Contemporary Egyptian Islamic Feminism. Possibilities and Challenges

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Introduction

In a 2012 publication, Omaima Abou-Bakr, the Egyptian scholar who has been producing scholarship that engages with the question of gender in Islamic interpretive tradition and a co-founder of the Egyptian non-governmental research organization Women and Memory Forum, wrote that the goal of Islamic feminism scholars is "the wide dissemination of this newly-produced knowledge in scholarly, academic, and activist circles and the establishing of its legitimacy through engagement with traditional religious figures" (Abou-Bakr 2012: 8). In a later publication and addressing the particular context of contemporary Egypt, Abou-Bakr sees the goal of Islamic feminism as extending beyond epistemological reform to "developing into a conscientious social and activist movement" (Abou-Bakr 2015: 182), a movement whose activism and politics are ethically-grounded and principled.

The focus of this paper is contemporary Egyptian Islamic feminism and its socio-political significance after the 2011 Revolution. The article will tackle the following questions: what are the current knowledge projects in the country that can be defined as Islamic feminism, as Abou-Bakr understands it above? Who are the actors undertaking these

knowledge projects? Who are their interlocutors? What role does Egyptian Islamic feminism play in facilitating gender activism that seeks legal and social reform? And how are these knowledge/activism projects impacted by the current socio-political context of the country? Throughout the paper, I call Abou-Bakr and others who identify and work with them scholars/activists because they see the ultimate goal of their scholarship to be a legal and social transformation that makes possible the realization of justice.

First, I briefly outline the historical trajectory of Islamic feminism as a transnational trend that emerged in the late 1980s. Second, I identify and describe a number of contemporary Islamic feminism knowledge projects in Egypt, undertaken by diverse women scholars/activists. The most notable of these scholars/activists are Omaima Abou-Bakr and Amany Saleh, who directs the non-governmental organization Association for Studying Women in Civilization. I also describe other scholars who work closely with Omaima Abou-Bakr and/or Amany Saleh to produce and promote this new kind of knowledge. Third, I examine how the work of Egyptian Islamic feminism scholars/activists intersects with or collaborates with efforts by a number of actors in the country who are also seeking reform. These actors are women's rights groups and a non-governmental organization called Mada Foundation for Media Development. Lastly, I reflect on the ways in which the current political context in the country may impact the efforts of Egyptian Islamic feminism scholars/activists to reform religious discourse and facilitate gender-sensitive legal and social reform.

Research and methodology

My analysis draws on field research that I have been conducting as part of a larger study titled *Islamic Feminism: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*. This study investigates the hermeneutical methodologies, epistemological contributions, and the political significance of selected transnational[1] and national (taking Egypt as a case study) knowledge projects that are undertaken by Muslim women scholars who engage with Islamic religious sciences seeking reform and production of gender sensitive religious knowledge.

I conducted the fieldwork for this paper in Cairo and Alexandria over a period of four months in the span of two years (September 2013 - May 2015). I conducted 18 interviews with: scholars/activists working on Islamic feminism knowledge/activism projects from the Women and Memory Forum and the Association for Studying Women in Civilization; independent young scholars and activists who are working with or engaging (through their writings and activism) with the Islamic/feminism scholars in the two organizations; key staff members from Mada; key staff members from women's rights organizations who are working with Islamic feminism scholars/activists; staff members from other women's rights organizations who identify themselves as secular; and Al-Azhar graduate students and academics seeking reform in religious education.

I also draw on data collected from participant observation of meetings, workshops, and conferences co-organized by the afore-mentioned organizations and groups. My analysis is informed as well by a close reading of the works produced by the studied Islamic feminism scholars.

Islamic feminism: background

Since the late 1980s, a body of scholarship emerged in a number of countries in the Global North and South, which has been engaging with Islamic sacred texts (i.e. Qur'an and Sunnah) and its interpretive tradition (i.e. exegesis, jurisprudence, Hadith compilations, etc.). Gender justice and methodological reform have been the key questions driving this scholarship. These studies problematize dominant religious interpretive knowledge that sanctions patriarchal gender relations and discrimination against women, and they seek to produce new interpretive religious knowledge that grounds gender equality and justice in an Islamic paradigm, shaped primarily by Quranic ethics. The studies are being produced predominantly by Muslim female scholars (but also some male Muslim scholars) from different disciplines and countries. This body of knowledge has been called Islamic feminism (Abou-Bakr 2001; Badran 2002; Mir-Hosseini 2006; Al-Sharmani 2011).

The term Islamic feminism, as well as the various knowledge projects subsumed under it, has been contested for different reasons. Some scholars critiqued this scholarship from the perspective that no gender equality and justice can be sought in religious terms (Moghissi 1999; Tohidi 2003). Others, while committed to the goals of this scholarship, rejected the term feminism because of its colonial legacy (Barlas 2008). And some argued that Islamic feminism as an epistemology had tenuous links with Islamic tradition and is predominantly a discourse that is addressed to a Western audience of academics, activists, and policy makers (Moll 2009).

In my view, very different and divergent knowledge projects and activist efforts have often been lumped together under this term. And Islamic feminism has either been celebrated (Fernea 1998; Cooke 2001) or critiqued (Moghissi 1999; Tohidi 2003; Moll 2009) without much unpacking. I see Islamic feminism as both transnational and national knowledge projects that are predominantly undertaken by Muslim women, and which seek to trace and problematize patriarchal religious discourse and knowledge that sanction gender inequality; and to systematically produce alternative readings that are grounded in Islamic ethical and theological principles. While, the transnational scholarship has been predominantly produced and consumed in English in academic circles, there are national knowledge projects that exist in a number of countries in South Asia (e.g. Indonesia and Malaysia) and the Middle East (Iran, Egypt). These national knowledge projects, some of which have also transnational ties, have produced scholarship in their national languages and have been engaged with issues and actors in their national contexts (Al-Sharmani 2014: 86).

Contemporary Egyptian Islamic feminism

Early Egyptian feminism was closely linked to the nationalist goal of securing independence and building a modern sovereign nation. After independence, Egyptian women were among the first in the Middle East to have the right to education, suffrage, and paid labor. But women still confronted many legal and cultural inequalities, particularly in the family domain. The use of an Islamic framework in the pursuit of gender equality is not uncommon (Abou Bakr 2012; Badran 2005; Hatem 2011; El Guindi 2005). The historian of Egyptian feminism, Margot Badran (2005), for instance, notes that the early Egyptian feminist movement employed Islamic modernist discourse and knowledge (e.g. of the Al-Azhar scholar Muhammad Abduh) to advocate for reform of personal status laws. Also, the Egyptian political scientist Mervat Hatem shows how Egyptian female writers such as 'A'isha Taymuriyya (1840-1902) revisited and problematized religious discourse that justified a husband's guardianship (*qiwamah*) over his wife on the grounds of assumed inherent male superiority (Hatem 2011).

Still contemporary Egyptian Islamic feminism projects, I argue, have a number of distinct features that set them apart from earlier generations of feminists or women's rights advocates who may have drawn on Islamic framework to promote for gender justice. Contemporary Islamic feminism scholars, while few in number, partake in systematic production of alternative religious knowledge. In addition, their project is based on ethically-grounded holistic worldview that links knowledge building to activism, to politics, guided by the Qur'an main ethical messages (Abou-Bakr 2015: 198). But the most notable feature about contemporary Egyptian Islamic feminism is that thus far it is not an organized full-fledged movement. Omaima Abou-Bakr, in fact, calls it a "trend" and a "current" rather than a movement (Abou-Bakr 2015: 194, 201). For the most part, Egyptian Islamic feminism comprises of knowledge projects that are undertaken by a relatively small group of individual scholars/activists from different generations. The key scholars are academics and co-founders of women's research organizations, who are able to produce and disseminate their scholarship through their organizations. In addition, not all the organizations to which these scholars belong are devoted to the production of reformist feminist knowledge that engages with sacred texts and the interpretive tradition. And there are also scholars/activists who partake in Islamic feminism projects, and who are not affiliated with any particular organizations. Omaima Abou-Bakr, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cairo University is the leading scholar/activist in contemporary Egyptian Islamic feminism. Abou-Bakr's field of academic specialization covers Sufi poetry, women's mysticism in Islam and Christianity, and Islamic cultural history. For almost three decades, Abou-Bakr has been undertaking historical and hermeneutical studies which problematize gendered religious knowledge and meta-historical narratives that affirm and justify Muslim women's inferiority, unequal rights, and presumed passive roles in Islamic history. Abou-Bakr is a co-founder of Women and Memory Forum (WMF, al Mara' wa al Zakirah),[2] a non-

governmental society that was established in 1995 by a group of women historians[3] and literary critics who "adopt a gender-based cultural mission". WMF "aims at contributing effectively to the production and dissemination of alternative knowledge concerning women in the Arab region. It also aims at rereading Arab tradition and cultural history in order to create a new cultural and social awareness that is supportive of women's social and intellectual roles in the face of dominant negative stereotypes".[4]

WMF, as an organization, is not devoted to Islamic feminism since its scholars have different interests and approaches. However, the work and activities of Abou-Bakr - much of which she produces through her role as one of the main WMF scholars - constitute a major part of Egyptian Islamic feminism scholarship. Abou-Bakr has also been working with another co-founder of WMF and an active member, Hoda El-Saadi. El-Saadi is a historian of early Islamic eras and an Adjunct Professor at the American University in Cairo. Abou-Bakr and El-Saadi have produced numerous joint Arabic publications that unearth women's roles as producers of Islamic religious sciences and as active participants in different domains of public sphere in pre-modern Islamic eras (Abou-Bakr, El-Saadi 1999; 2001).

I have written elsewhere about the hermeneutical and epistemological contributions of Abou-Bakr's work (Al-Sharmani 2014). Here I briefly note that Abou-Bakr's scholarship illustrates that the problem of religiously-sanctioned gender inequality is not simply interpretations that discriminate against women *per se*. Rather it is these interpretations' underlying discourse which perpetuates gendered notions about the nature of women, men, and their roles; the gaps and contradictions in the interpretative methodologies used by early jurists and exegetes as well as modern religious scholars who advocate for patriarchal interpretations; and the disconnect between some of these methodologies and the interpretations, on the one hand, and the underlying theological and ethical principles of upholding Quranic ethos of justice and living God-conscious life, on the other hand. In other words, the works of Abou-Bakr not only seek alternative egalitarian gender-sensitive readings, but also raise the broader question of methodological reform.

Through her work at WMF, Abou-Bakr collaborates with local NGOs working on reform of family laws. Abou-Bakr and her WMF colleagues also organize capacity building workshops for students of national universities across the country to train them in gender-sensitive approaches of engaging with Arab and Islamic intellectual histories. Abou-Bakr's sessions in these workshops focus on revisiting Islamic interpretive tradition and Islamic cultural history from a gender-sensitive perspective. One important goal for WMF is to produce scholarship that will lead to social transformation. Therefore, the organization disseminates its knowledge not only through academic publications but also through illustrated readers that are linguistically accessible to the general public. Abou-Bakr and El-Saadi write in both English and Arabic, engaging transnational and local interlocutors and readers.[5] For instance, WMF led by Abou-Bakr organized an

international conference on Islamic feminism in 2012, which brought together scholars working on Islamic feminism from the Arab region as well as Europe and North America. Some of the conference papers were presented in Arabic and some in English, to ensure that the work reaches Arabic speaking audience (Abou-Bakr 2013a; 2013b). The conference proceedings also resulted in two Arabic and English publications. WMF, furthermore, has been undertaking translation of English-speaking literature not only on Islamic feminism but also feminist theological studies in Christianity and Judaism, so that this scholarship would be available to Arabic-speaking readers. In addition, through the work of Abou-Bakr, Women and Memory Forum collaborates with the global movement Musawah, a knowledge building movement that works towards equality and justice in the Muslim family.[6]

Another key scholar/activist in contemporary Egyptian Islamic feminism is Amany Saleh, Professor of Political Science at Misr International University. Saleh leads an organization that has been primarily devoted to the epistemological goals of Islamic feminism project. The organization, Association for Studying Women in Civilization (ASWIC, al-Mara´ wa al-Hadarah), was established in 2000 by Mona Abulfadl, Professor of Political Sciences at Cairo University. After Abulfadl's death, her student Amany Saleh took on the directorship of the organization. The organization consists of a small group of women academics and doctorate students who conduct hermeneutical studies (in Arabic) of the Qur'an, and the exegetical and juristic interpretive tradition as well as historical studies of different Islamic eras to unearth women's voices and roles. The group produced three influential issues of a journal named after their organization in 2000, 2001, and 2002. Some of the articles in these issues, such as the one by Saleh on the concept of 'pairing' in the Qur'an (Saleh 2002) draws on the notion of ontological and spiritual equality of women and men in Islam, which is a central idea in most of the transnational and national Islamic feminism scholarship, and which has become the basis for the idea of gender equality in the social and legal realms. ASWIC remained fairly inactive after producing these first three issues, but they have revived their work since 2012 and have been working closely with Abou-Bakr, Alexandria Library, and the non-governmental organization Mada Foundation in a number of activities such as conferences and workshops with religious scholars, training of preachers, research and production of alternative Islamic interpretive knowledge on gender norms and rights. In addition to Saleh, another active scholar/activist in the organization is the younger Hind Mustafa, who published an important study problematizing juristic constructions of marital roles and rights and their divergence from Quranic ideals, particularly in relation to marriage (Mustafa 2002). Mustafa has a doctorate degree in political sciences from Cairo University and works at the regional Cairo-based Arab Women Organization. She is also a budding writer of short stories. Mustafa uses both the mediums of her scholarship and literary work to disseminate her ideas and knowledge on rethinking religious and cultural gender norms.

There are also younger women scholars/activists who work with Abou-Bakr and Saleh, though they do not belong to either of their organizations. One notable example is Fatma Hafez, a doctorate student in history in Cairo University who has published a number of hermeneutical and historical studies (Hafez 2014). Hafez has also recently assisted Mada and Alexandria Library in organizing an international conference in March 2014, which brought together Azhar religious scholars and women scholars working on reform of religious tradition from a gender perspective. The format of the conference was such that the women scholars presented their work and the religious scholars commented on them. Hafez also took the lead in co-organizing a regional workshop in June 2014, again with Mada Foundation and Alexandria Library on revisiting juristic and legal rulings on marriage and marital roles. And recently, Hafez was part of a task force group to assist Mada Foundation in organizing a three day conference in April 2015, to launch an Arab regional forum for Islamic feminism scholars, called Shaqi'q.[7]
In addition, there are young women activists and researchers who do not directly partake in the production of knowledge, but who identify with Islamic feminism project and promote it - albeit in different ways. Fatma Imam, a young activist of Nubian descent, got interested in Islamic feminism in 2003 when she participated in a training workshop that Abou-Bakr and her colleagues at WMF organized at the time.[8] Imam holds a BA in political science from Cairo University. She wrote her BA thesis on women's rights in modern family laws and Islamic jurisprudence. Imam, afterwards, received an MA in political sciences in Malta. In 2005, she co-founded with other young activists a women's rights organization called Nazra. Nazra undertakes a new kind of gender-based activism which breaks free from the mold of the older generation of women's rights activists both in the focus of their advocacy as well as the strategies of work. For instance, Nazra has been running a program titled the *Defenders of Human Rights*, adopting an integrated approach towards human rights (encompassing labor, civil, and political rights). The organization has also been undertaking comprehensive documentation of the gender-based violence that has been taking place in the transition period(s) since the 2011 Revolution. Imam had been heavily involved in documenting the violence against demonstrators. She also took part in lobbying work to incorporate the rights of women and minorities such as Nubian communities into the 2014 constitution. Imam left Nazra in 2013, and is currently working with the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance on their regional project to lobby for comprehensive reforms in personal status laws in four Arab countries, including Egypt. In addition to her multi-faceted activism, Imam has been a regular interlocutor with Islamic feminism scholars such as Abou-Bakr. She took part in the WMF conference on Islamic feminism in 2012, and co-presented a paper with her colleague and human rights lawyer Yara Sallam. Their presentation was on juristic and legal constructions of Muslim male and female sexuality and sexual rights within marriage. Imam also blogs frequently about the need for multi-pronged approach to societal reform, and

sees Islamic feminism as a promising project in that it escapes mutually exclusive binaries of religion-free secularism or religious patriarchy.[9] In April 2015, Imam, who identifies herself as a supporter of Islamic feminism, published an article reflecting on the role of Islamic feminism in Egypt since the revolution. The article was published in *Ikhtiyar,*[10] an on-line journal on gender studies, issued by Ikhtiyar Collective, a research/activist group established after the 2011 Revolution and "which is concerned with the question of gender and the documentation and development of knowledge on gender issues in Arabic."(Ikthiyar Collective webpage).[11] Imam wrote that the patriarchal and exclusionary religious discourses that became more dominant during the rule of Muslim Brotherhood highlighted the need for Islamic feminism as an alternative perspective. However, the political and societal significance of Islamic feminism remains limited, in Imam's opinion, because not enough of the new knowledge and ideas of Islamic feminism have been produced or disseminated in Arabic. Imam also sees that in order to build Islamic feminism as influential movement, there is a pressing need to build an alliance of diverse actors such as mosque imams, jurists, scholars, activists, etc. (Imam 2015).[12]

Sawsan Sharif, a researcher and also budding short stories writer, is another voice who engages with the Islamic feminism project. Sharif, who holds a doctorate degree in education, became interested in Islamic feminism through her work with a research team led by the author of this paper at the Social Research Center, the American University in Cairo, to study the reform of Egyptian personal status laws.[13] Sharif, then, completed two years of religious education in an Azhar-run educational institution for preachers, motivated by the goal to learn about women and men's rights and duties in Islamic jurisprudence. Afterwards, Sharif conducted a six month study on Islamic feminism in Egypt and its engagement with Islamic jurisprudence. The study culminated in a book written in Arabic, which was published in May 2015. In the introduction, Sharif presents Islamic feminism as a rights movement that is concerned with women's issues, particularly in regard to personal status laws. She explains that her main goals are: to inform a wide range of Egyptian audience about this movement and to highlight some of its limitations (Sharif 2015:3). Sharif sees the importance of this knowledge project in that it provides an alternative to patriarchal religious and cultural discourses on the one hand, and on the other it is an alternative form of religiously-grounded feminism. But Sharif sees that Egyptian Islamic feminism suffers from a number of shortcomings. In her viewpoint, this knowledge project engages in too much critique of religious interpretive tradition and discourse without providing an alternative. She also critiques the work of Islamic feminism scholars for being too abstract and narrow in its readership. Still Sharif identifies with this project and shares the goal of reforming patriarchal religious discourses and interpretations that discriminate against women.[14] But the reformist discourse that Sharif espouses promotes a notion of gender roles based on complementarity and focuses on educating men about their duties towards

women in the domain of family and gender relations.
The differences among the women in this small circle of Islamic feminism scholar/activists and their interlocutors and supporters are noteworthy. First, there is the generational difference. Abou-Bakr and Saleh are older (in their late fifties), while El-Saadi is in her early fifties. Sharif, Mustafa, and Hafez, who are in their early forties, constitute the middle generation. And Imam, who is in her early thirties, is the youngest. There are also some noteworthy differences in their perspectives on Islamic feminism, its role, and priorities at this juncture in the history of the country. For example, Abou-Bakr, unlike Sharif, adopts a nuanced understanding of different forms of feminism (whether west-based or not, religious or secular). She, unlike Sharif, see gender roles based on complementarity as often concealing discrimination against women that is not religiously-based though couched in religious terms. Another difference is that Saleh and Mustafa as well as Hafez see that their priority is to develop the theoretical knowledge of Islamic feminism, particularly at this early juncture of building a movement. But scholar/activists such as Abou-Bakr see that it is important to link the knowledge building with activism in order to have tangible impact. Hence, Abou-Bakr has been perhaps the one in this small circle who has undertaken more diverse forms of activities (e.g. training, writing, participation in public debates in the national and transnational media, collaboration with local and global activists and movements). Also, Imam, who is less involved in the production of knowledge than the others, is keen on strengthening the link between the knowledge building and activism, which she sees as only possible if more diverse allies are recruited into the movement with different roles to play.

Islamic feminism knowledge projects and activism

Working with women's rights groups

The ideas of these emerging voices of Islamic feminism scholars are echoed in the work organized by women's rights organizations. Scholars such as Abou-Bakr are invited to conferences and workshops that are organized by women's rights groups and which target religious preachers, lawyers, judges, media people, etc. For example, Abou-Bakr presented her new work that deconstructs the juristic concept of *qiwamah* in a conference on family law reform that was organized by the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) in 2013, and which invited Egyptian lawyers, judges, religious scholars, activists, as well as international scholars and activists. Also, organizations such as CEWLA and the Egyptian Organization for Family Development have been working with religious scholars and preachers in workshops and roundtable discussions to train preachers to rethink the interpretive tradition from a gender perspective, and revisit their assumptions about international conventions such as CEDAW and the incompatibility of values such as gender equality with Islamic norms.
For example, since 2011 and as a response to the recent backlash against the reforms

in Egyptian personal status laws that were introduced in the last decade of the regime of the ousted President Mohamed Hosny Mubarak, the Egyptian Organization for Family Development ran 10 roundtable discussions with religious scholars about women's rights issues, and a three year program to train male mosque imams and male and female religious preachers in poor neighborhoods in Giza. The director of the Egyptian Organization for Family Development described the relevance of the knowledge produced by Islamic feminism scholars to her organization's work with the preachers as follows: "our work needs solid theoretical knowledge as a backbone to support it. I indirectly draw on this knowledge in our training and advocacy work with the religious preachers".[15] However, she added that there was a need for Islamic feminism scholarship to be more organically linked to activism work and translated into more accessible formats that would be more useful to practitioners.[16] To facilitate the realization of this goal the Egyptian Organization for Family Development organized a three day conference in October 2014 in Sharm El Sheikh which brought together religious scholars, civil society groups, and Islamic feminism scholars (including Abou-Bakr). Female scholars and activists from other Arab countries were also invited to the conference. The conference resulted in published proceedings (Mostafa 2015) and further collaboration with Egyptian Islamic feminism scholars was planned.

Working with Mada Foundation for Media Development

Mada is a non-profit civil society foundation that has been working closely with Islamic Feminism scholars since 2012. The foundation was established in 2010 by a group of journalists and media specialists who were working at *Islam Online.* According to the director of the board and the director of the foundation's program on women and family issues,[17] the goals of Mada are: to renew Islamic discourse; promote knowledge that affirms values of plurality and diversity, reciprocal compassion (*tarahumeya*) and constructive dialogue among different sectors of the Egyptian society; and to translate the new knowledge and values into training programs that bring about social transformation. The foundation has three main programs: *Tawhiil il Nizaat* (Transformation of Conflicts), *Nun li qadaya al mara wa al usra* (Noon Center for Women and Family Issues), *Tawasul* (Communication).

The first program aims at creating spaces for constructive dialogue between societal sectors by training relevant societal leaders in resolving conflicts that have a religious dimension to it but are not simply reducible to this dimension (e.g. Coptic-Muslim conflicts).

One of the publications of the foundation explains the aim of the second program, Noon Center for Women and Family Issues as follows: "presenting an Islamic vision to women's issues from a moderate (*wasati)* Islamic perspective in collaboration with Al-Azhar scholars and researchers from social sciences background and researchers of what has come to be known as Islamic feminism" (El Kholy 2015: 7). Through Noon

Center, which has been running in cooperation with National Council for Population and the UN Woman office in Egypt, Mada has been pursuing a multi-pronged strategy of strengthening and developing Islamic feminism as a knowledge-building movement in Egypt. And lastly the third program, *Tawasul,* implements the training programs.

The starting point for the work of Noon Center is the lived realities of Egyptian women. The program is also guided by four principles: commitment to an Islamic framework as well as international conventions on women's rights except in those areas that contravene with *Islamic Sharia*;[18] making a distinction between what is sacred and what is a human understanding in religious knowledge and norms; affirming the knowledge building feature of the program as part of its goal to salvage the question of gender in Egypt from politicization and ideology;[19] and commitment to constructive dialogue and collaboration with different actors and stakeholders as a necessary pathway to strengthen women's rights in an inclusive way (El Kholy 2015: 7).

Since its inception in 2012, Noon Center undertook a number of activities which involved close collaboration with Islamic feminism scholars. For example, the center organized, in collaboration with Alexandria Library, an international conference in March 2014 that brought together Islamic feminism scholars and religious scholars from different countries. It also coordinated two meetings that brought together the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Dr. Ahmad Al Tayib, and Egyptian women's rights groups with the aim of working on a position paper on women's rights in post 2011 Egypt. Noon Center has also organized 10 workshops with different actors in the society on a number of contentious issues such as *qiwamah* and the right of women to *ijitihad* and production of religious knowledge. In addition, it has produced infographic materials, short documentaries, training manuals, and short booklets to disseminate the new knowledge of Islamic feminism scholars (El Kholy 2015: 9). And in April 2015, the center organized a three day conference in Alexandria to launch *Shaqi'q*,[20] an initiative to create a regional forum for Islamic feminism scholars and activists. The conference was attended by scholars from Al-Azhar, Islamic feminism scholars, a number of women's rights organizations, women scholars of Islamic religious sciences and women's activists from a number of Arab countries.

But perhaps the most significant activity of Noon Center has been the training workshops offered to 75 religious preachers from Al-Azhar, in which Abou-Bakr, Saleh, Hafez were the resource persons/trainers who were educating preachers about gender-sensitive approaches towards the religious discourse and interpretive tradition. It was in such workshops that Abou-Bakr and her colleagues could engage with preachers and expose them to their methodologies and alternative knowledge on gender norms and rights.

Mada also played a key role in the issuing of *Alexandria Declaration,* a position paper that presents a framework for gender equality and justice in the private and public domains. The genesis of this position paper was an earlier draft that was initially the

Al-Azhar's position paper on women's rights (ensuing from meetings between the religious establishment and women's rights groups and scholars in 2012 and 2013, and which were coordinated by Mada). Abou-Bakr, Saleh, Hafez as well as other women scholars/activists contributed to the drafting of the earlier version of the paper. But the religious establishment never issued the position paper. Mada, in collaboration with Islamic feminism scholars, and some religious scholars from Al-Azhar University worked on revising and developing the paper, which evolved to the *Alexandria Declaration*, and was adopted by the organization as the framework that would guide the work of the forum *Shaqi'q*. This document begins by emphasizing its starting points, which are: refraining from the politicization of women's issues; commitment to the Islamic value of moderation; the equality of women and men in dignity, human worth, and the responsibility of building human civilization; and working towards women's rights from a perspective that is based on cooperation and compassion rather than conflict. The document presents several main principles, which it grounds in the objectives of *Islamic Shari'a* and which affirm women's worth and their rights. The document, in particular, emphasizes women's rights in the following domains: legal capacity, family-related issues, education, work, personal safety, and public office. During the three day conference in April 2015 to launch *Shaqi'q,* there was a lively discussion about *the Alexandria Declaration,* which showed that there was no consensus on the document. Some participants argued that women's rights groups needed to be more centrally involved in the drafting of the document. Others noted that since *Shaqi'q* is meant to be the framework for a regional network of Islamic feminism scholars and activists, the document needed to address the regional context. A senior Azhar scholar argued that the religious establishment also had a claim to this document and thus needed to be consulted in the process of revising the document. It was agreed that the document would be further revised and developed through a process that would involve more diverse actors.

In April 2015 Mada had a three year work plan to establish a number of working groups comprising of Islamic feminism scholars, activists, and scholars from religious establishments in Egypt and other Arab countries (e.g. Morocco and Tunisia) to coordinate the building of Arabic scholarship of Islamic feminism in the region and to link this knowledge to gender activism and legal reform.[21]

Egyptian islamic feminism and post 2011: possibilities and challenges

Egyptian women were equal and active participants in the 2011 Revolution whose main slogans were not gender-specific (Elsadda 2011; Abu-Lughod, Mahdi 2011; Sholkamy 2012).[22] The participatory and inclusive politics of protest during the first 18 days of the Revolution and which resulted in the ousting of President Mohamed Hosny Mubarak created among Egyptians a sense of tremendous hope and involved citizenship. Over the subsequent five years, the country witnessed momentous political changes and

challenges. Soon after the revolution, a group of women and men protestors in Tahrir Square who were calling for gender-specific reforms on the occasion of Women's Day March 8 were attacked and chased away by groups of bystanders (Elsadda 2011; Sholkamy 2012). In addition, there was a backlash against some of the new personal status laws, which were introduced in the last decade of Mubarak's era and which gave women the right to unilateral no-fault divorce (*khul'*) and extended the period of their custody of their children in the event of divorce (Elsadda 2011). There were also initiatives to repeal these laws and propose new discriminatory laws against women, both during the transnational period under the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) and during the Muslim-Brotherhood led government of the now-ousted President Mohamed Morsy.

Under the current regime of President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, a state discourse calling for religious reform has become somewhat vocal, with the president emphasizing in numerous televised speeches the need to reform the religious discourse and reclaim the "moderate Islam" of Egyptians.[23] This call for religious reform has been taking place in the context of the political struggle with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood group and the increasing problem of local and regional terrorism. But different voices in the society have also been arguing that the state's call for religious reform is not serious since thus far there have been no tangible efforts to reform the religious education system, or to take tough stance against discriminatory and divisive religious discourse that is promoted by some Salafi preachers who still occupy a visible space in the media.[24] These doubts in the state's commitment to the reform of religious discourse were further exacerbated by the recent trials and conviction of the novelist Ahmed Nagy for publishing a novel that was deemed offensive to public morality and Islam al-Behairy, researcher and preacher and host of the TV program *With Islam*, for his critical views and language on classical Islamic interpretive texts.[25]

Furthermore, the current context is complicated by the arrests of youth as result of a new and controversial protest law;[26] and challenges for the work of civil society due to a new and again contested law that regulates the legality of the funding and resources received by civil society actors (and civil servants).[27] The question arises: how does this complex context impact the work of Islamic feminism scholar/activists?

Islamic feminism scholars such as Abou-Bakr, Saleh and others have been engaged in their knowledge projects since the 1990s and continue to do so. Thus, on the level of knowledge production, these scholars continue to produce scholarship. But one could say the linkages between the knowledge building and activism of the Islamic feminism project became more visible after the revolution, though not without challenges. For example, while Abou-Bakr began collaborating with women's rights groups before 2011 on the issue of reforming family laws, this collaboration became more sustained after the revolution. It was not so much that the revolution was the turning point since some women's rights groups such as Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance and the

Network for Women's Organizations have been focused since 2007 on incorporating the work of reforming religious discourse into their efforts to lobby for a comprehensive gender-sensitive family law (Al-Sharmani 2013; Sharafeldin 2015). But the significance of the revolution was that it provided all these actors with more commitment to pursue this interconnected work of gender-sensitive religious and legal reform. Initially this commitment was sustained by the sense of hope and investment in the country's democratic future and later on this commitment was challenged but also strengthened by the political difficulties that rose under the different governments of post 2011 Egypt.

Thus after the revolution and precisely through more sustained collaboration with a number of women's rights organizations and new civil society's actors, the work and ideas of Islamic feminism scholars and their colleagues have become more known in the public sphere. Although the insufficiency of materials produced in Arabic remains a problem, still the impact of the new knowledge is discernable in a number of ways. For instance, in the backlash against the *khul'* law[28] that ensued after the 2011 Revolution, those who were defending these reforms were using arguments that were indirectly drawing on the new language and arguments that have become prevalent through the works of contemporary Islamic feminism scholars/activism such as the distinction between man-made *fiqh* and divine *Shari'a*; the demystification of the juristic understanding of *qiwamah* as a Quranic concept and the call for context-based understandings of this principle, etc. Additionally, these knowledge projects have been strategically useful to some individual women rights activists in their advocacy work. For example, one young women's rights activist described the importance of this knowledge for her work as follows: "I find the knowledge they produce helpful. It helps me strategically; it protects me from being stigmatized as a secular. And I see Islamic feminism as the pathway to Islamic enlightenment".[29]

But Islamic feminism scholar/activists face old and new challenges in the current context. The old challenges that persist are mainly two. One challenge is suspicion and lack of support from some secular women's rights groups who question the pursuit of gender equality through Islamically-grounded approach that marries new religious knowledge with activism. Some of these women's rights advocates question what they see as the claim to a religion-based authenticity that is assumed in Islamic feminism projects.[30] Some are also concerned that by foregrounding Islam and Islamic framework, Islamic feminism scholar/activists are excluding non-Muslims and secular actors, and hence are not providing a viable foundation for new discourse and movement to transform the society.[31] One of these activists noted that foregrounding religion in reform efforts may also lead to the failure to see the importance of culture and class in understanding patriarchy and gender-based discrimination.[32]

The second old challenge facing Islamic feminism scholar/activists is the claim to religious authority that this new knowledge movement is still lacking. Amany Saleh, for

example, refers to the work of Islamic feminism scholars as intellectual *ijtihad*,[33] but what is the position of religious scholars? Islamic feminism scholars have been making efforts to engage with religious scholars through conferences and workshops but thus far these efforts have not led to substantive headways. Often the position of religious scholars has been one of rejection, claiming that those producing this new knowledge are not trained in traditional religious sciences and are applying methodologies that are alien to their tradition. Perhaps what adds to the challenge of Islamic feminism scholars' contested claim to expert knowledge in religious sciences is their small number. This problem is partly caused by the fact that these scholars are specialists and professionals in other fields (e.g. humanities and social sciences). Hence, in order to acquire systematic and well-grounded knowledge of Islamic religious sciences, Islamic feminism scholars have to devote a lot of time to learning and researching Islamic religious sciences. Not many are able to do so in a systematic and coherent way, both through academic research and years of self-study (e.g. Abou-Bakr and Saleh).

Religious scholars' contestation of the significance of Islamic feminism in the field of religious knowledge is often strongly voiced in the conferences that bring the two camps together.[34] For example, in an April 2015 conference that was co-organized by Alexandria Library and Mada, a senior Azhar scholar objected repeatedly to the arguments made by Abou-Bakr and Saleh regarding the gaps in the exegetical and juristic tradition. Also, this scholar, and in reference to the concept note on Islamic feminism which was distributed and discussed in the conference, objected to the term 'Islamic feminism,' saying that it was alien and unclear.[35] In response, Abou-Bakr and Hafez argued that the religious scholars' opposition to the term was often a way to evade contending with the actual content and goals of this new knowledge project. But for the Islamic feminism scholars, the term was significant. Their claim to it was not a blind commitment to 'feminism' but rather about reiterating that their project was not simply about engagement with patriarchal interpretations but also about methodological reform and opening up a constructive debate about the nature and epistemological value of traditional methodologies of Islamic exegesis and jurisprudence as well as those of feminist methodologies.

Although thus far there seems to be not much headway in the engagements between the religious scholars and the Islamic feminism scholar/activists, one promising development is noteworthy. Within the Al-Azhar establishment, a small circle of young reformist voices are emerging: graduate students and young academics who are concerned with the question of the reform of religious education. These new voices have begun to engage with the Islamic feminism scholar /activists through the coordination of Mada Foundation. For example, two young Azhar academics took part in the April 2015 conference. One was a female lecturer in the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language in one of Al-Azhar universities in the country. This thirty-four year old lecturer teaches Islamic theology and philosophy. And she is currently working on her doctorate

thesis. As part of her reform efforts, she has also been experimenting in her teaching with approaches that encourage critical thinking and active participation of students. She is also involved in a recent initiative, led by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, to reform religious discourse in the larger society and within the Al-Azhar establishment.[36]

The other young voice from Al-Azhar is a thirty five year old male graduate student who is planning to write his doctorate dissertation on Islamic feminism. He is also a producer in one of the independent satellite channels broadcasting religious programs.[37]

A third young Azhar voice is a thirty two year female graduate student who studied Islamic theology and philosophy and faced, for several years, difficulties with what she perceived to be a hierarchical and dogmatic approach in teaching and supervision at Al-Azhar University, during her efforts to get her thesis proposal for the masters accepted.[38] Meanwhile, this young woman, for the past eight years, has been working with the late Islamic scholar Dr. Taha Al-alwany in his think tank where he taught and worked with a circle of young researchers such as this informant and Sawsan Sharif on developing reformist approaches in Quranic exegesis. Al-alwany was married to Mona Abulfadl, the founder of the Association for Studying Women in Civilization.[39] Recently, Al-Azhar asked Dr. Al-alwany to take part as resource person and trainer in a training workshop for Al-Azhar scholars and professors as part of the efforts of the religious establishment to reform religious discourse and education within its institutions.

These reformist voices both from within and outside Al-Azhar are relevant to the Islamic feminism project, perhaps in two ways. First, their reform-oriented efforts are crisscrossing through conferences and meetings that bring them together, hence creating opportunities for collaboration. And secondly, because these new voices are not particularly concerned with gender reform but still share with Islamic feminism scholars the larger goal of religious reform, cooperation and alliances between these different actors may build the broad constituency that Islamic feminism needs, as Imam previously argued.

But there are also new challenges facing Islamic feminism. During the regime of Muslim Brotherhood, the challenge for Islamic feminism scholar was to claim that independent space where they could successfully distance themselves from the patriarchal gender ideology of the regime, while at the same time being able to pursue an Islamically-grounded project of gender and religious reform (Abou-Bakr 2013b). In the current political context, the official messages about the reform of religious reform are mixed and contradictory. In addition, some of the actors who are calling for and are engaging in efforts to bring about religious reform diverge with Islamic feminism scholars in their approaches and/or overall goals. For example, the confrontational approach of the Muslim scholar and TV program host Islam al-Behairy in critiquing Islamic interpretive tradition is very different from the approach of Islamic feminism scholars who tend to partake in careful, calm, and systematic critical engagements with the interpretive tradition. This complicates the position of these scholars some of whom find themselves

unable to ally themselves with different state and non-state actors because of the substantive divergences in larger goals and/or approaches even if they agree with these actors, in general terms, on the need to reform religious discourse. Furthermore, the overall challenges of the current political context may limit the scope of reform that Islamic feminism can pursue since the question of gender and religious reform are interwoven with the larger question of political reform and social justice.

In conclusion, the future trajectory and significance of contemporary Egyptian Islamic feminism remain unclear; whether as an epistemological movement that can produce alternative and authoritative religious knowledge, or as a new form of activism and public engagement that combine scholarship, advocacy and training. The number of individual scholars engaging in these knowledge/activism projects remains small. Yet their collaborative work with non-governmental organizations and individual activists (and its benefits) are identifiable. These scholar activists are also increasingly engaging with traditional religious scholars but the authority of their knowledge remains contested. Still the new language and religious arguments they are producing are discernable in public discourses, though within somewhat limited range and scope.

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NOTES:

1 - I am undertaking this research project (2013-2018) titled *Islamic Feminism: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, in my capacity as Academy of Finland research fellow, based at Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Finland. The transnational Islamic feminist projects that I am studying include the work of Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Omaima Abou-Bakr, Nevin Reda, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Kecia Ali, and Sa'diyya Shaikh.

2 - For further information about Women and Memory Forum, see their web page at: http://www.wmf.org.eg/.

3 - WMF was co-founded by 13 women scholars and professionals from different disciplines. They are: Afaf Mahfouz, Amal Abou El Fadl, Amina Elbendary, Amira Sonbol, Hala Kamal, Hoda El-Saadi, Hoda Elsadda, Iman Bibars, Mervat Hatem, Mona Zulficar, Omaima Abou-Bakr, Rania Abdel-Rahman, Sahar Sobhi Abdel. Hakim.

4 - See *Women and Memory mission and goals statement* on the Women and Memory Forum website: http://www.wmf.org.eg/en/about-us/.

5 - Bilingualism is not new to Egyptian feminist work. But what I am noting here is that the production of this new gender-sensitive religious and historical knowledge in Arabic and in accessible formats is distinctly significant and relevant for advocacy and reform of religious discourse.

6 - Abou-Bakr is a member of the International Advisory Group of Musawah. The movement was launched in Malaysia in 2009 by a group of Muslim women scholars and activists from different countries and with the coordination of the Malaysian women's rights group Sisters in Islam. Musawah adopts a four-pronged approach drawing on Islamic principles of equality and justice, international human rights conventions and principles, national constitutional guarantees of equality and justice, and lived realities of Muslim women and men.

7 - The name *Shaq'iq* is an Arabic word meaning equals and partners and it is taken from a hadith in which Prophet Mohamed reportedly said that women are the equals and partners of men.

8 - Individual interview, May 2014.

9 - Individual interview, May 2014.

10 - For the first issue of the journal in which Imam's article was published, see: http://www.ikhtyar.org/?page_id=20412

11 - For more information about the research/activist group and their activities, see: http://www.ikhtyar.org/.

12 - Yara Sallam also published a short article on Islamic feminism in the same issue in *Ikhtiyar*, titled *Who is Afraid of Al Shari'a? Islamic Feminism and Islamist Rule*. Sallam (2015) points out that during the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, there was a visible need for an alternative egalitarian religious discourse, but secular feminists' reluctance to engage with religion at the time did not give much space for the involvement of Islamic feminism scholar/activists.

13 - This four year ethnographic study researched the legal reforms introduced in the personal status laws since 2000.

14 - Individual interview, May 2014, Cairo.

15 - Interview with the director of Egyptian Organization for Family Development, August 2014, Cairo.

16 - This informant made this point in conversations with me in April 2014 as well as publically in a conference co-organized by Alexandria Library and Mada in April 2015 in Alexandria to launch a regional forum for Islamic feminism scholars.

17 - Interview with the board director of Mada and director of its Noon Center, and a senior staff member who was in charge of coordination and implementation of program activities, April 2014.

18 - In an April 2015 conference, organized by Mada, some of the participants from women's rights organizations took Mada to task for reproducing the state and religious establishment's stance on refraining from meaningful commitment to international conventions such as CEDAW under the pretext of the incompatibility of some of its articles with *Islamic Shari'a.*

19 - This idea of the need to avoid the politicization of women's issues is repeated in several of Mada documents and it also came up in my interviews with staff members. When I asked for clarification, the director of the board explained that they were cautioning against political opportunism that undermined women's rights in the process of contestations between different ideological positions.

20 - Participant observation, April 27-29, 2015, Alexandria.

21 - Mada Foundation suspended its activities since October 2015.

22 - The mantras of the protesters in the revolution were: bread, freedom, social justice.

23 - For example, on a televised speech on January 1, 2015 marking the Birthday of Prophet Mohamed, President al-Sisi called for a 'religious revolution'.

24 - For example, the well-known Egyptian journalist and TV program host Ibrahim Eissa repeatedly makes this point on air. See also some of the earlier articles (in 2013 and 2014) of the Egyptian scholar of Islamic movements and political sociology, Ammar Ali Hassan in the journals «Al-Watan» and «Al-Masry al Youm». See also his more recent articles: *Darurat al tanwir wa sina´t khitab dini gadid*, (The Necessity of Enlightenment and the Making of New Religious Discourse), in «Al-Masry al Youm», a four-series article, June 13, June 17, 2016. See also, Mohamed Nur Farahat, *Ma bayn izdira' al adyan wa izdra' al dustur*, (Between Contempt of Religions and Contempt of the Constitutions), in «Al-Masry alYoum», June 17, 2016.

25 - Al-Azhar filed a lawsuit against al-Behairy, accusing him of 'contempt of Islam'. He was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison in December 2015. Later an Appeal Court reduced his sentence to one year which he is currently serving.

26 - Law 104, 2013 was issued during the rule of the interim President Adly Mansour. According to Ziad Bahaa El-Din, well-known legal expert and former deputy prime minister in the government of President Mansour, this law contravenes with several articles in the country's current constitution and has four main problems. It obligates organizers of a peaceful protest to secure first the consent of Ministry of Interior before they can hold a protest; it criminalizes the peaceful public gathering of 10 people; it puts administrative obstacles that make organizing peaceful protests very difficult, and it sets the sentence for the crime of illegal protest at five years of imprisonment and a fine of LE 100,000. In this same article, Baha El-Din also critically examines a series of laws that were passed in the period from 2013 to 2015, and which he argues derailed the country's path towards democracy. These laws include Law 128 of 2014 which regulates the legality of funding received by civil society groups and civil servants; Law 94 of 2015 which defines terrorism in very general and loose terms; and Law 136 of 2014 which expands the jurisdiction of military courts to try civilian suspects. See Ziad BahaEl Din *Qanun al tazahur fi al mizan* (Protest Law in Scale), in «Al-Shorouk», June 13, 2016.

27 - Law 128, 2014.

28 - *khul'* law, which was legislated in 2000, gave women the right to no-fault judicial divorce without the need for the husband's consent in exchange for the wife relinquishing her financial rights (i.e. to dower and post-divorce financial dues such as *´iddah* or waiting-period maintenance and *muta´* or compensation maintenance).

29 - Interview with women's rights activist at CEWLA, April 2014, Cairo.

30 - Individual interview with co-founder and director of one of the new women's rights organizations, August 2014.

31 - This was expressed in an interview with an activist at a long-time women's rights organization that adopts explicit secular approach, August 2014.

32 - See endnote 17.

33 - Individual interview, April 9, 2014.

34 - This was reported to me in interviews conducted in April 2014 with Omaima Abou-Bakr and Amany Saleh as well as Fatma Hafez. All three presented in the conference and experienced this opposition from the religious scholars.

35 - Participant observation, April 27-29, 2015, Alexandria.

36 - Individual interview, May 2015. The initiative in which this informant was involved entailed launching an Azhar TV channel broadcasting reform-oriented religious knowledge and discourse. The informant's role was to contribute to the intellectual content of the programs.

37 - Individual interview, May 2015.

38 - Individual interview, May 2015.

39 - Dr. Al-alwany, who was of an Iraqi background, received his education in Al-Azhar and taught for many years in the USA. He was well known for his reformist work on Quranic exegesis. His think tank and research center are located in the same building that houses the library and the office of *Woman and Civilization,* founded by his late wife. Hence students and young scholars working with Dr. Al-alwany are also in close contact and communication with scholars and young researchers at *Woman and Civilization.* Dr. Alwany died in spring 2016.

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