

Article

What Role for the Sisters? Islamist Movements between Authenticity and Equality

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Abstract: In mainstream Islamist discourse, there is an awkward coexistence between recognition of women as equal political actors and affirmation of a traditional Muslim view of the man as head of the family. Islamism emerged in countries where patriarchy has remained deeply engrained. Yet their stances have varied. In Morocco, female Islamists have pushed for women's rights and a guarded opening towards cooperation with feminists. In contrast, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt have remained more conservative and female cadres have prioritised fighting any development seen as threatening the Muslim family. The Arab Spring also stirred matters regarding gender relations, as women took active part in the uprisings. In the years to come, women's issues will likely demand ever more attention across the Arab world. How the Islamists deal with this will be pivotal in determining the future of the movements. To understand the evolving responses of the movements to this challenge, it is essential to analyse the development of mainstream Islamist discourse and practice relating to gender relations in the period leading up to the ruptures of 2011. This article will investigate the issue in the two cases of Egypt and Morocco, and seeks to understand the relationship between internal and external drivers of ideological change.

Keywords: Islamism; gender relations; Egypt; Morocco



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1. Introduction

Perhaps the most deeply-rooted tension field between mainstream Islamism in the Arab world and dominant socio-cultural and political ideas in the West has been that which springs from conflicting ideas and practices regarding gender relations. Yet, as shown in the following pages, drawing primarily on the cases of Egypt and Morocco, there has also been strong tensions prevailing internally among Islamists around the question of the proper relations between the genders within political and social life and within the family. In the discourse of Islamists, there has long been an awkward coexistence between a declared recognition of women as equal political actors and an explicit affirmation of a traditional Muslim view of the man as the head of the family.

The societal and political earthquake that was the Arab Spring was never dominated by gender issues, yet it set in motion profound changes also in this field. In the years to come, women's issues will likely claim ever more attention across the Arab and Muslim world. How Islamist movements deal with this will be pivotal in determining their future. To gain a proper understanding of the evolving Islamist responses to this challenge, it is essential to analyse the development of mainstream Islamist discourse and practice relating to gender relations in the decades leading up to the ruptures of 2011. This article will investigate the issue in the two cases of Egypt and Morocco in this period. More specifically, it seeks to understand the relationship between internal and external drivers of ideological change.

Egypt is home to the first modern Islamist organisation, the Society of Muslim Brothers (*Jama'at al-ikhwan al-muslimin*, MB), which was by 2010 still the strongest in terms of both popular support at home and of international influence on sister tendencies within

other Muslim countries (Utvik and Tønnessen 2008). In Morocco, the Party of Justice and Development (*Hizb al-adala wal-tanmiya*, PJD)—based in the Islamist Movement for Unity and Reform (*Harakat al-tawhid wal-islah*, MUR)—had grown steadily stronger and was in 2010 the largest opposition party in the Moroccan parliament. In addition, Morocco was home to the probably even stronger Society for Justice and Beneficence (*Jama'at al-adl wal-ihsan*, AI), which was barred from political participation because the group refused to recognise the Moroccan monarchy as legitimate (Ibid., pp. 14–18). In their opposition to Western cultural influences, Islamist movements have in many ways represented a defence of patriarchal traditions as these were intertwined in dominant interpretations of Islamic law, the Sharia. This was reflected in the way especially earlier literature dealt with Islamism and gender issues (Kandiyoti 1991; Tadros 2012). As time has progressed, many authors have nuanced this view, especially in their analysis of the growing presence of female activists within these movements, in particular following the Arab Spring (Karam 1997; Biagini 2020, No. 3). Yet an understudied aspect is how the agenda of women's rights promoted by these activists—both inside their organisations and in society at large—is related to the core ideology of the Islamist movements to which they belong.

My main contributions in the present article are (1) to document that a gradual move towards advocating for an active role for women in politics and in the workplace was evident in mainstream movements well before the Arab Spring, as evidenced inter alia in programmatic statements, and (2) to argue that in pushing against the boundaries set by dominant patriarchal notions held by their movements, female activists could find support in other core elements of Islamist ideology.

A basic theoretical premise is that mainstream Islamism should not be understood as a fundamentalist “revolt against the modern age” (see for instance Kepel 1991; Lawrence 1990). Rather it is to be seen not only as “a product of the changes and conflicts wrought by modernising economic and social processes, but as an important modernising agent within current Middle Eastern society” (Utvik 2003). The main problematic field in this regard is precisely gender relations, as discussed below. The article is based on a close reading of programmatic statements from the Muslim Brothers and the PJD during the period in question, in addition to media statements from leaders and, in the Egyptian case, postings on the MB's official website ikwanonline.com. I also conducted a number of interviews with female Islamist leaders in the two countries during the years 2007 to 2009.

2. Political Equality—Almost

Going into the Arab Spring, nearly all Islamists were in favour of women's right to vote and to stand for election. There had also been a clear trend towards more general support for equality between women and men with regard to political rights.

There were still limitations. In the draft political programme presented by the MB in Egypt in 2007, it was explicitly stated that it is not desirable for a woman to be president because the head of state will also be the leader in war, something that is not in harmony with female nature. This discriminatory clause in the programme was the object of much criticism, not least internally in the MB. However, in the shadow of this debated point, the draft did promote full equality with regard to all other political rights (if not *inside* the MB's own organisation, see below), and did so more explicitly than earlier programmatic declarations from the Brothers (The Muslim Brothers 2007, pp. 102–7). The Moroccan PJD was largely in line with the Muslim Brothers in Egypt on these issues. The party acknowledged the political rights of women, inter alia the right to vote and to stand for elections (without touching on the issue of a woman as head of state; unthinkable in a Moroccan setting because it would infringe on the royal prerogative) (*Hizb al-adala wal-tanmiya* 2007, p. 66). In more conservative areas such as the Gulf, Islamists had by 2010 only fairly recently accepted the thought of voting rights for women and remained sceptical towards women in leadership positions. Here the situation was also influenced by the fact that the MB faced sharp competition from politicised *salafi* groups sticking to a traditional view of gender relations (Utvik and Tønnessen 2008, pp. 81–83).

3. The Family: A Muslim Fortress under Male Leadership

Yet along with an ever more unambiguous approval of full political rights for women, the Islamists stuck to the idea of the family as a sacred institution and the core of Muslim society. In this family, there is a specific distribution of roles and of power. The man is the head of the family and when there is disagreement, he will in the last instance be the one to take the decision on behalf of the family, even if he is enjoined to listen to his wife and children. The primary role of the woman is as mother and wife; she is responsible for creating a good home for her children and husband. Only after fulfilling this task may she contemplate a role in society outside the family. As for the man, he is the breadwinner and protector and therefore the primary liaison between the family and society.

In 1994, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers produced a declaration “On the Role of Muslim Women in an Islamic Society”, which to a large extent also set the framework for later formulations on the position of women. In brief it emphasised the equal value of men and women, while stressing the complementarity of the genders: women as mothers and “queens of the home”; men as breadwinners. The man is the head of the family. This implied among other things that he had the right to allow his wife to work, but she must always give priority to the home.¹ The same basic principles were present in the draft programme from 2007. Even among the leading female members of the MB, there was a strong focus on defending the family against what was perceived as a concerted Western attack against this core holding Muslim society together and providing it with strength. All feminist ideas about changed gender relations within the family were immediately interpreted as aiming ultimately at the dissolution of the family. As for the Moroccan PJD, its programme, in the same manner as that of the MB in Egypt, put focus on the primary role of the woman as mother, and the party campaigned regularly for strengthening the family as the mainstay of the nation and society ([Hizb al-adala wal-tanmiya 2007](#), p. 65).

4. Moving towards Equality?

The way gender relations were portrayed in central documents from the main Islamist organisations just before the Arab Spring thus depicted an apparent tension between a close-to-equal position for women in politics and a subordination vis-à-vis the man in family affairs. The contradiction between these two positions was not merely theoretical; it also had clear practical consequences. First, women’s capacity for active engagement in public life was reduced in that she could only become active after taking care of household duties. Second, the husband (or other male guardian) could, unchallenged, deny her the right to participate in any activity outside the house. Yet a distinct change could be discerned within groups such as the MB and the PJD over time. If for instance we compare the MB’s draft programme of 2007 with the above-mentioned declaration from 1994, the newer text clearly stayed within the framework established by the older one. Yet a significant change was represented by the fact that while the 1994 declaration stuck to *stating* the rights and duties of women according to Islam, in 2007 there was a repeated call for campaigns aimed at *improving* the actual status and position of women. The draft programme emphasised the necessity of activating the social and political role of women (*taf’il al-mar’a* was the term used). It was stressed that it had become obvious that women may master many tasks which society needs to see performed. To activate women, the programme recommended a campaign to spread “a culture of equality between the genders”. Interestingly, it even suggested making use of international conventions for the rights of women (and of working women in particular) ([The Muslim Brothers 2007](#), pp. 106–7).

In this connection, the programme differed from the earlier declaration in that it seemed as though the MB, albeit ambiguously so, now saw it as socially beneficial that women enter the workplace, and that their performance there be enhanced. Although the draft programme did not challenge, or even mention, the right of the husband or father to forbid a woman employment, it specifically called for government and lawmakers to intervene against private employers refusing to hire married women. The Muslim Brothers favoured legislation which would make it possible for women to work without neglecting

home duties, but, and this is significant, would also prevent home duties standing in the way of good job performance. The programme also demanded wholehearted efforts to eradicate illiteracy among women, and this was linked to the necessity of women working as part of a common popular effort for developing Egypt. It should be noted, though, that some ambiguity remained, as can be seen in the statement that “the call for women to leave the family in the name of liberation has met with a sharp reaction in society and therefore we must promote moderation and balance” (Ibid., p. 107).

The awkward balancing act as seen from the angle of the ever-growing number of female activists in the movement was well reflected in a short article on the MB’s website from 2005. Here Aisha Jum’a came out in clear support of the view that positions in social and political life should be subject to a meritocratic order, where abilities and performance would be what mattered, not nationality or gender. Men and women, she wrote, had been equally charged by God with being His stewards on Earth and making this world flourish, and would be equally accountable towards Him for how they have performed. She went on to praise the increasing public role successfully played by women “in spite of the outcry of opponents”, and lauded how “our age” had set free their talents, which were hitherto hidden and imprisoned. She stated that the woman who took part in building society redoubled her efforts, while other women often would waste their energy on luxury shopping and idle socialising. However, she then reminded the reader that “whatever rank of glory a woman may have reached in some positions, and whatever success she has had, she must enter her house knowing that in this house she must submit to the view of its manager and breadwinner whom God has made her keeper (*qawwam*)”. She must be aware of his wish to lead the family in the direction which he found suitable, though she might discuss with him and present her view. If she presented it in a smart and convincing way, he would accept it. Finally, Jum’a returned to asking from society that it accept the woman “in her new clothing” and appoint the Muslim woman to the position which befitted her abilities. This necessitated an effort to raise her consciousness, albeit it “within the limits of the law and custom (*al-shar’ wal-’urf*)”.²

Moreover, although leaders of the female section of the Muslim Brothers staunchly defended both the sanctity and practical necessity of male leadership in the family, they emphasised as strongly that obedience is always in right not in wrong, so the man should not be obeyed if he went against God’s directions. Likewise, obedience should only concern main matters, not details such as which dress to wear.³

The 2007 election programme of the Moroccan PJD showed a similar tendency as that observed in Egypt. The programme put strong emphasis on improving the education of women, strengthening labour legislation to make it easier for women to combine work outside with duties in the home, and preventing women being paid less than men doing the same work. What was somewhat of a development in Islamist circles, again with parallels in Egypt, was that these demands were put inside a framework where it was explicitly considered beneficial to increase women’s sustained participation in the labour market outside the home (*Hizb al-adala wal-tanmiya* 2007, p. 66).

5. Women Organised

It was a remarkable feature of the PJD/MUR social movement in Morocco that it included a largely autonomous women’s movement. Central here was the *Muntada al-Zahra*, an umbrella organisation which coordinated the work of a number of more or less explicitly Islamist organisations working to improve the conditions of women in Morocco. Female Islamist activists in Morocco tended more clearly than other Islamists to express the need for a specific agenda to promote women’s interests, not only in relation to state and society in general but also in relation to men. This was certainly true of the Organisation for the Renewal of Female Awareness (*Munazzamat tajdid al-wa’y al-nisa’i*). The MUR newspaper *al-Tajdid* (The Renewal) in November 2007 published an extensive interview with the leader of the organisation, Basima al-Haqqawi, who was also a long time MP for PJD (and later served as Minister for solidarity, women, family, and social development

from 2011 to 2019 in PJD-led governments). In the 2007 interview, she actively defended the use of quotas to promote female representation to Parliament and other elected organs in a society dominated by patriarchal attitudes. It is also remarkable that as an Islamist she talked about her pride in the achievements of Fatima Mernissi. Mernissi (1940–2015) won international fame as a Muslim feminist and author of a number of books on women and Islam, but had been sharply criticised by Islamists for moving too far in the direction of Western secular thinking. Haqqawi, while rejecting “Western feminism” and defending the idea of the complementarity of the genders, argued strongly in favour of the need for women to take equal part with men in the leadership of Islamist movements, and emphasised that setting up a separate women’s movement afforded women an invaluable freedom of action and a platform for developing self-esteem (Basima al-Haqqawi 2007).

The rival Moroccan Islamist group, AI, also had a separate women’s organisation enjoying relative autonomy. This was formally the women’s section of AI, but was widely known by the name of its website—the Sisters of the Hereafter (*Akhawat al-akhira*). The women’s section was headed by Nadia Yasin, another outspoken Islamist defender of an increased role for women.

In the same period, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt had a separate women’s section, *qism al-akhawat*, which was subordinate to the main organisation. The female members, however, did not enjoy voting rights for elections to the leading organs of the Brothers. This contrasts with the subordinate, yet much more prominent, place women had in Morocco’s Islamist groups, both in the AI and in the PJD. Several factors may explain this. For one, it seems likely that conservative attitudes were more strongly embedded in parts of the Egyptian organisation (and maybe in Egyptian society as such). For another, the restrictive Egyptian practice also sprang from a concern with security. It was a prevalent and strongly held view among men (and most likely among most women) in the organisation that women should not be exposed to the danger represented by a direct confrontation with Egyptian police and security forces. Partly there was a fear of physical attacks in connection with meetings and demonstrations, but in particular the MB wanted to prevent female members or sympathisers being arrested, out of fear for what they might be exposed to in the form of sexualised mistreatment.

One might remark, of course, that implicit here was the view that women need more protection than men; that they were less capable of defending themselves or enduring violence and torture. Many would react against such attitudes as a consideration of women as immature, dependent creatures, and argue that at least it should be the choice of each individual woman or man to decide which dangers to expose oneself to in the service of the good cause. In a society such as the Egyptian one, however, MB practice here was in all likelihood in harmony with widely shared attitudes. This question is tightly interwoven with the perceived duty of the man to protect the woman as part of maintaining his own honour as well as that of the family and the woman herself. The consequence drawn by the MB had been a more or less tacit deal with the authorities: women did not directly comprise part of the main organisation, and would not be touched by police or security forces. This factor was also a partial explanation for the scarcity of female MB candidates for elections. For instance, in the parliamentary elections in 2005, only one out of 150 candidates was a woman, Makarim al-Diri (who probably won the election in her constituency, but was deprived of her seat through government-sponsored fraud). MB leaders explained that they had prepared a list of 30 female candidates whom they wanted to field in the elections, but that one by one these candidates asked to be excused because of family duties or resistance from their husbands, or both. However, part of the reason why the women themselves and their husbands decided against running was also related to the question of security. One of the leaders of the women’s section in the MB explained that when her proposed candidacy became publicly known, she received a phone call from the security services where she was plainly told that if she ran for parliament it “would not end well” for her and her family. Furthermore, the MB’s treatment of the problems with the female candidacies also shows the framework within which the organisation operated on these issues. If the

woman herself was willing but pointed to her husband's resistance, the MB would contact him and try to persuade him to allow his wife to run. However, the man's right to make the ultimate decision was never a subject for question or discussion.⁴

Still, it is clear that in fact there were lively discussions happening inside the MB, touching on the relation between men and women. Among the leaders of the *qism al-akhawat* (the women's section), there was for instance much disagreement regarding the statement in the draft programme that a woman should not be head of state. Female circumcision was another question where disagreement was open. When the Egyptian parliament in the spring of 2008 debated a sharpening of the prohibition against this very widespread practice in the country, several Muslim Brother MPs resisted the proposed change in the laws. In response to this, a female activist wrote an article on the webpage of the MB where she declared that the MB condemns female circumcision and that the MPs in question were merely expressing the tradition-bound attitude in their constituencies.⁵ Some of the inner contradictions in the MB may also be discerned by glancing at what de facto served as the women's column on the MB website, and which characteristically carries the name *Wahat al-usra*, "Oasis of the Family". Although the MB draft programme, as discussed above, emphasised the need to stimulate greater female activity in society and politics, in the women's column one would find counselling for women pointing in a somewhat different direction. The column often presented questions from women struggling to combine demands of participation in the movement with the standards of being a good wife and mother. The answers given were generally held in a tone that emphatically stressed that a woman's first duty was towards her husband and children.⁶

6. Enter the Arab Spring

Although the uprisings and demonstrations of the Arab Spring were certainly not in general a movement for female liberation, it nevertheless in hindsight marks a turning point which pushed issues of women's rights higher on the agenda across the region. Great upheavals tend to bring underlying tensions to the fore. Moreover, large numbers of women took active part in the protests.

The effects are visible also among Islamists. Islamist women, not least students, took to the streets in 2011 and beyond. One of them, Tawakkul Karman from the Islah Party in Yemen, even shared in the Noble Peace Prize of 2011 for her efforts. In several countries, female Islamists entered parliaments in numbers. In Morocco, the PJD in the elections of 2011 and 2016 had the highest female share of any party, with 24 women elected MPs in 2016. Several female PJD members served as government ministers in the decade following 2011. In Tunisia, al-Nahda supplied 42 of 47 women elected to the Constitutional Assembly in 2011, with one among them, Mehrzia Labidi, serving as vice chair of the assembly. In 2018, Souad Abderrahim was elected as the first female mayor of the capital Tunis on the Nahda list, remarkably not wearing the hijab. In far more conservative Egypt, parliamentary politics remained overwhelmingly male dominated, yet four out of nine female MPs elected in 2011 came from the MB's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) (Škrabáková 2017, pp. 329–59).

At the same time, gender-related issues continued to generate internal tensions. In Morocco, the PJD MP Amina Maelainine became the centre of a public uproar in early 2019 when Moroccan media published pictures of her in the streets of Paris without a hijab. Interestingly, former PM and party leader Abdelilah Benkirane⁷ came out in her defence, considering this a personal matter that no one had the right to interfere with, while the PJD leader and Prime Minister of the time, Saadeddine al-Othmani, criticised her behaviour as unacceptable (Guerraoui 2019).

In Egypt after 2011, female leaders in the Muslim Brothers became somewhat more vocal on women's issues. In 2012, the Women's Committee of the FJP called a conference to mark International Women's Day, 8 March, and discussed a range of topics, including Egyptian women's participation in political life. The long-time central MB leader Manal Abu Hasan stated on the occasion that women were "capable of serving the nation just like men". The military coup in 2013 drove the MB underground. Yet younger female adherents

of Muslim Brothers have grown restive. They have demanded expanded rights inside the organisation and have challenged the subordinate role of women in the traditional family ideology (Biagini 2020, pp. 382–402).

Developments since 2011 have accentuated the tensions around gender issues in Middle East societies in general and among Islamists in particular. In facing the challenge of formulating policies and interpretations on these issues in a rapidly changing society, the Islamist movements are operating within an arena shaped by its past history and development. Understanding the drivers, contradictions, and obstacles populating that arena will equip us to better foresee future outcomes. So how could the logics of this arena going into the Arab Spring be understood?

7. Reactionary Essence or Real Tensions?

In their gender ideology and gender politics, mainstream Islamists by 2010 remained caught in a dilemma between on the one hand their wish to represent modernity, rationality, and progress, and not least to be seen as democrats opposing authoritarian regimes, and on the other hand a powerful mixture of identity politics, patriarchal tradition, and male self-interest. Both the MB declaration of 1994 and their draft programme from 2007, as well as the PJD's election programme of that same year, tried to square the circle of making the Islamist parties appear as modern enlightened organisations and simultaneously as defenders of authenticity and the Islamic heritage against a perceived Western onslaught. Nevertheless, it seems that by 2007 more weight than before was placed on the need to change matters in the direction of a greater societal role for women.

To understand the background for this change, one factor obviously at work was the agenda driven by feminists at the international level, pushing for women's rights, and supported by limited yet vocal secular feminist movements in the Middle East. Despite Islamist ideological resistance to this agenda, it was nevertheless making its impact among important Islamist constituencies such as female students. Far more importantly, social changes, similar to those that preceded the feminist wave of the 1970s in the West, were slowly accumulating strength. Central among these changes was the steadily expanding access to education for women, which in the next instance was bringing more women into the job market.

Although the call for women's rights often ran up against Islamist family ideology, it could in contrast find support in the central Islamist tenet of the individual responsibility of every true believer—male or female—to dedicate one's life to the fight for God's cause.

In ideological terms, the dilemma of the Islamists was linked to the fact that they considered that the family, which they saw as the core of Muslim society, was under attack. Because the role of the woman as mother and wife was central to their understanding of the Muslim family, and was seen as precisely defined in the holy scriptures, any attempt at altering the relation between the genders in the family was suspected of aiming at undermining the family, and thereby Muslim society at large. At the same time, their general drive for progress had pushed many Islamists towards the advocacy of improved education for women and greater participation in society and politics. The predominant line then involved an awkward balance between advocating for full political rights for women (often with the exception that a woman should not be head of state, as we have seen), and more hesitatingly their right to seek employment, while insisting on the man as head of the family, involving a right to make decisions for his wife and daughters. At times, one tried to solve the equation by claiming that male leadership was not valid outside the family, but as pointed to above, this remained problematic, because precisely the man's power in the family would limit women's access to public space outside the home.

There were pronounced regional differences over these questions. In the far West, Moroccan Islamists had accepted quite wide-ranging changes in the family law, and had set up quite autonomous women's organisations. In more conservative Egypt, women in the movement were still much more subordinate to the men, and the movement was as such more sceptical towards reforms seen to affect relations in the family. In the East,

Gulf Islamists had only belatedly come to accept voting rights for women, and the harsh competition from *salafi* political parties in countries such as Kuwait and Bahrain had also left its conservative stamp on the local branches of the Muslim Brothers.

We may easily conclude that the Islamists as represented by the PJD and the MB by 2010 largely represented positions regarding relations between the genders in general, and the position of women in society and politics more specifically, which in a Western European context would place them squarely within reactionary circles. Yet if we wish to understand the dynamic role of Islamists in Muslim majority societies in the Middle East, the Islamists must be understood against the context where they were in fact active, and which differed a lot from a Western setting.

As shown above, part of the restrictive practices when it came to active female participation in politics were related to security concerns. However, more importantly, patriarchal structures have remained strong across the Middle East and North Africa. In 2002, the first Arab Human Development Report identified the lack of empowerment of women as one of three key deficits hampering development in the Arab region.⁸ Conservative attitudes towards family structure and gender relations permeated Egyptian and Moroccan society among most classes, including the middle class, working class, and farmers from which the Islamists drew most of their followers and voters. To a large extent, these conservative attitudes were also typical of the Islamists themselves, but we must realise that there were as well considerations of tactics at play. It has been a not uncommon understanding in the West that if Islamists were to make a liberal statement, they were merely playing tactically to a foreign audience and to the local liberal elites. Such tactical considerations have obviously been part of the picture, but only part. For there were tactical considerations that were at least as important, namely pre-empting criticism “from the right”. Islamists such as those of the MB and the PJD were constantly being criticised and pressured from forces who thought they had gone much too far in adapting to the West and Western culture. For movements who tried precisely to pose as the authentic force, as defenders of the local cultural and moral universe against outside attack, such criticism threatened one main pillar of their legitimacy. This threat was real and was by the 2000s being accentuated. An essential part of the foundation for the popular support the Islamists enjoyed was the fact that the majority of the people were believing Muslims and strongly attached to their religion, even if the degree of pious practice varied greatly. This created a resonance when the Islamists formulated their reform programmes with reference to religion. However, a closer inspection of popular religiosity would show that in general it was tied to quite conservative understandings of Islam, which would sanction tradition-bound attitudes towards social norms. People’s immediate reference in religious issues was the local *ulama* educated at traditional institutions of learning such as for instance al-Azhar in Egypt or al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco, or in other cases local Sufi leaders. The interpretations of the scripture made by such religious leaders in relation to social relations were often far more literalist and rigid than those represented by Islamists such as the MB. What was often broadly referred to as *al-sahwa al-islamiyya* (the Islamic awakening), expressed a mobilisation of popular religiosity. It included everything from Koran reading circles by way of charitable work for the poor in the name of the faith to organisations who fought with political (and sometimes military) means for an Islamisation of the state. Ideologically the awakening encompassed very divergent tendencies as regards to which degree one was willing to reinterpret the message of religion in the light of changed social circumstances; from very conservative to very reform-oriented. Within the political field, the relatively modernist tendency linked to the MB had had the arena more or less to itself for a long time (even if that tendency itself encompassed contradictory ideological trends). Still, the MB and comparable groups, such as the PJD, always had to take into consideration that in those population segments where they recruited their members and voters there were widespread attitudes that were more conservative than their own. In the last few decades before the Arab Spring, there was a certain development towards these conservative trends forming political organisations to compete with the Muslim Brother-type parties. This was most visible in the Gulf region, as

in Kuwait where the MB-related Islamic Constitutional Movement was often surpassed by various *salafi* groups during elections. Moreover, in other areas, there were initiatives on the way to organise more conservative alternatives to the MB. With the *salafis* on the march, we must thus consider that conservative-leaning statements from leading Islamists in the field of gender relations may well have been intended to guard one's back against accusations of caving in to the West. There was a marked tendency in this connection towards any talk of strengthening the position of women coming under attack as giving in to Western attacks on the Muslim family in order to dissolve it, and thereby weakening Muslim solidarity and integrity. In this situation, a scenario tended to emerge where the more organisations such as the MB and the PJD talked of improving women's rights in society in general, the more they needed to compensate by emphasising that male guardianship in the family and the woman's primary duties as mother and wife were sacred principles which should not be touched. It is possible to see here a parallel to Iran, where female politicians in the Islamic Republic, who by the very fact of their position in public life represented a break with the traditional role of women, on every public occasion presented themselves in very strict *hijab*, with the face barely visible from inside the *chador*.

8. Conclusions

To gain a deeper understanding of the role of the Islamists in relation to the gender issue, we must pose the question: when we observe a tension in Islamist discourse between promoting female participation and defending a patriarchal order in society and family, how should this be interpreted? Does the evidence from the pre-Arab Spring period show us a movement with an ideology which in its essence was misogynist, and that Islamists only under extreme pressure from social change and competing ideologies would be pushed into opening a limited room for progress for women in some areas? Or were there elements in the "core ideological package" of the Islamists which, in interplay with social change, propelled change on the women's issue? I would claim that there *was* (and remains) a real internal tension in Islamist ideology in this field. The slogan of authenticity would easily lead in a conservative direction for the simple reason that patriarchal gender relations have long been a focus for Western criticism directed at Muslim societies. In this situation, defending these relations as they were inherited easily became part of the defence against what was seen as a continuing attack on one's own identity, religion, and culture. That the movements were at the outset male-dominated and that men may have felt their privileges threatened by social change supported by new ideologies only strengthened this defensive conservative reaction.

However, on the other side, the Islamist movements have from the start been intensely concerned with progress, both in a material sense and in the sense of enlightenment. Furthermore, and not least, their project for the renewal of Muslim society has placed great emphasis on the individual responsibility of every believer. The idea of progress has, if at times only superficially and tactically so, predisposed the Islamists to a wish to avoid an image as reactionaries. This is part of the reason why Islamists liked to underline how they favoured progress also for women, even while sticking to the traditional model of the family. However, the idea of individual responsibility cuts deeper. For when women in increasing numbers devoted themselves to fighting for the cause and joined Islamist organisations, while simultaneously, improved education and social development more generally works in the direction of higher female participation in the job market, it became gradually more difficult to uphold ideas of women as creatures that should, as it were, relate to God and God's cause through their men. The emergence of more distinct women's voices within the movements was a central driver in the change we have witnessed in the period before 2011, a factor that has just grown in force since then. As outlined above, going forward, the gender issue will be one of the main challenges confronting the Islamist movement. The outcome is uncertain, but the tensions over this issue that are internal to its ideology and its history will continue to be productive.

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Notes

- ¹ (The Muslim Brothers 1994). For the Arabic original cf. “Makanat al-mar’a kama yuraha al-ikhwan al-muslimun”, www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title= (accessed on 20 March 2022).
- ² A’isha Jum’a: “Dawr al-mar’a bayn al-taf’il wal-tajhil”, 26 March 2005, www.ikhwanonline.com/print.asp?ArtID=11284&SecID=325 (accessed on 30 April 2009).
- ³ Interview with Manal Abu al-Hasan 4 February 2009. After Mubarak’s fall, Abu al-Hasan became leader of the Cairo Women’s Commission of the MB’s Freedom and Justice party.
- ⁴ Interviews with male and female MB leaders, Cairo May 2008.
- ⁵ Mariam Ali, “The Muslim Brotherhood Does Not Support Female Circumcision”, Ikhwanweb 13 June 2008.
- ⁶ For one instance see “Al-mar’a al’amila kharij al-manzil wa tarbiyat al-abna’” (The Woman working outside the house and the upbringing of the children), 19 August 2003, www.ikhwanonline.com/print.asp?ArtID=1446&SecID=325 (accessed on 27 April 2009).
- ⁷ Re-elected party leader after the party’s crushing election defeat in 2021.
- ⁸ (UNDP 2002, p. 28). Cf. the follow-up report, (UNDP 2005).

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