriving from a particular understanding of culture as static, or from a need of perpetuating the construct of "west" and "east". Egypt has appropriated and woven "alien elements" into a vital indigenous culture (Badran 1995;32).

With the risk to fall into the reinforcement of just another form of an authentic Egyptian culture by following Badran's analysis, Lila Abu-Lughod (1992), instead explores the sites where the "Islamists", in their vast variety, and Egyptian feminism meet. She argues that the two have more in common than actually recognized. The two main features that differ are sexual independence and public freedom, but the Egyptian feminists', who in this analysis are the female media elite, advocacy for women's rights to education, to work, and the embracing of the bourgeois marriage are gingerly questioned by the "Islamists", even though these are as much from western liberal feminist thought as the former.

Ellen McLearny (2010) makes an insightful comparison between the Egyptian Islamic thinker Heba Rau'uf Ezzat's scholarship on gender relation in Islam and Wendy Brown's description of liberal family values. Ra'uf, visible in both national and international public spaces, draws on Islamic jurisprudence and religious theology from both modern and pre-modern time, delightfully conflated with liberal, feminist and secular theory, and has been credited for being a catalyst for serious change in Islamic thought. While she argues for the family as the core of political unit in the Islamic *umma* she corresponds with secular liberal

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thoughts that place the religious within the private domain. Ra'uf's ideal of society incorporates democracy and freedom of speech and describes the family built upon gender hierarchies. This approach is identical with Brown's picture of liberal family values, which concentrated hierarchies, dependencies, and duties to structure the realm of intimate relations and equality, freedom, and rights to the sphere of politics (McLearny 2010). Further, McLearny points to another example of when Ra'uf and liberal thoughts meet by pointing to the conversation between the female Islamic thinker and the outspoken Egyptian secular feminist Nawal El-Sadaawi. They have noticeable distinct ideas of the path towards women's emancipation, but are both subscribing to liberal thoughts of rights, equality, democracy, and justice as feminist ideals (McLearny 2010).

Over the last decade, the Egyptian context for women's rights work and NGOs have been going through a transformation and Abu-Lughod identifies three shifts in the Egyptian society: the governmentalization of women's rights through the NCW with the former president's wife Suzanne Mubarak at the front, the increased imbrications with religious institutions and discourse, and the association with the cooperate world. The main accusation for being western allied, anti- Islamic, or not serving Egyptian's interests is mainly received from the former regime and not religious groups or communities. I was told that CEWLA has been seriously harassed by the secret police last year as the director, Azza Suleiman, partook in the April 6th demonstrations. The same member tells me that it has been the state that has produced the picture to the public of CEWLA as a traitor with the aim to impose western ideas on Egyptian society.

Maha Abdelrahman (2009) sees the same tendencies from the Egyptian state towards human rights organization by employing a nationalist discourse. The former regime's

antagonistic position towards human rights groups accused them for being an extended arm of western powers, which undermined Egypt's sovereignty. The organizations were blamed for producing fabricated reports of human rights violations in Egypt and for creating sectarian splits by asserting the state's discrimination against Copt's and Shia Muslims. Foreign funding has, furthermore, been viewed as an act of betrayal and a neo-imperialist project aiming to consolidate western economical domination in the country. With these arguments, the former regime has been able to justify its protection of the country's security and sovereignty, partly by tightly controlling the civil society and its financial recourses. MOSA has through various laws not just placed NGOs in categories of either welfare or development organization, but has moreover been controlling all their running projects and monitoring their foreign funding (Abdelrahman 2004).

The NCW was established in 2000 and their role has been to inform the government of the impact of their policies on women and children (Sakr 2004). The council has also been working as an umbrella organization for other women's NGO and a channel for large amount of funding. What seems like the main impact of the council is its power to dictate much of women's rights projects and determine when and in what issues the women's rights groups can partake. At the UN conference, Beijing +5, in 2000, the Egyptian delegation involved state-sponsored representatives and the former first lady held a speech in favor of micro-credits and female entrepreneurs (Zuhur 2001). In 2004 during the preparation for a new reform in the PSL, several women's rights organization stated that they were excluded from the debates before the law was enforced. The only actor in contact with legislators and ministries was the NCW and the women's NGOs did not have a chance to give their reflections or opinion about the reform (Al-Sharmani 2009).

NCW can be argued to have been established to meet the high presence of women's NGOs in Egypt. While being able to easily control these activities through its political and economical advantage it has also represented itself as a protector of Egyptian women's interest. The statement of Nawal el-Saadawi in several interviews after January 25th Revolution, that Suzanne Mubarak killed the feminist movement in Egypt with the establishment of NCW is worth notice.

Post-Revolution

Even though it is still too early to conjecture how the revolution will impact gender justice and women's activism in Egypt, there is a big transformation in conditions for the women's NGOs and their participants. The members at CEWLA all showed a positive attitude towards the situation, even though the reports and media argue that women, once again, seem forgotten in the aftermath of the 18 days in the square of Tahrir, which overthrew the former president. The center's priority of advocating for political participation was expressed by all members at the center. Projects that were established during my conducted fieldwork mainly focused on political participation among ordinary people and to raise awareness about the constitution referendum and the implications of voting "yes", or "no".

Sehaam Ali, a lawyer in the advocacy program, who is normally lobbying and advocating for legal reforms and providing citizens with legal assistance, has shifted focus towards political awareness and participation. As she noted in the conversation with me: "The situation and people are not stable now, so I cannot sit here and apply family laws, I must go with the situation and focus on what is important" (Interview with Sehaam Ali, March 2011). This corresponds to what the director of CEWLA, Azza Suleiman, stated in an interview to the Weekly Al-Ahram state-run newspaper about the situation regarding women's rights work

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during this critical situation. She believes the transformation to a properly civil country is the main thing to focus on, not just women's rights[3].

The organization has had earlier projects about political awareness and democracy in which youth between 20-30 years old were educated and spread this awareness among other citizens in their communities of Boulaq and Ard el-Lewaa. These projects have resumed together with seminars and workshops in coordination with other NGOs. At the same time, another member told me, they have to be careful so that the situation does not get dominated by a specific group such as the Muslim Brotherhood. She says it is very important that a variety of voices and ideas for the future are heard in the public debates and CEWLA has a significant role here.

The overarching impression in the midst of reframed projects and thoughts about the future is the explicit sense of victory. This victory of not having the secret police harassing them and their projects, the victory of knowing that their vote will be counted, and the victory of freedom of expression.

This chapter has presented CEWLA's infrastructure, objectives, and the members interviewed for this thesis. It has further situated the organization within the Egyptian NGO scene with focus on various women's NGOs' relationship with international donors and the Egyptian state. CEWLA's organized engagement with al-Azhar makes it a unique actor within Egyptian civil society and an interesting resource for the objective of this thesis. The chapter has finally explored the organization's broader network of international organization

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[3] Weekly Al-Ahram 21-27 April 2011, Issue No. 1044. Accessed July 26 2011 at:
http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1044/fe1.htm

and donors, which has opened up for a discussion about the political and economical processes that penetrates global civil society. The chapter argues that even though CEWLA has space to choose from whom to receive funding, this choice is conditioned by the power structures of liberal political economy and the current dominant language within women's rights work.

Following chapter moves on to debated realms of women's rights, Islamic legal thought, and transnational feminism. It explores the contemporary debates over the employment of Islam in women's rights work. In relation to these debates, the chapter analyzes the organization's members' experiences of employing religion in their activities and perceptions of the relationships between Islamic discourse and women's rights work.

IV.   WHO SAID WE HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN ISLAM AND HUMAN RIGHTS?

The aim of this chapter is to explore and discuss the debates regarding the relationship between Islam, human rights, and gender justice in relation to how CEWLA interlocutors navigate these discourses. Inspired by the international human rights, CEWLA adopted this primary framework on which to base the objectives. The human rights framework is also used to guide and delineate the organization's projects. Simultaneously, the organization employs various degrees of Islamic discourse throughout its work, and for discrepant reasons. However, for the members of CEWLA, the combination of human rights and Islamic discourse is not contradictory or problematic since they believe Islam, given "proper" interpretation, corresponds to the principles of human rights.

The first part of this chapter maps out the contested realm of international human rights and raises some of the critiques towards its implications. The chapter also discusses more

explicit dialogues between Islamic legal tradition, Shari'a, and human rights. It continues with interviews with CEWLA members regarding their deployment of religion in the particular political and social context of Egypt. My material seeks to show CELWA's deployment of religious discourse in encountering the former regime and hegemonic religious discourses. Additionally, religion is referred when advocating for reforms in PSL, and negotiating popular sensibilities. CEWLA's multifaceted way of using religion is both connected to the growing international interest for Muslim politics, which in the NGO world has manifested through the highlighting of Muslim women's identity, and demands from the Egyptian society in which religiosity has gained legitimacy (Abu-Lughod 2010).

Critiquing Human Rights

Articulated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights have developed into the hegemonic and normative language used in discussions concerned with social justice and equality. Framed in western dominated spaces and questioned over its cultural and political legitimacy, the realm of international human right is a controversial site for all involved actors. Critics explore the power dimensions of these realms and its origin in western political thought. Believing human rights are more of a problem than a solution, David Kennedy (2002) highlights the particular place and time in which the human rights discourse derived: the pre-enlightenment, rationalist, secular, western, modern, capitalist space. He argues that with pragmatic thinking, this origin is not necessarily negative as long as it does not neglect alternative emancipatory objectives than the ones defined within the nineteenth- and twentieth century western political tradition, which unfortunately has been the case. Kennedy stresses that the hegemony of human rights discourse has resulted in a domination of the imaginative spaces of emancipation, which makes other valuable

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emancipatory strategies less available. The loss is local and diverse experiences and conceptualization of emancipation.

Dianne Otto (1997) argues that it is precisely the marginalized voices that should rethink the universal discourse on human rights, especially in regards the notion of universal and cultural differences, or cultural relativism. She argues that post-structural thinking of feminist, post-colonial, queer, and subaltern scholarships is necessary in framing a transformative project of human rights strategies. This in turn will elucidate the mechanisms of power within the modernity project it emerged from. In the same vein, Saba Mahmood (2003), in her correlation of feminism and emancipatory projects, questions the liberal feminist normative and hegemonic idea of what counts as emancipation for women. She gives examples of subaltern groups of women with a distinct notion of emancipation and urges for a nuanced and historical understanding of women's experiences and desires in life.

The western world's precedence over conceptual definitions like emancipation, justice, and rights has also resulted in vast human rights violations in US-led projects that aim to reinstate democracy or women's rights (read Muslim women's rights) in various locations. Otto (1997) explains how the universal and liberal discourse of human rights has set up new political agendas that have very little to do with human rights since these are actually used to violate human rights. Instead they are actually used to violate human rights attacking non-European traditions, such as those found in Islam. These violation have continued and escalated. Today we can witness systematic violation of human rights carried out by western states against a defined enemy, as demonstrated in the "war on terrorism".

Islamic Legal Thought and Human Rights in Synergy

Whereas these debates speak of the potentially problematic relationship of human rights and Islam they simultaneously create a vision of the necessity of projects in which these discourses are in conversation with each other. A variety of Islamic thinkers, such as Sudanese Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Egyptian Tariq al-Bashiri, and Abdolkarim Soroush from Iran have tried to unify Islamic thinking and doctrines with human rights. However, there are also more pessimistic voices who claim that the two contradict. A literalist interpretation of Quran and Hadith perceives that the sacred texts as immutable and static over time and space. Emphasizing these timeless junctions of Islamic texts can create a challenge in applying these to a society subject to transformation and change (Akbarzadeh and Macqueen 2008). With Asad's (1993) understanding of religion as a discursive tradition such interpretation is problematic. However, it must be understood within historic junctures of dominant knowledge discourses of Islamic legal history. A hegemonic feature of Islamic legal history is the "closure of *Ijtihad*", which is a phrase used to sum up the history since the tenth century (Hallaq 2007). *Ijtihad* is the human effort in reaching legal opinion to the extent that the faculties of the scholars are incapable of continuing efforts in discovering God's law. The closure of *Ijtihad* was equal to obeying God's law without questioning the reasons behind it. This picture of Islamic law as incapable of change was adapted by both nationalists and Islamic traditionalists during colonial periods. It was also used by the colonial power in their claim that Islamic law had lost touch with its surrounding reality (Hallaq 2007). However, Hallaq (1987) contests this closure as a myth and shows in his chronological study that *Ijtihad*, despite controversies and debates, continues throughout Islamic legal history.

To understand Islamic law as dynamic, changing, and subject to human reasoning is a condition for pursuing conversation between Islamic legal thought and human rights. While

An-Na'im (1990) recognizes the universality of human rights, he stresses that an engagement of religion and the recognition of religion as relevant and significant is indispensible for human rights advocates and scholars. Instead of perceiving human rights and Islam as a dichotomy, he views them as interdependent and in synergy. In his later writings, An-Na'im (2005, 2008) also includes secularism in this synergy. On one hand, he argues that if human rights are ever to be adopted as universal in religious societies, believers of these societies must perceive these rights as consistent with their religious convictions. On the other hand, that the protection of human rights are crucial for the integrity of religious belief and its relevance to its adherents. Consequently, each of them is dependent on the other in order to successfully being recognized.

An-Na'im (1987) claims that the moral philosophical base and political justification of human rights can be found in Islamic traditions, however, to fully unify Islam with human rights will require theological reinterpretations. He emphasizes that it is the political, economical and social context in which these interpretations are taking place that are of major significance for the outcome and its potential of corresponding to human rights principles. Asef Bayat (2007) argues akin to An-Na'im that the question of whether or not Islam is compatible with democracy[4] is wrongly put since the more relevant question to explore is under which circumstances this can be reality. Hence, the two authors recognize that it is the political and social context that shapes the theological traditions of Islam and nothing intrinsic in Islam makes it inherently incompatible with human rights or democracy.

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[4] Bayat recognizes the ambiguity of "democracy" and refers to Marxist, feminist, and liberal political thought and their varying stances of what indicates democracy and how to define the term.

For Saba Mahmood (2003), An Na'im's liberal embracing of human rights is problematic. She troubles recent scholarship of Muslim intellectuals that use liberal ideals of human rights and democracy as the norm to which Islamic legal thinking must prove its compatibility. The premise on which the conceptualization of democracy, human rights, and justice is based is rarely questioned, but used in the normative sense of liberal political thought. She stresses that the liberalism of the state is the ideal for many Muslim scholars, which mirrors the disparity in power between Anglo-European countries and Muslim societies. The liberal secular state as the best arrangement for all human societies needs to be put into question. It is probably that Mahmoud would like to see An-Na'im reverse his analysis and use Islamic doctrines and traditions to question the human rights discourse. This would open up debate of the issues international human rights discourse embody and explore how it can improve without the liberal political thought as the norm. An-Na'im is not doing that, nevertheless, he moves away from a normative understanding of secularism and recognizes that there is no universal definition of the concept. Each country's experience of secularism is rather deeply contextual and culturally rooted and cannot simply be imported (2008). He therefore corresponds to Mahmood (2005) in her understanding of different models of secular states of which the Egyptian state is one. Instead of importing a notion of secularism, An-Na'im (2008; 138) stresses the necessity of internal validity and cultural legitimacy and urges scholars to focus on the "internal dynamics and processes to establish and consolidate constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship within Islamic societies on their own terms" (138). However, An-Na'im's nuanced understanding of secularism and the process of consolidating human rights would benefit from deeper analysis of the power dimensions at play both within societies and, as Mahmoud points out, between the west and Muslim societies.

I argue that CEWLA's understanding of the relationship between religion and human rights coincides with Al-Na'im's reading of the problem space. Assertions that Egypt is a religious society in which people are connected to religious life is a returning statement throughout the interviews and is one of the arguments for employing religious discourse within projects. Further, the members of CEWLA claim that Islam reinterpretated is not an impediment for women's rights as declared in international human rights conventions. One of CEWLA's tasks is to prove this compatibility. As earlier explored, the participants' experiences reveal that dealing with (mis)interpretation of religion is a main part of their work. CEWLA members stress that the Egyptian society suffers from both the hegemonic religious discourse provided by the state and other actors along with confusions about religious verdicts. In the same manner as an-Na'im, my interviewees argue that since Islam is not a static entity with only one interpretation, this confusion and misinterpretation can change, which would support the cause of women's rights. An-Na'im further explains that human rights must be viewed as consistent with the beliefs in Muslim communities, which in CEWLA's work partly has manifested itself through their publication of the compatibility between CEDAW and Shari'a.

State Religious Hegemony and Counter Hegemony

What is CEWLA's strategy to contend hegemonic state discourse of the Islamic? Many of my interviewees believe that the state is maintaining a false "Islam" that is used in order to underpin its interests. For CEWLA members, the Egyptian state has been the primary impediment for the implementation of gender justice, equality, and human rights. It is due to the state's favor of a certain group in society and the marginalization of many others, CEWLA must cover up for its politics. This accurately corresponds to liberal political thoughts that civil society should be responsible for delivering welfare to citizens since the

state fails to do so. Through my interviewees it is revealed that the means, which the former Egyptian government utilized in order to maintain the public picture of the state as protector of the Egyptian people's interests and strengthening its power are vast. An explicit tactic mentioned among CEWLA members is the particular religious discourse produced by the state through the institution of Al-Azhar.

The 1970s revival of Islamic belief, also known as the Islamic awakening, was not just manifested through state oriented political groups, but as a religious sensibility in Muslim societies (Mahmoud 2005). In Egypt as a response to this, the Egyptian state energetically tried to represent itself as a religious, legitimate government with the accurate interpretation of Islam (Azzam 1996; Barraclough 1998). Supporting such an image has been trough the transfer of administrative duties to the religious institution of al-Azhar, which consequently gained power within public debates and policy making. The regime has used the religious authorities in myriad of matters, mainly in the violent struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood and the more militant groups of *Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyyah* and *Al-Jihad*, as well as matters regarding national legislation and policy making (Abdelrahman 2004). The former Mubarak regime used *fatwas* from al-Azhar to bolster its politics and to push its agenda forward. This has resulted in the partial success to maintain a particular Islamic discourse. Especially since the pro-government Shaykh Mohamed Sayyid Tantawi entered the directory of Al-Azhar in 1996 after the death of the more conservative and state critical Jad al-Haqq. The state has then through various venues broadcast a particular interpretation of Islam. The state media has been widely used for this purpose as well as the weekly lectures in the mosques. Also state-controlled, the mosques highlighted and discussed topics that were monitored and approved by the former government.

However, the religious discourse is one of many features through which the former regime exercised its hegemony. I have earlier referred to the former Egyptian state as a combination of patriarchal and nationalist ideology that has represented itself as the only actor able to respond to the interest of the Egyptian nation. Furthermore, the utilized various hegemonic discourses are not static or stable in any sense, but constantly negotiated and contested both by internal and external forces. Hegemonic discourses of Egypt's former regime have hence not operated impervious to transnational forces. Since discourses of human rights and women's rights have gained global terrain, the former regime was required to negotiate these new ideologies. Women's rights discourse also fueled the rapidly increase in established women's NGOs in Egypt and an internal contested realm developed within civil society. An indicator that the regime responded to the transnational appeal for women's rights and civil society is Egyptian state feminism manifested mainly through the earlier discussed NWC. NWC's, established in 2000, role was to inform the government of the impact of its policies on women and children. The government and state officials started to incorporate terms like women's empowerment and women's rights. Additionally, it also created a myriad of development programs that addressed women and their lives. The governmentalization of women's questions during the last two decades, and the state media's intensive reports regarding the success of NWC, resulted in that Egyptian state feminism became the dominant actor in delineating gender politics. Once again, this reinforced the idea that the government is the perfect protector of the nation. Simultaneously, its activity could be framed in a way so that it remained in control over the discourse of women's rights. As Pratt (2005) argues, state feminism in Egypt inserted the concept of empowerment and women's rights in a way that coexisted with the regime's discourses and as not to challenge its hegemony.

In other words, the former regime has exercised power and maintained its hegemonic discourses through several different strands. These various elements are not completely autonomous, but mutually constitutive. This means that if there is a change in one of the elements, other elements change too (Pratt 2005). As described, these elements are further realms in which power is continuously countered and negotiated. In turn, they have also resulted in new developed ways in which the government has tried to reinforce its hegemony. Hence, hegemonic religious discourse as addressed during my interviewees is present in this complex space, in which the former regime exercised power. Al-Azhar is one of many institutions, where religious hegemony has been reinforced and spread among people. However, it is effected and negotiated by surrounding elements of power.

In terms of religious hegemonic discourse, Egypt is not alone facing the phenomenon of an Islamic awakening. In many Muslim societies, the government tried to transform certain politics as a strategy to contend revivalists. It is not rare that women are at the center of this struggle. Aiwha Ong (1990) referred to the same situation in Malaysia where the secular state competed with the Islamic revival by launching its own Islamic campaign. The battle ground centered around women's bodies and moral agency. It resulted in the state's development of a new "family politics", which was broadcast through various media and state controlled institutions. The struggle between the hegemonic discourse of the capitalist state and the counter hegemonic discourse of the Islamic *umma* intensified gender inequalities in Malay societies as both argued for the domestication of the Malay women and as the reproduces of racial stock.

In Egypt, women's lives have been at the center of several controversies between the state and revivalist Islamic discourse. The government has partly responded in a countering

manner. For instance, the government issued a statement that female genital cutting is a non-Islamic practice while a leading Muslim Brotherhood scholar, Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, has remained neutral. Another controversial action was the banning of the full face covering veil in Egyptian universities. However, the Islamic revival has also elicited a form of "show" in religiosity from the state, most notably in conservative segments of the family law (Badran 1990).

For CEWLA, challenging many elements of religious discourse produced by the former government has been significant in the struggle to achieve the association's objectives. Large numbers of people are attending Friday prayers, watching the state media, and in other ways being subjected to the rhetoric and *fatwas* from al-Azhar. CEWLA wants to understand and monitor these state discourses that people are subjected to and to provide the citizens with an alternative understanding of Islam.

Sherif, CEWLA's Development Director, believes that many of the imams from al-Azhar produce a false Islam. For these imams, it is not about religion: it is about pushing the regime's politics forward. These imams have also been used by the government to justify atrocities against human rights, as well as creating a division between Muslims and Christians within the country. He believes these tactics were revealed during the January 25th Revolution when Muslims and Christians fought together side by side, proving that people can think for themselves. "The regime always said people are too stupid to think for themselves, but they can, and they showed that in the revolution" (Sherif. Interview conducted on February, 2011).

The strategies CELWA employs in challenging the dominating discourse are numerous. One such tactic is to collaborate with progressive religious scholars, imams, and authorities, in order to reveal that there are other interpretations of Islam. Many of these religious

authorities come from Al-Azhar, which indicates the varying characteristics of individuals within the institution. Al-Azhar is a large organization, which does not represent a homogenous voice. Like members of any institution, authorities, scholars and imams from al-Azhar do not assemble a homogenous group of people. Instead, they take various positions against the former regime and espouse different gender ideologies. Several of my interviewees informed me that CEWLA tries to find the most progressive scholars within Al-Azar and then establish a strong communicative relationship.

Another strategy has been to interact directly with the former regime, in attempts to encourage the regime to raise important topics through its control of al-Azhar and the mosques. Noura, one of CEWLA's lawyers, describes how CEWLA first uses a religious authority, such as a professor in Islamic law or a progressive imam, to clarify if a certain behavior or practice in society is religiously permissible or not, *haram* or *halal*. Afterwards, they set up round table discussions with people from Awqaf, the ministry controlling the mosques, to discuss the particular topic. CEWLA provides Awqaf representatives with reports with detailed knowledge regarding various issues. This gathered information is based on research conducted at different communities, in order to make Awqaf representatives acknowledge the possible harm on the society and people. According to Noura, "We are educating people from Awqaf about the situation within the community and the problems that the citizens are facing"(Interview with Noura conducted on February 2011). CEWLA's goal is to make the authorities from the government address the issues with imams so it can be discussed and resolved in the Friday prayer.

It is not a straight forward to route for CEWLA when the organization operates in the realm of civil society and counters the state's hegemonic religious discourse. While they

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critique segments of religious voices from Al-Azhar, they also work together with individuals from the institution of Al-Azhar in order to pursue their objectives. For instance, this can be seen in the case of the controversial *khul'* reform in 2000. *Khul'* is a women's legal right to file for divorce and the reform created vast tensions between legislators, religious authorities, civil society, and public opinion. However, the state supported this reform and together with the Grand Imam Tantawi, the Egyptian state implemented the legal reform that corresponds to CEWLA's demands. In a report compiled by CEWLA, Director Azza Suleiman (2005) states that CEWLA recognizes that *khul'* alone will not guarantee justice for women as long as there are no radical changes in the procedural rules and legislative system governing personal issues. The report means that, in the end, it is the dialectical relationship between the law, legal bodies, and individuals that implement the law reform that has the potential to work in favor for women. Based on a field study over the numbers of *khul'* petitions filed and the percentage of *khul'* judgments pronounced, the reports argues that the result shows that the filed petitions are minuscule since the ratification of the law. For these results and the general lack of public support for the *khul'* reform, CEWLA partly blames the mass media for employing a cynical and superficial coverage of the new law, which undermined the possible popular support. CEWLA also acknowledges that certain members of the parliament who had an extreme negative attitude against the law, which was widely reported in the national press. These politicians failed to speaking in favour for the law. Consequently, their silence extensively contributed to the lack of public support.

CEWLA is not alone for blaming the state and the media for limiting the legitimacy of *khul'* in public opinion. In an interview with the head of NCWR, Nihad Abul-Qomsan (2011), she told state owned newspaper Al-Ahram:

> If society hasn't been able to accept *khul'* more than 10 years after its inception, this means that government, education and the media have not played their proper role in showing that this right is important to society (http://weekly.ahram.org.eg).

These perspectives are interesting, as it indirectly question of the former regime's actual objective behind the reform. While the state promoted *khul'* it was simultaneously discouraged the legitimacy of the law in public attitudes through the controlled press. This may strengthen the argument that the state mainly implemented the law because of international pressure, without any profound conviction to establish justice between spouses. In other words, even though amendments of the law promoted by the state can correspond to CEWLA's proposed reforms, the state can have a rather different objective with the law. Ultimately, in producing a particular discourse, the state works against the very reform it has instituted. Even though CEWLA is not countering the state's religious discourse as in the case of *khul'*, the organization works against the state's attempt of portraying the reform as negative within the Egyptian society. Through published reports, seminars, and other public events, CEWLA's task is to counter the public discourse that the state produces and maintains. This indicates that CEWLA is aware that law reform is not a guarantee that improvements are indeed made. Instead, the entire system requires more fundamental change. In one of my interviewees, Gawaahar, an employee of CEWLA's advocacy program, explains that the deficits in the legal system reach beyond the implementation of the law. Even if the verdict actually is in favour for women, there is a small chance that the order will be executed. For example, sometime men prefer to go to prison for a short amount of time than pay alimony to his ex wife. According to Gawaahar, when an official is sent to ensure the execution of the verdict, he is bribed, ensuring that the case is not reviewed or further examined. Besides the huge issues of corruption these narratives tell, feminist criticism of the state have questioned the effectiveness of focusing on law reforms when the institution, which

will administer the law, is tied to prerogatives of manhood within a male-dominated society (Brown 1992). Women are not solely legal subjects, but also situated within, and effected by, the liberal political economy (Abu-Lughod 2009), which, in turn, is the main preserver of atrocities against women Mohanty (2003).

Although CEWLA views the state as the primary barrier for women's rights, the former regime's hegemonic discourse is far from operating alone on the realm of civil society. As mentioned previously, the former state's attempt to represent itself as a religious government was a response to the public rising support for the Islamic revival. The Muslim Brotherhood has been a strong force within the Islamic awakening and the groups has been argued to represent the dominant counter religious discourse in contemporary Egypt (Bayat 2007; Abdelrahman 2004). During my interviews at CEWLA, the Muslim Brotherhood's religious discourse is addressed twice. Seham, who works mainly on developing proposals for law reforms, explained that she hesitates in trusting the Muslim Brotherhood because of its heterogeneous character. She further explained that there are fractions within the Brotherhoods that stretch from progressive positions to more conservative stances on women's rights. She shows concern over how she will know who will take power over the women's question if they gain power. Nonetheless, Noura talks about the Brotherhood in positive terms. She believes they have a progressive interpretation of Shari'a and they are also known for showing interest in the Egyptian's desires and needs. Beside the Muslim Brotherhood, there are several other religious groups in Egypt with adherent gender ideology. After January 25th Revolution there has been apparent concerns in public media and debates over the gained public space of conservative religious strands in the Egyptian society. However, this concern is not present during the interviews and these groups are not mentioned.

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The relationship with the state is clearly a complex feature in CEWLA's work. As Gramsci (1971) describes, there is no clear division between the state and the civil society, as the ruling machine operates on the realm of civil society through its various institutions. Al-Azhar is one of these institutions, which with its intellectual, historical, and economical advantage, manifests a hegemonic discourse of Islam. On the one hand, this discourse has been appealing to Egyptian people as it suits large segments of the peoples' every day, ideas of life, and activities. On the other hand, this discourse has been protecting the regime's power. However, myriad of other actors, such as CEWLA, Islamic groups and organizations, other women's groups, Christian and Coptic organizations, political parties, social movements, and state affiliated associations, are located on the same arena as Al-Azhar. These actors are either reproducing the discourse and ideas of thoughts of Al-Azhar, or challenging them. This strategy of directly interacting with the state, in order to influence the Islamic discourse corresponds to Gramsci's (2001) definition of counter hegemony as a practice of reframing an already existing activity. In the same vein as the regime, CEWLA has used ideas of thoughts, intellectuals, and religious authorities in its activity of questioning and rework the discourse in play.

Navigating the Implications of Shari'a as the Source to the Law

CEWLA's deployment of religion is not isolated to only challenging state-produced Islam, but penetrates the organization activities in its works with the grassroots and local communities. When questioning when and why religion is used, my interviewees explained that the usage of religion allows them to enter a space of strategy, logic, and religious interpretation. Religious discourse is also a significant feature regarding human rights and family legislation. The bulk and the most explicit deployment of religion is in the advocacy programs, which are mainly framing and lobbying for reforms in the PSL.

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According to Seham, when developing and writing legal reform proposals, it must be initially clarified that these proposals do not contradict Shari'a. This is of high significance since article 2[5] in the constitution states that current law derives from the divine law. People will always ask her if the reform corresponds with Shari'a. To guarantee that her written proposals do not contradict with Shari'a, she normally seeks help from Al-Azhar University's School of Shari'a Law, asking scholars to find her arguments that support her reform proposals. She also uses her own knowledge about Shari'a that she obtained from law school. Finally, she refers to her own library of articles about Shari'a and *fiqh*. She believes that the core part of her work is to ensure that the reforms correspond to the divine law. For her, this alignment is not only due to the constitution, but because both Muslims and Christians, are linked to their religious lives.

Article 2 of the Egyptian constitution has created great tension for long time and escalated during the January 25th Revolution in relation to debates over the potential of transforming Egypt in to a civil state, *dawlah medaniyah*. Article 2 can be traced back to 1971 when President Sadat responded to the Muslim Brotherhood's demand by adding the previously absent clause of Shari'a as *a source* to the legislation. In 1981, President Mubarak reframed the article so it read that Shari'a is *the source* to legislation, which arguably also was to satisfy the Brotherhood. One argument for removing the clause is due to the Christian minority in Egypt. The Coptic writer and political observer Naji Youssef (2009) argues[6] that when a legal subject stands in front of the court and judge, there should be no difference in treatment according to religion. He also asks which of the various interpretations of Shari'a is

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[5] Article 2 in the Egyptian constitution: Islam is the religion of the state, and the Arabic language is its official language. The principles of Islamic law are the chief source of legislation.

[6] http://islamexplained.com/UVG/UVG_video_player/TabId/89/VideoId/678/204-----.aspx

to be the legislation's source. When addressing these debates and asking for Seham's perspective on the second article, she stated that there is a lot of confusion about this article, which makes people focus too much on it. She believes that, because the majority of the population in Egypt is Muslim, there is no problem that the article states that Islam is the religion. In terms of the article's statement that Shari'a is the source to law, Seham clarified that the article states that the principles of Shari'a should be the source to legislation and not doctrines from Shari'a. Seham emphasized that it must be clear to people that there is a difference between principles and doctrines. According to her, the principles of Shari'a are values such as equality, justice, freedom of religion, and so on. Certain doctrines of Shari'a can obviously not be applied on Christians, but that is not what the article implies. She also stated that CEWLA does not discuss this article as they do not see a particular issue with it. Seham is aware of that some Christians fear that this article can allow the state to enforce Shari'a laws upon them. Nonetheless, to Seham this is irrational. She believes this article is focused upon because some people wish to create a split between Muslims and Christians in the country.

Regarding legal reforms that are valid for both Muslims and Christians, Seham explained that CEWLA tries to reform legal articles that are applicable to both Muslims and Christians, without contradicting any of the divine laws, and then make a common law for both religions. The commonalities are on areas such as age for custody, alimony, and age of marriage. According to her, the divorce law is more controversial since Islam and Christian law differs in this matter and because the various strands within Christianity take different stances on divorce. Seham stresses they need to found the mutual laws and unify them under a common law, but then allow for the differences and respect these.

An Na'im (1987) addresses the rights of minorities under Shari'a with reference to the international human rights. He states that discriminations against religious minorities, or non-religious citizens, can never be justified by Islamic cultural relativism as no state possesses the right to treat minorities however it wishes. However, he argues that the rights of minorities should not be a problem for Islamic modern clerics to ensure since minorities' rights are nothing that inherently goes against the Shari'a. He believes that Islam rather emphasizesthe rights of minorities and refers to the tradition of interpretation of Islamic sources and the Muslim reformers who cite Quranic verses from the Meccan period. These sources and religious scholars support complete freedom of choice and prohibit any coercion on non-Muslims. To avoid any cultural relativism in formulating minority rights, An Na'im believes the international human rights must be the guiding principle for such reforms. Article 40 in the Egyptian constitution reads that all citizens are equal before the law. They have equal public rights and duties without discrimination between them due to race, ethnic origin, language, religion, or creed.

Seham's position on article 2 would be regarded by many as a sign that she does not advocate for a "secular" PSL. This article of the constitution has been the primary linchpin over the debates regarding a non-civil law and the main impediment towards a transformation to a complete *dawlah medaniyah*. Seham's position is not the only stance among members of CEWLA, which reveals the contradictions and limitations of attributing women's rights work as either "secular" or "religious" based.

Gawaahar's story contradicts Seham's, Gawaahar also works within the advocacy program, but focuses on projects concerning legal training, human rights awareness, and communication skills among lawyers and mediators. She argues against article 2 because it is

not fair to the Christian minority to base the law on Shari'a. She claims that CEWLA advocates for a secular civil law and that the organization is not very interested in Shari'a. However, she explained that CEWLA is using religious scholars and authorities when proposing reforms, but because the prevailing legislation is based on Shari'a. For instance, in a proposed reform regarding the division of wealth after a divorce, CEWLA received help from Abdle Moty Bayoumy, a professor of Islamic jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University and member of the Islamic Research Academy. She continues: "Just because we are using a religious language when advocating for reforms, it does not mean we want an Islamic country". Regarding the laws of Christians and Muslim, she argues CEWLA wants a complete common civil law for both religions. This is especially desired in issues such as divorce as Christian law only accepts divorce due to adultery.

In searching for supplemental information regarding the organizations position on article 2, no direct official statement on this matter was found. However, Noha, who is responsible for the international relations and donors, informed me that CEWLA does not have a public announcement towards the referendum of the constitution that in March 19, 2011. She explained that their focus is on political awareness and participation. In fact CEWLA staff voted both "yes" and "no" to the constitution. From other informal discussions with members at CEWLA, I obtained the information that they want to change extensive parts of the current constitution. Nonetheless, article 2 was not named in these conversations. Talking to Seham, I mentioned that other staff members had used the argument of a Christian minority against the second article. She responded that people are not knowledgeable about its implications. People mix up the principles of Shari'a with doctrines of Shari'a.

The different positions of Seham and Gawaahar can be due to a myriad of reasons. Even though they both work within the advocacy program, they perform rather distinct tasks within the field of law and draw on different frameworks. Seham is working on reforms in PSL, which entail a daily interaction with Shari'a and religious interpretation. Gawaahar is educating and training mediators in human rights conventions and values. Hence, their everyday work, individual convictions, and scales of personal engagement with their profession can hence be conflated with the official profile of CEWLA. Because CEWLA's work is constantly fluidly using various frameworks, Seham and Gawaahar different positions are necessarily neither rights or wrong. It can also indicate various definitions of *dawlah medaniyah*. The popular Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi is tied to the Muslim Brotherhood and controversial in the US for supporting violence against Israel and US soldiers in Iraq. He held his first speech in 50 years in middle of February 2011 at Tahrir square where he called for *dawlah medaniyah*. Even though they both use the term *dawlah medaniyah*, al-Qaradawi and the Coptic writer Naji Youssef are most likely not advocating for the same model of a civil state. However, the term is used by both in order to outline a vision of the future Egypt. A distinction in definitions of concepts among members of CEWLA is not impossible. The different positions of Seham and Gawaahar certainly indicates how critical definitions are, especially related to "secular" and "religious" ideas of the state, legislation, and gender politics.

CEWLA engages with religious discourse in terms of both Muslims and Christians. The CEWLA staff uses stories from the Bible when interacting with Christians in the same vein as the Quran. When Seham works on reforms in the Christian family law, she goes back to the time when Christians could file divorce on nine conditions, as opposed to current law, which

only allows divorce due to adultery. All members of CEWLA I talked to are keen to clarify that they work both for the Muslim and Christian community.

Egyptian Personal Status Law and Human Right Conventions

Beside female Muslim academics and activists, other scholars have also explored the ways in which the contemporary PSL developed in Muslim societies. The historic trajectories of the family law are significant in any analysis, debate, or reform advocacy of the law. The historicity of family legislation reveals that articles in the current PSL are not based purely on human interpretations of Shari'a. During the colonial rule in Egypt and the formation of the secular nation state, the country went through extensive transformation in legal administration and practice. Sonbol (2007) and others (Tucker 2007, Hallaq 2009) explain that there was a great contextual complexity open for interpretation in the pre-modern legal practice, and these practices changed as part of the historical process. Records from the Ottoman rule also reveal the large presence of women as litigants, filing cases such as divorce, alimony, and inheritance, which rapidly decreased with the formation of the state. Shari'a courts had often judicial power in urban areas, the rural areas followed customary procedures and a third kind of courts administrated non-Muslims' cases. With European presence, the Shari'a courts were gradually replaced by Mixed Courts for the non-natives that were controlled by the state. Over time, Shari'a law was confined to only administering family law and religious endowments and essentially structured to define the Egyptian Personal Law (Asad 2001). Asad means that when the divine law is placed in a subdivision of law, which is determined by the centralizing state, it is hence secularized in distinctive ways. The emerging secular state, nationalist ideology, and capitalist mode of production created a demarcation of private and public realm and the (nuclear) family was defined. Additionally, courts improved, juridical staff were educated, and the sacred text was codified to take care of what was defined as private matter.

It is in this process, Asad (2001) argues, where we find reforms that eventually translate the Shari'a to PSL, which is clearly a process of secularization.

As described, the current Egyptian legislation regulates family matters cannot only be traced back to Islamic traditions and indigenous changes: it is a narrative of how Shari'a became part of a process in which society should adopt the formation of a state apparatus. A state based on principles of liberalism, capitalism, individualism, and secularism. From my interviewees and the analysis of CEWLA's published materials, the historical trajectories of PSL are well recognized by CEWLA and utilized as arguments when approaching the PSL. It is also clear that they employ methods provided by "Islamic feminists", especially in clear marked distinction between Shari'a and *fiqh*. The networking group NWRO, which CEWLA is part of, has published an extensive report addressing many shortcomings in the PSL. This guide was given to me by a member of CEWLA. It includes recommendations and guidelines for an amending personal law that meets the principles of the Egyptian constitution, which guarantees protection of motherhood and childhood, and the international instruments ratified by the Egyptian government. Throughout the guide, the recommendations are remained aligned to the principles of Shari'a and drawing from the "enlightened interpretations". It emphasizes that Shari'a is applicable to all places and all times. Therefore, it should be interpreted with regards to the reality of current society and the changes it is going through. The introduction states that no opinion should overrule another, as Islam encourages argumentation and reasoning, and denies the upholding of one singular view. On this foundation, the family legislation must be discussed from various perspectives and should be based on the following principles: mutual responsibility, respect, understanding, and the assurance of family members' rights to equality, justice, freedom, and rule of law. The report's vision is to guide reform projects, so that the PSL will be "based on the principles of

citizenship and human rights, and inspired by the enlightened vision and right understanding of divine religions".

My interviewees believe that there are no inherent barriers within Islam towards a reform of PSL. Moreover, CEWLA members made no assumptions that there would be any contradictions in a law based upon the international human rights framework, while holding on to the principles of Shari'a. Some of the CEWLA members refer to the report published by CEWLA and the UN, in which Al-Azhar's Islamic philosophy professor Dr. Amna Nosseir, concludes that 95% of Shari'a corresponds with CEDAW. Nosseir argues that CEDAW should be applied as long as it does not confront Shari'a. However, her research demonstrates that there are very few articles that should be rejected due to this reason. Although there are few contradictions, human rights and Shari'a must be understood as two separate frameworks that play different role within the legal reform advocacy. This is further clarified by Seham. If we compare Shari'a with CEDAW, we would find that Shari'a provides even more rights for women than CEDAW. However, CEDAW is less susceptible to misinterpretation than Shari'a Therefore, it is a good supplement. Seham views CEDAW as an effective tool to push the government to implement laws that creates equality between men and women. CEDAW is like a "knife to the neck" for the policy makers. If they do not obey, they will look very bad in the eyes of other countries. She carries on that it is not Shari'a, but the chaotic state of people and the society that makes it difficult to only rely on shair'a. Other participants view CEDAW more as the core foundation of the organization as it began as a collaborative project with UNICEF. It is also referred to as the most applicable framework for CEWLA's work as it allows them to pursue their objectives of promoting and enabling rights for both the Muslim and Christian communities. For Gawaahar, who opposes against article 2, the human rights framework does not favor any religion more than another.

The NWRO's legal guide refers to an "enlightened interpretation" of Islamic law. This interpretation corresponds to the interpretation done by the different religious authorities that CEWLA systematically engages with. These progressive scholars and imams often state that contemporary personal law contains gaps. These gaps are due to classical interpretations, which have negative effects on women's rights and prohibit many rights women should be entitled to. These progressive religious scholars employ a contextual reading of the Islamic texts and use the contemporary reality as a reference, when pursuing interpretation according to the Islamic methodological rules. One of these progressive scholars is Dr. Abdel Moty Bayumi who is a member of the Islamic Studies Academy at al-Azhar University and a former Dean of the Faculty of Religious Sciences. CEWLA published Bayumi's book *On Women's Issues* addresses guardianship, superiority (Qiwama), polygamy, and women's testimony. When he puts *fiqh* into a historic and contextual analysis in order to critique earlier Islamic jurisprudence, he clearly employs methods of "Islamic feminism". In terms of guardianship, which states that a husband has the obligation to maintain the wife and she will in turn obey him, Bayumi believes that the conditions on which guardianship are based upon are not applicable today, as women are just as likely as men to earn their money and provide for their families. Today, women are taking part in public life, science, and the work field. They earn money and hold positions that make them many times superior to men, which make the condition for guardianship absent. This way of reasoning is appealing to women's NGOs today. As such, Dr. Bayumi is well quoted by several women's organizations.

Conclusions

This chapter identifies mainly two features in CEWLA's deployment of religion and engagement with religious authorities. The first feature of the chapter reveals that religious discourse partakes on a multidimensional level and is not just isolated to family legislation.

The internal political climate and complex conditions on civil society requires CEWLA to point to and address multiple sites, carried out with different methods. The former regime produced a hegemonic Islamic discourse, in order to display its religiosity and strengthen its power. This particular religious discourse is countered by CEWLA through the organization's interaction with state institutions and representatives, not least with al-Azhar. Through approaching the state, CELWA creates a space of debates and conversations within which the organization critiques the prevailing discourse. Furthermore, CEWLA provides an alternative religious discourse that is often more anchored in people's lived experiences, yet within the framework of religion. Additionally, CEWLA invites religious authorities and scholars to these debates, in order to encourage dialogue between various actors and demonstrate the many reading of Shari'a. Gramsci's concept of counter hegemony as something that works with the existing activity helps to identify CEWLA's own attempts of creating a counter hegemony. Through CEWLA's various methods, the center questions, reframes, and comes up with alternative understandings of Islam. However, CEWLA is not trying to implement a completely new idea of religious sensibilities. On the one hand, the objective is to critique certain contents within the government's religious discourse. On the other hand the objective is to counter the state's efforts to create negative public opinion concerning various aspects of the family legislation and women's rights.

The second feature of CEWLA's deployment of religion in this chapter is the strong conviction that there are no contradictions between CEDAW and Shari'a regarding women's rights. The conclusion of the compatibility of CEDAW and Shari'a is made by progressive Islamic scholars who. Through contextualizing and historicize Islamic jurisprudence *fiqh*, these scholars critique earlier classical jurists and argue for a family legislation that better suits the conditions of the contemporary society and the issues women and men are facing.

This method is also implemented by "Islamic feminists" who urge for an understanding of the distinctions between Shari'a and *fiqh*. Drawing on An Na'im's (1986) view on the synergy between human rights and Shari'a, CEWLA member perceive the two as separate, yet, complementary frameworks. CEDAW provides clear guidance for legal reforms and is a tool used to encourage the state to commit to human rights. Shari'a, with its potential of reinterpretation, is the contemporary source to legislation and meaningful to large segments of the population and their identities. In the debate concerning family legislation, CEWLA is one of many actors who have opened and facilitated a space where religious scholars and authorities, local activists, policy makers, and jurists can interact and discuss legal concept, religious interpretation, and the PSL in relation to gender politics. This does not just create a stronger female subject position within a predominant male domain it does also create a shift towards a more local understanding of how to negotiate gender inequalities in Egyptian legislation. Not least do they manifest an alternative Islamic discourse in society and among citizens. For example, the interpretation that *khul'* is something granted to women by God is, promoted by CELWA, is a different understanding of shair'a than the one deriving from classical jurisprudence (Al-Sharmani 2011).

Together these two features elucidates that CEWLA operates across boundaries of the "secular" and "religious", a dichotomy that often is used in reference to women's activism in Egypt. The ways in which NGOs are framing and performing their activity must be explored through a socio-political lens and put into the local conditional context. Additionally, women's NGO work must be analyzed with an open eye towards the complexity of how secular and religious discourses travel within society, state, legislation, and public opinion.

The following chapter addresses the ways in which CEWLA engages with the grassroots and local communities. The chapter discusses how CEWLA is dealing with sensitive topics and how the center solves disputes outside of the state controlled legislation. Moreover, it discusses how religion also plays a significant role in projects on the grass root level, which sheds further light to the complexity of civil society, NGO work, and categorizations of women's activism.

V.   NEGOTIATING DISCURSIVE SPACES AS A ROUTE TO SOCIAL CHANGE

This final fieldwork chapter moves away from CEWLA's relationship with the state and the formal legal system towards the organization's work with the grassroots and local communities. The chapter explores what strategic mechanisms of negotiation are at play when CEWLA interacts with members of the public. I will discuss a few particular narratives, which I believe illustrate the complexity of CEWLA's work. These narratives show how the members of the center navigate community discourse and effect transformation on the ground. The chapter argues that CEWLA is not in a position to single-handedly create revolutionary change to Egypt's social system. However, by negotiating various and dynamic discursive processes within the community, CEWLA generates change in the social imagination of people. This change becomes tangible in the way people inhabit new subject positions in localized cases.

How CEWLA engages with the community will be demonstrated by first exploring the various frameworks and languages that CEWLA employs when interacting with communities and its members. There are several factors that determine the ways in which CEWLA members chose to handle cases brought to them by individuals. Both the character of the issue and the individual's personality are important factors. Additionally, CEWLA carefully

reflects over the individual's particular circumstances and the context of the problem. These factors are also taken into consideration when the members of CEWLA discursively select the approaches for engaging with particular social issues. Every unique situation, and each person that comes to the organization for help, requires CEWLA to carefully judge what strategy will generate the best result. I outline this process through the concept of framing. Framing is used in social movement theory when analyzing how movements make sense of common goals and objectives in order to mobilize people (Merry 2006).

Much of CEWLA's work takes place in Cairo's informal areas and in the context of Egypt's informal sector of employment, politics, and conflict resolution. When CEWLA operates on the ground, the organization often utilizes informal rather than official and legal ways of conflict negotiation. Singerman (2007) refers to this informal realm as the "familial ethos", which is the legitimating discourse operating outside the state controlled realm. In order to pursue the organization's objectives, CEWLA chooses time and again to make use of the informal legal system as a substitute for the limited state-regulated legal system in Egypt. However, the organization's commitment to international human rights conventions and its ambition to move Egypt towards these conventions affect its work with the local communities. Since the organization's activities are embedded in the discourses of familial ethos, they have the ability to reframe these discourses and challenge particular elements, which, according to the organization, are impediments to international human rights.

Although CEWLA uses the informal sector in Egypt, the center's extensive work towards amendment of Egyptian family legislation indicates its support of a state-controlled law system. A well functioning state-controlled legal system provides citizens with non-arbitrary rule of law and guarantees that each and every person is equal before the law.

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However, CEWLA has realized that current multiple and complex defects in the Egyptian legal system make it extremely limited in its potential to deliver the rights to which citizens are legitimated. Therefore, CEWLA invests much recourses towards the familial ethos in which an alternative normative ordering already is at play. In order to maintain equality outside of the state controlled legal system, CEWLA tries to incorporate familial ethos with the center's principles of justice derived from the international human rights framework.

I explore how CEWLA begun to debate private concerns as public matters by illustrating the social imaginations they engage with in local communities of Cairo. I further show how these imaginations create the condition under which CEWLA's work operates. Social imaginations are key for CEWLA to understand such as the demarcation between private and public, religious practice, and other discourses that produce men's and women's gendered selves. By understanding these discourses, the center can further strive to reframe the social imaginations in order to realize the organization's foundational goal. This chapter outlines the operational spaces that CEWLA has established in order to approach these discursive realms. These operational spaces are, among others, counseling service, legal advice, and projects supporting families through familial disputes. These projects are developed through intense relations with the community and its members. Close contact with the community has made it possible for the organization to identify societal deficits and formalize venues, through which CEWLA assists the community members on various levels in life.

Mechanisms of Framing within the Informal Sector of Egypt

In order to understand the organization's work, one has to carefully balance how CEWLA approaches each case. While international human rights and CEDAW conventions are the

foundational road map and guiding principles, the organization has a broad repertoire of frameworks and languages it makes use of when engaging with different people in local communities.

My interviewees explain that it is both the character of the issue and the person they have in front of them that guide their evaluation of the situation. The issue and the person also determine through what channels CEWLA staff best can meet in-person the individual seeking guidance. The members of CEWLA frequently refer to the various "languages" they use in order to establish a common ground with clients. However, it is also clear that some situations require evaluation from diverse perspective. In such situations, different frameworks often are entangled. In terms of female genital cutting for instance, CEWLA uses imams and doctors in order to address the practice both from a religious and medical perspective. The imam refers to the holy Quran and Hadith to confirm that it is not an Islamic doctrine and the doctor shows what physical harm the practice can cause young girls. CEWLA also uses interactive methods to reach the community. In the context of female genital cutting, the organization stages theatre plays in which women's own experiences are highlighted. These plays further add a humanitarian aspect to the topic with underlying international human rights values, such as informed choice and body integrity. Female genital cutting is accordingly approached from various angels and knowledge drawn from different sources. This broadens the discourses around the topic.

In other situations, members of CEWLA told me that they also use logical reasoning and psychological terminology, as well as religious arguments. Religion is often referenced when discussing situations within familial life in Egypt since it is well embedded in the martial discourse. In particular, it seems like a significant perspective in situations regarding

divorce, custody, and inheritance. Religion may also provide parental guidance and marriage advice. However, Noura, from the combating violence program, explained that CEWLA staff wants people to use sound reasoning. Instead of settling for commonly produced religious arguments and societal norms and sensibilities, CEWLA aims for people to reflect over situations and religious knowledge. Noura argues that CEWLA's task is to open up this process among people in various ways. Islamic discourse is one way, but she believes that decision-making processes are often about values that go beyond religion. She believes that if a husband is a nice man who does not hit his wife or look at other women, he is a man with good values, not necessarily a religious man. Wisham, who is active in the counseling project and provides psychological services, explained that she uses religious language as a last alternative. She initially talks to people from a perspective of logic reasoning and psychology. If she fails to establish a common ground, she then uses religion. In such situations, she refers to religious stories and Hadith and uses knowledge obtained through religious law courses. However, sometimes when there is a difficult dispute, CEWLA needs to bring in a religious authority in order to solve the issue.

How various languages in different situations take place may be conceptually explored through the concept of "framing". Framing is a term social movement theory uses to explain the ways in which social movements mobilize activist around shared beliefs and collective actions. The "frame" is not an idea in itself, but works through the package and presentation of ideas. A condition for framing is that the frame should be resonant with local traditions and narratives in order to be appealing (Snow 2004). In the cases when CEWLA uses Islam, or Christianity, in their discursive approach, this packaging moves beyond its immediate use in social movements and becomes religious discourse channeled through various religious narratives, languages, and arguments.

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However, to some extent, the members of CELWA still work within the same principle as social movements in terms of framing. The principles addressed by social movements that are located within the constraints of existing discursive fields whose complex and multivocal messages are open to various and uncontrollable interpretations. Human rights intermediaries, like the participants I have interviewed, put global human rights ideas into familiar symbolic terms and use stories of local indignities and violations to give life and power to global movements (Merry 2006b). The members at CEWLA are guided by the international human rights framework. However, as the Egyptian context is a complex web of multiple discourses, they frame their objective in order to meet the community on a common ground. This not to argue that the organization produces a form of cultural gesture in order to accommodate the popular sector, or that religion is used a strategic tool to achieve result. Due to community members' unique demands and ideas, each situation requires its own individual solution and balance between various strategies. When looking for solutions to situations, CEWLA makes space for, and recognizes, the multiple discourses embedded in people's lives. Religion is one of these many discourses at play, which CEWLA interacts with throughout their multiple activities. The religious knowledge among CEWLA members derives from a systematic engagement with religious authorities and is debated among various religious representatives. CEWLA's use of religion is rather an indicator of the entangled relationship between a religious and secular dimension in Egyptian society, in particular within women's rights work.

Although CEWLA's mission is heavily invested in the formal legal system of the state, the ways in which the organization chooses to interact with the grass roots are to large extent located within the informal sector and the informal law system. Feminist legal theorists, reaching from a liberal standpoint to the more postmodern notion of legal discourse, discuss

law as something that happens to individuals, and something that is created and controlled by a state (Tucker 2008). These western centered ideas of law as a relationship between the individual and the state is also the core element of many the human rights conventions. This relationship is also one of the demerits of human rights discourse (Kennedy 2002). Anthropological ethnographies interested in law have disclosed a more complex relationship than western-centered theories about law as something taking effect between the litigant and the state alone. In large parts of the world, often in countries with a colonial past or the absence of a functioning state, more than one normative order of law is applied (Tucker 2008). Informal law is referred to as "a situation in which two or more legal systems coexist in the same social field," where a legal system is defined as the system of courts and judges supported by the state as well as non-legal forms of normative ordering (Merry 1988: 870).

Nehada Shehada (2005) shows in her ethnography of court cases in Gaza City how law operates within a myriad of norms. Law is something that negotiates the interest of the litigant, in this case the woman. However, law also negotiates the maintenance of social norms and harmony in the society, which include the woman's family and the society as a whole. Shehada's fieldwork reveals that a large quantity of pluralism takes effect when judges, litigants, and kin meet in court to find solution to various disputes. Occasionally, following the initiative of the judge, cases are even processed outside of formal court and handled within the traditions of customary law. Shehada explains a case in which the judge initially knew that the female plaintiff did not have a chance to win the case over her deceased husband's brother in the formal court. Therefore, the judge gathered the litigants for a couple of weeks of informal reconciliation. This indicates an informal system in place that is juxtaposed to the normative legal order, a system that is conditioned by traditional and customary orders.

In Egypt, such legal pluralism that involves informal avenues of conflict resolution can be theorized using the concept familial ethos. Singerman (2007) argues that, in order to capture all sites of politics and the changing modalities of power in Egypt, the informal sector of the familial ethos must be included in any analysis of civil society. Singeman further explains that the familial ethos is the legitimating discourse of political and economical dimensions that are not licensed, regulated, and numerated by the state. However, the familial ethos is extensively involved in almost all realms of political, economical, social, and moral life. It is described as an environment promoting solidarity, order, and reciprocity, and that supports a channel of arbitration, conflict resolution, economic assistance, and cooperation. This environment is made and remade every day. However, Egyptian historical legacy of intentional political exclusion by the state has large effect on this informal realm. Consequently, the familial ethos is not in any way isolated from the state (Singerman 2007). This political exclusion benefits some of its citizens and harms others, but importantly, greatly impacts the informal sectors. The state neglects large segments of the population in Egypt well functioning infrastructure and health service. Additionally, there are deficits in security are extensive, such as the lack of police or fire stations. While CEWLA, to large extent, interacts with the formal sector and the formal legislation in trying to reform them, when operating with the grassroots, they pursue many of their activities through the informal sector of the familial ethos.

One of CEWLA's many projects is to solve familial disputes outside of formal courts. A strategy CEWLA itself has chosen in lieu of the state-regulated system. The organization also educates local mediators about the principles of international human rights. These local mediators negotiate disputes that, even without CEWLA's interaction, already are taking place outside of the state apparatus. Gawaahar, from the advocacy program, believes the

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education of local mediators is a significant feature of CEWLA's activity. Since Egypt is a legal society that has signed human rights conventions, it is the organization's responsibility as an actor of civil society to assure that these conventions count for all segments of the population. CEWLA is consequently part of, and influences, the informal political networks that men and women create within the familial ethos.

Both in family disputes and through the education of mediators, CEWLA embeds values of human rights within these informal sectors and networks. Additionally, the organization has to navigate among the various discursive spaces that construct the communities. In the next section, I reflect over some of these discourses. This will be done in relation to how CEWLA has managed to reframe some discourses and further been able to challenge the social imagination of the private-public demarcation.

Embodied Discourses of Gendered Self

During my interviews at CEWLA, I became aware of the fact that, in order to pursue their objectives, CEWLA's staff makes use of prevailing discursive structures. This has resulted, to some extent, in transformation of the way certain discourses embody society and people's daily choices and actions. One strong discourse is that of religion and its impact on family decision. Another important theme that emerges for CEWLA is the imagination of what concerns belong to the private and public realms. The private-public dichotomy becomes particularly clear when the interviewees spoke about the ways in which the organization, since the beginning, has tried to bring family matters into public debates.

After a few years of work and increased legitimacy within the community, CEWLA started to tackle more "taboo" topics that were once silenced in Egyptian public discourse. Many of these topics are related to gender, marital life, and domestic violence. The center had

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by now started social research projects and expanded their work to governorates outside of Greater Cairo, which deepened its knowledge about different communities in the country. Based on this new information and familiarities with women and men's problems and positions, the NGO had managed to create spaces in which women, and sometimes men, felt comfortable to approach the organization and inquire about various problems in their families or communities. CEWLA picked up on the matters that were continuously presented to them, and with these personal narratives as references, they developed new programs, including focus on gender-based violence.

In our interview, Sherif told me that CEWLA was extensively attacked by the society for bringing sensitive issues into public debates. For instance, al-Azhar accused them of spreading immorality within the community based on delusive facts. CEWLA insists that the topics, such as sexual violence and early marriage, are not immoral, but actual reality for people. These topics must be openly debated as matters of public concern. Several members of CEWLA explained that much of their work circles around convincing members of the government, religious institutions, and ordinary people in society that certain problems exist and are widely spread. In order to broaden public discourse, CEWLA publishes reports and statistics to demonstrate what Egypt's reality looks like. To strengthen these arguments, CEWLA further points to individual cases. Incest was one such topic that required extensive work in order to be publicly recognized. Initially the topic was totally denied by government officials with the argument that such things did not exist in Egypt. However, CEWLA managed to convince government representatives that the organization was aware of several instances. They eventually met a promising response from officials, who agree to take action against the addressed issues. In this case, bringing issues that had been produced as private

into Egyptian public discourse, helped trigger both a public reaction and potentially legal prosecution.

Feminists of various orientations have provided an intensive critique of the construction of the demarcation of private and public spheres, and have revealed how this division has impacted women's lives and possibilities. Many feminists draw on, while also extensively critiquing, the work on Habermas (1989) and his theory of the bourgeois public sphere. According to Habermas, the public sphere developed as a site for rational discussion of public matters, resulting in public opinion about the "common good". This public sphere functions as a link between the state and society, and holds the state accountable for its actions. However, feminists have stressed that the idea of woman as the natural child bearer, and therefore belonging to the private sphere of the family, resulted in a total exclusion of women from the public sphere (Grant 1991; Pateman 1989; Yuval Davis 1993). To be denied access to activities located in public is tantamount to being denied full citizenship (Turner 1990). Another problematic aspect with the private and public dichotomy was the question of the appropriate scope of publicity in relation to the private, determining which concerns should be counted as public and which as private (Fraser 1990). As women did not have equal access to this realm as much as their male fellow citizens, women were not participating in the decision making about where the demarcation should be drawn. Consequently, "matters" that affect many women's lives were not recognized as common concerns. Although these theories are Euro-American centered, feminist activities in other parts of the world are also located within similar struggles to first, claim a voice in public debates and second, to argue that the family realm is something to be regarded as a public concern. As Seyla Benhabib states:

> All struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered private, non-public, and non-political issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power (1992: 84).

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Extensive contestations and debates in which women forcefully try to reveal systematic features of male dominance have, to some extent, resulted in the recognition of domestic violence as a public concern (Fraser 1991). To bring private matters into the public has been a main endeavor for many women's NGOs, including CEWLA. Sherif explained that the issues they started to address were very much attached to the private sphere, and were considered to appropriately be solved without the broader community's awareness. When the organization started to work with these kinds of problem, they entered a sensitive space. However, CEWLA members argue that the center gained more trust among community members. According to Sherif and other members, instead of CEWLA bringing up topics, women, and even a few men, began to approach the organization with their narratives. Sensitive issues, such as tribal marriages carried out against the spouse's will, absence of documents proving children's fathers, and sexual violence within families were exposed and eventually debated publicly. What interested me when listening to these narratives were partly what discursive subject positions are constructed from the social imagination that perceives these topics as private concerns. Furthermore, the stories drew my attention to how CEWLA became an actor in creating a shift in prevailing subject positions by creating space to act out previously "private" matters in the "public" domain.

CEWLA's interest in sensitive topics that include violence against women follows the international concern for gender-based violence in the Middle East and beyond. It lies outside the scope of this thesis to further explore this particular aspect of CEWLA's work. Nevertheless, I believe more attention is required regarding how gender-based violence in the region is typically discussed and investigated. Most academic literature concerned with women, gender, and sexuality in the Middle East and South Asia has been highly problematic. It is often distilled to signify an issue of honor, which is perhaps the most problematic term in

feminist literature and women's rights projects in a transnational world[7]. Honor has become the describing term for a particular cultural and ethnic behavior, which manifests itself as men's control over moving bodies, public spaces, female sexuality, and social behavior. Honor is further a dominant term to use when discussing gendered based violence, such as so called "honor crime" especially in the Middle East and South Asia. Instead of problematizing social, political, and economical reasons and incentives why gender-based violence occurs, or discussing various incentives, it is described as a result of an honor culture. The use of the category overlooks all other reasons why violence against women exists. In a report defined as "a comparative situation analysis of honor violence, early marriages and sexual abuse in Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Yemen", compiled by the Swedish Save the Children in 2007[8], the word honor occurs 404 times. "Honor crime" is defined in one sentence as "issues related to sexual morality and general behavior" (2007; 4). Throughout the document, "honor culture" is explained as the reason to why young girls are exposed to violence in their families. In the recommendation part of the report the authors conclude that in combating gender based sexual violence, four methods should be implemented: advocacy and awareness raising, research and analysis, direct support, knowledge dissemination and capacity building. It strikes me that these methods are recommended to the contexts of Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East, which lacks substantial infrastructure and education. The recommendations are further pointed to countries that have been exposed to

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[7] See Lila Abu-Lughod (2010) and her delightful analysis of the powers that produce and maintain the category of "honor crime". Also see Shalhoub-Kevorikan (2010) for alternative ways to approach issues of gender and violence.

[8] The research was an initiative by the Swedish Save the Children's regional representatives and lead by Dr. Pernilla Ouis and co-ordinated by Tove Myhrdal from Malmö University, Sweden. The research team was further in contact with organizations and universities in Jerusaelm, Beirut, and Sanaa and the introduction chapter to each country is written by a local academic, or activist.

war and atrocity for decades. Yet, the recommendations do not even mention social and political justice, or call for an end of illegal occupation and atrocity of Palestinian territories and populace. Instead, the violence these girls are suffering from is solely discussed as a result of something that the report cannot even define and theorize—honor. It is not surprising then, that the report overlooks the political, social, and economical context of these countries and the possible liaison to gender-based violence. The (mis)use of the concept of honor as a cultural behavior is not just stigmatizing an act, but also entire cultures and ethnic communities, countries and, regions. Consequently, this precludes a comprehensive picture of the complex reasons why such acts are performed, or an exploration of the real incentives to violence against women. The result is obvious: ineffective, misdirected, and futile recommendations to how to work preventative and effective in order to battle domestic violence.

Nevertheless, the ways in which honor has been conceptualized as a cultural behavior and used in the sense described above is widely questioned (Abu-Lughod 1985, 2010; Baxter 2007; Joseph 1993). Baxter (2007) distances herself from the simplistic perception of honor, which resonates with me in relation to the narratives at CEWLA. For her, honor is a "wide-ranging, dynamic, multi-stranded ideology about 'right-living'" that is primarily about relationship among various selves, bolstered by notions of selfhood and subjectivity (Baxter 2007; 238). To return to CEWLA's experience with topics that are considered private concerns, Sherif told me that this is something set up and maintained by the male members in the community. Wesham further explained that matters concerning female sexuality are tied to male responsibility within the family. An understanding of honor as not just as a specific cultural complex, but as a web of "selves and permeability of its boundaries of one's self, one's feelings of esteem or lack thereof, one's sense of legitimacy and 'rightness' [that] are

dependent on the actions of other" allows us to capture men's actions as performances that invoke assumptions of their gendered selves (Baxter 2007; 744).

From a poststructuralist approach, the self can be understood as the composite of multiple subjectivities that are brought about within myriads of discourses and discursive practice. The particular context in which CEWLA operates consists of multiple and fragmented gendered discourses, some more dominant than others. Since one actively takes up and is shaped by discourse, individuals are both socialized by- and agents within/against these discourses (Davies and Banks 1992). One individual is hence not the same as one subject position since persons constitute their sense of self through several, often contradictory, subject positions (Moore 2007). In relation to gender, the self is embedded in the many gendered discourses that shape the subject positions among individuals. This includes discourses of private versus public, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and family relations. Sherif and Wesham's description of male family members' various responsibilities over the family and towards the public is a male subject position as the guardian of female family members' sexuality. Within this framework, male family members do not only guard female sexuality, but also resolve matters related to this in private, confined to the realm of the family.

However, women are also creating their gendered self through these discourses, which all are at play when women approach CEWLA with sensitive topics. The post-structural approach can facilitate understanding women's actions. The process of feminists' struggle to destabilize what issues were confined to the private sphere, such as female sexuality, became a question of legal institution and law. Feminist legal theorists have debated which kind of law construction has the best potential to challenge gender inequalities, and how law in itself

is constructing its own subjects, affecting the consciousness of self. When a matter, such as violence in intimate relations, falls under juridical power the state has the responsibility to protect individuals from violence from their closest relatives. In a juridical process, this becomes a transformation of the relationship between the individual and the family, kin, and community. Additionally, this process creates a new relationship with the legal system and the state.

Sally Merry (2006) uses the poststructuralist framework of self to understand the ways in which battered women experience law. By engaging with law the woman takes on a new subject position, defined in the discourse and social practice of law, and hence enacts another self. Depending on the particular gendered discourses that surround the woman, her experiences of the new subject position vary. Merry further explains that the new subject position within the law, which has resulted in pressing charges against her partner, might feel alienating. Consequently, the woman may returns back to the subject position less challenging to her partner and maybe her kin. This can explain how battered women, after an initial contact with the police, the state, and legal institution discards this contact and "return home". At times, this procedure is repeated several times. Merry (2006) argues that it is of critical significance how women, who turn to social services and legal officials, are supported by the legal system for their decisions to remain in the subject position of the legal subject.

Following this argument, we may be able to capture what happens when women turn to CEWLA with sensitive narratives. The performance of approaching an organization, talking to a complete stranger about something that is understood from within another subject position as private, and to perhaps even present oneself as a victim is to take on another subject position. This subject position is not necessarily that of a legal subject shaped by

social practice of law as in Merry's example, even though a contact with CEWLA eventually can result in such subject position. Instead, it is a subject position that is shaped by discourses of autonomy and choice, which create space for reasonable behavior. The various gendered discursive practices at play are creating the conditional potentials for women to shift subject positions in this sense. However, CEWLA's presence, the organization's established trust within the community, and the members' ability to appear cognizant are significant factors for many women's decisions to bring private matters to a level beyond the family. Accordingly, CEWLA has been a catalyst for changing the ways in which private matters are dealt. This is in line with the feminist struggle of making the personal political.

Wesham reveals that CEWLA does not only create spaces for women to take on new subject positions, but also men. Within three months, six fathers from the neighborhood in which CEWLA is located approached the center for guidance in a private family concern. The fathers had in one way or another become aware that their daughters had had involuntary intercourse with their male cousins. The fathers had approached CEWLA and asked for advice. Their concern was how their daughters would be able to marry in the future, given that she had had a pre-marital sexual relation. Members at CEWLA are completely aware of the importance of protecting a young woman's reputation within the community, and therefore suggested that the fathers sign a marriage contract between the cousins. This contract could later be used as proof that the girl had had legitimate intercourse earlier in life. To put charges on the cousin and expose the situation to the whole community was not seen as a viable option. Neither would this alternative have improved the chances for the girl to marry in the future. Wesham, who works as acounselor for women, girls, families, and men, told me that this alternative is the most shielding towards the young girl. After the girl is married to her cousin, CEWLA follows up on her and provides counseling and therapy so that

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she can work through her experience together with professionals, and hopefully continue with her life sound and well. I asked what would happen if the young girl refused to marry. Wesham explained that the marriage contract could be signed and then they would divorce the couple straight after. The contract could then be used in the future as a proof. She told me that in three out of the six cases, the couples were still married and that CEWLA had continuous contact with the girls.

This strategy does not challenge the profound structure of the society and expected gendered positions. However, CEWLA's presence makes male members of the community enact rather radical shifting subject positions. As this narrative explains, these fathers enact multiple subject positions that constitute their internal sense as a father. The sense of being a father is also part of their self as husband and male member of a family, a community, a work place, and so forth. These subject positions are shaped by myriads of gendered discourses in society, some more dominant than others (Moore 1994). Wesham told me that concerns related to sexuality within the family are normally taken care of by fathers. The concern over the daughter's reputation, reveled in their contact with CEWLA, reflects a subject position as the care-taker for his daughter's honor, which includes not exposing any instances vis-à-vis the daughter outside of the family. However, this subject position comes in conflict with the concern over the daughter's chance to get married after he becomes aware of the situation with the male cousin. After all, his role as a father is also to equip his child for marriage and to create potentials for what he believes is a good future. Between these contradictory subject positions, the father turns to CEWLA for advice. This way of bringing an earlier private concern to the premises of CEWLA and discuss this beyond the family is to take on a new subject position. While the father is still enacting the position as protector of the daughter's sexuality, he enacts a new subject position, which negotiates the private-public discourse.

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Even Wesham was surprised that many fathers chose to seek help from the center. She believes the fathers come to them because of the gained trust within the community. She takes it as an indicator that people feel convinced that CEWLA can assist and help them in difficult situations. This is, according to Wesham, what makes their activities significant.

My choice to utilize the poststructuralist framework regarding these narratives is to capture the more complex processes of gendered selves that can be traced to issues of gender and sexuality, as well as gender and violence in the Egypt. To move away from a paralyzed sojourn at the cultural construction of honor will consequently avoid stigmatization of people and communities. It will further open up for analysis that reflect on the local, national, and international politics, and institutional and cultural dynamics, all essential to any analysis of women's lives and gendered societies.

As earlier discussed, another discourse that generates gendered positions in Egyptian society is the religious discourse. Besides countering the prevailing religious discourse at the state level, CEWLA also engages with this discourse embodied on the ground among community members. Noura explained that in general, people have many misinterpretations of religion. As a result, she feels these misconceptions must be challenged. She gave examples of when women claim that the angels will torture them throughout the night, if their husbands are unhappy with them as wives. Other examples include the notion that a wife must bow to her husband. "Where do people get this from" she asked. For Noura, the way out of these misunderstandings are not to abandon religion. Instead she believes that CEWLA must try to provide people with the right knowledge. For this reason, members of CEWLA are focus on providing alternative and sound religious reasoning to contest incorrect religious assumptions and interpretations. All this information, she continues, must come from verified

information. CEWLA staff refers back to the Sunna and Hadith, they use information provided by the progressive people within al-Azhar, and try to highlight manipulated and wrong cited Hadith. Noura explains that there was a time after the prophet's death, when many false Hadith were spread. It is significant to expose these false claims and correct them. She refers to some Hadith as examples, which seem to justify female genital cutting. However, as she puts it: "We know that in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim societies, this practice does not exist" (Interview with Noura, conducted February 2011).

Religion is also referenced by my interviewees when we discussed marriage, divorce, alimony, custody, and how to behave towards spouses and children. It is revealed that within these spaces of family life, religious discourse is significant for shaping gendered positions. This religious discourse is recognized by CEWLA as deeply embedded in the social imagination of the Egyptian society, which also becomes an axiomatic feature of the organization's work. Al-Sharmani (2011) explored how CEWLA's thoroughly deployment of religion results in a broader religious discourse Al-Sharmani met with women who, through the assistance from CEWLA and other women's NGOs, were recently granted *khul'*. She explains how these women view *khul'* as something granted to them by God. Al-Sharmani views this as a trickledown effect from the efforts of CEWLA to provide an understanding of Shari'a that is different from earlier interpretations of classical jurisprudence. This once again points to the organization's use of religion as something else than a strategic tool. Instead of instrumentalizing religious discourse in order to gain support, CEWLA operates within the discourse of Shari'a and reframes the prevailing understandings.

This reframing and broadening of discourses take place within the operational spaces of CEWLA's various projects. These spaces are the last subject for discussion in this chapter,

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expanding the discussion about how CEWLA utilizes the particular context of Egyptian informal realm.

Operational and Social Spaces towards Generating Change

The reframing of religious discourses are processes that take place within CEWLA's formalized operational spaces. Many of the programs and projects at CEWLA are conceived through interaction with the community and individuals. During my interviews at CEWLA, I repeatedly asked where the idea of a particular program derived from, in order to excavate if there was an underlying ideological objective behind the initiative. However, in all interviews I consistently received narratives that linked project ideas to the experience of individuals or groups in the community. When the organization started to promote legal awareness, they consistently discovered new problems. Sherif compares it to a snowballing effect. CEWLA addressed one issue, which was preceded by another issue, which also was preceded by a different issue, and so forth. After several rounds, the center's legal awareness project ended up in literacy training. Illiteracy was identified as the initial impediment for many people to enjoy their rights.

In the previous section, CEWLA's counseling projects were discussed as a space in which women and fathers shift subject positions and negotiate private public discourse. The counseling project also provides community members therapy and psychological support. These particular projects started after several women had approached the organization with their marital problems and asked for advice. The appeal for guidance and recommendations in complicated situations made CEWLA decide to formalize a section for such issues and established counseling, therapy, and also a hot-line. As described, these projects are now also approached by men and families in general, not only by women.

One of CEWLA's many programs is developed in order to help women after divorce. The organization assists divorced women in their process of finding a job and to establish a secure financial situation. This reveals CEWLA's deep understanding of the various forces conditioning women's lives in Egypt. CEWLA recognizes that even though women have the legal right to divorce, this is not a guarantee that a woman can leave an unwanted marriage. The economical context of a woman's life could be an impediment for her to continue a livelihood without the support of a husband. This project illustrates that CEWLA acknowledges women as more than solely legal subjects, but subjects to economical politics.

A third activity that operates within the informal realm is the project of assisting families in various disputes. Within CEWLA's advocacy program, the center tries to resolve family disputes outside of court. The idea of solving various kinds of family disputes outside of the formal legal system emerged during a project in which the organization assisted women during their divorce court trials. They realized that most of the cases took years and that the state legal system is disturbed by several factors. When CEWLA met a woman whose divorce case had extended for seven years, the center decided to do something about the situation. Several of my interviewees argued that the main problem with the law system is the fact that private matters, like divorce, alimony cases, and custody take several years to process in a court. CEWLA tries to circumnavigate this problem by resolving many of the disputes brought to them outside of the court. Wisham, who currently works with this processes, explained that in order to cause as little harm as possible to the woman, and in many cases even children, the most salient aspect is to complete mediations through a peaceful and calm procedure. A peaceful process will also have the best potential to make the outcome as positive as possible for all parts involved. Mediation service in familial disputes is also

implemented by the Egyptian state. However, when this activity operates within the state-regulated institution, it looks rather different than when CEWLA provides it.

Since 2000, a number of reforms in the Egyptian family law were passed, of which one is the previously discussed *khul'*. Another reform is the implementation of new family courts in 2004, and the obligation to file for mediation sessions between the spouses before one can file a court case. The motives for the new family courts are to retain the values of the family as sanctity, and to provide quick, effective, and just cases for the litigants (Al-Sharmani 2008). The obligatory mediation sessions are carried out by three experts in psychology, law, and social work and may progress for at least a period of 15 days. Al-Sharmani (2008) and Sonnewald (2010) conducted fieldwork inside the family courts where mediation takes place, and they reveal how this seemingly positive procedure operates in reality. Al-Sharmani explains that, since it is only obligatory to file for mediation but not to attend the sessions, husbands are often absent, and sometimes even the wives. The mediation sessions are taking place in non-private spaces, which are inconvenient for a family dispute session. Al-Sharmani further argues that the sessions are ineffective in the procedural practice, and lacks knowledgeable and experienced mediation experts. A remarkable character that both al-Sharmani and Sonnewald capture is that the processes often have a gendered connotation. Their fieldworks reveal gendered views among judges and mediation experts on women in relation to gender roles, female sexuality, rationality, and negative views on women filing for *khul'*. Al-Sharmani claims that the new family court and the obligatory mediation have, in general, not improved the legal status for women or resulted in any other amendments during the legal process. She concludes that, since substantive laws, which are discriminatory against women, are still implemented, the fragmented strategy of reform adoption, and the remarkable

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gendered connotation during legal processes, women still face unequal legal status compared to their husbands.

The studies of al-Sharmani (2008) and Sonnewold (2010) reveal that regardless of law reforms in the Egyptian family legislation, there are continuing shortcomings. These shortcomings are also expressed during the interviews at CEWLA. It is clear that the CEWLA members do not harbor many positive views about the court procedure. The organization's position towards the legal system is also expressed in CEWLA's report regarding *khul'*. The report states that a law reform alone is not enough for giving women a just legal status and fair court trials.

The mediation service that CEWLA offers is for many reasons different from the one implemented by the state. A significant aspect is that mediation sessions operate outside of the formal legislation and bureaucracy, hence CEWLA's mediation is not obligatory in any sense. When a mediation session is scheduled, the involved parties have already voluntarily agreed to try solving their disputes with help from CEWLA. Consequently, the parties have initially a more positive attitude to the strategy, which, in turn, gives larger potentials to an agreement. What might be even more significant is the fact that the mediation sessions carried out by members of CEWLA have minimal chances to proceed with a gendered connotation of the kind disclosed in the family courts. Members of CEWLA have been fighting for women's rights to file for *khul'* for decades, and do not possess any negative views towards women for using her legitimate right. Neither would they base a woman's rights to divorce on reasons based on female sexuality, but on women's individual right as equal before the law like their fellow male citizens. A gender neutral mediation process handles each case based on the perception that every individual is legitimated with rights and obligations in the particular

case instead of reinforcing gendered perspectives on women, men, and family roles similar to how it is done within the family courts.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed CEWLA's organizational operation in the community. In many perspectives, these projects differ from how the center engages with the state and official representatives. I have focused on four main features of this work: the mechanisms of framing, the usage of Egypt's informal legal sector, CEWLA's negotiation with discursive spaces, and the organization's operational realm of their various projects and programs. These are all interconnected and reciprocally determine CEWLA's work with the grassroots.

While CEWLA's activity is conditioned by the discursive spaces in the community, the center negotiates these in order to reach certain objectives. Although CEWLA officially pursues the mission to move Egypt towards a legal system that complies with the international treaties and standards of human rights, the organization's daily work necessitates maneuvering among various discursive, legal, and social levels. This negotiation sometimes requires staff to settle for more immediate goals. CEWLA navigates through the various frameworks of international human rights and religious discourse and finds ways in which each unique case can be fruitfully resolved. The ways in which CEWLA handles many social issues can, to some extent, results in changing the social imagination among people.

This chapter reveals that CEWLA's activists must be credited by their community in which they operate. Simultaneously, the organization must stand by the basic ideas of human rights, which many times conflict with prevailing norms, beliefs, and social practices. CEWLA's efforts to produce counter discourses within the already established activity through negotiating, broadening, and reframing the prevailing discourses can again be

paralleled with Gramsci's notion of counter hegemony. Sally Merry (2006b) refers to people within these professions, translators or intermediaries, as they translate the discourse and practice of international law into the specific situation of their community, region, or state. CEWLA translates the international human rights conventions through a careful examination of each case, and then approaches the situation the way the center believes will have the best result for the individuals involved. This chapter argues that CEWLA cannot single-handedly create radical changes in Egypt or within the community in which it operates. However, the organization's way of translating international human rights into local justice through navigating and negotiating local discursive spaces, challenges the discourses at play. To some extent, this element of CEWLA's work changes the social imagination of the private and public demarcation, and generates shifting gendered selves among community members.

Finally, CEWLA's engagement with religious discourse is not a cultural gesture. Instead, CEWLA recognizes the complex context of Egypt and the multiple discourses structuring people's lives and on which the social imagination is based. The NGO operates in a community where the demarcation between the secular and religious dimensions is vague and this is framing the whole organizational work of CEWLA.

An analysis of the reasons why CEWLA engages with religion, in particular Islam, is carried out in the following concluding chapter. I tie this discussion back to my research questions and the current debates regarding women's NGOs' employment of religion in women's rights work. The conclusion reflects over further research and the significance of entering women's rights work with a nuanced approach towards the demarcation of secular and religious based women's activism.

VI.   CONCLUSIONS

Through this project, I have explored the ways in which a women's NGO in Cairo deploys religion, and in particular Islam, to its work. The reason for selecting the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance as my research base is due to the organization's promotion of dialogue regarding religion and gender politics, and its engagement with the institution of al-Azhar and religious authorities. It is a site in which secular-religious dichotomies are challenged. Through analyzing CEWLA's work, I have highlighted how women's activism can be performed across frameworks and ideologies.

This thesis draws on narratives on several CEWLA members who work within the center's different programs. These members utilize various methods, and position themselves in distinctive ways towards Islamic discourse within women's activism and gender politics. Interviews with these members have enabled the thesis to: 1) Map and analyze the organization's deployment of religious discourses and knowledge 2) trace their origins and 3) explore the reasons why this religious deployment is at play in the first place. Further, by situating CEWLA within transnational feminism, Egyptian NGO work, and women's rights discourse, this thesis elucidates the complex and multilayered ways in which CEWLA deploys religion. Islamic discourse is referred and utilized when CEWLA is countering religious discourse produced by the state and when developing proposals for legal reforms. Additionally, religion is deployed when the organization engages with the discursive spaces of local communities and the grassroots.

My interviews at CEWLA reveal that the engagement of religion is profoundly conditioned by Egypt's particular social, economical, and political context. It is further linked to the transnational discourse on women's rights. CEWLA members are the intermediaries

between the local and global spaces of women's rights and gender justice. Within these spaces, Islamic discourses have become a significant element because of the growing international appeal for Islamic politics and the consensus that Islam and women's rights must reconcile. CEWLA is one of many actors that try to broaden the prevailing religious discourse within these spaces by encouraging and promoting open debates between actors of civil society, the state, and religious institutions.

By tracing the extensive deployment of religion at CEWLA, this project confronts scholarship that categorizes women's activism into either religious or secular based projects. Such categorization is often based upon the various frameworks that organizations and movements espouse. I argue that the Egyptian society, in relation to gender politics and women's activism, is too complex for this approach. This categorization of women's activism overlooks the vague division of the secular and religious dimensions in Egypt. In turn, this precludes a comprehensive understanding of women's activism and the prospects for gender justice in Muslim societies. CEWLA explicates the necessity of navigating among various frameworks rather than espousing one framework alone.

A nuanced understanding of the concepts of religion versus secular is required, in order to capture how these concepts manifest in the Egyptian society. Therefore, this thesis explores the historic trajectories of the ways in which these concepts have been conceptualized in western academic tradition. Further, this nuanced approach is applied to my process of analyzing how women's activism in general and CEWLA in particular operates within Egypt. This thesis argues that, although CEWLA is guided by international human rights framework, the knowledge, sensibilities, and ethics at CEWLA cannot be traced back to this framework alone.

Furthermore, a nuanced conceptualization of the secular and the religious is used when I discuss contemporary scholarly debates regarding the employment of religious discourse in women's rights work. I argue that CEWLA's activities add significant perspectives to these debates. Critical voices regarding the activity to use religious knowledge as a route to social change is that it is packaging religion into a static entity (recall my critique of Sholkamy, 2011). CEWLA thoroughly deploys religious knowledge, especially when developing proposals legal reform. In this process, CEWLA encourages dialogue and debate among various actors regarding women's rights, the Egyptian family legislation, and Shari'a. This creates a space where human interpretation of Shari'a in relation to gender politics is openly discussed, which has revealed how classical interpretations of Shari'a are widely questioned among contemporary Islamic scholars. These new interpretations of women's rights within Shari'a have been used as a theological base in CEWLA's proposals for legal amendments. CEWLA's approach is hence far from perceiving or promoting religion as a static entity, rather as a discourse open for contestation.

There is also discussion of an ongoing islamization of human rights discourse (Mustafa 2011). I am arguing that CEWLA's work points towards another direction. The organization utilizes international human rights conventions as clear guiding principles. However, CEWLA members believe that a reinterpreted Shari'a is not an impediment for a family law that simultaneously recognizes the human rights principles and agrees with Shari'a. Consequently, Islamic discourse is not the norm to which the human rights principles must correspond. Instead, the international human rights conventions are the guiding tool in the route towards proposed amendments in the family legislation.

To perceive women as legal subjects troubles Abu-Lughod (2009). She addresses projects for improving women's rights through Islamic knowledge by asking how reconciliation between Islamic discourse and women's rights will bring justice to women whose lives are subjected to more than right deficits. This is an important reflection, especially since most of Egyptian women's NGOs operate from a rights based framework. This thesis subscribes to the fact that legal reforms are not a guarantee that women's lives and possibilities are improved. Although CEWLA is well integrated in the framework of legal rights, the organization performs many interesting projects beyond law. For instance, CEWLA runs projects, which assist divorced women by providing them help towards a secured economic livelihood. CEWLA also offers divorced women group sessions with women in similar situations in order to open up dialogue about women's various experiences. CEWLA's work corresponds to Abu-Lughod's argument that women are more than legal subject since economic and social politics also affect their lives. CEWLA shows how religious knowledge can be utilized in projects that simultaneously approach various dimensions of women's lives, legal as well as economical.

This project employs a critical stance towards civil society by questioning civil society and NGO work as a route to social change. However, CEWLA's work with the grassroots shows that the organization actually is in a position to challenge discourses embedded in the local communities. CEWLA members negotiate these multiple discursive spaces and makes use of them to pursue their objectives. Although the organization's strategy does not result in any profound structural changes, to some extent, it transforms the way certain popular sensibilities embody society and people's daily choices and actions. By adopting post-structural theory of self, I have explored the processes of shifting subject positions taken place when women and men approach CEWLA with personal issues. Within this process, the

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discursive demarcation of the public private realm is radically challenged among community members. CEWLA members view this as an indicator that the center has earned trust within the community.

The ways in which CEWLA members navigate among the myriad of discourses and structures of Egyptian society has troubled my own position towards NGO work and my expressed critique. My interviewees are, as much as interlocutors of the processes I critique, the agents structuring activities in the midst of these power relations. Thus, the critique towards NGO work is not to devalue the work that NGO participants perform on a daily basis in their respective communities. Rather it is to point to the forces that determine the structural conditions under which they are operating.

Without suggesting that this project in any sense can represent women's activism within the vibrant civil society in Egypt, I have pointed to the significance of continuous debate regarding religious discourse, women's rights work, and gender justice. Through this case study, I have explored the problems of a strictly marked demarcation between secular and religious based women's activism. I argue that it provides a misleading picture of the complex and multifaceted work that is performed. I suggest that further research regarding women's rights work and women's activism within Muslim societies move away from entering projects by determining whether or not a particular civic work is religious-based or not. To look at several organizations, in the same vein as this project, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's activism and the myriad of strategies and frameworks employed to reach objectives and goals. Especially, since Egypt is going through a historical phase of transition to democracy.

In the beginning, I argued for the importance of a knowledge production that contest that Muslim women is a homogenous group with life conditions linked to religion and culture. These prejudices and stereotypes are widely spread across the globe. Together with a manipulation of feminist language of equality and liberation, these forces cause Muslim women extensive harm through discrimination, atrocity, war, and islamophobia. I believe that one of feminism's most vital contemporary missions is to, with all means, contest these forces theoretically, practically, and with extensive research. Feminists should never agree to have their ideals used for justification to war, undemocratic policies, discriminatory laws, or mobilizing any "civilizing mission". Through showing the complex character of women's rights work in Egypt, and the fluid relationship between religious and secular elements in the Egyptian society, I hope to have added a voice to the body of work that opposes such oppressive forces.

VII.   BIBLIOGRAPHY

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VIII. ACRONYMS

ADEW—Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women

CEDAW—Conventions on Elimination of all forms of Discriminations against Women

CEWLA—Center for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance

ECWR—Egyptian Center for Women's Rights

GTZ—German Technical Center

INGO—International Non Governmental Organization

MOSA—Ministry of Social Affairs

MWO—Muslim World Outreach

NCW—National Council for Women

NGO—Non Governmental Organization

NWF—New Woman Foundation

NWRO—Network of Women's Rights Organizations

PSL—Personal Status Law

SAP—Structural Adjustment Program

UN—United Nation

UNICEF—United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

WMF—Women and Memory Forum