



Gender Roles and Empowerment in Women's Islamic Activism

Sherine Hafez

1. Introduction

The success and longevity of women's Islamic social activist work across Muslim-majority countries have gained much attention from feminist scholars who focus their work on gender empowerment and women's status in Muslim-majority societies (Ahmed 2011; Ali 2014; Badran 2010; Mahmood 2005). While some studies applauded the positive impact Islamic activism has had on women in these societies, others remained skeptical about the extent of empowerment women might enjoy in Arab and Middle Eastern Muslim countries (Moghissi 1999, 2011; Mojab 2001; Shahidian 2002). Essentialized as misogynist and patriarchal to the extreme, Muslim-majority countries are often depicted as hostile to women's empowerment, which leads some to represent Islamic women activists as women who internalize their own oppression (Papanek 1994). Further noting that women who join Islamic movements and organizations parrot their male leaders, others maintain that Muslim activist women have access to leadership only under male supervision and command.¹ The following chapter questions the theoretical assumptions on which these conflicting views rest, in order to consider forms of empowerment other than those informed by mainstream liberal principles. Even early feminist writing, for example, the scholarship of Louis Lamphere (1993), Cynthia Nelson (1974) and Rosalind Rosenberg (1982), has long questioned Western universalist perspectives in assessing feminism and empowerment for women in non-Western contexts. Despite the legacy of this critical work reflecting decentering trends in Western feminist discourse which has grown since then, liberal assumptions remain trenchant in mainstream feminist discourses. As I point out above, this is not simply a Western phenomenon but liberalism is often a theoretical filter even among local scholars who examine emancipation and equality for women in Muslim-majority societies and in the Middle East from a liberal view. Recently, feminist historian Joan Scott (2017) argued against the predominance of liberal and secular notions in certain

¹ For a review of these perspectives, see Metcalf (1998).

strands of feminism in the West as well. She maintains that neither liberalism nor its offshoot, secularism, was ever intended as emancipatory gender discourse. Scott refutes the claim that secularism automatically brings about sexual liberation and, consequently, she maintains the question would remain a moot point for women who espouse the Islamic faith and its values. This chapter agrees with Scott and presents a glimpse into the lived experience of Muslim women who do not seek liberal emancipation but instead forge a trajectory that is relevant to them and to their societies. Drawing on feminist literature on power in Middle Eastern contexts, the following discussion will develop an understanding of what empowerment means to Islamic women activists. In many cases, Islamic women embody forms of empowerment that provide an Islamic alternative to general conceptions of empowerment in international development literature that often rely on universalist modern liberal norms. Women engaged in Islamically reforming their societies operate from within structures of authority which privilege men, paradoxically (and often unintentionally) finding themselves in positions of power by acting in accordance with prevalent norms of ideal female Muslim behavior. While women's roles shift to reflect their activism, they inadvertently begin to assume privileges and statutes in society that can be assumed to be empowerment in a liberal modern sense. However, I argue these shifts in roles and status are more complex and multi-layered when viewed from the perspective of the women themselves. Taking the perspective of Islamic activist women as a point of departure for this analysis allows for a more nuanced reading of the nature of their engagements with Islamic practice and how they often redraw the limits of normative gender roles. More importantly, we can also see how concepts of empowerment predicated upon universalist assumptions do not fully capture the impact of Islamic activism nor women's engagement with movements recognizing faith as an organizing principal.

Fieldwork data collected over a period of seven years from 2000 to 2003, then from 2005 to 2008 and then again in 2014, centering on women's Islamic activist movements in Cairo, Egypt, provide a perspective into these activists' own frames of reference and how they themselves make sense of the role Islamic teachings play in their lives and in their community.² Islamic activism appeared to redefine not only women's but also men's physical as well as discursive space. Muslim women activists became more visible in society. Their work brought a fresh new

² The present chapter draws on fieldwork notes, interviews and publications produced during this time period.

perspective to social reform and eradication of poverty, and they began to assume positions of respect and authority in their communities previously only enjoyed by men. As women became more active religiously and men's monopoly over the public religious domain began to be challenged, this produced conflict and tensions between women's and men's groups. These challenges were not interpreted as gender struggles, and the successes or failures the women experienced were not viewed as "power" issues but were viewed as part of the struggle for piety and Islamic social reform leading to God's blessing. In some cases, I have observed in my fieldwork the activist women's high levels of religious piety and social respectability have compelled—even obligated—male leaders to publicly endorse women's Islamic activism and to cede some control over religious spaces and activities. Through the various forms of activism and social work that they conduct, acquiring a good grasp of Islamic teachings and conducting their Islamic practices and rituals accordingly, Islamic women activists asserted their claims on this newly found space. Those claims intersect with socially acceptable gender norms, social values placed on age, education and the endorsement of government institutions, further their sense of self and enable their pious work. These interventions do not, however, in and of themselves, act as indicators or goals of empowerment for the Islamic activist women. In other words, assuming positions of power or acquiring control over space and resources does not appear to be a goal pursued by activist women but is, first and foremost, a means to gaining piety and religious fulfillment.

2. Islamic Women's Activism in Cairo

For decades now, since the 1990s, Islamic women have led an activist movement for social reform in Egypt centered in the capital, Cairo.³ They preach in mosques to other women, they teach classes on Islamic theology and law, lead philanthropic activities and often organize large-scale fundraising events that enable them to carry out their activism and provide support to those in need. Educated Muslim women taking the lead in preaching are called *da'iyat*.⁴ They have attracted much media attention and are considered authorities on issues dealing with Islam and

³ Islamic women activists established hundreds of organizations catering to the needs of women and their families. This came in the wake of a surge in Islamic organizations in the country. According to Bayat (2002), one third of all private voluntary organizations (PVOs) in the late 1980s were Islamic as well as half the number of welfare associations. Following Kandil (1998, pp. 145–46), Bayat mentions that at least 15 million people in the 1990s benefitted from Islamic welfare.

⁴ *Da'iyat* is plural of *da'iyah*, meaning a woman preacher, lit. one who invites people to the Islamic faith.

gender, the family and social Islamic ethics. While many activist women preach informally, most of the well-known preachers are certified to preach from the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*wizarat al awqaf*). They attract thousands of city women around them to hear their sermons. Many of these women *da'iyat* do not adopt feminism in their outlook, nor do they have a particular interest in addressing issues of gender equality. Their discourse is primarily aimed at perfecting the self through enhancing its relationship to God. Unlike their male counterparts who are employed by the Ministry of al Awqaf and therefore operate within the confines of the official government agenda, women's sermons focus on the daily needs of the modern Muslim woman. These needs include, but are not restricted to, raising children Islamically, conducting oneself according to Islamic teachings and the various challenges of being Muslim in a globalizing and Westernizing world. Their non-official capacity enables them to somewhat freely address the issues that are relevant to them and to their audience, creating a powerful impact and impetus for change.

These endeavors have created a momentum in society that has reversed some of the stereotypes about Islamic women being passive and oppressed—representations which often marginalized them and denied them a role in the religious, social and political aspects of government. With the growing trends in Islamism in Egypt before the revolution of 2011⁵ and then again after the Muslim Brotherhood became the ruling party, Islamic women became more publicly engaged than ever before. Although the activist women on whom this study is based are not part of the Muslim Brotherhood, the brief period during which the party were in control acted as a catalyst for some of the activism that was started prior to the revolution. They began conducting forums of dialogue to create awareness and to allow for exchanging ideas and organized training sessions, carried out community projects and taught hundreds of under-privileged women skills necessary for employment and economic gain.

3. Empowerment in Development Discourse

Empowerment has become a commonly used term to refer to the ability of an individual to be *enabled*, i.e., to be free, to exercise their power in decision making

⁵ Egypt experienced a series of uprisings, beginning on 25 January 2011, that sought to terminate the 30-year-old presidency of Hosni Mubarak and to usher in a new era of social justice, dignity and democracy. The revolution was steered into a different direction when Egypt's Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood, won the presidential elections. The short-lived presidency of Muhamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate, temporarily centered Islamic traditions as social practice.

and in making choices which shape their future. Despite the universality of the term, few attempts have been made towards developing a definition of empowerment. Often viewed as problematic and ambiguous, the word “empowerment” is not easily translated because it does not exist in most languages. In the Arabic language, the term “*temkin*” refers to the state of being empowered, yet it does not fully capture the notion of power and points instead to a state of being enabled. *Temkin* is employed in technical development language and is seldom, if ever, used in Arabic colloquial language. Social understanding of *temkin* or power as *meykanah* has some negative associations with tyrannical power, and *temakon*, which is the verb, implies the ability to dominate.

One study by Oxaal and Baden provides an extensive survey of development organizations and NGOs that aims at an understanding of the term’s usage, implications and indicators (Oxaal and Baden 1997). According to Oxaal and Baden, the notion of empowerment is derived from the birth of the idea of Western individualism (*ibid.*, p. 4). The roots of empowerment lie in longstanding concerns in development literature with power. “Power” itself, however, comes in diverse forms:

Power *over*—relations of domination/subordination are implicated here. It is based on socially sanctioned intimidation and invites active and passive resistance.

Power *to*—a creative and enabling power which is related to decision-making authority.

Power *with*—centers around the organization of people to achieve collective good.

Power *within*—refers to self-confidence, awareness and assertiveness. It is concerned with the way individuals can recognize power dynamics in their lives and learn to influence and change them. (Oxaal and Baden 1997, p. 4)

When development projects seek to “empower women,” they address specific criteria mainly derived from these standards or a combination of them. Criteria for women’s development include participation in decision-making processes, and the creation of an awareness among women that they may be entitled to occupy a decision-making space in the public sphere, to make choices and to be able to shape their environment. Power is generally articulated as a “possession” and determines whether individuals are dominant or oppressed. The Report of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which called its Platform for Action “an agenda for women’s empowerment,” maintained that “the principles of shared power and responsibility

should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities" (ibid., p. 4).

As a common paradigm, "Empowerment corresponds to women challenging existing power structures which subordinate women" (ibid., p. 4).

Central to this vision of empowerment, which has gained impetus in development discourse, is the notion that power belongs to the individual rather than the collective. Entrepreneurship and individual self-reliance are emphasized over co-operation as means of challenging power structures, which are seen as subordinating to women. This view, Oxaal and Baden point out, is derived from a belief in the entrepreneurial market capitalism as a rescue measure for ailing economies and the retreating state subsidy of social welfare, employment, health and educational services. Many of these assumptions regarding empowerment emerge from the modern liberal conception of the individual which are often inapplicable to community-based societies.

4. Selfhood: Boundless Possibilities

The notion of the "self" as a universalist assumption often distorts how this self may be empowered in multiple cultural and social contexts.⁶ Discourse grounded in an uncritical view of the unitary Western notion of the individual can be of little or no help in understanding unbounded selfhood or experiences of empowerment that are contextually different. Women in Western societies have struggled to find a place for themselves in a social world where power was not only defined in masculine terms but also identified with autonomy, independence and rights to freely construct legal relationships (Pateman 1988). Claiming a hegemonic discursive authority, in practice, however, this historically contingent concept of selfhood by no means included women—though political systems continued to presume the equality of men and women. Gendered, culturally specific and historical, the liberal view of the individual does not capture the nuances of selfhood in societies where concepts

⁶ In scholarship on Middle Eastern and Muslim cultures, a critical trend of the notion of the individual began with the work of Suad Joseph (1993). As she points out, various constructs of the self exist across cultures because selfhood is mediated by gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion and the state. In her work on Lebanon, Joseph maintains that, to a large part, a relational notion of the individual prevails (unbounded), one which develops through connective relations with significant others. This is in contrast to a singular notion of bounded selfhood in the liberal Western sense which can be described as unitary, independent, autonomous. This, however, does not mean that bounded and unbounded selves exist as binaries because they also parallel, intersect and fluidly evolve even in the same societies. The problem is when scholarship assumes that all selves are homogenous and are bounded since that pathologizes the unbounded self and obscures the complexity of its existence.

of the individual may develop from alternative historical and cultural processes. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the complexity of relationships that mediate the construction of the self in any given part of the world and at specific points in time. Suad Joseph (1994) points out that not only do various constructs of the self exist across cultures but they may exist even within a single cultural setting. This is because she sees selfhood as mediated by gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion and the state. In her work on Lebanon, Joseph maintains that, to a large part, a relational notion of the individual prevails, one which develops through connective relations with significant others. This directly opposes a singular notion of bounded selfhood in the liberal Western sense and urges us to ponder the possibilities in the constructiveness of selfhood and, consequently, its sociopolitical manifestations. By understanding the self as a fluid and contextual notion, studies of empowerment may be able to consider boundless possibilities for understanding its multiple manifestations.

5. Whose Empowerment? Islamic Activist Women in Cairo

In contrast to the liberal modern reading of empowerment prevalent in development discourse, the Islamic women activists that I worked with in Cairo, Egypt, find an empowerment from “within” such relations of power (Hafez 2011). They subscribe to Muslim feminine ideals, demonstrating that women are not merely subjugated in relations of power, but are also empowered as a result of the dynamics in these relationships. Islamic women preach modesty and obedience and emphasize feminine roles that often appear in contradiction to what liberal theorists call, namely, independence, and freedom against oppressive traditions, sexual liberty and freedom from gender discrimination. These Muslim women were concerned with an entirely different project. Theirs was the project that began with the self as a site for social development. To these women, activism as a service to others lies at the heart of this process.

Most development theories and schools of feminist thought define strategies as resistance and contesting male authority as paths for women’s empowerment. While these are paths that are not entirely absent from the experiences of the women I worked with, resistance, autonomy and independence in themselves were often necessary means to attaining the larger goal of social change. In fact, the tensions between the pursuit of a religious ideal that women define as being closer to their God often intersected with such liberal feminist ideals. These tensions and negotiations between what are often perceived as conflicting traditions are far more complex and complimentary than they are dichotomous. The various forms of empowerment that Islamic activist women experience in their movements are born out of these creative

tensions and intersections. While Islamic activism occasionally places women in positions that challenge male authority, such as competition over resources or public spaces where they preach or social reform projects that male religious leaders may have led in the past, the general consensus is that this is acceptable as long as these efforts are for the general good. The gender ideology that informs this general consensus is based on an Islamic model that emphasizes the complementarity of the different roles of women and men rather than their absolute equality. They are, in other words, equal but different. The goal is to affect harmony and balance in society with the belief in the justice of God, as the ultimate judge of all things in this world. The Islamic egalitarian view of gender roles seeks to create balance in society while guaranteeing women's rights as decreed by Islam. However, in the event that there is conflict between the genders, Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith maintain that issues of obedience to male authority are of a more complex nature (Haddad and Smith 1996). The notion of *shura* (consultation), which is the basic form of Islamic decision making, prevails even in the home, with the husband acting as arbiter if consensus is not reached. Islamists, claim Haddad and Smith, see a need for leadership for all social units and as women carry the burden of childbirth, men are obliged to take on their own role as well.

However, many of the women interviewed who worked in Islamic social reform organizations saw empowerment in remaking themselves as ideal Muslim women. For instance, Salma, one of the leaders at an Islamic center for women, recounts that empowerment is related to her sense of success at self-enhancement. She spoke about how she undertakes a strict disciplinary attitude towards her sense of religiosity. Islam acts as a constant frame of reference for her in every action of the day. Salma explained how she sets high standards for herself because she is a *da'iyah* (preacher). She was reluctant to talk about her empowerment as we discussed the various manifestations of the concept in her opinion. After some minutes into our discussion, Salma said,

You know if it weren't for the fact that this concept is so important to you, I would never mention this to anyone. Saying that I am empowered is in direct contradiction to what I represent as a *da'iyah*. My duty is to be modest and unassuming. It is true that my religious role gives me a sense of power and achievement compared to those who involve themselves in trivialities, but talking about it should just not be done. It is against the spirit of Islam.

I had similar discussions with other activists such as Maha, a wife and mother in her 40s. Maha was a high achiever; she graduated at the top of her class and worked

as an assistant professor for a short while before moving on to banking. She now dedicates her time to Islamic activist work and has single-handedly improved many people's lives. Maha was the epitome of patience and care—even when faced with the most challenging situations. Attempting to understand what activism meant to her, I asked her how she would feel if she were to stop her activist work. Startled by the question, she stared back as if the thought never crossed her mind till this moment, and then she said,

It will affect my relationship to God. If I do not perform these acts of kindness, it will sever a strong link to God. I cannot see my life without this. This (activism) is a reward that God has sent me. I would feel deprived from a privilege that I tremendously enjoy to help others and to attend to their needs.

Maha interprets the satisfaction she gets from Islamic activism as a divinely given privilege. In this, her views seemed to parallel the rest of the Islamic activist women I spoke with. To them, Islamic activist work is a gift from their God and a path to piety. Activism is not a conscious pursuit for fame or social recognition, far from it. In fact, this work was about placing their will and agency in the hands of God. Any empowerment, therefore, which emanates from these activities is not understood in this rationale as a direct consequence of the action, but rather as borne out of the religious experience. Using the word in English, I asked Maha what it meant to her and how she would define "empowerment." Her response deflected from any possible confusion that I might have about conflating empowerment with autonomy or agency. She continued to explain that Islamic activist women enjoy positions of authority, such as the director of the organization, *Doctora Zeinab*, and famous Muslim preacher, Shereen Fathy, and others, but that these situations develop as these women succeed in achieving high levels of religious knowledge and as they themselves become role models to others who respect them and admire them. However, Maha here is using "empowerment" to mean power over others in an authority sense. Salma used empowerment to mean a higher level of self confidence and assurance. However, neither of them see empowerment as a goal of their Islamic activism. Rather, they see it both as a natural outcome of religious duty and of activism. Maha explains, "These women do not covet power. What they seek is a religious perfection which will bring them closer to God." This image of religious perfection is, however, defined and articulated by discourses which rest on patriarchal sources of Islamism.

6. A Theoretical Conundrum?

There are two main theoretical problems that Islamic women activists pose to liberal modern assumptions on empowerment. First, they belong to a “tradition”—Islam—which is perceived as being oppressive to women. With Islam generally interpreted as a patriarchal religion, which favors males over females, they fit into generalized feminist criteria of oppressed women. Secondly, Islamic women activists endorse a gender ideology that is not predicated upon a universal feminist view of gender equality as a means for women’s empowerment. Instead, they emphasize in their daily activities their religious zeal, virtue and high levels of moral ideals as prescribed means to self-enhancement.

Some feminists caution against emphasizing gender differences, since this will inhibit an analysis of power, as power can be masked in arguments over “difference” (Flax 1987). Meanwhile, the Islamic women I interviewed posit varying viewpoints about gender relations, and many even do not consider the matter of gender difference as an issue in Islam. The majority of these women see that their God created the female and male to complement one another, to fulfill different roles in society, which are outlined in the Quran (holy scripture). Islamic women *da’iyat* (preachers) do not converge on the issue, but they are clear on the fact that men and women are different. They view the relationship between wife and husband to be based on responsibilities as well as obligations, which are clearly outlined in the Quran so that a harmonious and equitable relationship prevails in the family and both partners enjoy the rights which Islam has decreed for them. Islamic women scholars, however, elaborate on the issue of roles in that many of them maintain that the Quran never restricted roles based on gender. These scholars argue that motherhood, though most certainly an honored position in the Quran, was never presented as a sole option for women (Muhsin 1992). Egyptian Islamic women intellectuals include Heba Raouf Ezzat and Omaila Abou Bakr, who, among others, have developed new inroads into the Islamic debate on women’s issues. Ezzat and Abou Bakr, who are both university professors, are an authority in the public debate on women and their position in the Muslim Middle East. These women scholars participate in the dominant discourses in their society, thus challenging male exclusivity on the religious forum based on their knowledge of the Islamic texts. In their view, gender complementarity, not gender equality, is the true path to women’s liberation, a path that is already provided by Islam for both men and women. Ezzat and Abou Bakr perceive Western models of liberation as not only irrelevant to their societies but also as potentially harmful and demeaning for women. Despite their interest in seeing women gain their rights

in Muslim society, the term “Islamist Feminist” does not sit comfortably with either of them. Omaira Abou Bakr phrases this as follows:

I don't have to subscribe to any foreign/Western agenda or discourse on feminism and gender Some of these are simply irrelevant However, one can define one's own context and paradigms for a gender-sensitive perspective. (Abou-Bakr 2000, p. 1)

To Abou Bakr, a well-respected scholar and Islamic activist, the idea that gender scholarship on Muslim-majority societies must contend with topics relevant to Western audiences in order to gain credibility in academia seems misplaced. To her, gender issues in Muslim-majority societies should be defined by contextual and gender-sensitive paradigms. To pious women who have committed themselves to a life-long dedication to self-amelioration, perfection of religious ritual and service to their faith, contributing to Islamically reform society takes priority over seeking self-realization. Our scholarly epistemologies need to be sensitive to these nuances in individual aspirations because, while sharing many parallels with other women contending with patriarchy and gender injustice around the world, Islamic women activists may only indirectly engage with the challenges of patriarchy rather than address them as a goal.

7. Conclusions

The vigorous involvement of Islamic women in the public sphere to Islamically reform society in Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt could be generalized as an act of feminist empowerment which would obscure the nuances and complexities of pious activism undertaken by women. As discussed in what preceded, although women's Islamic activism has shifted their position in society and has redrawn the boundaries for gender roles in ways typically identified with feminist outcomes, this interpretation glosses over the women's desires and aspirations for pious fulfillment and religious service. This, however, does not mean that empowerment is altogether absent from these women's lives or thoughts, nor should we assume that Islamic engagement leads to the polar opposite of empowerment in a liberal modern sense. It is important to consider, though, that liberal modernist criteria for empowerment that advocate for independence and autonomy as markers of the modern individual who is free to choose an identity and lifestyle regardless of the social fabric in which they live cannot adequately critically analyze an empowerment for women whose world view is not consistent with this type of ethos. Clearly, a consideration of empowerment which regards its subject as created by social relations and not as autonomous from them will provide a more lucid understanding of the impact of

Islamic activism on women's empowerment and provide a better understanding of empowerment for future development projects.

As Islamic women's groups vary in their scope, orientation and activism, their empowerment also reflects varying degrees of social, psychological and political forms. There is the sort of empowerment contingent upon relinquishing the forms of power that derive from overt resistance and relies instead on socially cogent notions of perseverance, cooperation and the attainment of higher levels of religiosity. In fact, the women I have studied defined a condition of empowerment concerned with attempting higher goals that are consistently spiritual as well as material. Working both inwards to hone their pious selves as well as outwards in their communities to reform them Islamically, activist Muslim women see these efforts as inseparable from their faith and worship. Despite what these experiences bring to their own lives, neither the sense of pride in what they do nor the acquired confidence from working on social reform is in itself their coveted reward. This is because their pursuit of self-enhancement towards the Islamic notion of the ideal woman is deeply committed to Islamic teachings and the attainment of higher levels of piety.

These conceptions of religiosity and self-awareness intertwine with social aspirations for what the activist women perceive as a better, brighter future for a society that upholds Islamic teaching. Although the Islamic agenda that they envision for their community is shaped by a patriarchal tradition—one that demands of women a specific attitude and comportment—it also allows them a measure of mobility and action. The patriarchal values that inform women's Islamic activism in contemporary Egypt should not be perceived as a return to a traditional past. This is because the women's activism engages with modern and contemporary issues and does not discount the global world in which the women and their families live and contribute to. Can we hasten to tell whether Islamic activism is going to actually empower women in the future? We cannot begin to tackle this question adequately without revisiting our own normative conceptions of empowerment necessary for understanding women across various historical and cultural contexts.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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