Mustaqillat: navigating women's mobilities in post-2011 Egypt

Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty

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Mustaqillat: Navigating Women’s Mobilities in Post-2011 Egypt

A Thesis Submitted to:
Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women’s Studies.

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for:
A Masters of Arts degree in Gender and Women’s Studies.

Specialization:
Middle East and North Africa

By:
Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty

Under Supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker

Fall 2019
Acknowledgements

To my mom, the woman whose experiences have opened my eyes, Thanaa Mohamed Ali.

To my dearest sisters, Ghada and Kholoud. To my lovely father, Ahmed Eldamaty. To Mohamed, my partner, thanks for the support, the intimacy, and the love you give me. To my dear nieces, Taline and Celine.

To the women who shared my life with me at al-Mahalla al-Kubra for more than 20 years. To the friend who shares my inner thoughts, speaking them out loud, Alaa Hosny. To Hind Mahmoud, the friend who never compromises her feminist beliefs. To Marina Joseph, the friend who visited me while I was doubting my activism, and feminism, encouraging me to apply for that Master degree.

To the women who trusted me, allowing me to enter their lives, for my coauthors in this research. To the women who gave me that honor to share sensitive parts of their istiqal journeys.

To the women who took the January 25th revolution seriously, and those who believed in them. To the newcomers, the outsiders, and the othered. To those who have to write their own history. To every woman who has been told that her experiences, and beliefs are not a political priority. To the women who have realized that social movements are evoked in their kitchen.

This thesis is dedicated to all of you. Thanks for being here.
Abstract

Following the Egyptian revolution of January, the 25\textsuperscript{th}, 2011, the term women’s independence, \textit{istiqlal ijta'ay}, has been widely used by young Egyptian women. A \
\textit{mustaqilla} (independent woman) identifies herself as a woman who is socio-economically 

independent from her family, lives on her own, and works to support herself. This thesis is 

concerned with the emergence of independent women, \textit{mustaqillat}, as a social phenomenon, 

and questions how the phenomenon of \textit{istiqlal} is constructed. What are its socio-economic 

dimensions, and associated meanings? Based on an ethnographic fieldwork with a group of 
Egyptian women who identify themselves as \textit{mustaqillat}, this thesis focuses on \textit{mustaqillat} 

who moved from their governorates to Cairo, and other cities in Egypt, for the purpose of 

having a greater mobility.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Prologue

My activism began after the revolution of January 25th, 2011. I belong to a working-class family that was never involved in nor cared much about politics. I lived with my family for 21 years in the city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra, where I was born. I began to closely watch the events, as they unfolded, and in opposition to my family’s will. I decided to participate in demonstrations, labeling myself an activist. In early 2012, I founded the digital feminist platform ‘The Girls’ Revolution,’ concerned with women sharing their own experiences with gender-based violence, such as FGM, sexual harassment, and forced hijab. This allowed me to communicate with other young women from various parts of Egypt, and focus on differences and similarities between my experiences and theirs. Much of these experiences centered around issues of sexual and domestic violence, and the related problem of restrictions on mobilities and freedom of movement. The notion of free choices thus emerged as a central concern. Many of the young women who shared their experiences with mobility on ‘The Girls’ Revolution’ mentioned that their families deny their rights to free movement based on the idea that they should be ‘respectful,’ linking freedom of movement to marriage, i.e. “when you marry, you can travel alone;” when you marry, you can take off your hijab;” when you marry, you can return home late.” These concerns were widely shared among young women, whether they lived in Cairo, or in other governorates like myself.

In June 2012, I had a clash with my family, because I wanted to take off my hijab. I consequently decided to move out of my family’s home to Cairo where I believed I would be free to decide for myself. My choice of Cairo as a new city of residence was motivated by my
excitement that Cairo would be a more open space for women, and where I could move freely. When I arrived in Cairo, I had to find a place to rent, a place that is ‘safe,’ and would not question the reason why my family was not with me. It was not an easy task, as I searched the internet for rooms to rent. Places for young women to reside in Cairo, *daur mughtaribat*, (hostels) were conditioned by the family’s presence as evidence that the renter is not a runaway, *(hariba)* from her family. I called several hostels, but all of them asked for my family’s consent. My online research for a room was unsuccessful. One of my friends recommended that I look in the area around Cairo University, where female students who were unable to secure a place in the university dorms share flats to be close to the university, *Bein al-Sarayat* neighborhood. It worked. I found a bed in a shared room, in a shared apartment that the owner managed. Curfew was mandatory at 11.00 pm. No resident was permitted to be late, otherwise, she would be dismissed. I accepted. This was the only option. I realized that whether or not I live with my family, I have to comply with the dominant social standards of respectability as a woman. I was also confronted with the fact that I was not financially independent, in order to build a life for myself in Cairo. Finding a job was obligatory. Failure to find a job would have forced me to return home. My family would have seen this as failure, putting more restrictions on me. In fact, it was my biggest fear, because even if I had conflicts with my family, back then they perceived themselves as my only resort for survival. I wanted was to prove that I had other options.

Fortunately, I was offered a job at a women’s rights non-governmental organization. I came to identify myself as a *mustaqilla*, and wrote a Facebook blog narrating the clash over hijab, “It’s time for *istiqlal ijtema’ay*.” My blog received tens of messages from young women on my personal profile, and ‘TheGirlsRevolution’ page, asking me to help them to be *mustaqillat*. In the initial stages of my *istiqlal*, when I was not sure of the outcome of my experience, I provided no advice other than the place where I found cheap rooms to rent. I
repaired my relationship with my family who were satisfied with the justification of moving to Cairo for work, finding it a reasonable purpose for living alone in another city. After a few months, the owner of the apartment dismissed me, after I broke the curfew. I then stayed with a friend until I managed to rent a flat for myself, and started to announce that I need women flatmates to share the flat. From my experience, I realized that being a mustaqilla comes with a price, whereby negotiations are our companions, and compromises exist on many levels, starting from the act of moving, to the process of renting, and remaking the idea of home.

Since then, and the term mustaqillat has become a category of self-identification among many women in Egypt. The number of groups helping mustaqillat on social media, for instance Femi-Hub, has increased. My positionality, both as an activist and a member of the group, has allowed me to access mustaqillat’s networks, interact with them, and observe how mustaqillat as a phenomenon has not yet been documented, nor conceptualized in academic literature. The internet has played a salient role in keeping me in touch with mustaqillat. My activism on the cyberspace, and the visibility I gained, thanks to my radical feminist views and cyberbullying, have allowed me to be in contact with other women, whether they are mustaqillat, or still seeking istiqlal.

The Femi-Hub group was founded in late 2015 by Sohila Mohamed, and two of her friends. They successfully managed to mobilize a large number of mustaqillat in one Facebook group: Femi-Hub. The platform has served as a refuge for mustaqillat, where they share their stories, concerns, seek help, and actively interact with each other. As Sohila explains in an interview conducted for this research in September 2018, the main purpose of the group is “mobilizing women seeking istiqlal, and mustaqillat.” To have the maximum support, Femi-Hub runs different strategies to keep the platform safe for women, irrespective of their social status, religious views, and/or sexual and political orientations. I attended the social gatherings that the platform manages, for this research.
I relied on the internet to contact and interact with my interlocutors. During my fieldwork conducted between September 2018, and March 2019, I participated with mustaqillat in a number of online and offline activities. I attended their birthday parties, they attended mine, contributed to home parties, and socialized with them.

**Research Questions**

The conceptualization of this form of women’s independence, *istiqlal*, is mainly built on women delinking themselves from the family as a social and economic structure. Not only does independence, *istiqlal*, passively mean not to be identified as ‘dependent’ on their families, but it also means the status of being free to move out of the family’s home, to have a greater sense of mobility. Through my fieldwork, I investigated the micro-level dynamics led to that feeling of restricted mobility, mainly in the family, and the macro-level ones constituting that perception of restricted mobility versus *istiqlal* as attempted processes for women’s mobilities in post-2011 Egypt. My thesis is trying to answer the following questions. First: Why do participants seek *istiqlal*? How do mustaqillat negotiate *istiqlal* with their family? Does *istiqlal* affect their freedom of movement, compared to the family’s home? Second: Does the phenomenon of *istiqlal* challenge concepts of family and women’s normalized identities as familial subjects? Third: How do participants remake the idea of home? What challenges do face them as women living alone, by both their new community members, and the state? What are the affects attached to the experience of *istiqlal*?

**Contextualization**

Young women who live away from their families for the purpose of higher education, or jobs in other cities are called *mughtaribat*, and women who left their families with no intention of return are called runaway, *haribat*. Mustaqillat is linked to to *mughtaribat*, and *haribat*. Young women (*shabbat*), who are in their twenties, leave their family homes for
purposes such as education, especially those who live in governorates other than Cairo. However, this purposed moving is restricted by the duration of their studies, or the geography of their assigned public-sector jobs. This moving out has been socially accepted to a large extent, as education and geographically assigned jobs legitimate their living alone. For instance, women doctors who are required to complete their degrees in one of the public hospitals in governorates, as a practical experience and license to be officially admitted to the profession. Hostels in public universities, such as Cairo University, have specialized residences for both male and female students who wish to study in a specific field that is not offered in their governorate, or simply based on the geographical distribution of high school graduates based on their grades, known as tansiq. Students who are not admitted to university hostels, rent apartments in neighborhoods close to the university. Women living alone in Egypt is not a new phenomenon, it began decades before 2011.

Independence is a term that is, to a large extend, linked to colonialism and struggles for liberty, (McMichael, 2017). The term refers to the status of delinking oneself from a dominant power structure. In Capital, Volume 1, (pp. 161, 202, 209, 217, 457, 472), Marx conceptualizes the term independence in different occasions to point to the status of disconnecting individuals from the hegemonic structure of capitalism. In doing so, he refers to workers’ independence from capitalists, individuals’ independence from the fetishism of commodities, and workers’ independence from their fellow workers based on the division of labor inside factories.

Federici (2009, 17) uses the term independence in reference to peasants’ struggles against slavery and feudalism, and the rise of capitalism as an alternative economic system that promises freedom. She traces the economic dependence of women to men to the rise of the nuclear family in Europe, in which women have been domesticated for the sake of capital accumulation. Capitalism has transformed these struggles for independence into exploitative
work relations built on dependency chains that start and end with capital relations. Within capitalist binaries of breadwinners/housewives, productive/nonproductive, public/private, and gendered divisions of labor, women have been identified as dependent socioeconomic and gendered subjects. In modern industrial societies, independence is linked to workers’ waged labor, which is the family wage. The family wage includes workers’ dependent subjects, children, elders, and women, (Weeks, 2011, p. 51).

A mustaqilla is a woman who moves out of her family’s home, becomes financially self-sustaining, declaring that she is no longer a dependent person. Dependence here refers to the status of a person who depends on others, primarily family members, socially and more specifically, economically. This includes children, spouses, and elders. Independence, or istiqlal, is built upon a set of assumptions, i.e. women are perceived as dependents on male family members, who in return regulate their mobilities. Despite the heterogeneity of Egyptian society in terms of class, social statuses, regional variations, and other criteria of social stratification and differentiation, mobility of single women across Egypt is constrained by micro entities like the family, or communities, and the state. Istiqlal goes beyond delinking oneself from her family. It is a form of expressing agency in front of restricted mobility in a wider sense. Istiqlal is a way through which mustaqillat constitute their subjectivities, and affect the subjectivities of those around them. Istiqlal cannot be achieved only by moving out of the family’s home, and it necessarily requires the woman to find a job to sustain her living away from the family’s financial support. Similar to how education serves as a socially accepted justification for mughtaribat to live away from the family, work serves a similar legitimizing role for mustaqillat. Both groups, mustaqillat and mughtaribat are premised on a purpose for not living with the family.

An overlapping occurs here between the two groups, many mughtaribat do not identify themselves as mustaqillat, unless they find an occupation that allows them to financially
support themselves, and to continue legitimizing their statuses. Nonetheless, terms are not fixed, as some mustaqillat identify themselves as mugtaribat, although their spatial separation from the family is purposed by work, not education, as in the case of geographical assignment of jobs. This thesis focuses on those who identify themselves as mustaqillat, and their negotiations with their families, other mustaqillat, the larger community, and the state.

Work becomes the means through which women claim their istiqlal. Joining the market as a laborer in this situation is a two-sided coin. While a mustaqilla is trying to delink herself from the family as a social structure, she is entering the labor force where she cannot delink herself from. Independence comes as a package with other forms of dependence. This problematizes the term independence itself. It is a hard equation that mustaqillat have to face as part of their journey with istiqlal. Negotiations with the family on moving out draw upon the necessity of work to the person as a sense of achieving herself. By associating mobility to labor, mustaqillat have indirectly participated in shifting much of the social perceptions of women living alone. Runaway, or hariba, has been a social stigma of single women who leave their families’ homes without a socially accepted purpose, such as education, as in the term mugtaribat.

Many of the mustaqillat participating in this research have moved to Cairo. Many of them belong to lower middle-class families who live in Egyptian governorates other than Cairo. They frequently visit their families, keeping their familial relations alive. In contrast to the runaway, hariba who cuts such relations and hides, as both the family and the state track her to return her to her family. In many cases, the family call the police to track her, and forcibly return her back home. This is inseparable from the social stigmatization of haribat, as most of the time they are socially perceived as sinful women who bring shame to their families, by leaving them behind and running away. The hariba is portrayed in the media as an impulsive
and irrational woman who leaves her family, which often ends up either with her regretting what she did, or dead as in Naguib Mahfouz’s well-known novel, *Zoqaq Al-Madaq*.

*Mustaqillat* negotiate with their families to avoid being labeled as *harebr*. This does not assume that familial conflicts do not occur before and after *istiqlal*, or that women perceived as *haribat* cannot identify themselves as *mustaqillat*. Likewise, some women who live with their families identify themselves as *mustaqillat*. This has been revealed through my fieldwork, as many women wanted to participate in this research told me they identify themselves as *mustaqillat*, despite living with their families, asserting how financially independent and self-sufficient they are, and how they use these statuses to identify themselves as *mustaqillat*. Other women use the term *mustaqillat* to identify themselves. While the latter group are spatially separated from their families, their families financially support them in their *istiqlal*, helping them pay for their rent, provide them with some food supplies, or pay for their studies.

In my thesis, I focused on *mustaqillat* who spatially separate from their families. This is purposed by my intention to investigate the challenges that those women face, by living apart from their families. However, the challenge of *mustaqillat* to live alone goes beyond the family. *Mustaqillat* confront morality politics, whenever they search for an apartment to rent in Cairo. Landowners, doormen, neighbors, and even brokers either deny women the right to rent apartments, or supervise their residences and spy on them as potential trouble makers, and a form of social disorder. This comes along with politics of securitizations that often target women living alone, as a continuous attempt to secure public order and public moralities. Through our close interactions with my interlocutors, I examine how these power relations affect their experiences with *istiqlal*, and how they maneuver and cope with them. This thesis explores what *istiqlal* means, how it happens, how it affects subjectivities, and how the concept of home is made and remade.
Literature Review

1. Family as a Historic Institution

This section is devoted to introduce different theories on patriarchy and mobility, in their intersection with other power structures, such as capitalism, and law. The academic literature does not address the phenomenon of istiqlal, except a mention by Asef Bayat (2017). He refers to it as a social phenomenon in post-2011 Egypt, and links it to mobility.

Theories on patriarchy range from and not limited to, liberal, radical, socialist, post-modernist, and post-structuralist approaches, (Feldman, 2001). These theories have given attention to the power relations that sustain women’s positions in relation to men, one of these relations is the family. Since this thesis is concerned with how women negotiate mobility with and beyond the family, this section of the literature review maps how the family, as a concept. Also, since most of this literature introduce the family as ‘patriarchal,’ it is beneficial to understand how and why the family is perceived as such, and how this affects women’s mobility.

Radical feminists such as Maria Mies (2014) argue that patriarchy, as a hierarchy of power, deeply relies on the biological differences between the sexes, where women are being controlled by men, in what she calls ‘male domination’ over women. Nevertheless, she agrees with Marxist feminists who argue that patriarchy and capitalism are correlated, since the rise of capitalism required a masculine workforce, at the same time it subjugated women to men for their reproductive roles and unpaid work. Silvia Federici (2009) argues that capitalism has arisen on the backs of women whose reproductive roles contributed to increase the labor force, and their unpaid work has been subsumed under the ‘family wage.’ A similar argument is made by Dalla Costa and James (1975) who argued that capitalism idealized the family as a social structure, for the purpose of capital accumulation, what Federici (2009) refers to women as ‘bypasses’ for capital accumulation, and a continuing process of
‘primitive accumulation.’ In both Marxist, and radical feminist approaches to women’s position within the family in relation to capital accumulation, the distinction between the so-called public and private spheres is essential, with the public identified as masculine and productive, and the private as feminine and nonproductive. Janet Careston (2003) concedes this binary as a distinction between two worlds, the inside and the outside of the family house, where men are identified by the social world outside the house, and women are identified by what is inside it as a feminized space.

Rodriguez’s (2010) has critiqued Marxist approaches of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, since the Marxist notion of ‘simple’ versus ‘productive’ labor has intensified the degree to which women’s unpaid labor is subsumed by both capitalism and men workers. In other words, the perception of women’s unpaid labor within the household has been one of the consequences why paid wage labor was prioritized in Marxist literature and encompassed in ‘class struggles’ over struggles that women go through within the frame of the family. Engels (1942) considers the family as a capitalist product that subordinates women; thus, he called for women’s participation in production processes as an emancipatory action from such submission to men. Maria Mies (2014) points to this conception of women’s struggles within the family as private, while the workers struggle is not only prioritized, but publicized and politicized too, what she considers as a reinforcing of existing power relations between men and women, rendering the power hierarchy of the family untouched.

Ironic is how the family has been subsided as a power system, for the class struggle to gain more visibility as taking place in the politicized public sphere versus the depoliticization of the familial power relations perceived as private. It is something that has re-emerged within the highly politicized context in Egypt post-2011, when istiqal as a discourse has gained less visibility, for it being tied to the family, compared to other discourses on women’s mobilities, especially sexual violence in the public spheres. The bulk of academic
literature on women’s mobility in post-2011 Egypt, has focused on sexualized violence against women, and how women’s bodies are being perceived in the public space after 2011, (Ammar, 2011; Hafez, 2012; Abouelnaga, 2016; El-Said, 2014; Hasso, 2015; Rizzo, 2014). 

Istiqlal takes place within the framework of the family, the sexual violence phenomenon, on the other hand, is linked to women’s visibility in public spaces. Little attention has been given to mustaqillat and istiqlal. Although the phenomenon of women moving out from their families’ houses to live alone is not new, as I mentioned previously, the term has been widely spread in post-2011 Egypt, encouraging many women to start their istiqlal and identify themselves as mustaqillat.

Kandiyoti (1988; 1993) argues that patriarchy as a power structure has developed within the framework of the family, and introduces a concept of patriarchy as fluid and negotiable by both men and women members of the family. She argues that women strategize to position themselves within their families, and bargaining to benefit from the system, which makes their gendered subjectivities fluid and non-fixed, and affects male family members’ subjectivities as a result. This calls into question how the family plays a role in constituting gender identities. Joseph (1993) refers to this fluidity as ‘patriarchal connectivity,’ in which individuals constitute their gendered subjectivities in relation to other family members.

This is intersected with other factors, such as age. For instance, elder women have authorities that younger women, and young men do not. Women are usually identified as the core of morality and respectability politics, the family’s honor, (Baron, 2005; Kogacioglc, 2004), restrictions on their mobility are intensified, if compared to men who are considered honor keepers by sustaining control over women’s bodies. Thus, in order to preserve the family’s honor, women’s mobility is limited to the so-called ‘private sphere,’ in which they, in return, develop their sense of the self, and constitute their gender identities in relation to men, (Careston, 2003). Therefore, fluid subjectivity in that sense means that a person could
develop a sense of the self that is both subjected to control, and prepared to gain control. In this regard, *istiklal* is a transgressive action to the normalized identities for women as familial and gendered subjects. When they delink themselves from the family as a social structure, and start identifying themselves as independent, *mustaqillat* are challenging the social hierarchies upon which women’s gendered identities and mobilities are built. Nevertheless, this is challenged by the fact that such gendered identities and roles are the socially accepted for individuals. That is to say, gender identities within the family are normalized and institutionalized by the state.

Enloe (2004) theorizes patriarchy as a complex power dynamic that is not only inherited in the family, but legitimized and institutionalized by other social forces and hegemonic discourses, including the state. This takes me to the role of the Egyptian state in regulating women’s mobility and perpetuating the family as the only legitimate space for women. In her book, *Egypt as a Woman*, (Baron, 2005) historicizes the position of women in relation to the state through law. She traces the secularization of the criminal law during the late Ottoman Empire and early modern Egyptian state through the adoption of the French-derived law in late nineteenth century Egypt. This secularization of the penal code gave the state space to regulate honor-based crimes, usually conducted against women thought to be involved in sexual affairs outside of marriage. These transgressions adjudicated by Islamic courts, or solved according to customary laws, have increased the power of the state over the social domain. The 1923 constitution inaugurated right to primary education for women but without a specific focus on the status of women, or the family. The 1956 constitution allowed women to vote for the first time, it mentioned Islam as the religion of the state, and the family as the main unit of the Egyptian society, a unit that is based on “religion, morals, and nationalism.” The 1971 constitution proclaimed the Shari’a as the main source of legislations, and added a clear obligation of the state in article (9) to “preserve and develop the authentic nature of the
Egyptian family, including familial values and traditions.” This goes along with article (11) that mentioned for the first time that the state should support women in managing their familial and work duties, according to Islamic Shari’a Law. Added to that is article (12) that authorized the ‘community’ to take care of public morals and enhancing authentic Egyptian traditions. The 1971 constitution was in effect until February 2011, with additional engagements with global convections, such as The Convention of Eliminating all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). According to the New Woman Foundation, an Egyptian NGO founded in 1980s, the CEDAW reservations made by the Egyptian state on articles: (2; 9; 16; 29) were mainly built upon perceiving these articles as opposed to the Shari’a, in terms of marriage, and equality between men and women within the family. In its reservations on article (16) of the convention, the Egyptian state considers itself as the regulator of social relationships between men and women inside the family, according to Islam. To elaborate, the objection included a clear statement that marriage in Islam guarantees equality between the husband who is required to provide for the household, and the wife who is financially dependent on that husband; thus, he is the one who decides divorce, in contrast to the wife who is denied that right, unless she has a judicial permission of divorce. In short, the Egyptian state plays a vital role in perpetuating and idealizing the family, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. Despite the changes in Personal Status Law in 1980s and 1990s, there has been an intentional ignorance of a specialized law to criminalize domestic violence, justifying this as a way to keep the unity of the family, and its privacy. These articles have been included in the 2014 constitution, particularly in articles (10, 11, 12). Feldman (2001) argues that the modern state empowers the male citizen in the private sphere by considering his relation to women as ‘private,’ while it deprives him of his political and democratic rights, in a constant subordination circle where the patriarch here is
the gendered and masculine state. In that sense, *istiqlal* challenges the state as a guardian of the social fabric. This role of the state is meant to preserve public order.

Additional are socio-economic factors that constitute the family and gender identities within it. For example, the changing of Egypt’s political economy has affected the family as a social and economic structure. Structural adjustment programs and economic instability over the past 20 years, according to Ammar (2011) and Rizzo (2014) have played an “emasculating” role in Egypt. Singerman (2013), Maher (2013), and Hafez (2012) demonstrate that these economic changes affected the gendered relations within the frame of the family in Egypt. That is to say, when women entered the labor force out of necessity, this has led to a gap between the masculine man who could not provide for the household, and his declining authority over family members due to this economic inability. This is suggestive that the family and what happens inside its household, including relational connectivity and gender roles, are not separable from what happens ‘outside’ these households, (Careston, 2003). These analyses give clues as how socioeconomic power dynamics exceed male domination to other forms of dominance, adopted by external agents that are not necessarily human on both the nation-state and international economy levels, (re)producing social relations more complex and intersectional than a single signifier of power such as, patriarchy, (Enloe, 2004; Feldman, 2001). This is relevant to studying the phenomenon of *istiqlal*, as it challenges that concept of the family idealized by the state for decades. It introduces a social modality for women, parallel to the family, in an attempt to destabilize that normalized social order.

2. **Moralizing and Securitizing the Social**

The obsession with reserving morals as a constitutive component of the social in Egypt, is not something new. Hanan Kholoussy (2010) historicizes the marriage crisis in the beginning of the twentieth century in Egypt. She illustrated how middle-class men preferred high
education over marriage, which many public figures at that time considered as a masculinity crisis that threatens the Egyptian society, (Amar, 2011a). This happened in parallel with perceived young men as the modernizing subjects of the nations, and women as the social reproducers of new modern generations. This moral anxiety continued in post-colonial Egypt. Beir (2011) mentions that there were constant demands to criminalize paid sex work, as threatening to the public morals of the Egyptian society. So, it has been criminalized since then, by article number (296) of the Egyptian criminal law. By the rise of neoliberalism in Egypt, the anxieties over public morals remained in the hands of the state, introducing an era of securitization. Lazzarato (2005), and Venn (2009) argue that neoliberalism has been globally tied to insecurity, and risk. These require more securitization processes to be conducted, either by the state, or by private corporations. What defines securitization, according to (Ammar, 2011a), is the ways in which social, economic, and political affairs are dealt with as security issues by police forces. During the last few decades, the security state has been the entity responsible for reserving public and social orders. This included targeting politically active groups, such as Islamist groups, feminists, social riots i.e. Bread Riots (1977), Workers uprisings (2006), the Sudanese refugees massacre (2005), and subjects that are seen as abnormal or do not follow the social order as regulated by the state i.e. homosexuals, sex workers.

The moral anxieties continued to play a role until very recently. Article number (10) of the recent Egyptian constitution issued in 2014, mentions that the family is the unity of the Egyptian society, and it is based on nationalism, morality, and religion, and the state is responsible for its unity, and values. In such a context where the family is normalized as the unit of the society, and the state is the institution that regulates how this unity is maintained, it is not easy for individuals go against such hegemony without serious consequences. The article clearly states that the state ensures values, and morality, which are two loose terms
that can be interpreted for state benefits. To explain, the article is exclusionary for many citizens who neither identify themselves as familial subjects, nor do they follow the heteronormative order on which this concept of family is built. This article is critical, since it is reflected on the criminal law, as well. For example, article number (296) of the Egyptian criminal law, criminalizes ‘debauchery,’ which includes same-sex relations, and paid sex work. According to AMNESTY international, November (2017), more than 70 persons were arrested and accused of homosexuality, in a mass arrest following raising the rainbow flag in a concert held in Cairo, August (2017). Whereas, over 50 parliament members have signed a law proposal to explicitly criminalize homosexuality, in a separate article of the Criminal Law. In his article, Hossam Bahgat (2004) demonstrates the relationship between morality and what he called “the vice police,” as a relationship in which the state places itself as the protector of moralities, on the expense of individuals perceived by the state as threatening to morals, and order. He refers to the Queen Boat incident in which more than 50 men were arrested, defamed in media, and accused of homosexuality, and foreign spying.

Public moralities in Egypt are increasing anxieties for the state, and a mechanism through which it introduces itself as the guardian of the society, and its values. Not only does the state target sex workers, or people with non-normative sexual orientation, but it also targets women who leave their families’ houses, for the same purpose of reserving public orders and ensuring moralities, as I discussed in chapter one. In his argument, Khaled Mansour (2016) mentions many incidents in which police officers randomly stop men in the streets as suspected homosexuals. He recalls a well-known case of an Egyptian woman who got forcibly divorced from her husband and writer Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, because of the latter’s religious views that some people took to court as evidence that he was no longer a Muslim and his relationship to his wife is Haram, and socially seen as a moral corruption. According to the Guardian, Egyptian novelist Ahmed Naji was sentenced to two years in prison, after a
lawsuit raised against him for violating public modesty, November (2016). Another law case was raised against actress Rania Youssef for wearing a transparent dress during Cairo International Film Festival, accusing her of ‘incitement to debauchery,’ The New York Times, December (2018). Rania Youssef was hosted in a TV show broadcasted on MBC, to apologize for “the Egyptian people,” for wearing such a revealing dress, promising she would never do it again, and cried saying that “I am your daughter.” Only then, the criminal charges against her were dropped. The state uses police forces, and judicial systems to allow people to report other people and accuse them of being morally corrupted.

This is suggestive that the complex relationship between securitization and public moralities in Egypt are increasing over time, and is used as a tool by which the state controls both political and social lives of citizens. In this case, istiqlal and women living alone are targets for process of securitization, for being familyless, and do not follow the heteronormative order of the social.

3. **Reconstructing Home**

In her famous book, *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir discusses how can a woman be ‘independent.’ In her analysis, she mentions that the first thing that many women do to feel and express their independence is a space that she rules, a home. In this construction of home, she expressed that a woman’s autonomy is reflected on the spaces she manages by herself. In spite of associating women with the home, or the house, as a ‘private space,’ De Beauvoir did not reproduce it by telling that women look for a space to consider home. Rather, she illustrates that having a space of her own would make a woman more autonomous in terms of how she controls that space, and builds her personal attachments to it. Janet Careston (2003) argues that houses are places where memories and relationships to others and to objects are giving meanings. For her, houses are identified by such meanings given to them. Houses reproduce meanings. Habitual actions can also give meanings to houses. For example, home
is where food is made, or where clothes and dishes are washed. Such practices constitute the meanings given to a house, as well as highlight normalized relationships of power. Her argument on houses explains that kin relations are not just given by blood. Individuals sharing one space together are related by forms of kinships that depend on shared interests, concerns, habits. She argues that houses are given meaning by what is ‘outside them,’ too. So, a house is defined as a place of stability, in relation to an unstably settled outside. A point that Samira Aghacy (2014) refers to as a segregation between public and private spheres is reflected on Rashi al-Daif’s novel, *Passage to Dusk* (1986). The narrator thinks that his home is a distinguished from its incoherent and violent outside that is shaped by the civil war in West Beirut, (Aghacy, 2014, p. 75). This spatial differentiation between his home and public streets, infected with conflicts, but gives him a sense of ownership over his private space. Therefore, home is both the inside and the outside. This inside includes the relationships between people and the objects they use, or objects that give the sense of home to a place.

Yeal Navaro-Yashin (2012) examines the relationship between affects and subjectivities in a given space, where objects play a role in constituting subjectivities of people. She makes an interesting point referring to how individuals define themselves in relation to objects, making their sense of self extended between the inside and the outside of their bodies and sensations. This is relevant to my argument on *istiqlal* as the process of making home rises as a fundamental aspect of *istiqlal* experience. When *mustaqillat* rent room or apartments they appropriate these spaces as extension of their personhood, depending on the practices and the objects they generate. Their homes are reflective of what are ‘outside,’ such as economic decisions, moral anxieties, and securitization. However, making and remaking of homes over and over again captures that constitution of subjectivity among many *mustaqillat*, making it harder for them to relate or attach to many spaces, many objects, and many people. That may
be one reason why getting together by sharing the experience of istiqlal, has proven its significance for many mustaqillat.

4. On Egyptian Feminisms

I would like to locate the phenomenon of istiqlal with the larger context of Egyptian feminisms, and women’s movements in Egypt, since the beginning of the twentieth century. Historicizing the Egyptian feminist movements has begun with writings of women in the late nineteenth century. Despite the multiplicity of these writings, the most famous was a book entitled: Women's Liberation by Qasim Amin published in (1899). What the book of Amin raised was an extensive debate linked to the values of modernity based on which mothers can educate their children. Conservatives accused Amin of Westernization and destroying the Egyptian identity, and called to "isolate" women from the public sphere and political movement to save moralities, drawing that on women's reproductive roles. Women have been identified with their reproductive roles as mothers, even in a context that has been promoted as a "liberation."

In the early 20th century, Huda Shaarawi founded the Egyptian Women's Union. She raised the issue of women's involvement in the struggle against colonialism. This involvement was not separated from women's reproductive roles, either. Sharawi and other middle-class women have linked the struggle against the occupation with charitable work, partly in their education of rural women, (Beir, 2011). Middle-class women were at the forefront of the struggle for the right to education, but at the same time they did not abandon their social status and consider rural women to be receptors only, despite the participation of the latter in political events, such as the 1919 marches. For the first time in the history of Egypt, the 1923 constitutions recognized the right of women to primary education.

Reaching the 1952 revolution, the Egyptian women's movements continued to be associated with nationalist movements. Cinema was a mirror to demand for women's
liberation, linking this liberation to national conflicts and nationalism. In this regard, Latifa al-Zayat's novel, "The Open Door", and other novels such as "I am free" by Ihsan Abd al-Qudus, were published. The focus on the right to education has shifted to the right to political participation, such as the right to vote, which the 1923 constitution did not grant to women despite their clear participation in nationalist movements against British colonial powers.

After the 1952 revolution, the independent Egyptian women's movement was nationalized. By the name of 'state feminism,' the 1956 constitution gave women the right to vote, and protected women workers' rights in factories. These rights, which some described as secularist, were carried out in parallel with nationalizing and securitizing independent women’s movements, political, and social life. In the 1980s, Islamist movements merged into social life, portraying women as the focus of the Islamic identity. The voices calling for the stay of women at home, and the wearing of hijab as a symbol of Islamic identity were increased. At the same time, women's groups began to form according to Egyptian law. NGOs such as the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), the Association for Development and Enhancement for Women (ADEW), The New Woman Foundation, and the Women and Memory Foundation were established. Some of these women NGOs led demands to change the personal status laws, in the 1980s and 1990s. This was followed by family laws, such as khula’, custody. Opponents considered these laws as destroying to the Egyptian family. Egypt has signed the Convention Ending all forms of Discrimination Against Women, (CEDAW) with some reservations.

In the early third millennium, the Egyptian National Council for Women, (ENCW) was established, as part of state feminism. Sexual violence against women, and debates related to bodily integrity were highlighted. During January 2011 revolution, many feminist platforms have been founded on the internet, including women never participated in politics before. The struggle for the right to a safe public space took on a more grounded form and focused on
sexual violence, especially after sexual assaults against women protestors in Tahrir, November 2012. The right to body approach has become an important focus in post-2011 era, (Nazra for Feminist Studies, 2019).

This quick timeline of women’s movements in Egypt highlights istiqnal as an extension of long feminist struggles that Egyptian women have led. When talking of how these grand-arguments have benefited istiqnal, I can recall the role that some feminist NGOs individually play to support mustaqillat in their networks. However, this does not happen on an institutional level. One critic that I would like to make is that many women NGOs do not assign programs for supporting mustaqillat. This can be attributed to the fact that istiqnal takes places within the frame of the family, which is depoliticized by the state as I explained earlier. Nonetheless, there are some NGOs programs concerned with women’s positions inside the frame of the family, i.e. FGM, and domestic violence.

**Conceptual Framework**

1. **Family and Gender Relations**

   Based on this literature review, it is important to understand how and why mustaqillat leave the family’s house, start living alone, and identify themselves as independent women. I worked with some feminist theories that track the genealogies of the family as a socioeconomic structure. I worked with (Mies, 2014; Federici, 2009) to understand the family and its complex social relationships between members. This included analyses on the role played by family as a social institution through history, and how this is related to women’s bodies and freedom of mobility.

   I worked with Suad Joseph’s (1993) argument on relational connectivity between family members. She argues that gender relations inside the family are constitutive of individuals’ subjectivities. According to her, members of kinship-based relations internalize how their subjectivities are dependent on one another. Hence, subjectivities have both internal and
external factors that a person consciously and unconsciously use to build their personhood and gender identities. This makes gender relations inside the family fluid, allowing individuals to define and recognize themselves in relation to other family members. In this regard comes Kandiyoti’s (1988) argument on ‘bargaining with patriarchy,’ in which she argues that women follow tactics to position and reposition themselves inside the family. She argues that socioeconomic changes affect the relationships between men and women of the same family, which may lead to either emancipatory effects in terms of gender roles. Farha Ghannam (2011) explains how gender relations are constituted inside many families in Egypt. Whereas she was closely observing how masculinities are socially constructed, she tells the story of a young woman whose subjectivity has been influenced by work. When Zakeyya started to work, her relationship with her family members changed, and so did her relationship with her body.

These arguments unpack how my interlocutors managed to start their spatial separation from their families. I used them as frameworks to understand the complexities that may help or impede that spatial separation, and what strategies research participants followed to persuade their families that they want to live by their own. By doing this, I argued that istiqlal affect subjectivities of both research participants and their family members. In addition, I used their discussions to research how women living alone may identify their subjectivities in relation to their flatmates, giving rise to the concept of family to reappear again after istiqlal.

2. Securitization and Public Moralities

The literature review shows that politics of moralities and securitization processes are correlated. Farha Ghannam (2011) argues that the visibility of certain subjects in public spaces are not desirable for the security state in Egypt. For example, when working-class young men are seen in downtown Cairo, police follow them as, suspecting them as criminals, and perceiving them as subjects who do not belong, due to their class and physical
appearances. Paul Ammar (2011b) argues that the security state followed working-class men as threats to women in public spaces. In his critic to anti-sexual harassment campaigns in Egypt, he refers to them as entities that assist the security state to securitize public spaces, and cultivating its securitized subject in the figure of the working-class man. I refuted Paul Ammar’s (2011b) argument that both politics of securitizations and conceptualizing the state as the protector of women’s safety target the working-class man figure, as my research unfolded that when gender intersects with class, processes of securitization targets women living alone, as the undesirable subjects, for the state to keep its public and social orders.

This triggered other aspects of researching the hassles that mustaqillat encounter at their new neighborhoods, whether these hassles are community-based violence, or politics of securitization. I worked with (Phadke, 2005; 2007) debates on restrictions that women face on their mobilities whenever they mention they live alone, which itself dependent on women reproducing respectability politics. As I stated in the literature review, the relationship between securitization and public moralities are complex. However, I am investigating one aspect that is how women living alone in Egypt are perceived by the state as threats to the social order, which makes those women targets of securitization and policing as symptoms of social disorder that should be tackled.

3. Remaking Home and Subjectivities

During my fieldwork, affects played a central role in my interlocutors’ experiences with istiqal. Janet Careston (2003), argues that houses are spaces where memories, codifications, and relationships of power, bring into being different meanings and spatial practices. For her, houses can be places where kinship relations are made and practiced, not assumed by blood ties. This is done by sharing interests, caring, and habits. She discusses that although household duties are central to those inhabit it, they reveal hierarchies that are normalized as given facts. Hence, houses are not just places where meanings are brought to being, but they
are also reproduced and maintained through these habitual actions. She adds that houses are reflective of historical, economic, and political processes. They are not separable, but connected. Normalizing hierarchal household positions and practices is a component of what is ‘outside’ a house. I worked with her arguments on how houses are made, and how giving the meaning of a ‘home’ to a place involves physical and emotional labor.

Navaro-Yashin (2012) argues that people relate to the spaces they inhabit by the affects circulating between them and those spaces, objects exist in these spaces, and people they live with. In return, individuals who inhabit a shared space can develop affective relationships with each other. Their subjectivities are embedded in the objects they use, constituting and reframing them. In the course of my research, women move out from their families’ houses to start live by their own. They may share apartments, or rooms with other women, starting a sociality in which each one relates to the others spatially. The process of remaking home, or remake home is hard in the case of mustaqillat, since many of them continuously move from one apartment to another, and from a room to another. This affects the ways in which mustaqillat attach to different places, build memories, relate to flatmates, and affectively relate to the objects around them. They are nomadic subjects. However, many of them start to reappropriate their rented rooms and apartments, bring objects that remind them of home and increases their sense of familiarity and connection with the rented place. Others could not feel attached to these spaces, because the spatial relations are disturbed frequently, either by moving out, or by being asked to keep the place as they firstly receive it, in order to receive their insurance back.

**Methodology**

The internet as a way of networking and getting-together has played an important role in connecting mustaqillat. This makes my fieldwork reflective of this role in the emergence of istiqlal as a phenomenon. The contributors who I knew them through my work at NGOs,
were contacted via the internet due to their activism, or participation in newly-founded feminist groups. Those who I knew as flatmates were contacted by the private messages feature on Facebook, as I offered rooms for rent in my rented apartment. Cyberspace, as one of the spaces that connect mustaqillat, is usually perceived as ‘virtual,’ which I disagree with based on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted for this thesis. I conceptualize cyberspace as a dimension of public space, where people interact with each other, find groups of mutual interests with other. A space that is fluid and generative of relations that are themselves transformed into real life off-line social relationships.

The internet is a key feature of the relationships that mustaqillat build and rebuild, and is a constitutive factor in the process of sustaining such relations. These relationships move beyond the internet itself, making face-to-face activities and interactions between mustaqillat more affectively grounded, even if friendships have started on the internet. Accordingly, the internet is one of the spaces through which istiqlal is produced and reproduced, along with the (re)production of the subjectivities of mustaqillat themselves where their gender, class, and affect intersect. Therefore, I followed the participant observation methodology to grasp how these specific subjectivities are articulated and rearticulated. In order to do so, I analyze some of the posts and comments published by members of the group: Femi-Hub, and other groups founded for mustaqillat. I observed their day-to-day practices, and shared parts of their lives during my fieldwork. This allowed me to have a deeper understanding of women’s experiences with istiqlal. Some interviews were conducted with people who are part of the process of istiqlal, i.e. brokers and landowners who have previous experiences with renting apartments to single women.

Analyzing visual contents related to the theme of istiqlal was useful to understand the socio-cultural dynamics that surround women’s mobilities in Egypt. I analyze two films, along with TV talk shows in which mustaqillat were hosted. The first film is produced in
2008, *Balad al-Banat* (Country of the Girls), and the other is a documentary produced in 2017, *Mughtaribat* (Women Migrants). Finally, I attempted to organize a collective writing workshop with a group of *mustaqillat*, with the aim to collectively produce a number of texts written by *mustaqillat* themselves. Unfortunately, this did not materialize, as a collective experience due to scheduling challenges. Instead, I asked my interlocutors to write their stories individually. The stories are attached as written and without any interference by me as a researcher, in an additional chapter. I included these texts in the thesis, giving these women's experiences the space to be read in their own words.

I am devoting this thesis as a co-authored research to the women who respectively agreed to participate in it. My purpose in this devotion is to challenge my positionality as a researcher and a knowledge-producer that might be considered as a privilege during and after conducting my fieldwork. As a woman who identifies herself as a *mustaqilla*, I want my research to be mentioned as a collective production, in which many women gave me the space to talk to them, live with them, and to tell their stories, hoping to document the phenomenon of *istiqlal* in academia. Hence, I consider this thesis a cooperative work.

**Chapters’ Summary**

Chapter two explains how the family is normalized as a socioeconomic unit of the Egyptian society. It presents *istiqlal* as a parallel social modality, in which women are not identified by their familial positions. Politics of subversion come to the forehead of how women negotiate their *istiqlal* with families. The chapter focuses on how women begin their *istiqlal* journeys, and how the revolution motivated them. It discusses how some families and the security state go after many women, to return them home by force. It ends with an analysis of how mass media present *mustaqillat* as role models, trying to absorb the aftermath of 2011.

Chapter three explores gendered safety and respectability politics as central to areas of
residency that mustaqillat seek in Cairo. Every neighborhood has its internal regulations inseparable from its position in the housing market. The state plays a role in women’s gendered safety. This chapter unfolds how single women in Egypt suffer to rent an apartment, or a room. Starting from the rules set for women renters by landowners, to the surveillance practiced by neighbors, and the constant attempts by the state to be part of the rent processes. The chapter focuses on mustaqillat’s experiences in Bein al-Sarayat neighborhood.

Chapter four explores how mustaqillat reappropriate their shared rooms, or apartments, and how this reappropriation is constitutive of their spatial subjectivities. It signifies how istiqlal affects mustaqillat’s sexualities. In addition, the chapter moves to the everydayness of mustaqillat’s lives, and the daily practices. It highlights istiqlal as an endless process of remaking and reconstructing the concept of home, given that many mustaqillat tend to move in and move out from one apartment to another, deepening a sense of nomadism.

Chapter five argues that istiqlal is an affective experience. I researched how affects produced through istiqlal constitute mustaqillat’s subjectivities. I mentioned how fragmented these subjectivities are, through analyzing affects that my interlocutors expressed and felt during the process of my fieldwork. Also, this chapter highlights that many mustaqillat get together as a mechanism they follow to overcome the hardship of the experience, including online and offline activities.
Chapter 2
Contextualizing Istiqal

Introduction

This chapter contextualizes istiqal as a social phenomenon in post-2011 Egypt. The chapter starts with an overview on how the Egyptian constitution portrays the family as the unit of the Egyptian society, a unit around which nationalism, morality, and values are built. The chapter introduces istiqal as a challenge to the family as a normalized socioeconomic structure and source of social identification, by introducing itself as a social modality that is parallel to the family. Also, this chapter explores why participants seek istiqal, and how they start it. It explains how many women domesticated the revolution, and linked it to their experiences with istiqal. Moreover, it investigates the role of securitization in sustaining what the state perceives as the public and moral order, at the expense of women. It ends with analyzing TV interviews with mustaqillat, highlighting how istiqal has been presented in media, and the role that the media plays recently to absorb what I called the youth crisis.

Destabilizing Social Order

Understanding istiqal requires an understanding of how the category of women is naturalized and neutralized as part of the family in Egypt. Leaving behind the problematization of the category ‘woman’ itself, this chapter focuses on how this category is deeply embedded in the social fabric of the Egyptian society. The Egyptian state considers women as family members only, acknowledging the different ‘positions’ of women depending on their familial statuses. The successive constitutions, including that of 2014, upholds the right of equality for women to education, work, and welfare benefits. Yet, the emphasis on the reproductive role of women inside the family as a socioeconomic structure, remains a responsibility of the state by asserting that the state is obligated to maintain these equal rights, should they do not disrupt the duties of women inside familial households. For
successive Egyptian regimes in the twentieth century, women are only mentioned in constitutions as daughters, sisters, housewives, widowed or divorced. That is to say, the category ‘woman’ is subordinated to the category of the family itself, and both remain depoliticized, in terms of that any claims to rights are normalized as merely economic and social, far from political. This statist discourse in Wendy Brown’s (2002) words, relies on the categorization of the family as a nuclear unit for nation-states, through which the production of the social is regulated and controlled for the state to function through disciplinary and depoliticized frameworks. This is reflective of the liberal discourse of rights embedded in the statist discourse over the so-called women’s rights, which renders claims to rights as claims for universal justice, represented in the constitution, and the personal status laws, yet not expanded to the family that is perceived as private.

Politics of subversion emerges as an essential part of the istiqal experience. The word mustaqillat itself encounters the hegemonic discourses over women as family members only. In other words, mustaqilla emerges as an assertion that whoever labels herself a mustaqilla refuses to be identified by her relations to any social structure, except what she decides for herself. Hence, istiqal reconfigures the classification of women as of from the ‘whole,’ be it family, or the nation-state’s disciplinary frameworks. Mustaqillat in that sense destabilize the social fabric, moving beyond the framework of the family, and the state as a classificatory force of socialities. It ruptures the production of the social as a disciplinary gaze through which social behaviors are normalized as social positions and identities i.e. mother, daughter, widowed, divorced, (Brown, 2002).

Istiqal for mustaqillat is a matter of possibilities. That is, identifying oneself as not a familial subject is possible. It is an open door to social modalities other than the family, which does not require the destruction of the family itself as a concept. I would like here to borrow the phrase of “living with,” usually used in medical contexts in reference to mental
health disorders. In these contexts, we would say ‘I live with depression,’ or ‘I live with bipolar,’ or ‘I live with anxiety.’ These are chronic mental health disorders that the person does not completely overcome, or is cured from. They are playing in the background as a soundtrack that does not replace displayed visuals. Sometimes they are loud and distracting. Other times, they are not. But, they never disappear. The concept of ‘living with’ better captures istiqal as a parallel social modality to the family. They both coexist. I highlight this in relation to istiqal as it does not conceptually replace the family, nor does it present itself as an alternative to it. Many mustaqillat do not cut off their relations with families, bearing in mind women who identify themselves as mustaqillat and still live at their families’ homes. This helps in conceptualizing istiqal as a non-obedient action, even if it can be so, introducing it as a modality of living that does not require mustaqillat to be identified as familial subjects, nor alienated from the family, even if spatially separated. This micro-level of istiqal has paved the way for women seeking istiqal. Should we take into consideration the complexities and moral anxieties of families regarding women living alone as a symptom of a social disorder.

Public moralities in that sense are preserved by the state, as well as, social institutions such as religion, media, and community or family members. Many women in Egypt are considered the signifiers of family’s good reputation, and honor, (Ghannam, 2011, Baron, 2005). Those women have to perform the role of a modest person, in order to obtain this image about herself and her family, and/or community. This is reflected in restrictions on how women should act, dress, behave, and move. However, many of them maneuver this feminized public morality, and find their ways to do whatever their families, or communities, perceive as abnormal. This includes istiqal as a non-normative social modality, and self-identification process. Within this navigation, mustaqillat are moving beyond the hegemonic knowledges, discourses, and normalized identities produced and reproduced by the state on
the identification of women as family members. *Istiqla*l has a potential to destabilize the social fabric, introducing it as a transformative process of subjectivities. This navigation relies on the everyday practices of women identifying themselves as *mustaqilla*, their negotiations with their families, and the beginning of their journey to *istiqlal*.

**Istiqla*l and Freedom of Mobility**

While conducting my fieldwork, mobility has been mentioned several times as a motivation to *istiqlal*. The following narratives are directly quoted from the complete stories of *istiqlal* attached to this thesis, and resulted from the written testimonies\(^1\) methodology I mentioned in chapter one.

*Istiqla*l has allowed me to move freely, without having to take permissions from my father. If I want to travel, I travel. I go out whenever I want, without caring about how my family would react to me being late to home, as before. No one asks me. No one controls me. I am free to move wherever and whenever I want. This would not, and would never be the case, if I was living with my family. Sometimes, I compare my recent status as a *mustaqilla* who has that freedom of movement, with my little sister, who is still living at our family’s home. Unfortunately, her steps out of the home are counted, and regulated. Other times, I feel guilty and helpless, because I cannot help her.

For me, *istiqlal* was a dream that should be realized. I wanted to have my own space, a room that I can close its door, a closet that no one opens, a locker where no one looks for my secrets. Before *istiqlal*, I felt that I am always surveilled. I mean that all of my secrets should have never been out of my head, because I have no elsewhere to keep them. This has affected my relationships with my body, my freedom of expression, my ability to write, and other things.

I wanted to have my own place, not theirs, despite our good relationship. I needed a home, where I apply my rules, with all my simple stuff and thoughts, a home where I can go out and get back to, whenever I want to.

\(^{1}\) Although my assumed methodology for this was a writing workshop should have been done collectively, it ended up with the writing processes being individually conducted by my interlocutors. This was mainly because of the conflicted schedules we all had. And however, we had agreed collectively that weekends would be suitable for us to gather and write, when we assigned a date, my interlocutors could not attend. This had driven me to re-approach the methodology in terms of collectivity. So, I asked my interlocutors if they can write their stories individually, and send it back to me for translation. Fortunately, this worked for the majority of them. Some sent me their narratives in Arabic, others in English. While few of them got involved in personal stuff that did not allow them to write. This is something that I deeply understand, and appreciate. As the everyday lives of mustaqillat are full of emergencies, and things can pop up out of nowhere. Therefore, they might have prioritized their personal emergencies, over participating in the storytelling section. Nonetheless, those who did not write a full story, have already participated in my research, either by conversations they allowed me to had with them, or by answering my questions and inquiries I posted on mustaqillat Facebook groups.
Of course, istiqlal gives me a freedom of movement. Now, I can travel across Egypt, seeing places I never dreamed to see. I know that many young women in my age and older, have never got out of their family’s home, except for marrying someone. Or at least, this was the norm at the place where I came from.

To understand why many families regulate and control women members’ freedom of movement, this section highlights how the family is normalized as a hegemonic social structure and the only source of social identification for women in Egypt. Feminist theorists such as Maria Mies (2014), and Silvia Federici (2009) have tried to unfold the gendered power dynamics inside the family. They have illustrated the male domination concept that goes beyond patriarchy as a single signifier of power relations, by highlighting the interconnection between patriarchy and other power systems, for instance capitalism. Both authors argue that the rise of capitalism required male workforces, which prioritized the role performed by men in public spaces, over women’s roles in private spaces. This includes, and not limited to, a subsumption of women’s domestic work and reproductive roles, for the purpose of ‘primitive accumulation.’ This encompassed workforce that relies on men working at factories, and women working at domestic spaces, has been one of the reasons why the male worker’s wage is called a ‘family wage,’ creating a binary between the so-called public versus private spaces. In this binary, the public spheres are perceived as masculine and productive, whereas the private spheres, especially the family, are perceived as feminine and unproductive. It has followed that masculinist public spaces have been limitedly accessible for women, unless they provide a serious purpose of existing out of their right space. This differential access to public spaces has resulted in women’s visibility in public spaces to be considered as social disorders, (Phadke, 2005; 2007).

As Maria Mies (2014), and Silvia Federici (2009) put it, capitalism has intensified the degree to which women are subordinated to men to dominate both women’s bodies and women’s mobilities. Calling for women’s participation in production processes outside the
domestic space as a ‘liberation’ from such subordination to men, as Engels (1942) respectively argued, has increased the underdevaluation of women’s unpaid work, and underestimates their already existing contributions to production processes via their reproductive roles, and unpaid domestic labor. This is what Mies (2014) criticizes as the illusion of the liberal imaginary of women’s waged labor perceived as women’s emancipation, which ends up with women working in two jobs, outside and inside domestic households.

The division of labor between men and women, along with women’s limited freedom of movement, to a large extent, continue to be the norm in Egypt. To understand this point, I want to get back to the quotations given by mustaqillat. These narratives highlight not only women’s regulated mobilities, but also the surveillance conducted by family members, trying to dominate mustaqillat as gendered and familial subjects. Mustaqillat talk about their urgent needs to have a space for their own, a greater mobility of going in and out without having to provide explanations on why they do so. That restricted mobility is itself linked to the family as an economic structure. Mustaqillat’s narratives at the end of this thesis tell us how the process of delinking themselves from the family requires a source of income to financially support themselves. This takes me back to the arguments on ‘family wage,’ and how it has enhanced those women’s feelings of being ‘dependent’ on someone who regulates their mobilities in return. In doing so, mustaqillat are examples on how subsuming women’s unpaid domestic work in the so-called ‘family wage,’ has resulted in regulating their mobilities by family members, including mothers, and elder sisters. Some mustaqillat’s families have used the ‘family wage’ as a weapon to encounter mustaqillat’s financial abilities to live by their own without a steady income. This has driven mustaqillat to realize that waged labor is essential to istiqal, just to be able to pay for their basic needs. They are challenged by the division of labor, in which the father is considered the provider for the
family and the dominant figure inside familial households. This patriarchal role of the father as a provider has been destablished, due to the economic arrangements in Egypt, since the 1970s, (Maher, 2013; Singerman, 2013), which has had an emasculating effect on men, limiting their economic abilities to provide for their families. In Heba Hafez’s (2012) discussion of this emasculation, she refers to the gap it has created between women and men inside familial households, in terms of gendered identities. A debate that Farha Ghannam (2011) points to as a changing force in the relations between men and women in Egypt, once women enter the job market. What matters for mustaqillat is how they manage to get work, what work represents for them, and how it affects their istiqlal. In other words, it is how they manage to start their spatial separation from the family that matters the most, a process that requires them to work. Work has affected mustaqillat’s subjectivities that is built upon both mobility and work. What mustaqillat represent in this regard is a transformation in family-based power relations, a notion that Maria Mies (2014) argues to be the basic and first struggle women encounter to reposition themselves in a given context.

It was financially hard for me at the beginning, especially that I was still enrolled at my university. Thus, I was obligated to find an additional source of income, a job that helped me to pay for my expenses, rent, and transportations. I was working almost 18 hours per day, until I graduated in 2015. I left the night shift work, and continued to work at a private incorporation, where I occupied different positions, i.e. HR representative, sales, administrative officer, public relations employee, and retail. That was so far from what I wanted, but it was obligatory for me to survive my istiqlal. Recently, I have shifted my work to content writing that I feel passionate about. It also helps me to pay for my expenses.

The hardest matter about istiqlal is the endless financial pressure. Work is mandatory, even if we do not like it, just to pay our rent, our utilities, and our food. After a while, work gets intensified, and a larger income is required to protect ourselves in safer residence, or to stop using public transportations, limiting sexual harassment. All the time, I am between two hard choices, either to live, doing the things I am passionate about, or to build my capacities for work. This has given me the feelings that I am always late. Istiqlal, as it gives us comfort, freedom, and awareness, it also gives us hassles.

As I said before, the challenges I face during my istiqlal are mainly financial. I have to find a place to rent. Same happens with my studies. In light of the current economic repressive decisions in Egypt, this all gets harder. Other challenges may be that I do not have permanent friendships, or activities to participate in. My life is
temporal. Everything is temporal, starting from the room I rent, to the relationships I have.

*Mustaqillat* are not financially challenged only because they delink themselves from their families, but because they are like many Egyptians who got negatively affected, due to the degradation in the Egyptian economy in the last few decades. More than three decades separate us from the rise of neoliberalism in the Middle East and North Africa as a globalized project, (Bogaert, 2013, 221). After World War II, tendencies towards decolonization have increased in the Global South in general, as well as in Egypt post-1952. Such movements gave rise to the centralization of authority in hands of the state represented by military leaders, such as Gamal Abdel-Nasser. Nasser led “Arab Socialism” as a part of the struggle for political and economic independence from Western imperialism, producing a nationalist and statist economy, (Maher, 2011, 33). The defeat of the Egyptian Army by Israel in 1967 played a vital role in shifting economic policies in the whole region by the beginning of 1970s under the rule of president Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat. Attempting to compromise Nasser’s conflicts with Israel, Sadat signed the Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel in late 1970s, (ibid, 33). According to Freichs (2016, 615), Sadat built his economic policies in light of what he considered “regional peace” with Israel that (re)activated Egypt’s role in global trade, facilitated building Western allies, and mediated receiving financial aid from the International Financial Institutes (IFIs) such as IMF and the World Bank, launching *Infitah* (openness) policy. This would not have been achieved only with “regional peace.” Sadat had to implement his so-called Open Policy starting from 1974 to start the liberalization process of the market and linking it to global capital, (Bogaert, 2013, p. 222). These economic transformations encompassed neoliberal reforms required by the IMF were accompanied by the decline of Egypt’s welfare socialist state, freeing the market to attract both foreign investments and funds. As a result, social inequalities and the decline in public
services increased through the privatization of public-sector agencies, and political life has
been state-centralized, (Singerman, 2013, p. 5-6). In January 1977, Sadat’s government
declared prices increases, requested by the IMF, leading to “Bread riots,” which resulted in
mass arrests and the killing of more than 65 protestors, (Freichs, 2016, p. 613).

These economically and politically repressive policies continued under Mubarak’s rule,
and have profoundly affected social life. Neoliberal economic strategies, especially
privatization, have cut down the number of public sector employees, and dominated the
Egyptian workforce to meet neoliberal requirements; low wages, longer working hours, and
social services of less efficiency, (Maher 2013, p. 36). The unemployment rate has
dramatically increased, and processes which were thought to attract foreign investments and
secure economic growth has turned to transfer capital from peripherally national economy to
core countries where capital is accumulated. (Bogaert, 2013, p. 223; Venn, 2009, p. 208).
This is what David Harvey (2007, p. 35) calls “accumulation by dispossession,” in which
public properties are privatized, labor is commodified, and financial assistance is
institutionalized via debt systems, i.e. the Third World debt crisis in 1980s, and the Extended
Fund Facility by the IMF in mid 1990s, (Bogaert, 2013, p. 222, Freichs, 2016, p. 613). Given
that workers moved from secured public sector jobs to temporary ones in private/privatized
corporations, approximate 80% of those workers are estimated to live in poverty by late
1990s, (ibid, p. 225). Since privatization has been introduced as a mechanism for encouraging
competition and efficiency, it proliferates social inequality as a requirement for sustaining
neoliberalization of the market, (Venn, 2009, p. 13). Consequently, surviving inequality is the
individual’s responsibility, who should develop their innovative and competitive skills to fit
in the system, in which only upper-classes benefit from the system, are enlarged, (Harvey,
2007, p. 34). In that sense, the neoliberal economy has benefited those in power, the ruling
class, businessmen classes, and the army’s officer class, linking power of politics with power
of capital and widening the social gap between classes, (Maher, 2011, p. 34). Bogaert (2013, 223) triggers this decline in middle and lower-middle classes to unjust wealth distribution from Nasser’s state, in which the state provided free education and secure jobs for graduates, to Sadat and Mubarak’s eras where public services, such as education as a master key to the market, are privatized and unaffordable for the majority of Egyptian citizens. Coping with the reduction in state-led employment, Mubarak expended the service industry led by transnational corporations, to guarantee a flow of foreign currency, after internationalizing the US dollar as the official global market currency. These repressive economic decisions have fueled the people with rage and frustrations, especially as they were conducted along with a corrupted politics led by Mubarak’s security state, (Bayat, 2013; Hardet, 2011). This led to the withdrawal of Mubarak’s regime in February 2011, although the economic context has not achieved any remarkable progress since then. During the last few years following the revolution, the Egyptian market has witnessed unstable and decreased amount of the US dollar as the official foreign currency, which has led the Central Bank of Egypt to announce the floating of the Egyptian pound in 2016. This has come as a requirement by the IMF to loan Egypt almost US$12 billion, published on the IMF website, February 2019.

While the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, and the massively increasing prices, the socio-economic statue of millions of Egyptians has been negatively affected. This has resulted in many mustaqillat quitting their jobs, moving out from their rented apartments, or having their salaries decline in their cash value, to financially survive their istiqlal. Many others went back to their families’ homes, as they could no longer afford their independent life.

Many research participants and other mustaqillat on Femi-Hub testified that the range of their salaries is 3000 EGP, equivalent to 171$ per month. More than half of those women are working either for digital marketing agencies, digital journalism, real estate, NGOs officers,
and freelance graphic designers, or translators. Few of them are working for public-sector jobs. Many of those I asked have more than one job, including mustaqlillat who are public-sector employees. None of them mentioned that their salaries are the only source of income they have. However, almost all mustaqlillat I asked have been negatively affected by the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, except one participant who does not live in Egypt.

I can no longer save money. I let go of many things I used to buy before the devaluation. I just buy what I need.

Now, I cannot buy anything without checking its price, and calculate if it is within my budget.

The devaluation has fu*ked me up. The currency has lost its value. All my life expenses have been tripled.

This devaluation has destroyed me. Now, I hate my illness more than I did. Being sick means once a month means that the end of this month is debt. Sometimes, I had to work two different jobs, from 9.00 am to 10.00 pm.

After it, I had to add a freelance job to receive the same exact salary I was receiving before. There was no place for any entertainment. I could barely pay my expenses.

My salary dies before the month ends. I do not eat at restaurants, nor sit in cafes. My budget is too tight.

It is catastrophic. What I considered before as needs, is now luxuries that I should not spend my money on. It destroyed my plans to buy home appliances and rent an empty apartment, instead of renting highly expensive furnished apartments. So, now, it compels me to look for apartments at neighborhoods that are socially lower than what I used to rent at.

I cannot buy anything. My outings have been extremely limited. I have to prepare anything at home, not just meals, no matter how hard it is. Now, I usually walk to save money, despite my leg injury.

It affects my istiqlal. I prioritize rent, transportation, and tuition, over should have been prioritized too, as food.

Taking the Revolution Home

Contextualizing istiqlal both socially and politically is necessary to understand what motivated more women to question their mobilities, their relationships with their families, and their attempts to start identifying themselves as mustaqlillat, independent women. During my ethnographic fieldwork with mustaqlillat, our outings, home gatherings, celebrations, and
hard times, they never mentioned istiqlal without mentioning the January 25, 2011 revolution, al-Thawra. They never call it uprising, Intifada, as some academics would describe it. For mustaqillat, it was a revolution, a radical change that has transformed their ideas and thoughts about themselves. Borrowing my interlocutors’ words, it was an eye-opener, a possibility, a push, and an indicator to an increasing gap between them and their families. No wonder if the revolution as an ‘event’ has increased the questions young women ask themselves every now and then. It has given them the motivations to ask those questions loudly, a legitimization of their questions, especially when they connected with other women who share the same questions. It was the moment when they realized that questioning any system is possible. If the political system has been questioned, held accountable, and thrown away, so could the family, the direct power system they deal with daily. In an outing with a group of my interlocutors, one of them came up with the sentence: “It gave me the hope that saying no is an option.”

The revolution was my eye-opener. It was the first thing that inspired me, giving me better understanding of my political and social circumstances. Before the revolution, I was a reader. But, after it, I discovered that my readings were all about novels. That has pushed me to participate in the revolutionary events, in 2012. To be at the center of them, I got involved in press covering these events. I wanted to read more, know more about what was happening around me, changing the whole country.

Mustaqillat’s references to the revolution are examples of the micro-politics that the revolution has opened up. By micro-politics I mean the micro-level change on the everyday life of many Egyptian women. Many young women in Egypt have acknowledged the family to be the way in which they identify themselves. It is something that they have shifted in post-2011 contexts. The uprising, al-Thawra, served as a transformative effect that has enhanced young people’s abilities to question their social and political roles, (Bayat 2013; 2017; Bogeart, 2013). In the case of mustaqillat, the power system that needed to be questioned was the family, the way in which the family serves as a regulator of their
mobilities, and bodies. Thus, to restore that ownership over freedom of movement,
*mustaqillat* have tried to spatially separate from the family. I link this to the realization that
this freedom of movement would not have been achieved the same way, while they live at
their families’ homes, for the direct interactions and dynamics that would result from it, as
they repetitively stated. In other words, being spatially close to family members would
activate the control they already perform over women’s bodies, and regulated mobilities.
Therefore, moving out has been an attempt to delink themselves from the family as a social
structure. The same happened with the protestors when Mubarak promised them more
freedom of expression, once they break up their Tahrir sit-in. They realized that this promise
was just a word, if Mubarak would have continued in power. Continuing to live at the
family’s home, while trying hard to have greater mobilities, would have been similar in terms
of being under family member’s close supervision and mentorship.

This is not suggestive that women in Egypt have never enjoyed their mobilities, before 2011. Instead, it is an attempt to highlight what role the uprising played in motivating
*mustaqillat* to move out from their families’ homes. Many of my interlocutors participated in the events coded as revolutionary since 2011. Given that more than half of the participants are women in their twenties, the revolution has been the big event that they witnessed on their way to question their lives and, cultivate their own subjectivities. Imagining how this has influenced them and their personhood is a way of understanding the revolution itself as a promise, a dream, a hope for a better future, and a possibility that can be realized.

The revolution gave me one huge push. It gave me motive and waved possibility towards my face. If it was one year earlier, I would have never believed I could make it alone in another city without any help with no college degree or anything. As much as it failed on a national level, I believe I lead my own miniature protest to the right path. I have created change, and maybe someday, it will happen for the country.

My interlocutor expresses what the revolution represents for her, and how it affected her life. In her narrative, she borrowed some of the words usually used in the context of
Weeks (2011) explains daydreams as free wills aiming for a better future. In this narrative, daydreamers, the youth, the revolutionaries, challenge the power of those who want to censor their hopes, their becomings. In Weeks’ (2011) expression, daydreams are conscious and subjective, but nightmares are subjected to unconscious censorship, or fears of unimagined future. In the name of restoring order, the Egyptian authorities are trying to constantly get rid of those revolutionary youth, i.e. labeling them as destructive, (mokharebiyn). Nonetheless, we could summarize it in the state’s concerns and fears of open futures. Imagination was one of the main motivations for citizens to protest Mubarak’s security state. They imagined alternatives and brought them to reality, overthrowing the regime. They proved that daydreams have potentiality to influence the present. Few months after the uprising, media celebrations of youth as “the future” have been limited by authorities and turned into stigmatization and criminalization. Metaphors of limiting future and criminalizing hoping for it are deployed. Hence, hope in this context is both cognitive and performative, (Weeks, 2011).

The year 2011 was the year that I would graduate from high school, and be 18-year-old person. Then, the uprising happened, and I was still enrolled in my high school. I participated. I still remember that feeling of owning the world. I felt that I belong to this generation leading change in our country. My desire to be a mustaqilla has increased and changed. The istiqlal I wanted when I was 15, was only financial, but in 2011, I wanted to completely move out from my family’s home, to live by my
own. My family fueled my desire to istiqal, especially after blaming me, and punishing me for participating in the revolution. I felt there was a gap between us. So, I decided to systematically plan to persuade them with my intention to be a mustaqilla.

This narrative explains how the revolution has affected my interlocutor’s subjectivity. It has changed the way she perceives istiqal, or how she wished for when she was a child. However, her family’s punishment has opened her eyes on a gap between her and her family members. She participated in the revolution, and felt attached to it, but they blamed and punished her for doing so. In a home visit, we talked more about our relationships with our families before istiqal, when she stated that it was the first time for her family to punish her. Their fears and anxieties about her safety, or may be their political views, drove them to practice their authority over her actions, punishing her for not following what they perceive as the right thing to do. In this situation, the revolution has affected her family member’s subjectivities, as well.

**Politics of Subversion**

In a public space where ‘political,’ are these struggles directly involving statist powers, Mustaqellat have effectively politicized their personal struggles within their istiqal processes. Talking of how politicization as both a phenomenon and a methodology benefits struggles, Brown (2002, p. 569- 571) accredits the feminist, queer, and Marxist theories for politicizing ‘the private.’ The distinction between the public and the private here is not to affirm the binary as a colonial and capitalist heritage, (Schiwy, 2007). Instead, it is used to highlight how theorists challenge that segregation by explaining the interconnectivity between the two concepts, the intertwined realities and interdependencies of the public and the private. Mustaqillat, to a large extent, have not relied on the hegemonic discourse of violence against women, as it has already been politicized by women’s rights NGOs, and international conventions, i.e. CEDAW, which would have contributed to a higher visibility.
of istiqlal. Many mustaqillat have taken the harder route of conceptualizing istiqlal, giving little attention of whether a mustaqilla is a victim of domestic violence or not. What has been a matter of concern is how a woman starts her istiqlal process, while surrounded by dominant power relations inside and outside the family. The politicization of istiqlal as an emerging discourse, in the aftermath of January 2011, is a bit liberated from the constrains embodied in other discourses, i.e. victimization. For instance, in order for a woman to be a mustaqilla, she is not obligated to identify herself as a victim of violence or discrimination at the first place. This encounters the discourse of violence against women as a ‘given fact’ for a woman to ‘willingly’ reposition herself within a certain sociality. To move out of the family’s home is not restricted to those who are victims of violence. It is a transformation in the baseline of discourses on women in Egypt.

When Asef Bayat (2013, p. 89-105) historicizes women’s activism in Iran, he mentions the everyday life practices as subversive methods by which women have started to mobilize themselves against both patriarchal orders, and the authoritarian regime of Khomeini. It was the overthrow of Shah when women realized their slow expulsion from public spaces. Hence, they have occupied it with every means possible to them, including but not limited to sports, music, running for public offices, and even debating women’s positions in Quran and Sharia. While some Iranian women utilized Quran, Fiqh, and Sharia, and others utilized feminist books as a starting point to argue for women’s rights, Mustaqellat have utilized the January 2011 uprising as their moment and space of departure to argue for istiqlal. Al-Thawra, the revolution, has indirectly paved the way for mustaqellat to initiate a discourse over istiqlal, by their utilization of cyberspace where they have publicized their experiences with istiqlal and created their own mustaqillat networks. It is something that lies in the in-between of the private and the public. Mustaqillat have domesticated the revolution in the first place, brought it home, and taken good care of it, in terms of its social significance.
Many mustaqillat debated with their family members over istiqlal, citing the revolution differently to have a greater mobility, (Bayat, 2017). For instance, a Mustagilla from Tanta, says that her ex-husband just disappeared and stopped supporting her and their son financially. She spent all the money she received after her father’s death. Then, she decided to move out from her mother’s home where she lived after the divorce, and justified her istiqlal with the fact that she needed a proper job that would not be available for her in Tanta. She referred to the economic downturn after the revolution in the debates with her mother, as a mere justification for her istiqlal. She feels sympathy for her mother who woke up one day and discovered that her daughter has already left to Cairo.

I am trying to compensate her every now and then, as I feel guilty after leaving her. I had no choice. I wanted greater freedom of movement. That would have never been obtained if I remained at her home.

Politics of subversion is also exemplified in the familial relations that give the family a sense of control over, or more adequately, connection with, mustaqillat’s behaviors, mobilities, and clothes. The direct relationship with the family by everyday communications, and weekly familial visits, has been transformed by mustaqillat to their advantage, by conforming these social behaviors in front of family members. One of the participants says that she continued to wear hijab, headscarf, in her familial visits. Other mustaqillat are keen on their familial visits on regular basis, which gives them and their family members a connective relationship that fills the gap of being spatially separated. Another participant usually visits her family and comes back to Cairo with some frozen food that her mother especially prepares for her. Whereas a third participant has developed a strong friendship with her mother, in which they both prepare food for each other on familial visits.
These affective relationships between my interlocutors and their family members are mediated through food. It lies in the in-between of their bodily sensations and their feelings of a temporary connectivity, (Highmore, 2002). The value given to food prepared during mustaqillat’s visits to their families makes the experience of getting together through food special on the level of putting effort to prepare specific meals, and tasting this caring as part from the meal itself. Specific meals are these that mustaqillat cannot easily assemble, while
they are in another city, either because they cannot cook them, or because they are expensive too to buy, i.e. ducks, kebab, mahshi, etc. Food is used to show affection for mustaqillat, a way that their families, especially their mothers, use to encounter that feeling of being away from each other. It is a complex affect in which both pain of separation, and happiness of being here and now, are produced and consumed by both mustaqillat and their family members. Here comes the packed food as an extension of this complex affect. It is a way of connectivity between mustaqillat and their families, so that when this packed food is being eaten, it mediates the caring, the pleasure, and the pain between the body of the cooker, and the body of the eater, despite the distance. One of my interlocutors whose mother packed the frozen food for her, she published every now and then posts on her Facebook account, describing how she missed her mother’s food. Sometimes she posted photos of the table that her mother prepared for her during her family visit. In doing so, the affect that is mediated through food lasts longer in the memory of my interlocutor. It is lived in her body through her memory, through the photos she took, and through the very sensation of missing the taste of the food. This can be understood too when she was passing through a tough time, and recalling the taste of the food as a form of intimacy she feels during her family visits. She recalls the moment of tasting the food in which the cooker, her mother, tells her indirectly not to worry about today’s meal. She is there with her memory and feelings, while her body is elsewhere. It seems to me as if she needed someone who takes a burden away from her shoulders, she needs something or someone to tell her ‘do not worry.’ Also, as many of my interlocutors testified, this packed food from the family’s home is a mechanism to help mustaqillat in their life expenses, providing them with some food supplies.

Some mustaqillat have to go through violent clashes with their families for the purpose of istiqnal. One of my interlocutors explains how she was placed under house arrest for three months by her male siblings, due to her discussions over istiqnal after she graduated from al-
Azhar university. When she had the chance to attend a Sufi lecture for university graduates, her brother insisted on accompanying her to Cairo where the lecture was held. There, she insisted on an opportunity to work as a coordinator in a feminist NGO that might not be available to her again. After some verbal quarrels, her brothers agreed under some conditions, the first of which was that she would live with her uncle’s family. She said that she lived with her uncle’s family for a few months, during which they tried to control her attitude, clothes, and mobility by setting curfews, simulating the role of her nuclear family members.

It was just a step towards istiqlal, then, I decided to move out from my uncle’s home to make a home for my own.

To understand how women negotiate their mobilities and behaviors, that is identities, with and within familial relations in istiqlal, we can deploy Suad Joseph’s (1993) notion of ‘patriarchal connectivity’ that allows both men and women to identify themselves relationally and fluidly, in societies that depend on kinship and sociability. Therefore, fluid subjectivity in that sense means that a person can cultivate a sense of the self that is both subjected to control, and prepared to control, or at least to share power with others. In the stories of mustaqillat shown above, mustaqillat have negotiated power with their family members, who in return, negotiated back, even if they applied violent constrains such as placing her under house arrest. Such negotiations of power can better capture the gendered politics inside the family which has a potential to transform the social.

“It was gradual,” a mustaqilla from Alexandria, tells her story with istiqlal. When she started her university that was located outside of Alexandria, due to the geographical distribution of her high school score, also known as Tansiq, she lived in dorms only during examinations. Her father was angry about her living away from the family’s home for days, especially that her mother passed away few years before she began her high education. During her studies, she found a job, and this time, she voluntarily asked for a geographical
relocation to Hurghada, a city by the Red sea. “I nagged, and insisted,” she reflects on her reaction to her father’s refusal to the new relocation. He finally agreed, but was not fully convinced. After graduation, it was easier for me to raise the argument of istiqpal; “I am old enough to live alone. I have already lived alone for years. My father was always opposing my arguments, and he often treated me as mentally non-stable and impulsive,” she resumes.

Now, surprisingly, he defends her istiqpal.

Few days ago, my father was in a familial gathering when one of our extended family members asked him if it is appropriate to let me live alone. My father’s reaction was bold, “She is a Mustaqilla. She is not dependent, tabea, on anyone, and I am proud of her,” he replied.

To put it another way, when mustaqillat negotiate their istiqpal with their families, sometimes via discussions and other times via spatial relocation of jobs and high education, they radically utilize their familial connectivity not only to have greater mobility, but also to transform this familial connectivity itself as constitutive force of subjectivities; hence, transforming subjectivities themselves. This is explicit in her father’s reply to defend her istiqpal, after he opposed it, and accused her of being mentally unstable. Her istiqpal has affected her father’s subjectivity. Similarly, what happened after another research participant’s negotiations to stay in Cairo was transformative for her brothers’ claimed masculine identity. At first, they placed her under house arrest, then, they accepted her istiqpal under specific conditions. But finally, they have accepted her spatial separation, and now she lives alone, not in her uncle’s home, nor her family’s.

Other mustaqillat have used the right to work to negotiate their istiqpal with their families, putting their istiqpal into a more accepted framework. According to Sohila Mohamed, a mustaqilla and the founder of Femi-Hub group, work can be an accepted reason for istiqpal. If a family is convinced that women’s labor is essential for their daughter to achieve herself, they can agree on her spatial separation to another city, what enhances her mobility. Here,
work is not a goal for itself, it is rather a tool that women use to have greater mobility compared to a restricted mobility at their families’ homes, she adds. A *mustaqilla* from Alexandria, says that when she was offered a job with high salary in Cairo, while her father’s business was financially destroyed, she used the right to work discourse to seek *istiqlal.* “It was not the job, in fact, it was me wanting to move out, to run away with a legitimate purpose they could accept.” Meanwhile, other *mustaqillat* have navigated their *istiqlal* with their families, by marriage. Whereas, marriage is socially perceived as a happy and normal sociality, some *mustaqillat* used it to start their *istiqlal.* Sometime, it is getting hard to persuade their families that they want to move out, and start living alone. Thus, they use marriage as a cover for their *istiqlal,* as one of my interlocutors testified below.

I was fed up with lies, with saying that I live in another governorate while I live in Cairo. I was afraid that anyone could easily recognize me, and tell my family that I am in Cairo. I got married to end that dilemma. My marriage was partially purposed to have my full *istiqlal,* even if my family continues to perceive me as dependent, *tabē’a,* on someone else. What matters is what I feel, and how I managed to be a *mustaqilla.*

*Mustaqillat* as an identity is not fixed, nor stable. In 2012, when TheGirlsRevolution platform started to open discussions over *istiqlal,* it was about young women who want to live alone away from their families to get rid of their restrictions on mobility. In sum, *istiqlal* for us at that time was about spatial separation from the family, and more specifically for those identified by law as *daughters* or *sisters,* and those who were never married before. Since 2015, the term *mustaqilla* has been enriched by other women who started to identify themselves as *mustaqillat,* while they still live with their families. Meanwhile, women with ex-marital statuses have joined. Divorced women, and single mothers have started to identify themselves as *mustaqillat* as well. *Mustaqillat* as a term has been very fluid and generative. It brings together women who do not necessarily conform to the initial conceptualization of *istiqlal,* something that would be a productive site of further inquiry.
Politics of Securitization

However, such negotiations with family members, if conducted, do not always reach a common ground that allows women to seek istiqal without serious consequences. This renders any claims to the socially transformative potential of istiqal illusionary, if we are to mention mustaqillat who have already started their istiqal, without mentioning those who failed, and whose istiqal’s birth has been its own grave. Here, I want to point to the failure of negotiations with the family, and the interventions made by the security state accordingly.

In August 2016, a number of posts were published on social websites, especially Facebook, in which young women’s photos were attached for people to recognize. The posts were published by the women’s families who claimed the women were kidnapped and suddenly disappeared in Alexandria city, calling for the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to intervene. Some of the posts were teasing police forces by headlines such as, Raya and Sekkina are back, two women popularly known for kidnapping women in 19th century Alexandria. Although the three women were not friends, their stories were publicized at the same time, which gave the impression that there was a mafia in Alexandria that kidnapped young women. Newspapers started to write about the mysterious disappearance of women, and TV shows started to blame police officers for being ineffective. Such provocations led security forces motivated to arrest the women to prove their effectivity. The story took another direction when the women were arrested in different locations, i.e. the North Coast and Sharm al-Shaykh. In an interview with presenter Wael al-Ibrashy, Norhan who is one of them was asked to explain what happened on air, when she negated that she was kidnapped, and clearly confirmed that she was at home, explicitly saying that these were rumors, and that police officers were visiting her daily to make sure she was home. Meanwhile, Hadeer Helmy talked to the presenter while she was at the Ganoub Sinaa’s police station, explaining that she went to Sharm al-Shaykh to work, but she would return to her family after they reported her
disappearance, and the matter got serious. Ironically is how Hadeer was asked, or compelled, to talk to TV shows by police officers who personally called the hosts, emphasizing that she was not arrested, she was hosted by the police, and they gave her the freedom to choose if she wanted to return to Alexandria, or stay in Sinai.

Politics of subversion can also be detected here. This time it is not mustaqillat who subvert, but families and the state. If we zoomed out the political moment at that time, August 2016, it was the peak of the discourse over coercive disappearance by statist and non-statist groups. Many citizens were coercively disappeared, and then their relatives discovered they were arrested by police forces months later. Some of them were detained without judicial sentences, others were already in courts denied any rights of hiring lawyers, and others have never appeared again, such as Mostafa al-Massouny², (Al-Ahram English online, November, 2016). National and international human rights organizations mobilized against coercive disappearance in Egypt, so did activists, NGOs, and those interested in social justice. Reports were issued with horrific numbers of people kidnapped by security forces, whose names were included in cases labeled as national security lawsuits against terrorism, (AMNESTY, 2016). This national and international pressure on the Egyptian authorities was reflected on the parliament discussions in which MOI representatives clearly stated that they did not kidnap citizens. In an interview on BBC Arabic, November (2015), president Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi claimed that some of the youth who the MOI was accused of kidnapping had volunteered to participate in the Syrian war, joined ISIS, or died during illegal migration.

What happened in the case of the three young women was that their families perfectly

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² One of the most high-profile cases of alleged forced disappearance in Egypt, who went missing in June 2015 as he went out to buy food. His family said that they looked for him everywhere; in hospitals, police stations and morgues. Massouny is a graphic designer and video editor, worked for a private company before his disappearance. His fate is still unknown.
exploited the momentum on social websites and mass media over forced disappearances. As usual, these familial reports were highlighted in statist media and TV shows, and used as scapegoats to cleanse the MOI hands of forced disappearances. Other hosts and websites known for their loyalty to the security state, were channels utilized to prove MOI’s innocence, at the expense of these women. This better explains the statements made by police officers in media, Sada al-Balad website, stating that the three women were found separately, each one of them had left her family’s home after clashes with family members. During the on-air calls, host Wael al-Ibrashy stated that Hadeer left due to familial problems which are ‘private affairs’ that should not be discussed on air, although Hadeer’s sister negated such assertions and so did Hadeer herself. TV shows continued to mention and host representatives of the MOI, glorifying their efforts as “the humanitarian face of the MOI who protects the unity of the family,” a direct quotation by al-Ibrashy.

Politics of subversion is not only used by mustaqillat, but by their families, and the security forces as well. Those who exploited such incidents to reintroduce the state as a regulator of the social, a protector of citizens, a safeguard of the moral order, keeping statist violations under the carpet. These violations conducted by the state have not been limited to tracking family’s reports to return women back home, as they also target women living alone as part of the securitization processes.

The fear of being reported to police as disappeared, kidnapped, or even as a thief, has continued to haunt mustaqillat’s imaginaries while seeking istiqlal, leaving them in constant status of anxiety. Other aspects, further add to understand the complexities of istiqlal, or living away from the family’s home. For example, when religion intersects with gender, the brutal face of the state reveals itself. A mustaqilla who has geographically relocated her job from Cairo to Dahab, speaks of the challenges some Christian women experience if they seek istiqlal. In 2017, (x) shared an apartment with (z) who was a Christian mustaqilla who had
relocated her job to Dahab, as well. (z)’s family reported her to the Church who contacted the police to find her and get her back home. When found in Dahab, the police representatives talked informally with her Christian manager to persuade her to return home without getting arrested. The manager started to threaten (z) that the story was getting harmful for their religion and her family’s reputation, especially when he knew that her boyfriend was Muslim. “She resigned, and then disappeared. No one knows anything about her now, and whether she got arrested, and forcibly delivered to her family, or not,” (x) tells.

In such cases, police officers get Christian women back to their families, so that they can prevent a ‘religious crisis,’ (*fetna taeFiya*). Religious crises in Egypt have a history, as the matter is left to be handled by the security state, as a preserver of the public order. *Fetna TaeFiya* is a term that is usually used in the contexts of Muslim-Christian clashes that in many cases end up with coercive displacement for Christian families, Human Rights Watch (2018). The term is primarily used in reference to the interreligious love affairs, in which women are perceived as the main causes, (Madamasr, 2017). It also is used when individuals want to convert from Christianity to Islam and vice versa. Many *fetna taeFiya* incidents were publicized in media as caused by women, i.e. *Wafaa Qustantien* and *Kamelya Shehata*, two famous bloody clashes between Muslims and Christians that are called after the women’s names. Politics of securitization emerges here as a way to detect what causes could lead to *Fetna TaeFiya*, to prevent them. This happens at the expense of women, no matter what their religious beliefs are. Therefore, to get Christian women back home is a matter of national security conducted by police forces. Nonetheless, some Christian *mustaqillat* have negotiated *istiqlal* with their families. Sometimes Christian families set rules, such as accommodation in hostels offered by the Church for *mughtaribat*.

Some *mustaqillat* have found a refugee in leaving Egypt, and moving to another country where their families have no institutional or socially normative rights to get them *back home*.
by force. A mustaqilla from Cairo had to leave Egypt and move to the Arab Golf, secretly. When her family knew that she left Egypt, they could not believe how she managed to deceive them, and successfully got the visa and the requirements to leave without their permission. Until now, she cannot visit Cairo, as her family have already reported her to police for theft, to make sure that whenever she is in Cairo, she will be arrested.

The Youth Crisis

In 2016, Lamees al-Hadidi in her talk show, Hona al-Assema, hosted a group of Mustaqillat. Almost half of the interview was devoted to discuss how living alone would help women developing their careers. Ambition was mentioned as a reason for Istiqlal, and searching for proper jobs was argued to be a justified purpose achieving this ambition. The presenter was amazed and smiling to the interviewees, while they narrate their success stories, represented in building professional careers in their different fields, to the extent that their Istiqlal has been reduced only to waged labor. Defending living alone as a way that women use to achieve their professional goals, the host counterattacked some of the discouraging calls that she received on air. Other calls were supportive, some of which were received from other mustaqillat who expressed how hard their istiqlal is, and the others were received from mothers who defended istiqlal as a tool that young women use to build their own capacities whether in life, or professionally. The interview that begun by istiqlal as a process through which women manage to have greater freedom of mobility, turned into a defense of istiqlal as a process in which Mustaqillat should be supported, as goal-oriented towards building their careers.

By talking about how istiqlal has been presented in mainstream media, I would like to mention that what media has been doing during the past few years, particularly after June 2013, is to introduce positive role models of the youth, away from politics. The task is to highlight other aspects in which those youth, people in their twenties, can get involved in
without these involvements being classified as political. The *good* citizen, the *working* woman, the *conscious* TV watcher are among the subjectivities that mass media have been trying to cultivate, for the sake of supporting the state regaining public order. In her arguments, Laila Arman, an Egyptian journalist, analyzes the systematic processes of restricting the aftermath of January 2011 by mass media, be it advertisements, drama, and even film festivals. For her, the discourse circulating on youth after 2013, the year when the military led by General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi took over, is a discourse that eliminates any possibility to be, or to continue being, politically active. The reason behind is that youth, *al-shabab*, are argued to be *revolutionary subjects* for the role they played in the January 2011 uprising, or more specifically the downfall of Mubarak’s security state, (Bayat, 2013). So, restoring public order could not be achieved if those subjects remained involved in politics. Conversely, alternatives should be provided to absorb such rage and energy, epitomized in reintroducing a new version of *al-shabab*, those who attend Al-Sisi’s economic conferences for youth, run their own start-ups, or present the *good* citizen image who does not care about politics but his/her personal development on a micro-level, (MadaMasr, June 2017, October 2018). As part of this youth, the interview with *mustaqillat* could not actually have gone further beyond patronizing them as *good* role models. In doing so, mass media contributes to normalizing practices that benefit cultivating specific subjectivities through discourses, images, personal narratives, (Taylor, 2005). The TV show did not only normalize *istiqlal* as a career objective, but it participated in the understanding of *istiqlal* as a one-end trajectory, a practice that is carried out for one purpose, and in a singular way that is professionalism.
Chapter 3
Mustaqillat and The City

Introduction

The previous chapter traces the emergence of istiqal in conjunction with the 2011 revolution. This chapter explores the everyday lived experiences of istiqal, focusing on how mustaqillat find apartments to rent and to share with others. It analyzes how women living alone are challenged by the politics of public moralities and its intersection with the politics of securitization. Navigating their new neighborhoods, and the state, this chapter traces ways in which mustaqillat achieve their gendered safety and freedom of mobility at the neighborhood level, attempted as independent women.

Searching for Flatmates, Women-Only!

In 2012, when I decided to be a Mustagilla, it took days to look for a place to rent. After a clash with my father, concerning hijab and my subsequent move to Cairo, I was hosted by a newly married woman. When I made my decision to reside in Cairo, we both started to surf the internet looking for shared apartments to rent a room in. We used Google search, as the only online platform we could find advertisements and offers. It took three whole days of endless research during which we used different keywords to help us. Some of which were: Mughtaribat accommodation, rooms for rent for women, student dorms, girls dorms, and youth hostels. Our research was in Arabic, and the result we got were ranging from posts published on women-only forums, i.e. Fatakat, and real estate websites, i.e. Dubizzle, now OLX. The search was not very successful, as many of these posts were already expired, or the phone numbers attached to them had changed. We ended up with collected data on where exactly to find affordable shared rooms for women who reside in Cairo for educational and work purposes. One of the areas that appeared several times to us was Bein al-Sarayat, a neighborhood that is very close to Cairo University, and it is known as a place where students
usually rent rooms. On the third day, I headed to Bein al-Sarayat with a friend, asking the people in the area about a broker, or anyone who rents their apartments to women. People sounded familiar with the questions. They referred us to a woman called Um Mohsen, who is well-known for renting shared rooms at her building for mughtaribat. I cannot recall what details, except that she asked me to go upstairs, knock the door, and tell the door-guard that I was sent by Um Mohsen to see the available bed. I was not expecting the bed to be fancy, as Um Mohsen said that it costs 150 EGP. The flat was very dusty, the room was too small with two beds, and insects were crawling in the kitchen. I was disappointed, as I feared options would be limited. I returned to the people who referred me to Um Mohsen, and asked them for other references. Also, during my fieldwork conducted for this thesis, I was surprised that many of my interlocutors already know Um Mohsen, and have stories with her. I will return to this later in the chapter. People referred to Hany, a man in his early thirties, who ran a local accessory shop, and had a small business of renting beds for Mughtaribat at an apartment that he assigned for this reason as a private business. Hany was literally interviewing me, asking me why I want to rent a bed. He was quite alerted to my clothes, tone of my voice, and my messy hair. Before telling me the price, he said there was a curfew at 11.00 pm, and that I was not allowed to host anyone, including women, to sleep over, or even visit me without notifying him. Men are not allowed to exist in the lives of women renters, as the reputation of the apartment and the women renting is to remain pure. Then, he stated the price which was double that of Um Mohsen’s. Once I agreed to all his rules, he gave me the permission to see the apartment, and the available bed, which was very clean. I resided there for months, before he dismissed me, after continuing to be politically active, despite his warnings.

Since then, searching for apartments, and available rooms or beds, has become less difficult than it was in 2012. The search engine has been mainly shifted from Google to Facebook. Different Facebook groups have been established for the purpose of renting
apartments or sharing apartments, for both men and women. The direct contact that Facebook facilitates between both people who rent to others, and people who want to rent, or share apartments. The forums on Google did not provide such direct connection, especially that there were not applications on smart phones that allow notifications of messages to pop up, as it is the case on Facebook mobile application, and its notification settings. Individuals had to wait until the other person they communicate with to check their inbox and reply. This usually took days, not to mention the expiration dates of the posts on real estate websites that removed any phone number of advertisers, once the post was expired. I would like to highlight the significant role played by social websites, i.e. Facebook, in this regard.

Nonetheless, I would argue that it is not Facebook per se. Rather, it is how netizens use it for their own interests, and how they appropriate it for their benefits. These (re)appropriations are one of many other mechanisms that individuals use to tackle the challenges of their everyday life.

_Mustaqillat_ have done this very successfully. For instance, the majority of the posts published on Facebook groups searching for flatmates, are women looking for flatmates, or shared rooms to rent. This reflects the degree to which _mustaqillat_ and the phenomenon of _istiqlal_ has increased after the 25th of January 2011 revolution.

Hello everyone, I'm looking for a nice a cozy room for girl starting November 5. I'm looking for a long period stay in Cairo and preferably in downtown, Dokki or Mohandesin. The maximum budget is 2,500 EGP. Please inbox me if you have an available room. Anonymous – October 2018.

Hello Everyone, I have a sunny 2-bedroom apartment. Available for short term rentals only, duration is negotiable. Females only, if interested please inbox me with your desired date and duration of stay. Anonymous – October 2018.

A room for two women is available in Faisal, Talbeyya, close to al-Sa’ah square. The building is very safe. The apartment is fully furnished. There is a doorman. It is announced for 1000 EGP. No insurance fees needed, neither broker fees. We need two quit and obligated women who are willing to share the cleaning duties. For further communication, please contact my friend. Anonymous – December 2018.

Hey, I'm looking for a room in a shared apt. in Dokki, Agouza or Downtown. I respect others privacy, open minded, so I hope roommates also do. I don't have a
specific budget but I'm not a millionaire yet. If you have room or know someone; please let me know. Thanks in advance.

The renting of shared rooms happens mostly informally, and depends on oral agreements between renters and announcers. If a woman is interested in an announcement, she asks for an appointment to see the apartment, when both she and the announcer orally agree on their needs, including the house rules, such as smoking, pets, sharing household duties, and if there is any deposit needed for confirmation. The reason behind this is that according to the Egyptian law number (136) of the year (1981), renters are not allowed to sublet the property they initially rent. It is illegal to rent private properties, if the person is not the owner. So, any written contracts, even if not officially registered, would result in legal troubles for both the person who signed the official rental contract with the owners, the first renter, and the owners themselves, rental law articles (13, 18, 23). To tackle such a challenge, people who usually announce they have available rooms for rent at the apartments they are renting from the owners, tell the owner that they are sharing the apartment with others, and dividing the rent. Some landowners agree, and others do not, according to their personal preferences, and legal considerations. That is why, renting an apartment requires more effort than renting a room in an already rented apartment. It takes more time. The various rental arrangements directly affect the daily relationships between mustaqlat, as I argue in the next chapter of my thesis.

The Interconnected Authority of Doormen, Landowners, and the State

To understand how the authority of these three parties work, and come together, I interviewed a doorman, and a landowner. Interviews focused on how they perceive and deal with women living alone who want to rent apartments. Their answers are analyzed in light of my interlocutor’s words, and a narrative quoted from the documentary: (Mughtaribat, ONTV, 2017).
I planned to rent a flat for myself, but landowners always tell they do not rent flats for young women living alone. They asked me why I live alone, where my family is, whether they regularly visit me or not. I retreated. I asked my father to appear in the picture, in front of the landowner convincing him that he would rent for a family. Abdul-Ghanni, Migrants, (2017, 10:37)

The landowner in Abdul-Ghani’s narrative feels suspicious on her living alone, away from her family. In his questions, he is not concerned with what she is doing, as much as why she wants to rent an apartment, and if her family visits her. This could be framed in two main explanations. The first is that he himself is convinced that women should not live on their own, since they are usually defined in relation to their families. In this context, women are seen as part of the family, a social organism that maintains the statist approved social order. Moreover, women are seen as non-juridical subjects, dependents, whose separation from the family is indicative that they are not morally-disciplined. Here, the landowner adopts a heteronormative conceptualization of women “outside” of their homes, as an abnormal status. These views are part of dominant discourses discourses that are mainstreamed by the security state, in its attempts to dominate the social, alongside with colonial and postcolonial discourses on women’s respectability and domestication. Consequently, women living independently from their families are a source of “troubles,” since they are not in their “place,” for a period of time, (Ahmed, 2010; Harvey, 1999; Merry, 2001).

For me, what matters is paying the rent regularly. Yet, if I am offered two renters, one of them is a family, and the other is a woman living alone, I would definitely choose to rent for the family. In Maadi, neighbors do not give so much attention to each other, unless there is a seriously strange issue. In this case, they would call me, asking me to solve this issue. And, I do not have time for such hassles.

The second explanation is a more direct link to the state and its sovereignty. Mustaqillat could be socially perceived as sex workers, those who are legally criminalized, socially stigmatized, and politically introduced as “vulgar” subjects, (Beir, 2011). Sex workers have been targeted by police forces, in their moralization and securitization processes of the public
space, (Amar, 2011a, p. 312). It means that, wherever they exist, sex workers are followed by police, what could be socially perceived as a trouble for landowners, (Law 136, 981). Those could be punished, if not arrested, for renting their private properties to sex workers.

Generally, in both cases, the security state plays a significant role in offering disciplinary mechanisms, via “individual social policy,” (Lazzarato, 2009, p. 118), not only for those categorized as abnormal, but also individuals who know about them being abnormal and do not report them. This is mentioned explicitly in article number (25) of the Egyptian Criminal Procedures Law. The next quotation reveals these interrelated dynamics.

Dear, neighbors do not accept women living alone, to avoid headaches. Those women who may dress transparently, or come back home late, are targets of neighbors’ attention. They may conclude that she is a sex worker, Masheya Mashy Batal. If I saw a woman like this wants to rent an apartment, I do not let her meet the landowner. This is because I usually know his reaction. He would reject. Few years ago, there were some women living here. They were wired, always arrived home late, wearing very tight clothes. One day, the neighbors fed up by the women regularly hosting too many men at the apartment. So, the neighbors reported the police, who came and arrested them all for running the apartment for adultery, sex work.

The state absorbs differences throughout its power, transforming citizens into its representatives, in every home, and in every neighborhood. For instance, a colleague and a friend, shares that in 2016, when living with other mustaqillat in Garden City, before she moved abroad, that Qasr al-Nile police station indirectly investigated them as women living alone by interviewing the building’s doorman, and domestic workers who enter their apartment regularly. The women felt that their work, political activity, and sexual conduct, including their public appearances, were being watched. The doorman usually entertained informers from the nearby Qasr el Nile police station in the foyer of the building, serving them tea and chatting with them. When asked who all these men were, he replied, “informers, but do not worry, they protect us.” The doorman monitored and commented on more than one occasion on who went upstairs, especially male guests. He regularly questioned the male
guests before letting them up. Once he told a regular male guest he could sleep over if he liked, as he was dating one of the women in the apartment at the time, in exchange for a special arrangement between the two men likely in the form of extra money. The landlady also explicitly mentioned face to face to the woman whose name is on the lease that no male guests were welcomed to uphold the apartment’s reputation. Especially between 2014 and 2015 the women say they felt insecure and surveilled, with police raids every January 25th that targeted apartments like theirs. To counter this violation of privacy, the women in the apartment changed their locks, fired the domestic workers, and used their class position to limit the doorman’s continuous intervention to their private life. They continued to pay him double the amount of other tenants (his monthly fee was 50, he asked for 150 in exchange for keeping their secrets away from the landlady, but they agreed to 100 in the end), but started to be formal in limited interactions with him. Other mustaqillat prefer to compromise. In another conversation with one of the research participants, she noted that she prefers to rent apartments in buildings with no doormen, preferring to bribe the doorman to just live in peace. During my fieldwork, I interviewed a journalist and anthropologist, who explains this intersection between class, and authority of doormen in relation to the housing market, in Egypt.

Residential neighborhoods have different cultures. Although these cultures depend on the housing market, as well. In other words, there are some neighborhoods that are ready for permeation, and accepting subcultures. One of them is Downtown Cairo that have been more flexible to have single individuals living alone, not just families, throughout the last two decades. Also, there could be mixed-genders apartments, where men and women live together, despite not belonging to the same family. This is something that was not very acceptable before, based on the needs of renters, and the housing market. Social class has remained a barrier between renters and those who may bully them at the neighborhood. That is because class fills the gap, between renters, and the authority of doormen, and neighbors.

However, this does not work for all mustaqillat. Sometimes, doormen exploit these dynamics to receive extra money from Mustaqillat, as they both know that landowners
usually trust doormen in regard with their close observations, or more adequately
surveillance, over renters. Another *mustaqlīla* describes this mutual trust between the
doorman and the apartment owner, and how it affected her everyday practices. She stated that
the doorman used to accompany any visitor to her apartment door, even if he is a delivery
man who simply carries fast food. This was to make sure that they would immediately leave.
Every now and then, he used to indirectly refer that she was late the night before. If she did
not pay him extra tips, he would spread rumors about her, or asking the owner to break her
rental contract. As she puts it, “when I confronted the doorman that he was a sexual harasser,
he reported me to the landowner, claiming that I host men at my flat. The owner called to
insult me, threatening me of breaking my contract, if I did not stop hosting visitors, even
women. When I chose to leave, she did not pay me back my insurance.” In another
conversation with a research participant, she elaborates on the authority that doormen and
landowners think they have over women renters.

In another apartment, we rented in al-Dokki, the landowner knew from the
beginning that we were a man and a woman sharing it. Yet, he was persuaded that we
are not in a relationship, just because the guy was Christian. [Laughs]. After very few
months, he decided to break our rental contract, justifying it that we were being
visited by women he do not accept the way they dress, *shemal*. He directly said that,
and accordingly, we asked him to give us our insurance to move out. He threatened us
if we did not immediately leave that he would have asked his son to firmly intervene.
His son was a police officer. We were frightened that he would accuse us of adultery.
So, we left without our insurance, or even a half of the month we already paid. We
spent around two weeks homeless, occasionally hosted by friends. As the following
month started and we received our salaries, we loaned from our friends to collect the
amount of money required for renting a new apartment in Garden City, i.e. insurance,
broker fees, and an in-advance rent. The new doorman was a son of b*tch. He wanted
to receive 500 EGP from us on monthly basis, as he knew we were mixed genders. He
blackmailed us, since the landowner did not know we were a group of men and
women. She thought the renters were all men renters. As the landowner totally
refused to have mixed gender renters, only my male friends met her to sign the rental
contract, and I remained out of the picture as a woman flatmate. The doorman
gossiped to the landowner that we were a group of men and women renting the
apartment as a night-club, *Kabareih*. This was not tackled, until we agreed to give
him the 500 EGP every month. Only then, he settled the matter with her, claiming that
he would be very cautious if we behaved unacceptably. Afterwards, he never opened
his mouth, whatsoever. We were doing whatever we want, including home parties.
We acted very freely, with no restrictions. He turned out to be cool, brightening our image in front of the landowner, even if we were sleeping with each other on the stairs!

These complications of rentals are not limited to single mustaqillat. My neighbor who is a divorced woman in her late sixties tells me that she encountered similar constraints, when she was looking for an apartment to rent, following her divorce. She is a hijabi and was already in her 60s. Nonetheless, the broker treated her badly, and refused to put her in contact with the landowner. She explains that as she was living alone with her daughter, and no men appeared in the picture in her negotiations with the broker. Her tone was frustrated while narrating, as according to her, she did not appear as immodest, for the broker to refuse helping her as a single woman. Another research participant expands more on these dynamics as a divorced woman and a mustaqilla.

Divorced women are always under constant observations of her neighbors. She is stigmatized and perceived as dangerous for the owner, and his wife, just for being unmarried. Divorced means that the woman is always going after her ex-husband in courts. So, the owner can be financially anxious, of what would happen if her ex-husband stopped paying the rent? She is monitored by everyone waiting for that f*cking scene of catching a man at her apartment. Secondly, all her men neighbors, and sellers at local shops are attentive to her behaviors, acting this da*n patriarchy of helping her, which ends up with them commanding her, and commenting on her visitors. [You cannot host women wearing short dresses. The voice of your cassette was too loud yesterday.] Personally, I prefer to say that I am still married, and my husband is working abroad. I once claimed that, but my ex-husband was upset with my male friends helping me moving in my furniture to the new apartment. He went to the owner, reporting him that we are divorced. The owner went upstairs to my apartment, talking to me very roughly: [I do not rent for divorced women.] This continued, until a lawyer came to persuade him that it was a temporary situation.

Hence, renting an apartment, as a woman and living alone, is full of difficulties. My neighbor’s age, and conservative clothes did not help her finding an apartment to rent. No matter of their age, appearance, and purposes of renting apartments, many women living alone are perceived as social disorders, a source of troubles that should be avoided. Many of them are socially unacceptable subjects, for not being identified as ‘normal’ family members;
thus, they are punished by brokers and landowners. Local authorities serve as ‘social institutions’ through which cohesion is promoted, assigning what should be done, and what should not, as Simone (2010) argues.

**Gendered Safety and the Right to City**

The gendered safety discourse targets the figure of the working-class man as deviant, and restricts women’s accessibility to public spaces, depriving them both of their *right to city*, (Ghannam, 2011; Ammar, 2011), in the name of securitization. Women’s exclusion from public spaces is tied to the exclusion of other marginalized individuals or groups, (Phadke, 2007). Consumption emerges as a categorization of who has the right to exist in public, i.e. middle-class women’s public visibility is desirable, since they are categorized as modern subjects, able to act as consumers, (ibid), and as long as they are not perceived as opponents or threats to the security state, (Ammar, 2011a; Nassif, 2010). Nevertheless, the identification of the public space as ‘risky’ for women requires identification of that risk. The working-class male figure is framed as the source of this risk that needs to be contained, making him a target of state violence. This happens in parallel with questions of citizenship, sexual safety, honor, respectability, and reputation that accompany women’s visibility in public spaces as gendered subjects. If women are identified with the private sphere, then they should legitimize their existence in the public, (Phadke, 2005). Thus, when perceived as keepers of honor, any assault is an attack on that honor, and on their reputation. Sexual assault raises questions of women’s respectability in which women are blamed for the assault, (Amar, 2011a). This places the state as a protector for women’s safety that is preserved by attacking that source of risk, working-class men, (Merry, 2001). Working-class men are perceived as potential threats to women’s *purity*. This respectability politics intersecting with class limits women’s accessibility to the public sphere, as well as that of working-class men. What this discourse of gendered safety renders invisible is how women should negotiate risk and create
‘safe’ spaces for themselves in public, (Phadke, 2005; 2007; Wright, 2004). To conclude, market-oriented urbanism generates forms of gendered urban violence, and makes public space inaccessible for specific subjects, i.e. women and working-class men, (Kern and Mullings, 2013).

There is an implicit understanding that women living alone are potentially disruptive for the social cohesion of a neighborhood. For mustaqillat, areas of residency in Cairo should be wisely chosen and marked as “safe,” as shown in the quotes of offers and requests for flatmates demonstrated above. What constitutes safety is the degree to which those women are not vulnerable to violence, whether it is sexualized or not, (Nassif, 2010). Social class and purpose of istiqlal determines women’s selection of a neighborhood. Many mustaqillat prefer to reside in an area where they pay less for a place to stay in due to their low salaries. While at the same time, it has to be a neighborhood whose residents accept a woman living alone. A compromise could be seen here between safety and its social price. Cairo is a space that is (re)produced through discourses, such as freedom of mobility for women who may merge in the ambiguity of the city to practice it, (Taylor, 2005; Pieterse, 2009). Nevertheless, practicing this freedom of movement requires women to negotiate their safety on daily basis. When mustaqillat move to Cairo, they perceive it as a space where they can move freely, but eventually, they discover that this mobility has to be paid for, negotiated, and coped with, to survive the city, and to survive their istiqlal. In some cases, women who identify themselves as mustaqillat while living with their families, testify they enjoy their freedom of movement i.e. staying out for long hours, allowed to be late at night, or to travel to other cities. Unlike mustaqillat who spatially separate from their families, but must perpetually negotiate their freedom of movement in their new neighborhoods. In some instances, women move out from their families’ houses, only to face the larger community from which the family previously served a shield.
For me, safe residency is the one located in vivid neighborhoods, such as Downtown, Mohandiseen, Agouza, or al-Dokki. Most preferably is to be something where money could solve any unexpected problems. It is also the one where landowners do not live at the same building. I use every means possible for me to find suitable apartments. The most annoying thing is the doorman. So, I prefer buildings without doormen at all, or at least a doorman whom I could pay for him extra money in order to mind his own business. For neighbors, I think that having a formal relationship with them, keeps them away from intervening in my personal life. Safe residency for me is Downtown. This means that I can walk home from nearby places any time, even at 4.00 am, while I see the street is still awake, and people pass by me, normally. Also, this means that I would not be afraid at my neighborhood, in contrast to my feeling if I walk in New Cairo, or Sheikh Zayed city, where my spatial limits are the compound gates.

There is a difference between safe streets and safe residences. There can be streets in Zamalek, Maaid, or Garden City, where you can walk alone late at night, or dress whatever you like, but the apartment itself has rules and vice versa. The safest residence could be in new cities like the 6th of October, or New Cairo, but the streets cannot be the best to walk in, or to come back home late. Honestly, I do not understand the idea of safe residences, because there is no such thing like that. There is no law that guarantees your rights. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) has no role to stop any harm you are vulnerable to. So, ‘safe’ depends on how the owners, and neighbors are satisfied by your daily practices and actions. That makes the ‘unsafe’ a place where they successfully caught a mistake for you, and asking you to move out, consequently. This is not a victimizing viewpoint. Instead, it is how the rental processes are basically built upon the concept of the family. There is no privacy, even in Zamalek or Garden City, where any neighbor can easily accuse you of a crime you did not commit. For me, a new apartment is like a watermelon, either it is deliciously red, un-tasty white, and can be rotten anytime.

For me, safe residency is what are called classy neighborhoods, a place where I can dress whatever I want, get home at any time, and walk to it with the least possible sexual harassment. It also should be a place where I can host visitors, with no restrictions. I resided at al-Dokki, Garden City, and Maadi. Al-Dokki was not very safe for me, but I resided there, as it was affordable for my financial status as a new Mustaqilla.

For a place to provide safety for a woman, a set of rules are expected to be restrictively followed regarding notions of respectability, sexual conduct, and reputation, (Phadke, 2007). A woman is expected to have a claim for being visible in public spaces, and a purpose for staying alone, for existing in a specific place at a certain time, which is represented in moving out from the family’s home, and/or city. Thus, the compromise here, I argue, is women’s ability to (re)produce notions of respectability in exchange for gendered safety. Moreover, as participants separately discuss, new cities and gated communities are safe places for
mustaqillat’s accommodation in Cairo, as highly securitized spaces. However, such places are inaccessible for mustaqillat, due to cost. The following reflection by an interlocutor narrates how gendered safety is socially constructed as a compensation for reproducing respectability politics, and discourses aiming at disciplining women seen as ‘outside’ of their homes, and without family protection. It portrays such a complex relation between mustaqillat as gendered subjects, and working-class men. When mustaqillat, working-class men, and state apparatuses are framed together in one scene, mustaqillat are perceived as the most vulnerable on this hierarchy of power.

In 2015, we were residing at Downtown Cairo, me and my flatmates who were also friends and Mustaqillat. One day I felt that someone was following me. When I turned my back to check, there was nothing. I entered the building where our apartment was. I went upstairs, to the eighth floor. There were not any lifts, so I was too exhausted and my legs hurt. I opened the door, and finally got inside. Very few minutes later, the door was knocked. I was expecting it to be one of my flatmates. It was a stranger who pushed me inside, and kissed me by force. I pushed him away, and started to scream. He ran away. I followed him, wearing my home clothes. People at the neighborhood were staring at me, thinking I am crazy. I was shouting at people to follow the harasser with me. No one helped. No one moved. My flatmate, was entering the street where I was standing in the middle crying, and screaming. She took me upstairs, trying her best to calm me down. I decided to report the guy. There were no witnesses, I replied to the police officer who was investigating me. I realized that the harasser was a neighbor, when the landowner asked me to abandon the report. I refused, and he broke our rental contract, as a punishment. Anonymous – December 2018.

Similarly, I had to negotiate my safety by conforming to the majority of the neighborhood’s rules. A few months after I left Bein al-Sarayat, I rented an affordable apartment for my own, in Al- Malek al-Saleh that geographically belongs to Old Cairo. Ironic is that I should have set rules for myself and my flatmates, to avoid any misinterpretation of our accommodation in the area that could have been resulted in breaking our rental contract. During the period between 2015 and 2016, many of my flatmates started to complain of being sexually harassed by a group of the neighborhood’s men. One day, I approached one of the harassers’ families, the father was the imam of the mosque. During my conversation with
him, I relied on discourses of reputation, respectability, religion, and protection. It worked, but for a few days only. The verbal harassment continued, my flatmates left because the apartment was no longer “safe” enough for them to stay, and I stayed with new flatmates whom I told a little about the story. Events unfolded, when the young men discovered my Facebook profile, and started watching my online videos debating women’s sexuality, one of which was a TV show episode on virginity with an Islamic figure who accused me of atheism and reported me to the public prosecution on air. There was an intersection between the community, the state, and media, in which politics of morality are (re)articulated, and discipline is activated, (Phadke, 2005). I became the target of the group, those who justified their violence as it is conducted against a “loose woman,” (sharmīta in vulgar Arabic). They gathered at the entrance of my building every day, bullying and harassing me and accusing me of being a sex worker. I panicked. What I managed to separate for years was now connected in a horrifying way, my cyber-activism and residency. I was afraid that some of the online bullies would reach my home, but what happened was the opposite. Those young men were attentive to my existence in the neighborhood, since the hegemonic social modality was families, and my family had never visited me there. They searched my name online to collect information. After more troubles, and failed attempts to (re)approach the imam who started to justify why the harassers violate me, I approached the police. The state, was my last option.

In the power hierarchy, the young men, as well as I, are subjugated to the sovereignty of the state. But on the same hierarchy, I am at the bottom as a familyless woman living alone in another city. My viewpoint was that I had to make an immediate intervention, yet not official for the young men’s safety. Many of them belonged to families of Muslim Brotherhood members, a dangerous association in the aftermath of the overthrow of MB rule in 2013. Intending to abandon the report, I called the police. I aimed to put the state in the scene, so
that I could reposition myself from a perceived weak woman to one who could recall authorities whenever it is needed to “protect” her. This happened regardless of my critical views on the protection discourse promoted by the state, and how it is used to justify violence elsewhere. Sometimes, we make decisions recognized as opposing our feminist beliefs, for our own survival. Other times, we negotiate power and turn the same discourses we criticize on their head, as if we are pushed to legitimize them. What followed was epic. I cancelled my report, and for a month, police representatives knocked at my door every day, claiming they were ensuring my safety. In fact, they were investigating me, and my flatmates’ identities and purposes of our residency in the neighborhood. They photocopied our national IDs, passports, and university IDs. This was the moment I felt that I was trapped. Since, I am an activist, being under this intense statist and community censorship is threatening. I left the whole neighborhood, looking for safety in another place. I did not want to leave, nor was I financially ready.

For mustaqillat, gendered safety is a social commodity that women should pay for. Payment is employed in women’s behaviors, in their clothes, and attitudes at their new areas of residence. The previous stories show that mustaqillat are socially mentored, and expected to conform to certain criteria to achieve safety for themselves, (Phadke, 2005). Even in the neighborhoods that are perceived as ‘safe’ zones for mustaqillat, such as Downtown, mustaqillat are socially disciplined via many techniques, be them harassment, bullying, or just being under close observations of doormen and neighbors. This takes me back to the journalist’s argument on the areas that are ready for accepting woman living alone. As we could see from these different narratives of mustaqillat, if women living alone are not directly targeted by their neighbors, they are possible targets of securitization. Gendered safety depends on reproducing respectability politics, socially accepted norms, and statist discourses. Therefore, when factors, class, gender, and right to city intersect, as in the last
two narratives, women living alone are the most targeted, as undesirable subjects for both their new local communities, and the state.

When mustaqillat are in the same place as with working-class men, men win the battle. They win the battle on the both levels of either their local communities, the state. When the working-class man figure is targeted by the state as a threat to women’s safety, middle-class women’s safety, he is favored by the state at the expense of women living alone. Politics of securitizations that targets working-class men, is fluid and depends on many other factors. One of these factors is class itself intersecting with gendered subjectivities. Hence, mustaqillat as gendered subjects do not enjoy the same privilege of being protected by the state apparatus. They can be even targeted by the state itself, as not following the statist approved social orders, represented in being familyless. The figure of mustaqillat as a gendered subject is itself subjected to community and state violence. To unpack this argument in more details, I now focus on different stories of mustaqillat in one specific neighborhood in Cairo, Bein al-Sarayat.

**Mustaqillat Stories at Bein al-Sarayat**

During my fieldwork in the Fall of 2018, I came to realize that many mustaqillat resided at Bein al-Sarayat, at the beginning of their Istiqlal. Based on our conversations, they stated that Bein al-Sarayat has been a good option for them for a number of reasons. First, it is affordable; they can rent one bed with little money. Second, it is very close to the city center of Downtown Cairo, from where they can easily reach wherever they want. Third, it is very close to two subway stations that are Cairo University, and al-Buhoth. Forth, it is a vibrant and busy neighborhood, with people walking in the streets, even at night. Fifth, it has affordable local marketplaces, where mustaqillat can buy their affordable groceries. Bein al-Sarayat as many other neighborhoods, has its own spatial governmentality. It is identified as a working-class neighborhood that is called “popular,” (sha‘beyya). Women renters are
expected to (re)produce notions of respectability. Thus, gender segregation is rule number one, no smoking, and of course, a curfew. This includes how women dress, how they act in the neighborhood, and how they prove by every step that they are respectful, and deserve to be safe. This morality politics follows Merry’s (2001) argument on spatial governmentality conducted by owners, for security. Their rules are a combination of discipline intersected with the normative view of women living alone as a symptom of social disorders. Owners are trying to sustain order by dominating women’s behaviors.

On the 16th, of December 2018, I posted a question on Femi-Hub Facebook group. My question was intended to know if there are any mustaqillat who have previously resided at Bein al- Sarayat. The answers were surprising. I received many comments of mustaqillat, confirming their residence in the neighborhood, and I was overwhelmed by the negative comments.

- Me! It was cheap, and my salary was just 500 EGP.
- It’s a fu*ked up area.
- Me. A bi*chy area.
- I did. A son of bi*ch place.
- Isn’t it the area around Cairo university? It’s a rotten one.
- It’s a scary neighborhood. Do not remind me of it, please. [Laughs]
- It’s an as*whole place. It caused me a nervous breakdown. Sh*tty. Sh*tty. Sh*tty.
- I of course did. The worst days of my life. I wish Allah keeps it away, and never repeats it again.

I have become more interested to know the reasons behind their answers. So, I kept chatting with them, asking if they agree to include their answers in my research. Some of them agreed, while others were a bit concerned, and disagreed. Hence, I am quoting some of the answers I received.
I was our first time to reside in Cairo. Me and my friend did not know anything in Cairo, and a friend of us found this apartment and it was affordable at that time. We rented a ground floor apartment, consisting of two small bedrooms, and a smallest reception. [her friend made an intervention in our conversation, directing her words to the narrator: Do not forget the insects who were living with us, please]. It was five years ago, and we were still wearing our hijab. The people were surveilling us, whenever we were out, whenever we were back. The son of its landowner was a man who was very attentive to us. One day, he saw a male friend driving us home, and he was upset with us. He expressed how frustrated he was, and advised us not to allow anyone to drive us home again. He justified it that he cares about his own reputation among other neighbors, and warned us not to repeat it. This was his common behavior. If he was not there, he recommended his father to keep his eye on us, if we ever came home late at night. And yes, it has something to do with money. We were not working yet, and the apartment was close to the metro station. I do not mind if you included my testimony in your research, with my name.

I swear to God, it was the worst year of my life. Do you remember the woman who was always sitting near to the beginning of the street, and mentoring all the young women at the neighborhood? She was scaring me. When I entered the street with a male friend, she was about to drag me! She was always standing in front of the juice shop, with a Kebda cart directly behind her back. She used to stare at us to give us the impression that we were under her constant surveillance. She acted as Rose character in the Monster, Inc animation movie. [laughs]. But, you know, I heard she used to be high because of drugs. However, I did not honestly care, as I used to stand with a male friend in the street, after we were done with our classes at the university. And, yes, regarding the local internet café, it was owned by Hisham’s sons, the landowners of the building I was renting at. Sherif, this as*whole, was renting us internet from their net café. He was limiting our usage, and never allowed us to connect his internet on more than one device. I was not allowed to use it on both my laptop, and cellphone. Nevertheless, he allowed one of our flatmates to connect it on her two devices, because he had a crush on her. [laughs]. There was a time, when the internet connection was completely disabled. We were in a big mess. So, this as*whole, Sherif, said he was ready to enable the internet connection again, if the woman he had a crush on, went to the internet service provider with him. [laughs]. So, we called Hisham, his father, and told him with what Sherif was doing with us. I have no idea what his father did with him, but he (re)enabled the internet for us. Our flatmate did not have a crush back on Sherif, but she used to treat him friendly, to avoid any troubles he would have caused. He was just a kiddo. Also, there was a contestation between him, and another male neighbor who was living with his mother at the same building we were renting at. Their main battle was who was entitled to control the women renters at the building. This guy used to close the building door at 12.00 am, and whoever entered the building after this curfew, was subjugated to his bad words. This guy had an authority over Hisham and Sherif, as he threatened them to report the police that they were illegally renting their apartments for more than one renter. There was a small supermarket and its owner was an old man who opens 24/7. He was always listening to Um Kulthom at night. That sound of her singing was entertaining for me, while studying at night. It was said that he was a drug dealer and that was why he opened his shop at night. [Laughs] He kept his eye on women renters at the area. Whenever one of them disappeared, he would have asked about her. Um Mohsen was a giant. She was renting her son’s apartment for others, while he was working abroad with his wife. His apartment’s furniture was brand new, as he was a newly married
groom. This is all added to the financial exploitation of sellers. A thing that costed one pound, they sold it with two. I swear to God that Bein al- Sarayat is a great material for films and TV series, a dirty place! If you want to include my story, please keep my identity confidential. I do not want any headaches.

It was five year ago. My first residence was in Naser City, as I was a student at al-Azhar university. At Bein al-Sarayat, my flatmates were kind, and minded their own businesses. Everyone was concerned with whatever she was doing, either working or studying. There were not headaches, or clashes between us. The apartment itself was so simple. A part of it was built by old woods. The furniture was very old. There was a non-working fan. But this did not bother me. We were four flatmates. I lost connection with all of them, except one who I have known before. The exact neighborhood is so difficult to live in, and so Shabeiya. However, no one annoyed me there. I have no problems if you include this with my name.

I am living there now. But thanks God, I do not reside at its depths. There are some young men always standing at the beginning of the street, in front of the internet café. Until now, there are no major things happened, but some verbal harassment. I hope nothing happens, because the apartment is nice, and I like it. Also, the landowner is a friendly woman, so is her husband. This is of course added to the inexpensive rent.

During our conversation on my post, mustaqillat were very familiar with some of the stories and many residents in the neighborhood. All knew Um Mohsen, the local internet café, and Hany, the man who was renting his apartment to me and my flatmates. We laughed while recalling our stories in Bein al- Sarayat. We all agreed that the reason behind our residence in this neighborhood was that it costs little to rent a bed, a room, or an apartment. Many of us confirmed that Bein al- Sarayat was our first destination after we decided to be mustaqillat. We realized that almost the same people were acting towards us the same way, although we did not know each other before, and we were not residing there at the same time. We were surveilled by the neighbors. Curfews were mandatory, and we had to act in a way perceived by the people of the neighborhood as modest, to avoid trouble, and being dismissed from Bein al- Sarayat. Also, we understood that whenever we had the chance to move out, we did without neither regrets, nor hesitations. In a friendly visit to one of my interlocutors’ rented apartment in November 2018, as a part of my fieldwork, we started to talk about the areas we resided in as mustaqillat. She mentioned that she rented a bed at Bein al- Sarayat for one month, during which she had a financial issue, and could not afford more than one
bed at *Bein al-Sarayat*. When I asked my question on Femi-Hub group, she said, “it is a nightmare,” but she did not talk more, as we did during my visit to her. Therefore, I re-approached her via Facebook messages, and here is what she said:

I felt estranged, and so furious with the whole building. It was located in a narrow lane, *Harrah*, where there always were people sitting in the street watching women renters. They used to stare at us, and verbally harass us. I remember that day when I stopped to ask a harasser why he was doing so to me. He replied with a vulgar tone, saying that he did not touch me. I did not feel safe, all the time I spent there. It felt as if I could not even breath. And, I had nothing to do. I could not sleep because of the noise downstairs, and I could not adapt to it, neither to live in a hot place where there was no fan, air conditioner, nor even a window!

The apartment I used to share a room in, was occupied by six women diversified in their purpose of residency between studying, and working. Our purposes of residency were well-known for the owner who investigated us before accepting our stay. Furthermore, *Bein al-Sarayat* is placed under a strict state surveillance, for the police to be updated with who are involved in student movements, or revolutionary events. One day after I came back from Tahrir square in the consequence of November 2012 clashes with police forces, the owner told me that two police officers asked him for more information about me, yet he warned me if this happened again, he would dismiss me. A day later, he called me at night and asked where I was. I had no chance even to lie, the clashes were too loud to be recognized. He asked me to leave the apartment within three days. The owner thought of me as a problematic resident whose actions did not represent a respectful woman. I used to participate in politics, my male friends used to drive me home, and I could have negatively affected the reputation of his apartment, his business that should have been kept free of disrespectful women, for others to see “safe” and rent it.

Why did I reside there? Because it was cheap. It was such an interesting thing to find in Cairo! If I want to rent an apartment and live my life without any problems, I should have a very high budget that would f**ck me up. I was sharing one room with a flatmate, and we had two other flatmates sharing another room. They were kind, but so conservative. I mean, if I was back home late at night, they would blame me, saying that people were giving us attention at the neighborhood. The whole building was assigned for students, and women residing in Cairo for work. The boys, *E’iyal*, at the street were a catastrophe. we could not sleep, as they were awaking to later than 3.00 am, talking about their sexual affairs. One day, one of my flatmates was putting clothes in the balcony to dry at night, while one of those boys was watching porn, directly under the balcony. When I decided to take my hijab off, it was such an issue. I spent almost two to three months, wearing it while at the neighborhood, and taking it off when I leave it for work. I could not take it off at the neighborhood, because they knew literally every woman at the neighborhood, watching her very closely. Before this, I resided in another apartment, at *Bein al-Sarayat* as well. But, it was closer to Cairo university. It was a family building that its owners used to rent one of their apartments for young women. There was a curfew at 11.00 pm. If we were home after 11.00 pm, we used to secretly open the building door for one another. The landowner's wife was too nosey. She had a key for the apartment we were renting.
Sometimes, she opened the apartment door, and walk the apartment, like a policeman. She even was opening the refrigerator to see the food we had. [Laughs]. One day, one of our flatmates, who was a journalist, was late, and the other flatmate who would have opened the building door for her, felt asleep. She started to knock the door to wake the owner. Apparently, he was not sleeping, and he did not intentionally want to open the door for her. So, she threw a stone on his window. He insulted her loudly, saying that she is a sex worker, Enty be-tetsharmaty ya monhalla. I left.

Navigating the City

This last section of the chapter aims at unpacking how mustaqillat deal with such policing in either their new neighborhoods, or the state apparatus. It also highlights how mustaqillat position themselves in the urban space of Cairo. As the previous reflections show, mustaqillat are challenged as women living away from their families. Their right to city is denied and ignored as gendered subjects. At the same time, women have their own survival mechanisms shaped by their everyday life in Cairo, (Simone, 2010). Repetitive laughs and the sarcastic tones that mustaqillat use during our conversations, demonstrate a technique of overcoming an overwhelming experience. They use tones of making fun of the people who try to control their behaviors. They use claims before landowners to avoid trouble, such as the woman who stated that she was still married. Also, they even disappeared from the picture as women flatmates, such as the narrator whose male flatmates claimed they are renting the apartment for themselves, with no women sharing it with them, in order to sign the rental contract with the landowner. Some mustaqillat claim they are still living with their families, and have their family members sign the rental contract for them. When they are under security surveillance, they leave the neighborhood and look for other places to reside in, depending on the ambiguity of the city in which they can merge. When it comes to doormen and the authority they think they have over women renters, mustaqillat can either bribe them, or stop paying them tips, as punishment. Regarding curfews, mustaqillat depend on one another to break curfews at night, calling each other to open the building door, as in the case of Bein al-Sarayat. They can manipulate the discourses on women’s protectionism by the state, and call
the police to intervene, no matter how this ends up. To tackle the close observation of the neighborhood, some mustaqillat who want to take their hijab off, wear it in the neighborhood, and take it off when they are away from it. They can even stop to discuss why someone is harassing them, or reporting one annoying them to someone who has local authority over the person, such as the incident of disabling the internet. Other mustaqillat manage to support their flatmates to overcome potential problems, such as the one acting friendly with the internet café man, to ensure that her flatmates have access to the internet, or that one who risked her own residence because she opened the building door secretly for her flatmates who break curfews.

In their navigation of the city, mustaqillat have not only been impacted by the city, they have impacted the city, as well. As the journalist I mentioned earlier told, there are some neighborhoods that now accept renters who are not part of one family, especially people in their twenties who have started to rent apartments for themselves and with other flatmates. Mustaqillat have affected the housing market, making the offers and requests more frequent, especially areas close to downtown and the city center that many women perceive as safer residences for them. An interesting aspect is that some neighborhoods perceived as popular, and not very friendly to women living alone, have recently been accepting women renters, i.e. al-Sayeda Zainab, Dar Al-Salam, or Giza suburbs. During the last few years, people are escaping the city center in Cairo for gated communities, which makes the city center a destination for many young people.

I would like to conclude this chapter with my translation to an Arabic song of Egyptian singer Muhammed Mounir. The song expresses the constrains on women’s mobilities in Egypt, mentioning surveillance, mentorship, and curfews set by neighborhoods. It highlights the space-time relations that construct women’s behaviors and appearances in public. I think
it perfectly captures the dynamics and hassles that women experience, when walking down the streets. It also recalls the watches as signifiers of these time-space bonds. At the end of the song, the singer describes the actions of throwing watches away that many women do, resisting such restrictions on their mobilities.

Oh girls, oh girls,
At the country of girls, all the girls
Fill their sockets with candy,
At the country of girls, all the girls walk
holding watches in their hands,
And before the home doors close, before darkness covers lanes,
At the country of the girls, girls run home,
Oh girls, oh girls,
At the country of girls, all the girls,
When they laugh, hearts dance,
When they sing, we are taken by moans,
Oh girls, oh girls,
At the country of girls, all the girls
Dream of sparking like stars,
Dream of flying like flags,
Oh girls, oh girls,
They can rebel, they can revolt,
But sometimes, they throw their watches away,
The beats of watches hurt things, and strangle things,
At the country of girls, all the girls are girls!
At the country of girls, all the girls fill their sockets with candy!
Chapter 4
Remaking Home

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed how mustaqillat find apartments to rent in Cairo, and the difficulties they face in searching for safe neighborhoods to reside in. These difficulties have resulted in a sense of nomadism among many mustaqillat, represented in the repetitive actions of moving from a place to another. This chapter focuses on how mustaqillat make, and remake the concept of home, inside the apartments or rooms they rent. It highlights daily routines, and quarrels. Shared apartments are shared spaces where mustaqillat’s bodies, affects, and life material conditions intersect, (Simone, 2010), producing and reproducing different meanings and practices.

Re-appropriation and Ownership: Make It Feel like Home

Many of the posts published on Femi-Hub are published for the purpose of asking for support and advice. One of these posts was published by a mustaqilla, expressing her anxieties of moving out of her family’s home after both her parents passed away in a short period of time. Trying to advise her, mustaqillat explicitly told how she could appropriate the new place to feel like home. The implicit was that sense of alienation that can invade mustaqillat, especially those who have not experienced living alone before, or resided in university hostels. Hence, overcoming the affect of alienation requires emotional as well as physical labor, represented in the action of reapropriating the new place that mustaqillat move to, making it feel like home. Hence, I try to unpack how reapropriation of space can help mustaqillat to cope with the affects that are linked to istiqtal.
To make it feel like home is a common practice among Mustaqillat. Some of them have moved objects they are attached to from their families’ homes to their rented rooms, or apartments, such as mugs, kitchen tools, bed sheets, furniture, and appliances. Other mustaqillat have started to write on the walls of their room with their hands, draw on it, change its colors, move the existing furniture, add other furniture, add lights, add toys, or change curtains and carpets. Many of mustaqillat have adopted pets at their rented apartments, as their families prohibit having pets in their homes.

This gives a sense of ownership and belonging to a new space. This is also limited by the extent to which mustaqillat have the right to do so. If a mustaqilla shares a room with another, this needs to be their shared decision to redecorate the room. In a conversation with one of my interlocutors, she expresses how she reappropriated her new shared room at Bein al-Sarayat neighborhood. Whilst she individually developed that sense of home as a mustaqilla, other mustaqillat collectively developed it when they were sharing an apartment together. Nevertheless, another research participant does not have that sense of belonging to the apartments she has rented insofar.
I brought things with me to save money. But, I brought other things that I do not really need, like hand-bags, pants, and old books. I brought all the small stuff I have, may this familiarize me with the new room, and help me to feel it is so much like my room at our family home. One of these is a bed sheet made of wool. It belongs to my mother, and it warms me in cold winter nights.

The process of reconstructing home is dependent on affects that are related to the newly inhabited space, the rented apartment or room, and the objects that exist in that space. As expressed by many of my interlocutors, appropriating rented spaces, and obtaining that sense of belonging serves as a mechanism to deal with the rented space as a ‘new’ space, transforming it into a familiar one, into a home. The word ‘new’ itself implies that the rented room or apartments are needful of reapropriation, in order for a mustaqilla to feel at home. For some, the word ‘home’ refers to the family’s house, in which many of the research participants grew up in. Other participants used the word ‘home,’ in reference to a place of their own, a created home of their own.
Some *mustaqillat* recreate the family’s house, the home, in their rented apartments, as an affective space where they feel comfortable and are familiar with its objects. Some others start creating a home from scratch, a home that they make for themselves. This is explicit in the action of bringing items from the family’s house to the recently rented room, holding on this affective relationship between *mustaqillat* and the objects they are attached to as constitutive parts of their subjectivities. (Navaro-Yashin, 2012) argues that subjectivities are embodied and reconstituted in objects through affects attached to these objects. Thus, when a *mustaqilla* brings what she feels attached to from her family’s house to hers, this asserts that feeling of being home. I recall the frozen food example from chapter two, when my interlocutor’s sense of intimacy with her mother is mediated through eating that prepared food while in Cairo.

The blanket that my interlocutor brought to her rented room, reminds her of her mother. Meanwhile, the lights bought for the purpose of decoration is another example on how *mustaqillat* reframe their spatial subjectivities, in their relation to the objects they buy to decorate their rooms. In this affective relationship between *mustaqillat* and the spaces they rent, the idea of home is recreated as an expression of stability, which reflects the new meanings and practices in a given space, especially if that space is surrounded by instabilities.
and uncertainties, (Careston, 2003). The uncertainties are the fears and double-checking safety over and over again. However, that sense of stability and the process of reframing subjectivities are interrupted by the nomadic statues that many mustaqillat experience during their journeys with istiqlal. This makes the process of making home itself harder, as one of my interlocutors puts it, “temporary.” She can barely have an attachment to the rooms she rented, not only because there is no time between every moving out and moving in, but also because she feels threatened to be attached to something that she does not own, (Berlant, 2002). That explains why she wishes if she can have a home for herself, as if she is waiting for that moment when she owns what she feels, if she can rest assured there would not be any interruption between what she feels and what she should feel.

In one of my posts on Femi-Hub, I asked how long mustaqillat usually stay in a rented room/apartment. The answers ranged between two nights to two years. Participants reported that they felt uncomfortable with the new place, and/or potential flatmates. The repetitive action of moving out from a house to another, from a rented room to another, and from one neighborhood to another, explains that sense of nomadism that many mustaqillat feel during istiqlal. Many mustaqillat pack their luggage every few months, which intensifies the degree to which mustaqillat’s spatial subjectivities are divided among all the spaces they inhabited, all the people they lived with, and all the objects they use, or carry on their backs from place to place. While the next quotation by one of the research participants captures this affect of nomadism, it also spotlights that re-appropriating a space might not be possible for many mustaqillat, which in return makes the process of remaking home more complex. In this narrative, the participant is aware that trying to reappropriate a rented room can cost money, and affect her financial status that negatively affects her ability to re-rent another room. She is keen on not changing the walls of her rented rooms as if she does not live there.

I did not bring anything from my family’s home, except an old blanket they do not need. I buy whatever I need for myself. You know, I have a feeling that any rented
room is not my own, because I usually move from an apartment to another, or more specifically, from a room to another. Also, because there are insurance fees that I pay, I cannot post anything on the walls of the rooms I rent, to be able to receive my insurance back when moving out. I dream of a day when I can have a home for myself, where I live alone. But I do not have the money to afford a private apartment for my own. I also have concerns of loneliness. I am afraid of living alone. I am a social person who likes to live with roommates, even if we do not socialize a lot, and every one of us always closes the door of her room.

Negotiating Sexual Pleasure for Gendered Safety

The Egyptian film Balad al-Banat (2008) narrates the story of four young women living together in Egypt. They met at Cairo University hostels, where they obtained their BA degrees. Heba, Farah, Salma, and Nehal were born in different governorates. They moved to Cairo for the purpose of high education. Upon their graduation, they rent an apartment in a working-class neighborhood, where they finally feel free, away from the supervision of the dorm manager, restrictive rules, and curfews. When their experiences of life differ according to their personal objectives, power dynamics start to emerge, and fights on how to keep the house ‘safe’ becomes part of their daily life. Nehal starts to develop an authoritative attitude ordering her flatmates on how to respect the neighborhood they live in, and not to behave immorally, or come back home late at night. When she discovers that Farah gave the number of their landline to a stranger in the street, she gets angry and accuses Farah of being morally corrupted.

Nehal to Salma: I told you from the beginning that she is not behaving very well.
Salma to Nehal: What should I do with her? I am not a social reformist. This is how she is. We have known her for four years, what has changed?
Nehal to Heba: What do you think, Heba?
Heba to Nehal: Every person has the freedom to act freely.
Nehal to Heba: Bravo!

Such dynamics that take place between mustaqillat, do not only reflect their social anxieties about gendered safety, but how the imposed politics of respectability affect their relationships with each other. (Phadke, 2007) discusses how women might prefer to perform
respectability politics, even at the expense of their real needs for safety. For example, Nehal is anxious about their image in the neighborhood, so no male visitors are allowed, except their fathers. However, Farah managed to host her boyfriend overnights, without telling her flatmates, and no one noticed his presence, including Mrs. Soufi, their close neighbor.

Hosting male visitors is itself a dilemma and a heated topic among mustaqillat sharing one apartment. Based on both my observation and fieldwork, the majority of mustaqillat prefer to share apartments where male visitors are not allowed, or highly restricted. The idea here is that many neighborhoods, especially working-class ones, popular, require women renters to behave in a modest way, to conform to respectability politics, in order to be entitled to safety, to be seen as respectful women. As I argued in the last chapter, neighborhoods such as Bein al-Sarayat, a destination for many mustaqillat with limited budgets, assign conditional accommodation for women renters, i.e. curfews, complete banning of male visitors, or prohibition even to be seen with men in the neighborhood. Such restrictions aim to restrict mustaqillat’s mobility, as well as their sexual conduct. Therefore, if a mustaqilla breaks these rules, she can be dismissed from the building. Other neighborhoods perform a role that is similar to Bein al-Sarayat, despite the fact that they are not classified as working-class neighborhoods, as one of my interlocutors respectively mentioned that safe residences are not absolute, and there are some rules that neighbors, doormen, and landowners impose on mustaqillat renters. Having a male visitor is a threat to the reputation of the apartment, or the building. As having a male visitor is perceived as having a man to sleep with, which raises some concern for from whoever sees a man entering the apartment of mustaqillat.

Hegemonic masculinities are socially constructed concepts that require women to perform subordination to men, and their sexualities are to be censored and controlled, (Enloe, 2004; Connell, 2005). Hence, if a woman hosts a male visitor, she does not perform her assigned feminine role of following the rules. This leads to a hostility with neighbors, especially men,
doormen, and landowner. Hosting men at mustaqillat’s apartments is a signifier of those women’s moral corruption, which in effect emasculates them, (Abdallah, 2014). In that sense, mustaqillat are obligated to negotiate their sexualities, for the sake of gendered safety, and safe residency. They have to choose between sex as a luxury, and safety as a priority. This ends up with prioritizing safety over sexual freedoms.

During my fieldwork for this thesis, I had one-to-one conversations with some mustaqillat. Also, I posted some questions on how it is like to have sex while being a mustaqilla, on a Facebook private group that is concerned with women’s sexual and reproductive health. The majority of this group members are mustaqillat. The quotations below reflect the worries and suspicions that mustaqillat experience while having sex at their rented apartments, or at their partners’.

If I am in a relationship with someone, I intend to make him appear with me from the beginning of seeing the possibly rented place. I introduce him to the doorman and the neighbors as my brother. They do not usually suspect us, because he helps me in moving my stuff to the new apartment. This makes them convinced that he is my brother for real, without even asking for our national identity cards. This reduces a lot of hassles that could have been happened, if they mentor him entering my apartment as just a visitor. They might be too curious to know who this visitor is, and sometimes they knock the door to ask about him, or order the doorman to do so. This takes me to the first point, which is bribing the doorman. If you pay him well, your life would be much easier. Definitely, I have come to this conclusion after years and years. I have learnt to cut the way off, for any hassles of this kind. Before, I used to tell the doorman, or neighbors that this visitor is a delivery guy, or a pharmacist who is here for injecting me. By doing so, they do not ask further questions, but some of them are very silly, asking for his identity card. I reply to them calmly that no delivery guy has an identity card for his job. If this is the case, I keep myself quiet, and never show hesitations, nor nervousness. I would like to stress that all of these situations happened with my male visitors who were just friends. I was not involved in any kind of sexual relationships with them back then. This gave me the required experience of how to deal with the neighbors and the doorman, when I started to date my boyfriend, and hosting him overnights.

Gad al-Kareem, an old doorman, narrates the story of a group of women who used to host men at their shared apartment. Their disapproving neighbors reported the women to the
police. This resulted in an arrest for the women, accusing them of running the apartment for adultery, sex work. Thus, if mustaqillat are not very attentive to their surround environment, they can end up not only being homeless, but in the worst-case scenario arrested.

I was visiting a male friend who was living alone at his rented apartment, when suddenly his neighbors knocked the door with weapons made of cold-steel, threatening to report me to the police. I shouted at them with confidence, claiming that I am a doctor existing her to medically check the friend. I took the lie so far, showing them an English ID card that was not even official. They did not understand it, and let me go in peace. If I hesitated or showed any sign of fear, they would have scattered us in pieces, before reporting the police. Another incident happened at an apartment I was sharing with another woman who warned us, me and our flatmates, from talking to the doorman, or tipping him. So, he was too picky with us, waiting for a moment that he could take an advantage of. One day, he reported us to the police. I was hosting my boyfriend that night. We were all arrested, and went to the police station together. My boyfriend was too anxious, while I was too bold, shouting at the police officers that they were detaining us illegally. I claimed that he is a graduate student whom I was teaching IELTS, continuing to accuse them of detaining us with no reasons, as the Egyptian Penal code does not criminalize private lessons at homes. They let us go. That is why keeping the doorman financially satisfied is so important to be safe.

When we are talking about safety in this context, it takes us to safety on other levels, for instance the concept of ‘safe sex.’ While the mainstream understanding of safe sex is primarily built upon sexual and reproductive health, which in many cases are represented in attempts to avoid unplanned pregnancies and Sexual Transferred Infections (STIs), it also involves a sense of feeling safe and comfortable while having sex. So, if mustaqillat managed to secretly host their male partners for the purpose of having sex, they would be burdened by thoughts of arrest, of what would happen if anyone discovers the matter, and of what can happen to her, to her family, to her job, if she got arrested and accused of sex work. That is to say, her body may not be enjoying having sex, just because her mind is elsewhere, full of anxieties and fears.

I prefer to have sex at my place. I know my apartment, and how to handle the doorman and my neighbors. So, if something happened, I can tackle the issue. This is quite different from having sex my partner’s apartment, because he is the one who
handles the situation. You have no position from which to talk. You are just a visitor. And I do not trust anyone to solve any problems for me. Also, I do not have major concerns while I have sex, not because I do not follow all the safety standards which is not okay by the way, but because I would not enjoy sex at the first place. This is simply me. I believe that I do something that is completely my right. I have a slogan: I do not owe anyone anything.

I do not prefer to have sex at my rented apartment. I cannot guarantee that landowner, neighbors, or doormen would not scandalize us, reporting us to the police. I prefer to have sex with my partner at his apartment, especially if it is his own, not just renting it. I was meeting a guy, and it was our first time to meet. We met at a café that was close to his neighborhood, and was too far away from mine. It was already too late for me to leave, and to enter the neighborhood where I reside at that time, due to the curfew. He offered me to sleep over at his apartment. I accepted. The first 30 minutes went normally. Afterwards, he entered my room, nagging me explicitly to have sex with him. I was too afraid, and was awake all night. Once the sun rises, I ran away.

I would never risk my safety and my life, for having sex. Because if any bad thing happened, I would be totally fu*cked up at the neighborhood where I live, as I will be searching again for a shared room, which would negatively affect my work. If my work got negatively affected, this would harm my financial status, too. Everything would be destroyed. We have to be cautious, because we are more threatened than men. And, since we do not have real backbones, we are should be more attentive than anyone else.

**Day-To-Day Practices: Navigating Personal Spaces and Privacy**

In this section, I am moving to affects emerging from the micro-level dynamics between mustaqillat in shared apartments. These affects range from passion, solidarity, and support, to quarrels, clashes, and fights between them. My purpose is to introduce Istiqal as a social modality that recreates women-only households that are as multidimensional as non-women-only households. As other social modalities, the central issues that are put into mustaqillat’s considerations while renting an apartment are the household duties, (Careston, 2003), such as rent, utilities, cleaning, food supplies, personal spaces, and privacy. In order to understand how these aspects are constitutive parts of the dynamics between mustaqillat, I had some conversations with mustaqillat who I got to know on Femi-Hub.

I always face that problem over cleanliness with flatmates, because I do not like to live in a place that is not clean. They do not commit to our weekly schedule, despite agreeing on specific days for cleaning the apartment regularly. Another problem is
that someday, they go to visit their families for days, during which they leave the dishes unwashed. We had several clashes over that problem in particular. So, I decided to collect any unclean dishes, and put them all together in the balcony of the kitchen until the flatmates were back and wash them.

I take photos for any uncleaned stuff and send them directly to my flatmate via Whatsapp. Last week, the door was knocked, and it was the gas bills collector. He told me that we did not pay the bills for the last three months. My flatmate did not tell me that, as I just rented that room few days ago. So, I did not pay, and she told me she would do. What bothers me is that all the bills are only 34 EGP, and the gas company may cut the gas off. She did not pay; however, she buys manicures and perfumes for herself. Another thing is that she does not replace the plastic case for the toilet’s basket, if I did not do it myself, as if I am a specialist in cleaning toilets! There are some infrastructure issues with the plumbing that she did not tell me about, while she was showing me the room she offered for rent. When I tell her that I have a right to have a copy of the rental contract, she shouts at me. I pray to Allah, this is a very big dream, to give me rizq, money, to rent a studio, or an apartment for my own. But, I have many responsibilities, and I cannot cut some of my daily expenses to save money to rent an apartment from scratch, and to furnish it, since the rent I am paying is barely paid.

The gum! My roommate used to chew gum every single night. She used to be awake late at night, whilst I used to sleep early. It was very annoying, as she was chewing the gum loudly until 2.00 am! It felt like a slow torture. Something that is very similar to torturing prisoners by the sound of water drops. I also had that problem of cleanliness with her, because she was throwing the chewed gum anywhere. I once had a strong fight with her over it, and I asked our flatmates to intervene. Afterwards, we agreed on a system for cleaning the apartment that anyone who uses a dish, should wash it immediately, for the kitchen to remain clean. That was because we used to clean the dishes no matter who used them, while my roommate was like a pasha, cleaning nothing. Yet, it ended up with us cleaning after her, because we needed the stuff she used and did not wash.

Also, she was asking me why I was late. If I had slept over at a friend’s house, she would have asked me about that friend. I was afraid of them [flatmates], having concerns of what they would think about me. When I decided to take off my hijab, I
was wearing it in front of them, and taking it off in the street, putting it back on before I enter the apartment.

I shared a room in a rented apartment with other women flatmates where pets were allowed. I told them that I had a cat, and they had no problem with it, except that it would be of my responsibility and that cleaning after it was mandatory. I committed to their conditions. Nevertheless, I discovered that whenever I was visiting my parents, they lock the cat in my room, and never allowed her to be out. The cat was screaming for days, because she was locked inside. It followed that, they call me complaining of her loud voice. I tried to convince them that the cat did not enter their own room, but I had the right to keep it unchained in our shared space, reception, kitchen, and balcony, as long as they accepted me having a pet from the beginning. It was a useless discussion, and I left.

When I was still studying, I was renting a room at an apartment that had too many Mughtaribat like me. There were always fights between flatmates over food. I remember that day when two of them woke up hungry, opened the refrigerator, and cooked a chicken that was brought by another flatmate. When she knew, she shouted loudly at them. They did not apologize, justifying it that they were hungry and have no food. After such a silly excuse, she had all the right to shout. Ah! There was also a flatmate who was counting sausages, to know if someone was stealing it.

I was robbed, baby! The four flatmates approximately locked me inside the apartment, when I told them I was moving out. During these two days, I was afraid to leave the apartment and come back to find out that my stuff was gone. If I have ordered a delivery, they have told him that the address was wrong. If I put a bottle of water in the freezer, they spilled it. All of this happened because I locked my closet, and prevented them from wearing my clothes. I also usually have little grocery, one oil bottle, one sugar package, one butter cube, and one salsa jar, as my financial status was not very good. Whenever I was home, I found my grocery completely used and finished, despite the fact that they pay around 300EGP daily for delivery, and I just have this grocery to cook my food. It was intimidating. When I started to hide my grocery and lock the closet, they intended to bother me until I left.

Cleanliness, respecting privacy, loud voice, loud TV and songs, were my problems. There are some mustaqillat when you live with them, you feel they are on a daily trip. There is no respect for the rules. Sometimes, I felt that they misunderstood Istiqlal as a chance for chaos, and disrespecting any rules at all.

When I started to live by my own there was a flatmate who was always leaving the dishes unwashed, letting them accumulate in the washbasin. I asked her several times to wash the dishes, because they were blocking the washbasin. So, she turned to wash the dishes, keeping the washbasin blocked with water and food tissues! I bought some chemical thing to melt these food tissues, and it worked successfully. Yet, the next day, she left a dish full of rice, and it blocked the washbasin again. I asked her politely to be cautious, but she left the whole apartment. Afterwards, I was sharing the apartment with other flatmates with whom I have become friends, and we had no clashes. Thanks Allah.

Most of the dynamics taking place between mustaqillat in shared apartments are centered around household duties, and upon rules. Therefore, when a rule is not followed by one of the
Flatmates, it irritates the others, especially if they are sharing one room. The repetitive phrase, “I/she left,” tells a lot about getting used to others’ personal behaviors, if they got together for the purpose of sharing an apartment. Moving out from an apartment to another makes Istiqlal an endless process of searching for, and reconstructing homes. While the concept of home itself, in these narratives, is built upon how mustaqillat manage to live together, spatially relate to each other, building affective relationships with objects and spaces inside a rented apartment. These micro-level dynamics introduce Istiqlal as a social modality that needs endless efforts to sustain, given the fact that not all mustaqillat can afford to even move out, as they expressed many times during my fieldwork. Whereas some mustaqillat express that istiqlal is about respecting rules, and respecting others’, other mustaqillat perceive it as an opportunity for living without boundaries, which usually ends up with dynamics between the two categories. Accordingly, the self-management concept emerges as essential to istiqlal, where mustaqillat seek to avoid an endless search for a place to live. For example, the flatmate who does not wash her dishes, expects others to wash them for her, or does not bother herself with cleaning, or the flatmate who locked her closet, because her flatmates were wearing her clothes, or the one who ate her flatmate’s food. This might be what “chaos” means in one of the previous quotations. Navaro-Yashin (2012) discusses how objects can be an embodiment of subjectivities, in her discussion on houses as ‘affective spaces.’ Following her argument, the perception of cleaning duties as part of the social order inside the house, leads to the perception of whoever does not clean her dishes as a source of ‘chaos.’ Perceiving the dirty things as opposing to that pure self of the speaker, is a way of distinguishing oneself from the others, be the other mustaqillat or shared items. (De Beauvoir, 1963) argues that women tend to identify their personhood in relation to objects around them, especially dust and uncleaned things. She explains that in the process-making of ‘the normal woman,’ women are taught directly and indirectly that they are part
from the home, so any unwashed things refers to an unclean woman, impure self. It is how mustaqillat are reframing their subjectivities in relation to their flatmates, their shared spaces, and the objects around them. In that sense, mustaqillat’s shared apartments are constitutive parts not only of their subjectivities, but also of encoding and practicing orders, (Careston, 2003). This makes rented apartments spaces that actively produce and are produced by these daily interactions, including relationships with objects through which that space is maintained and gains different spatial representations.

Another aspect of remaking home in mustaqillat’s rented apartments are the ways in which mustaqillat relate to each other. Sometimes, the family-based terms are reproduced, recreating the family itself as a concept, and the family’s home as an intimate space is extended to include households that are not kinship-based. Some mustaqillat recreate the concept of the family between them and their flatmates, and others do not.

Humm, at the very beginning, our fears of the experience of Istiqlal, and the fact that we were missing our families have reflected on our behaviors. So, we were reproducing our relationships with concepts as home and family, but on our favors. We were sharing everything together, eating together, and calling each other to make sure that everyone of us was safe. I think that the first thing I did to make it feel like home was assigning a personal space for myself and on my terms. However, this was not available for me at my family’s home, it was how I developed my feeling of being home. As soon as our economic and social statuses were getting better, it was more evident how we turned our shared spaces to be more of a home than a mere shared apartment. We put stuff we felt attached to. The books we were hiding from our families were no longer hidden. Even our clothes, and the words were being used without concerns in our daily life. Especially clothes had made me feel I was home, because I dress whatever I want. I speak whatever I want. I close my room’s door whenever I want. I no longer need to hide anything. Yes, I think also that the most thing that gave me the feeling of home was that I was able to host anyone. The most stuff I used to buy since I have become a mustaqilla, is kitchen tools, way more than anything else. Cooking for me is giving me the sense of home. And that my home is not a Mughtaribat shared apartment, nor student dorms.

The speaker feels attached to the tools she uses in the kitchen. This gives her a sense of home. Cooking for her is what makes her feel she is home. Janet Careston (2003) argues that habitual actions such as washing dishes, and cooking are tied to remaking the meaning of
home. It is through these objects, kitchen tools, and these actions, cooking and eating, that the meaning of home is remade for my interlocutor. This meaning of home is connected to her flatmates too. They borrowed terms such as one family, sisters, to describe their relationships to one another. They practiced caring, cooking, and sharing ‘everything’, which in (Careston, 2003) argues that new kinship-based relations emerge between people who are not necessarily blood related.

In December 2018, two of my interlocutors were visiting me at my home. One of them wanted to surprise me on my birthday, she brought me a gift and little cake. The other came to (re)buy a dress that I bought from another mustaqilla on al-Wekala day, a day assigned by group moderators for commodities exchange on Femi-Hub. The dress was not my size, so, she wanted to see if it would fit her. Meanwhile, they both met for the first time that day, and the second invited us to attend the New Year’s Eve party at the apartment she is sharing with another one of my interlocutors. The three of them were among participants in this thesis research. Thus, they have got to know each other through me, the same way I got to know their friends that are mustaqillat, through them as well. During our conversations, we started to talk about our experiences as mustaqillat, when one of them shared her thoughts about her ex-flatmates and the dynamics that led to her departure.

I got through strange things for a year and a half. One of my flatmates slapped me, while she was supposedly advising me to stop my anti-depressants for being addictive. My flatmates called my mother on the following day at 1:00 am to report her that I was not home, whilst I told her I was sleeping. They were bullying me, if I prayed. Sometimes, I was waiting until none of them was home, to pray. When we all agreed to move out from that apartment and separate, they called my mom again to tell her that I was looking for an apartment in Downtown, and justified their call as they were caring for me, because Downtown is a bit known as a site for hassles [allowing visitors, police visits before any political event, etc]. Despite the fact that I was looking for an apartment in Dokki, or Agouza neighborhoods. I never understood

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3 As I participated in her surprise birthday party, September 2018, she wanted to do the same with me, as we both do with other Mustaqillat of our friends who have occasions to celebrate, or need support. So, my fieldwork with her has been relied on mutual visits and intimate interactions that have been developed through the fieldwork process. I have got to know her from an event organized by Femi-Hub group, mentioned in details in chapter 3, and our friendship got stronger over time, when I asked her to be one of my interlocutors.
why they called her. Consequently, I left the apartment and was homeless for days; nonetheless, I was staying the last month by the insurance fees I paid before, leaving all my stuff at that shared apartment as usual. During these days, there were a lot of problems they initiated with me. For instance, they renewed the rental contract, and did not tell me. One of them called me to ask for the monthly rent, when I told her that I have had already paid it as an insurance, she shouted at me, called my mother to complain, and asked a friend to persuade me to pay. This situation was humiliating, since I have never had a clash with anyone over money. During this critical time, I was hosted my friend at her shared apartment and with her flatmates, when my own flatmates were mad at me becoming very close to that friend hosting me, accusing me of smoking weed and getting drunk at her place. That one who volunteered to gossip to my mother whatever I was doing, was calling me constantly to ask me to do my cleaning duties. Yet, I was not home at that time, and I did not cause any mess at the apartment for her to ask me to clean it. She did not even appreciate the time I spent at home cleaning alone, as they all were working for long hours, and I was doing all the household duties without any complains. So, when I was not home, how come I was asked to clean it? Was I supposed to go home only to clean for her to go home after work and find it clean? Okay, I was not home basically. On the contrary, when we were moving in to this apartment, she was not in Egypt, and I was moving all the stuff alone. My dad helped me, paying for a private moving company. And when she arrived, she found the apartment ready for her, even her own clothes, I put them myself in the closet. Until this moment, I never got why she did that with me. I never hurt her. The most hurting thing was when someone decided to defame me online. They asked me to write on my Facebook profile, but I refused for many reasons concerning with my family’s reputation. They asked his brother to write on behalf of me, but he also refused, telling them that I should have asked that myself. They got back to me again, trying to convince me to write a public post, defending myself. Again, I refused, and they lost their minds, talking about me at any gathering, describing me as a weak person. They used me as an example to show off their personalities in front of their friends. One of them was explicitly saying: “She is a weak person. If I were in her shoes, I would not have allowed anyone to insult me online.” This added a burden to my own. I even started to believe that I was a weak person. And I spent years to overcome this feeling. I had good feelings for them, treating them as my sisters, but you know, nothing lasts forever.

This narrative is a more detailed than the other conversations I had with mustaqillat on Femi-Hub. This may be because we had the time and the space to talk more during her visit to me. What I want to focus on, in her narrative, are not just the dynamics between her and her flatmates, but also their authoritative attitude. When she told me that she was treating her flatmates as sisters, her tone of voice was one of disappointment. She dealt with her flatmates as if they were a family, introducing them to her parents, while her flatmates’ concept of the family itself was different than hers. From her story, I understood that she uses the concept of
the family as an intimate relationship between her and her flatmates, a status of *unconditional* help and support, (Ahmed, 2014b). Whilst her flatmates adopted the concept of the family as a social modality where individuals sharing one space are external dimensions of each other, (Jouseph, 1993; Kandiyoti, 1988; Ghannam, 2011). When they called her mother to tell her she was not home, they were performing the role of the guardian over her, the role of the person who monitored her conduct, and served as a channel between her and her mother, despite the fact that she did not ask for it. They slapped her, when they thought that antidepressants are addictive, and wanted her to stop it. They developed an authoritative attitude that often extended to violence, as an expression of caring and a claim of support. This could be explained in light of the last quotation during which her flatmate used the participant’s own personal behavior to present herself as a strong person before their mutual friends. Here, my interlocutor’s own subjectivity was being used as a signifier of her flatmate’s subjectivity. As her narrative develops, she was frustrated by the fact that her flatmate was gossiping about her to show off how different she is from her. I find this relevant to Kandiyoti’s (1988) argument on patriarchal connectivity, where individuals inside a family position other family members as extensions of their own subjectivities. Whereas the participant can be the most vulnerable subject inside their shared apartment, she was bullied, exploited to do household duties alone, and got physically violated due to her mental health condition, her flatmates justified their actions as they were caring for her as a sister. Joseph (1993) argues that women tend to internalize patriarchal practices and reproduce them for their favor in many cases, such as the new bride who looks forward to eventually practicing her authoritative role as a matriarch over her daughters-in-law. My interlocutor’s flatmate performed a similar role, when she was monitoring her, and reporting to her mother almost everything that she was doing. However, the latter strategized her efforts to reposition herself in this hierarchy of power. She stopped cleaning, and left the apartment, searching for another place to rent.
where she would feel she is not monitored, nor supervised. While listening to her, me and my other visitor and interlocutor reflected on her own experience.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 7: Two of my interlocutors preparing breakfast at their shared apartment*

She was a cute flatmate, at the beginning. After few months of sharing one rented apartment, something wrong started to happen between us. I will tell you how I felt it. At first, she never expressed that my female friends’ visits would annoy her, so I was hosting my friends normally. By time, she was behaving badly with them, like for example, she roughly asked them to stop smoking. Yeah, I mean she used to suddenly get out of her room to just close the reception’s window, where me and my friends were sitting. She could have asked me to do that myself, and I would have accepted, but she never did. Also, when I cooked my food, I offered her to share it with me. She never offered me to eat with her, and I was okay with that. I got used to her sharing my grocery that I keep in our refrigerator. I whispered to myself that it is okay as we are a small family. I remember that day when I ate a very small piece of her cooked eggplant that she left over. She asked me very firmly if I ate her food. I swear it was a very small left-over piece. But I tried to calm her down, asking her to order something for us to eat on dinner as an apology. While we are eating, she was commenting on my weight, and asking me to stop eating her food. From that day on, her comments on my body were repetitive. Her superior attitude was annoying, as she always offered her advice as if she knows everything. I got bothered by her treating me as a naive person. So, I left.

During my conversations with *mustaqillat*, I wanted to understand more, why flatmates who do not follow the rules are problematic subjects in shared apartments. The answers I got were mainly about the perception of *Istiqlal* as an individual responsibility. In other words, they expressed that when a flatmate breaks the agreed rules, this increases their own household duties, and makes them unable to feel very comfortable at the places they rent. “It
takes time and effort to wash all the dishes, instead of washing what I just used,” as one of my interlocutors told me. Hence, if a flatmate failed to self-manage her own duties, this affects other flatmates duties.

However, dynamics between mustaqillat are not limited to the self-management concept, and respecting rules, as sometimes the dynamics emerge because of the daily interactions that may cause a sense of discomfort, or micro-aggression between mustaqillat. Mustaqillat may accept something that they thought they would be okay with, but with time, it turns to be the opposite. For instance, the narrative on allowing pets at the beginning, which turned to be a hassle between flatmates who locked the cat inside her owner’s room, when she was visiting her family.

**Reflective Homes**

Other dynamics emerge as a reflection of the already existing dynamics out of the apartment itself. Exemplified is the respectability politics that affects the relationship between mustaqillat in their shared apartments. This was touched upon by my interlocutor who used to worry about what her flatmates would say about her, if they saw her without her hijab. Caring too much about the neighborhood and, committing to respectability politics script has its influence on the day-to-day practices between mustaqillat. In 2015, I was renting an apartment with other mustaqillat, in Old Cairo, al-Malek al-Saleh neighborhood. Ironic is that I should have set rules for myself and the women living with me, to avoid any misinterpretation of our accommodation in the area. For instance, the gender segregation rule was still prioritized, no male visitors. Restrictions were based on everyday dynamics that might have affected the whole residency, a matter of survival. “If you are a smoker, please do not smoke in shared spaces,” I told my flatmates, planning to prevent any possible troubles. Limiting these micro-dynamics influenced our public image in the neighborhood. If there was
any loud voice, this would have been interpreted by neighbors as a sign to give more attention to the apartment as a site of problems.

Not only do respectability politics affect dynamics between mustaqillat, politics of securitizations affect them as well. After moving out from al-Malek al-Saleh, I rented an apartment in Garden City, where I agreed with my flatmates that male visitors were allowed. In November 2016, there was a campaign initiated by police forces in Downtown, inspecting any rented apartments, after a call for protest on 11/11. My flatmate’s boyfriend who was visiting her daily was arrested. He came to our apartment only half an hour after he was released from Kasr al-Nile police station. I and the other flatmates were angry, when the man was most probably followed by police informants heading to our apartment, giving no attention to how unsafe that was. So, we explicitly asked her to not host him for a while, for the apartment not to be targeted by police forces. This caused a clash between us, and she left accordingly.

These dynamics are enhanced by the macro-dynamics that surround mustaqillat and istiqtal as a social phenomenon. They also reflect on how the private, the micro-level dynamics, is interconnected to the public and the macro-level ones. For example, during my fieldwork in November 2018, I and a group of mustaqillat were cooperating to get through a harsh experience. While we were hosted by one of my interlocutors, we had many conversations about our lives as mustaqillat, as a tactic to overcome the anxieties we had, due to the situation.

When I geographically relocated my public sector assigned job, to start my Istiqlal experience, my fate put me in one room with a coworker, at the hospital dorms. She was there before I came, and there was no chance to ask for changing the room, as it was assigned for me as a doctor, and this was not allowed. The story begins when she started to drink my juice, eat my grocery without permission, and wearing my clothes. I asked her politely not to do. But, she continued. I was sharing my cigarettes with her. It is a common behavior of smokers. Bit by bit, she stopped buying cigarettes for herself, and relied completely on mine. At that time of 2016, cigarettes were not that expensive. So, I never minded her sharing them with me. I also was buying very fancy stuff, different kinds of cheese, turkey, and smoked beef. I felt that sharing
some with her, is a good thing. By the Egyptian Pound devaluation, my money lost much of its value. I stopped buying these fancy stuff, and I was only buying what I need to eat. Also, my cigarettes have become too few to share with someone. I asked her again not to use my grocery, nor my cigarettes. She began to steal them, instead. She said that her salary does not allow her to buy stuff. Yet, we were receiving the same salary! What made me mad and her was that I found out that she knew the password of my cellphone, and used to open it while I was sleeping! We had a clash, and I almost hit her, because of her creepy behavior of spying on me.

The narrator is not the only mustaqilla who has been negatively affected by the devaluation of the Egyptian Pound in late 2016, many suffered the consequences of these economic decisions. What I want to focus on, in her narrative, is that the dynamics between her and her roommate got intensified after the devaluation. Her life itself was affected, as she stopped buying things she wanted, to buy things she needed, to survive her financial status as a mustaqilla. Another result is that many other mustaqillat have moved to cheaper rented apartments. One of my interlocutors, told me that when she had a financial crisis, she moved out from a rented apartment in Zamalek, to a small shared room in Bein al-Sarayat, where she faced difficulties in getting used to the new working-class neighborhood, and her new flatmates. The larger context of the Egyptian political economy affects the everyday life of mustaqillat, limiting their options in residences, and compelling them, to some extent, to accept living with flatmates with whom they are not very comfortable.
Chapter 5

*Istiqlal* as an Affective Experience

**Introduction**

The previous chapters focus on *istiqlal* as an experience. Through the chapters, many affects have come to shape this experience, such as guilt, fragmentation, suffering, and fear. Thus, the first section of this chapter is devoted for analyzing how these affects are constitutive parts of *mustaqillat*’s subjectivities. While the previous chapter explains how *mustaqillat* make and remake the idea of home at their shared spaces, it does not address how *mustaqillat* may relate to other *mustaqillat* who do not share the same space with them, through affects, i.e. loneliness, and abandonment. Therefore, this chapter fills this gap, giving attention to *istiqlal* as an affective experience in which many *mustaqillat* relate to each other by the affects produced through it.

**The Strong Independent Woman**

One of the problematic discussions over *Istiqlal* is the *strong independent woman* myth that valorizes *mustaqillat*’s abilities to cope with the hardness of their *Istiqlal*. Many people perceive *istiqlal* as a strength that not every woman has. In this imaginary, women living alone are perceived as individuals who do not need help of any kind.

Jasmine Abrams et al (2014) explain the historical conditions that have led to the emergence of the *independent woman* phenomenon. In their research with a number of black women from different ethnicities in the United States, they trace black women’s identity to the *independent woman* identity. They explore how women have been expected to fulfill certain stereotypes of black womanhood that of a woman who does not only financially support herself, but also extends this support to her family members and the larger black community. As a mechanism of coping with the racial discrimination, the researchers point to
how such conditions compelled black women to adopt the *independent woman* personality that is socially expected from them as a group. The fact that such racial discrimination has resulted in criminalization and underemployment of black men has made many black women responsible solely for their households. Added to that is how this sense of responsibility is explained in light of these socioeconomic and political conditions, as a superpower that black women *should* perform, despite the limited resources available to them. These are not limited to financial support, but serious emotional suppression as a sign of the *independent woman* schema. Hence, many black women are obligated to act rationally, not to show their emotions, not to express their vulnerability as any expression of these feelings results in them being stigmatized as weak, and not responsible nor strong enough to sustain the survival of the black community, which has impacted their mental and physical health, (Abram et al, 2014). Thus, the *strong independent black woman* synchronizes with the social expectations surrounding black women in their daily life, identifying them as selfless, sacrificing themselves for others, especially their families. They are superwomen, out of a social obligation.

Neither I, nor my contributors could trace the emergence of the *strong independent woman* myth in Egypt, except that it has been widely used by *mustaqillat* in post-2011. Many *mustaqillat* have started to identify themselves as *strong independent women* who can financially sustain themselves, and succeed in the modality of living that they have chosen. It has been a way through which they build and rebuild their subjectivities, asserting how independent they are from everyone including their family members. However, this attempt to form a subjectivity of being an independent person who does not rely on anyone, did not last. It has turned out to be a stigma on social websites, especially Facebook.

When we, *mustaqillat*, have chosen *Istiqlal*, we were enthusiastic to experience our lives by ourselves, and not in the name of our families. Yet, what we witnessed in the process of
Istiqlal has led us to realize that Istiqlal is bounded by myths of how to be a mustaqilla, and what exactly is expected from us. The dilemmas of navigating Istiqlal with families, finding a job, renting an apartment, sharing a household with other mustaqillat, the socioeconomic circumstances, the things that have been revealed by time, and by the process of Istiqlal itself, have influenced our perspectives of Istiqlal. Istiqlal is not an easy process, nor is it a pure personal struggle, as that very personal is social, (Taylor, 2002), and both are intertwined. As Istiqlal unfolds itself as an individualistic lifestyle, it has proven over the course of time that it can also be social isolation for mustaqillat.

To unpack these thoughts, Istiqlal as any social modality has many complexities that need to be deconstructed. Once a woman identifies herself a mustaqilla, she is expected to financially support her life expenses, to be strong in the sense that she does not complain about how socially and economically hard istiqlal can be, to be emotionally secure, and never shows vulnerability. These social expectations are carried out by the people surrounding mustaqillat, including their families, friends, employers, partners, and internet users.

Mustaqillat are expected to be rational decision makers, since their decision to Istiqlal is seen as a financial, emotional, and spatial separation from their families and communities. If a woman complains of her low salary, her listeners usually blame her for not being rational enough to wisely spend it, or to refuse a job while others are unemployed. This is double-burdened by the basic blame for being a woman who is not capable of sustaining a life with restricted resources and opportunities. For instance, mustaqillat usually hide their economic statues from their families, so that the latter do not ask them to return back. There is something that we should put into consideration, as many families usually challenge mustaqillat’s financial abilities, to live by their own. In some cases, families bet on mustaqillat’s return due to their fragile finances.
Added to that is the stigmatization of mustaqillat if they expressed their emotional needs. A mustaqilla from Kafr al-Sheikh, explains her friend’s reaction when she cried over a broken relationship. “You are a mustaqilla! Never convince me that you feel broken! I cannot believe you are crying,” her friend said. Many Facebook users stigmatized one of the research participants when she got married, as not strong, not independent.

Similar stigmatization happened to me when I launched a fundraising campaign to pay for a semester of my graduate studies at the American University in Cairo (AUC). People started to cyberbully me, using the strong independent woman schema in a sarcastic way, asking how can I be a strong independent woman while I am incapable of paying my own tuition fees, wondering why I joined AUC at the first place when I know very well that it is expensive for me as a mustaqilla.

It is a systematic dehumanization, when women, mustaqillat or not, are required to fulfill specific roles that suppress them as humans. Mustaqillat are indirectly punished for their istiqlal. They are socially disciplined, and isolated. Many mustaqillat are not welcome to express the harsh conditions of istiqlal, be them social, economic, or emotional. They have to keep feelings to themselves. They are socially tortured by their choices. Many people act as if they are testing mustaqillat abilities to live by their own. They are seen as people who should show others that their decision to istiqlal worth it. They have to deserve the strong independent woman label, to earn it by showing off how strong they are, how superheroes they are, depriving themselves of their humane vulnerability. When mustaqillat used the term strong independent woman, they meant to assert their ability to live alone, (Butler, 2004). Nevertheless, it has turned to be a myth, a theme for sarcastic posts, and comics that bully mustaqillat on the internet, or make fun of women who express their needs.
Fragmented Subjectivities

I was fed up with lies, with saying that I live in another governorate while I live in Cairo. I was afraid that anyone could easily recognize me, and tell my family that I am in Cairo. I got married to end that dilemma. My marriage was partially purposed to have my full *Istiqlal*, even if my family continues to perceive me as dependent, *tabe’a*, on someone else. What matters is what I feel, and how I managed to be a *mustaqilla*.

When one of my interlocutors wanted to live alone in Cairo where her family resides, she knew that her family would not have accepted that. She justified her spatial separation by telling that she was offered a job located in another city, which was not true. After a few months later, she decided to tell her family that she was back, but would live alone. They started to threaten her to get back home, and she refused. Some women like her have chosen to live in socially accepted frames such as marriage, to navigate for *istiqlal*. She was not comfortable by telling what she describes as ‘lies.’ Her lies were mixed with the fear of being recognized by whoever knows her, and may tell her family. In her narrative, she was aware that lies were the way she used to navigate her *istiqlal*, a temporary justification. Nonetheless, these lies turn into constant sources of discomfort, an interruption to her *istiqlal*. In such cases, the experience of *istiqlal* itself turns to be a fragmented status, a status that is subjected to unexpected events. Also, it reveals how this feeling of frustration may result in a dissonance between what she imagined she would feel, independent and owns her life, to the fear that hunted her. Sarah Ahmed (2002) points to that gap between what we think would cause us happiness, but it gets complex and disappointing, resulting in an affect of estrangement.

I experienced that fragmentation, as well. I used to lie about my work and what I do, whenever a neighbor, or a landlord asked me. I was afraid that they would have rejected me as a renter, if they knew I am an activist. I did not want anyone to know, to search my name online, and to access my articles, because I am sure they would not have accepted to rent me
an apartment. I lived years keeping these different parts of myself apart, until it was the moment when one of the neighbors found out, and I ended up leaving the neighborhood, as I mentioned in chapter 3. Many of mustaqillat lie, we lie to survive. Lying has become a status of being for many of us in different ways, and for different purposes. For instance, another research participant testified that she used to lie about her boyfriend, telling her neighbors and the doorman that he was her brother.

The freedom here for a Mustaqilla is to choose the less harm possible in any choice. That is, our choices are themselves restricted by the fact that we need to work. When we do this, we encounter a life that makes us more vulnerable to violence, a life that cannot be stable, nor safe. On the other hand, we make a choice based on compromising. We choose even not to eat, just to have a little sense of freedom.

The narrator perceives istiqlal as a promise of freedom, which is not given. For her, this freedom is made, even if it is little, even if it is hardly achieved. This promise of freedom, throw mustaqillat in a precarious life, where their vulnerabilities are revealed, for her. Berlant (2002) observes that promises attached to what we perceive as ‘the good life,’ carries possibilities, even if others perceive it as precarious, and even if our vulnerabilities are exposed through it. The narrator pays for her promised freedom, and payment here is not money, but the compromises she makes. Brilliant is how she refers to work as a constrain for this freedom, rendering visible how central is work to life, and how its precarious conditions leads to a precarious life of workers, (Weeks, 2011). In another conversation, the narrator mentioned that she feels consumed by work, and this intensifies by time as a requirement for a safe, and stable life. She differentiated between her big two options, either to work and develop her work capacities to make her life safe and stable, or to make what she loves without feeling guilty about it.

On how guilt affects mustaqillat’s experiences, two of my interlocutors testified in chapter two that they feel guilty for leaving behind members of their families, and move out. They feel guilty and selfish for leaving. Sometimes, they tackle guilt by trying to compensate those
left behind. In other times, the guilt is mixed with helplessness, deepening a sense of selfishness. This causes discomfort, and interrupts the experience of istiqal as a promised freedom. Mustaqillat feel guilty, not only because they left those people behind, but also because the social perception of women labeled as ‘selfish,’ affects them. In chapter one, I discussed the case of haribat, women who leave their families, and run away. Those runaway women are socially portrayed as selfish, whereas women are normalized as sacrificing themselves for those they love. Many mustaqillat are convinced they are not haribat, because they have good relations with their families, and they do not leave anyone behind. However, when they encounter by the experience of istiqal and the attachment of it to freedom, mustaqillat feel guilty for the people they left behind. They encounter the affect of guilt, in its connotations to self-sacrifice for others, and the shame that follows women not sacrificing themselves. With time, many of us discover that we are haribat in one way or another, not because we left people behind, but because we also escape from other attachments. We escape, hoping for freedom. But, we are trapped, and imprisoned by these old thoughts whispering to us that we are the women people hate. And, we cannot handle that.

**Solidarity as an Affect**

Many women who identify themselves as mustaqillat have become friends. One of the mediums through which they have known each other is cyberspace which they have effectively utilized to know women who share the same thoughts and experiences. Many of these online friendships have turned into on-ground friendships and activities, through which mustaqillat mobilize themselves and sustain their social relationships. I highlight this utilization of cyberspace to the January 2011 revolution, which has proven to be a social and a political upheaval that used the internet as a tool for mobilization. However, the internet itself has been just a tool by which different groups started to mobilize themselves and call for actions, (Hardet, 2011). For him, the 2011 events were the result of the harsh political and
socioeconomic conditions, as well as the effective use of the internet by youth groups. Hardet (2011) mentions the internet as a means that has helped to mobilize collectives, but not the internet itself that fueled the rage in streets, a point that (Asef Bayat, 2013; 2017) also stresses. The internet has helped many women to come together after the uprising, searching for people, more specifically women, who share the same beliefs, on national and transnational levels, (Munro, 2013).

In the case of mustaqillat, the reason for coming together has not purely been the need for political actions to be taken. Rather, it has been the need for getting together, and being together, (Vachhani and Pullen, 2018), which is political but not directly addressed as such. It has enabled the building of relationships, not just a temporal meeting at a protest, a workshop, or a meeting for organizational purposes. As Vachhani and Pullen (2018) argue, the newly founded feminist movements have used the internet to broaden the platforms on which women engage with each other. This sort of engagement challenges the idealized social imaginary of self-governance, by moving from individual experiences to collective actions, encountering the binaries of public/private, and political/personal. For instance, the Every Day Sexism Project (ESP), a digital website aims at collecting women’s stories with sexism, has served as a platform on which women write their own experiences with ‘sexism.’ The website allows women to write their stories, tag them, and use whatever words they see suitable for describing what they feel. By doing so, the platform highlights structural and institutionalized silencing of women. As Sarah Ahmed (2002) puts it, structural silencing happens when women speaking out of what discomforts them, and then they are perceived as the cause of discomfort for others, kill-joy. Vachhani and Pullen (2018) demonstrate how this is constitutive of building solidarity among women who write, share, and interact on others’ posts. This mobilization of personal narratives is rooted in affects circulated via these posts, rage, frustration, and discomfort. For Hemmings (2012, 158), the term ‘affective solidarity’
refers to the emotional dissonance results from experiences that alienates individuals from their realities and affects triggered by these realities, and drives people to come together.

What interestingly distinguishes Femi-Hub from other cyber-based platforms is the offline activities and support they practice off the internet, combining both online and off-line mobilization techniques. Femi-Hub is a closed Facebook group that targets supporting mustaqillat, and those seeking istiqlal. In order to analyze the role played by Femi-Hub as a mustaqillat network, I interviewed Sohila Mohamed, the founder, in September 2018.

Femi-Hub is an Egyptian initiative supporting mustaqillat, and women seeking Istiqlal, founded in November 2015. In a friendly meeting with two of my friends who were seeking Istiqlal. One of them was already a mustaqilla, but her family was nagging to get her back home. I was a mustaqilla back then, we asked ourselves who are we? Who are the women like us, who want to spatially separate from their families, because they are prohibited from doing many things? We talked a lot. We decided to found a platform and to call it Femi-Hub, as we perceived it as a Hub for mustaqillat, on which they can support each other. We called for three focus groups with women identify themselves as mustaqillat. We asked participants very specific questions: what do you need? What are the challenges you face? Why do you want to be mustaqillat? What are your cities? What is the purpose of your Istiqlal? What do your familial relations look like after Istiqlal? We expected the answers to be like: we need money, we search for work. But their answers were different. Their basic needs were the need for support. “We need people to support us. We feel lonely. We feel abandoned. If we are not in relationships, we are completely alone.” So, the emotional support was their key answers. Firstly, we started to gather. We organized dish parties. We started some activities to fulfill mustaqillat’s needs: English conversation meetings, CV writing workshops, etc. But we noticed that this is not what we should have offered. There was no commitment, and we were not very successful doing these workshops. There are professional agencies providing such services. By time we got to know that our real capacity, and what we can really do is to mobilize. Our mobilization is oriented towards one purpose that is Istiqlal. However, this was a bit utopian, since the Istiqlal process itself is full of ups, and downs. So, we are together to support each other during these uncertain circumstances.

Istiqlal can be analyzed as a non-normative mode of sociality, popping up as different from the family as a normative mode of sociality. Between the norm and the non-norm is affects produced and sustained, not only by mustaqillat, but also by their families. Let us first investigate the family, and the deployment of politics of abandonment, represented in mustaqillat’s answers to Sohila’s questions. On how the nuclear family is seen as a social
ideal that everyone should conform to, (Ahmed, 2014b, p. 106-110) argues that subjects who do not conform such idealization of ‘normative existence’ are perceived and stigmatized as ‘shameful.’ In this perception, shame expressed and felt by the family is a two-faced coin, in which the affect of love is at the heart of the affect of shame. I am here not naturalizing the family as a source of love, but how the family is usually presented as the source of absolute love. As Sarah Ahmed (2014a, p. 107) puts it, “family love may be conditional upon how one lives one’s life in relation to social ideals.” So, when subjects do not conform to social ideals, they are labelled as bringing shame to the family, by failing to imitate what is seen as the norm. Mustaqillat, even if supported by their families, can be perceived as non-productive agents, since they do not follow the model of the heteronormative family that reproduces bodies by birth giving. Many mustaqillat are not married, when marriage is the social ideal for women in Egypt. They do not give birth, because giving birth depends on marital statuses. Consequently, they do not conform the normalized ideal of women as social reproducers, and family members. Here, mustaqillat are women who ‘fail’ to conform to these socially normalized ideals, i.e. marriage, motherhood, or more specifically domestication of women’s bodies as family members, no matter what positions they occupy. Mustaqillat’s bodies, in that sense, are not oriented towards ‘building a family, (ibid). This is exemplified in the families’ repetitive questions to mustaqillat: “when will you get married? And when will you get back home?” Answers might be disappointing, or failing for whoever asks. That feeling of failure linked to shame according to (Ahmed 2014b), is not just because mustaqillat do not conform marriage as the social ideal, but also because marriage itself is conceptualized as a ‘happy ending,’ (Ahmed, 2002). Shame appears here as affect resulted from failure to follow social norms, for mustaqillat’s families. Since shame is linked to developing a moral self, (ibid, 2014a), families feel ashamed of failing to ideally-raise their daughters, who do not imitate social ideals.
Back to Sohila’s quotation, what mustaqillat stated as their urgent need was the need for companionships and support. When mustaqillat were asked what they need, their answers were articulated in the need for connection, to be connected with others, to cope with that feeling of abandonment and loneliness. According to (Hemmings, 2012), experiences can result in an affective dissonance, when individuals have that feeling of discomfort that enhances their awareness of the gap between the world they aspire, and the world they live in. Similarly, Istiqlal as a social experience unfolds the difference between the world mustaqillat aspire, and the world that punishes them, as women living alone. Also, it shows the fragmented subjectivities that many mustaqillat have, given what they feel and need versus what they express and hide. This affective dissonance, in Hemmings’ (2012) argument, has resulted in affects that serve as fuel for the need of connection, or as she puts it, ‘affective solidarity.’ Affective solidarity is conceptualized as a mechanism by which individuals cope with the harsh conditions they go through in a given context, by getting together with others who go through that specific experience. Getting together itself becomes a need, an urgent need in the face of the neoliberal world that individuates our experiences, and disconnects us from each other, (Phipps, 2016). According to Sohila, Femi-Hub realized that their capacities are at the heart of mobilizing the space, the hub, for mustaqillat to know other mustaqillat, to get together, and to express solidarity based on their shared experiences with Istiqlal. Based on my observations, Femi-Hub includes women who do not necessarily identify themselves as mustaqillat. Yet, the majority of its members are mustaqillat, and the concept upon which they get together is the experience of Istiqlal, as Sohila respectively mentioned. I am now translating some of the posts on the group that both the moderators and the women wrote them gave me consent to include in my research.

I have learnt a lot. My happiest days are those I spend on the group with you, and your honest advice. This goes along with my feeling that I always have women getting my back. I have support other than my family, friends, and fiancée. Many
thanks, and please, should anyone of you need help she thinks I can offer, never hesitate to contact me.

I cannot thank you more, you women in my life who I have known here. I was surprised by the support you provided, and the love you expressed with me. That gave me strength, despite of the sorrow I am getting through. I received many messages from members who I never knew before, and many others were surrounding me without any relationship between us. I am thankful for your feelings, and I need your prayers and advice for my next step of Istiqal after I lost both of my parents. The good news is that my sister, and my uncles said it is my decision to live alone or not. Also, they supported me to search for an apartment to move to. For the next few days, I need to know what exactly should we do, as mustaqillat, when we live alone? How do we sleep? I am leaving my family’s home that is not in a friendly neighborhood for women living alone, so that I can minimize the harassment of neighbors. What do we need? How much should I monthly assign for the new apartment? What should I be alerted to? Apparently, I need to meet some of you to share their Istiqal experiences with me. I had no clashes with my parents. I used to have my personal space, and I never thought of leaving them. Yet, it seems that I have to go through the experience of Istiqal. Pray for me to overcome the loss, and the loneliness. You are a real backbone. Thanks so much.

Hey! If the apartment is not furnished, take the basic appliances, and furniture with you. I think your budget should be like 2000 Egyptian Pounds, as long as you are living alone. We can meet to discuss further details, and the basic needs you have to buy every month.

You will need to take the appliances, if the apartment is not fully furnished, i.e. your bedroom. The budget depends on the amount of the monthly rent, on food you eat, and on your lifestyle in general. We will meet to talk more about this. For example, you may need to cut almost 500 EGP for utilities, and about 1000-1500 EGP for groceries, and cleaning liquids.

Welcome back, honey. If you are going to close your family’s apartment, you can save more money by moving some furniture to the new place. This will allow you to rent an unfurnished apartment for your own, without high budget. Regarding living alone for the first time, I can help you. It is not very hard as it sounds. You may feel a bit alienated at first, but after that you will feel you are home. Take things from your parents’ apartment that you feel attached to, such as things you used to put in your bedroom, this can familiarize the new place to you. Generally speaking, when you are looking for an apartment, think of the feeling of home more than anything else. This is what I have on mind now, and I am ready to help whenever you need me. I am happy you are back. And I am happy too that you are thinking of your next steps. God bless you, and give you the strength to recover this.

As our conversation started to focus more on forms of solidarity that Femi-Hub offers, I asked Sohila why they decided to assign a phone number to receive calls from mustaqillat.

“Someone volunteered to give us this phone number. We do not have the capacity to offer psychological support. Although, we receive calls friendly. I mean, the group’s moderators
receive calls by themselves, and they are not specialists. Many of the calls we receive are from mustaqillat who want to just talk, fadfađa, with someone understands them. Also, they may ask for specific things, such as legal support. We do not really provide these kinds of support, but we suggest alternatives, and put them in contact with NGOs or individuals who offer it. If a mustaqilla wants to talk, fadfada, any other member or moderator can meet her, based on her preferences on whom she wants to talk with. We even can meet at a local café, to talk with her, and this happens all the time.” Later during the conversation, Sohila expressed how the security attack on feminist NGOs has affected Femi-Hub and its members, such as Nazra for Feminist Studies in March 2018. These NGOs used to provide legal and psychological support that Femi-Hub does not usually offer. This support highlights how interconnected the different generations of women’s movements in Egypt.

Another form of solidarity is an initiative of financial support that emerged from the group, especially after the devaluation of the Egyptian pound in November 2016. According to Sohila, more than forty mustaqillat have been financially supported. Femi-Hub has created a thread, a group of sequential messages on Facebook messenger, namely the financial support initiative. The mechanism used by Femi-Hub in this regard is collective, as mustaqillat donate for each other. When she had a financial crisis, and was thinking of returning back to her family’s home accordingly, Sohila was financially supported by members of the group. It was like a loan without profits, as afterwards Sohila returned the money back for other members who expressed their financial needs. One of those was a PhD candidate in a European university, and the money was sent to her abroad, after donated and collected by group members.

Goes along with that is legal support. I recall an incident in which one of the group members was sexually harassed by her therapist. We employed a lawyer for her. Fortunately, the therapist was fired from the center he worked for. He also deactivated

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4 Fadfađa is the Arabic expression usually used to describe a deep need for speaking, driven by overwhelming feeling.
his Facebook account and completely disappeared. He ran away, and we do not know where he is right now. Many other things, for instance, when two group members were in a legal trouble after reporting being sexually harassed, we launched a campaign titled: sexual harassment is a crime, al-taharoush garymah. Because one of them did not prefer to talk publicly by herself about the incident, “Do not mention any details publicly for your personal safety. We will talk on behalf of you. We are a collective, and we will attract the public’s attention,” we said to her. Moreover, when anyone of us is cyberbullied, we counterattack the bullies. Always. Sohila Mohamed. September 2018.

**Mustaqillat and Collective Mobilization**

While the experience of istiqal is the core principle upon which mustaqillat are mobilizing themselves on Femi-Hub, the group has turned into a space for exchanging experiences, and activities other than istiqal, and has become a mobilizing tool by itself. To illustrate, the group is run as a space for any member to initiate whatever she prefers, be it an interactive post for sarcastic purposes, or activities that exceed the limits of the online space. I am mentioning here different instances in which mustaqillat differently utilize Femi-Hub as a space, based on my observations both as a member of the group, and a researcher. As Sohila respectively reported, the group is a place where online and offline activities are being organized. Important to highlight is that group members have the right to organize activities without any need to get the moderators’ permissions, a shared right between administrators and members. In June 2018, a member suggested that group members could meet for Ramadan Iftar, to know each other personally, after months of interacting solely on Facebook. As a religious occasion, Ramadan is the Muslim fasting month, an opportunity of reunions, especially families. The month is a chance to come together, to agree on a day to have Iftar that allows individuals to connect with their loved ones. This extends familial gatherings to friends, coworkers, neighbors, and recently, people who get to know each other online. These reunions often take place at one of those individuals homes, and it is known as Ouzoma. Ouzoma is an invitation for food, in which an individual/group pays or cooks for the others. Whilst this can mostly be found in familial Ouzomas, it can also take the form of a
dish-party, as happened on Femi-Hub. Immediately, an event was created via *creating an event* feature on Facebook. Members of Femi-Hub started to distribute roles, and responsibilities upon themselves, according to what could they offer to do. Some members promised to cook, others said they would bring drinks, or desserts. Other members expressed the need for disposable dishes, and cups, so that any member who could afford them, bring them with her. It ended up with the payment redistributed among a group of members. The place chosen for the *Iftar* was a public garden, *Hadiqit al-Operah*, in downtown Cairo, near to *Tahrir* square. The reason behind this choice was the urgent demand for a place that could be reached easily by members, a place that does not require private transportation, and is close to a metro station. I was fortunate to attend that day. On the *Iftar* day, an approximate number of 100 member attended, the majority of them *mustaqillat*. I arrived at the moment of *Iftar*, and witnessed how women organized themselves on ground-tables that were not actually tables, but disposable sheets on the grass of the garden, around which members were sitting, eating, and chatting. Many of them were moving between tables, assuring that all the attendees taste what others brought. I had a seat on one of the tables, on the semi-wet grass with other members who I did not personally know, and joined the conversations, while invited to have a delicious oriental dessert by one of the women moving between tables. As the conversation got louder by our laughs, other members came and joined. They were interested to know other women who are actively participating on group posts, women who share a common ground with them. The center of attention was the attendees, and the affect presented and circulated between them. The number of attendees was increasing, with many participants from other cities attended the gathering. Others were having to leave, since they live far from downtown, especially those who live with their families and seek *istiqlal*. Before leaving and saying goodbye to all members, many of the attendees participated in cleaning the tables, putting the disposable dishes, and the trash in plastic bags they brought
for this purpose. The rest of the food was distributed among members. I moved to another table where Sohila Mohamed later joined. Our conversations were turning into being more intimate than before. We even talked about our sexual preferences and experiences with women who we just knew. We did not feel evaluated, nor monitored, so we spoke ourselves without being anxious about how we would be perceived. Many of the mustaqillat I met on that day have since become my friends.

Figure 8: Mustaqillat’s activities after Femi-Hub Iftar

Another instance of transforming Femi-Hub as a space for exchange is an initiative called: al-Wekala. Al-Wekala is a hashtag, created to exchange clothes, and other items for sale. Many of these items are used, secondhand clothes, and are announced for sale to other members to buy, so both the seller and the buyer can benefit. Thursdays are assigned for al-Wekala posts. The main idea behind this initiative is the mutual benefit between buyers who can buy good-condition clothes at less cost, and sellers who can use the money to pay for other things they need. Many members wait for al-Wekala posts, and others wait for Thursdays, so they can sell their things. In some cases, it has turned to be a method by which mustaqillat who need money, can sell some of the things they have. The processes of exchange happening on al-Wekala days are mainly based on digital activities that involve

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5 Al-Wekala is a shortcut for Wekalet al-Balah, a place in Boulaq near to downtown Cairo, where smuggled and secondhand clothes are being sold. It is a flea market, and a refuge that residents from Cairo and other cities, who are willing to buy clothes with their low budgets, approach.
both the offline and the online. Even those who started their small businesses are directing them online. Away from *al-Wekala*, and the exchange of material goods for profit making, or tackling financial needs, some members have started their separate Facebook-groups for exchanging information on women’s sexual and reproductive health. Such groups used to be run by moderators other than Femi-Hub’s, whereas the large number of their members already know each other from Femi-Hub, and are mainly *mustaqillat*.

*Istiqlal* as an experience has created a network of *mustaqillat* and non-*mustaqillat* women who come together despite their might be different objectives. As Hannah Arendt (1998) puts it, “solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common grounds.”
Chapter 6
Conclusion

From Family to Larger Community

In the course of my fieldwork conducted for this thesis, mustaqillat have tried to delink themselves from the family as the social structure that gives women social and judicial identification. By the time that mustaqillat have managed to delink themselves from the family, for the purpose of greater mobilities, other power structures have challenged their attempted freedom of movement.

When mustaqillat start planning for their istiqbal, it is essential to find a place to reside at, depending on their budgets, safety, and location. However, when they meet brokers, landlords, or doormen, they are challenged by the fact that those are literally interviewing them, to make sure they are respectful women renters. In many cases, as illustrated in details in chapter four, mustaqillat are rejected as women living alone who want to rent apartments. Mustaqillat are perceived as socially problematic subjects, and to some extent, sex workers. Consequently, either they are denied their rights to rent, or conditionally accepted. In their new neighborhoods, mustaqillat should perform their respectability and conform to the conditions assigned for them by landlords, neighbors, and doormen. These conditions are restrictive rules on mustaqillat’s mobilities, i.e. curfews, dress codes, and hosting visitors. It activates the authority of these three parties, owners, neighbors, and doormen, over mustaqillat as gendered subjects. Mustaqillat are perceived as symptoms of a social disorder that requires those parties to police and supervise women living alone at their rented apartments. By doing so, mustaqillat should conform to reproduce this respectability politics, in order to survive their residences in Cairo as women living away from their families. If they do not conform, they are considered as disrespectful women, which endangers their residences, and their lives as explained in chapter five. If they conform, they are seen as
respectful women, who deserve to rent, and to live safely at a specific neighborhood. In fact, these perceptions of mustaqillat as disrespectful or respectful women play a significant role in achieving their gendered safety at these neighborhoods. As gendered safety itself, as a discourse, relies on whether a woman deserves to be safe, or not. Therefore, the three parties here perform the role of the family, the mentor and the supervisor of women’s mobilities. It leads, in many cases revealed through my fieldwork that mustaqillat have delinked themselves from the family as a social structure, but at the same time, conform to restrictions on their mobilities by other factors that do not accept the fact that women can live by their own. This is suggestive that both respectability politics and gendered safety are socially constructed concepts that are built upon time/space as socially constructed notions as well, as argued by (Harvey, 1999).

Although this makes mustaqillat’s urban experiences harder in Cairo, the fact that these parties have no direct authority over mustaqillat, as in the case of the family, sheds lights on mustaqillat’s continual attempts to navigate such restrictions on their freedom of movement, discussed in chapters four and five of this thesis.

**The State as The Social Guardian**

In chapters two, three, four, and five of my current research, the state has appeared as both direct and indirect power structure that constrains mustaqillat’s residences and mobilities. As I argued before, the state acknowledges women in Egypt only as family members, their identities are naturalized as familial, and most importantly, as gendered subjects, (Brown, 2002). Hence, when mustaqillat try to delink themselves from the family, they are considered as a chaos for the state that normalizes the family as the sole social structure for individuals. This positions mustaqillat as targets of processes of securitization for both the public and the private spheres. This captures why families who do not accept the spatial separation of women members, resort to the state to find those women, delivering them by force to their
families. By doing this, the state negates those women’s citizenry rights, normalizing the familial status as an ownership over women’s bodies, (Phadke, 2007). The examples I gave on the Egyptian police tracking women in chapter two, especially Christians, reflects the role played by the security state in this regard. The state that sees women living away from their families as social disorders, places those women at the core of securitizing the public sphere. The so-called fetna ta’efiya, in which Christian and Muslim women are blamed for Muslim-Christian clashes that named after the women’s names, unfolds how women separated from their families are considered as cores of morality politics that strips women from their citizenship rights, for the sake of securing the public order. Targeting women living alone in Egypt is not limited to going after them and coercively delivering them to their families, as a direct intervention. In her argument, (Merry, 2001) discusses the intersection between systems of surveillance, and politics of securitizations, to explain how the state regulates the social domain and punishes individuals perceived as disorders, marking them as undesirable subjects. Focusing on the Egyptian constitution and legislation systems renders visible how the state normalizes the family as a social modality, identifying women as familial subjects and criminalizing women living alone as potential sex workers. So, when living alone, mustaqillat are being targeted by their new neighborhoods, and security forces. Policing mustaqillat at their new neighborhoods introduces another level of controlling individuals in which both the state and community members cooperate as a hegemonic power exercised over mustaqillat’s behaviors, and bodies as gendered subjects, (Phadke, 2005). Accordingly, whenever mustaqillat are seen out of the familial contexts, they are mentored for the possibility of them being sex workers, or at least ‘loose women’ who live away from the family that represents the domination over women’s mobilities and sexualities. Given the fact that the Egyptian Penal Code has criminalized sex work, since Nasser’s era, (Bier, 2011), it also criminalizes renting to more than one renter. Therefore,
renting an apartment for a group of women living away from their families is problematic and illegal, which makes the renting process itself a problem, as I explored in chapter four. It follows that, if mustaqillat are not rejected as problematic renters, they are supervised by the doorman, neighbors, and the owner, in order to avoid any possible problems that their residences might trigger. In chapter five, some of my interlocutors were already reported to the police, and arrested for hosting visitors. As in chapter four, one of my interlocutors was threatened to be reported to the police for hosting female friends whose clothes were perceived as non-acceptable to the apartment owner. As a result, the state here intervenes but not directly. It relies on these community-level dynamics that turn people at mustaqillat’s new neighborhoods into police informants. Here, the state activates its power over the social domain, because if these community-level dynamics do not recall security forces, it will negatively affect those involved, especially landowners for renting their apartments illegally to more than one renter, or to rent it for the purpose of adultery, paid sex work. The Egyptian Parliament has recently agreed on issuing a law that compels owners to report the nearest police station with identities of possible renters, (MadaMasr, March 2019). Issuing that law comes as a continuous securitization of the public space under the claim of ‘fighting terrorism,’ which directly affects renters in general, and mustaqillat in particular, insuring the statist authoritative mission over both apartment owners, and renters. Therefore, mustaqillat have to negotiate this risk of being arrested, or breaking their rental contracts, in order to create safe spaces for themselves, as the state and local communities collectively participate in (re)producing safety and risk as socially constructed notions, (Phadke, 2005).

Moreover, this reveals how the intersection between class and gender leads to a deferential access to the public space. As living away from the family is a transgression of normalized social behaviors, community-violence against mustaqillat is legitimized. As gendered subjects who move beyond such socially constituted norms, mustaqillat are more vulnerable
to community-level violations, which itself intersect with statist domination over the social fabric. In other words, based on my fieldwork in chapters four and five, when mustaqillat were sexually violated at their new neighborhoods, they were targeted by police forces, or denied their rights to state protection, despite the fact that those who harassed them were classified as working-class men. This takes me to Paul Ammar’s (2011) argument on how securitizing the public space involves targeting working-class men, as a threat to women’s gendered safety. My fieldwork unfolds the fact that women living away from their families are too exposed to securitization processes, even when working-class men involved in the scene. Denying women’s access to the public sphere, is not fixed, nor absolute. Rather, when class intersects with gender, women are perceived at the bottom of this social hierarchy of power. I want to reflect in this point on Caroline Nassif’s (2010) debate on that many middle-class women are denied state protection, when it comes to sexual harassment conducted by working-class men working at City Stars mall in Cairo. In that sense, when other marginalized subjects are threatening women’s gendered safety in the public space, the state does not simply go after those marginalized people, such as the working-class man figure, as argued by (Merry, 2001). Instead, it evaluates the situation, assessing who is the most undesirable to exist in the public space. So, as gendered subjects who do not conform to the statist accepted social order, mustaqillat are the undesirable subjects that should be illuminated, to reserve the public order and its social hierarchies.

In this regard, this thesis is an academic contribution to the theories of how both the public and the private spheres are interconnected. Also, it highlights how the private sphere itself is fluid and non-fixed. It is generative in the sense that the matters classified as ‘private’ are themselves public concerns for both the state and local community members. Through the five chapters of this research, I have argued that preserving the public orders are interdependent on the private sphere as the main constitutive unit of the public.
Theorizing for the family to be the sole power source over women and their gendered subjectivities is not accurate. When women spatially separate from the family, other power structure appear to play the role of the family: the mentor, the supervisor, and the regulator of women’s mobilities and bodies. The family itself is conceptualized as a firewall that protects women members from the challenges they face, if spatially separated. What happens inside a home, as a domestic space, is a public concern as long as it does not take place in a familial context, as it is the case in neglecting the constant demands for a law that criminalizes domestic violence.

**The Price Paid for Istiqal**

In chapter three of this thesis, I have discussed the ways in which mustaqillat come together in solidarity with each other. To understand why mustaqillat share the affect of solidarity, and the needs for support, I explored istiqal as a shared experience among mustaqillat, looking deeper at the affects produced through it. My interlocutors have stated that they need support, and for people believing in them being able to live alone, but never deny their need for help. This takes me again to the family introduced as the source of unconditional love and support for individuals. As Sarah Ahmed (2014b) argues, individuals access to the support and the claimed ‘unconditional’ love is itself conditional and socially constituted. By mustaqillat identifying themselves as gendered subjects who are independent from the family, their self-identification serves as a barrier between them and the people who are perceived as sources of support and love, be them family members, or friends. To explain, conforming socially accepted patterns, of identifying oneself in relation to her family and living at the family’s home, is the condition upon which support and love are expressed. Thus, when mustaqillat move out from the family’s home, for any purpose, they are seen as fully independent subjects, who do not need support from people surrounding them. By fully independent I mean that when mustaqillat self-identify themselves as independent, it
implicitly indicates that they do not need that support. This results in an emotional dissonance between mustaqillat and persons they are socially related to, (Hemmings, 2012). It makes istiqlal an emotionally exhausting experience of social isolation. Emotional dissonance is itself experience-based, reflects the gap between what mustaqillat expect, and what actually happens, in terms of social relationships. In that sense, social isolation, or emotional dissonance is a social disciplining mechanism, for those who do not conform to the normalized identities socially assigned to them, (Ahmed, 2014b).

Istiqlal as an individualistic experience spotlights individualism itself as a discipline tool for individuals, (Harvey, 2008). Even in the case of conceptualizing istiqlal as a career-oriented action, discussed in chapter two, those who celebrate independent women whose istiqlal has been purposed for career goals, give little attention of how other forces have serious consequences on women living away from their families, which negatively affect their whole experience of istiqlal. That urgent need for support has driven mustaqillat to search for support elsewhere, looking for women who share similar experiences of theirs. This happens in parallel with, or as a result of, the state and community-based violations that mustaqillat are subjugated to, as mentioned in chapters four and five. Here comes the cyberspace to connect mustaqillat to other mustaqillat, allowing for an experience-based solidarity between them and other women who do not necessarily identify themselves as mustaqillat. The Facebook group Femi-Hub has been founded for the aim of connecting mustaqillat and women seeking istiqlal together. On the group, mustaqillat often express their needs for support, and their constant feelings of loneliness and social isolation, as if they are socially punished for being mustaqillat. Mustaqillat have utilized that cyberspace in order to collectively overcome the hardship of istiqlal as a gendered experience. In fact, this has been developed overtime. As the need for support itself has been extended to financial, and material needs, marking the Facebook group as a space for exchanging advice, support, and
second-hand commodities. This is added to mobilizing themselves to financially support each other. Affective solidarity between mustaqillat has come to be a counterattack to the different challenges that mustaqillat face, during their istiqlal journey.

The other aspect that makes istiqlal an endless effort to socially relate to others is exemplified in the dynamics between mustaqillat in rented apartments. Sharing a rented room, or apartment, has intensified the affect of dissonance. This can be understood in light of the repetitive action of moving in and moving out. This has led to a sense of temporality that mustaqillat individually develop by time. Searching for a place to rent, getting along with flatmates, and dealing with the hassles of the renting processes are enough reasons to make istiqlal an infinite process for reconstructing home. As illustrated in chapter five, many mustaqillat have spatially appropriated their new rented places, with implicit, huge social and material effort to be conducted, to create a home. In the cases where my interlocutors expressed an attachment to their rented apartments, they usually put extra efforts to sustain and reserve that attachment and comfort with their flatmates. The high price that is paid for their independence, among all these, is depression, OCD, PTDS, and anxiety. If mustaqillat are willing to have greater mobilities, they have to socially and personally pay for it.

**Focus of Study and Further Research**

At the end of my thesis, I would prefer to mention that every experience of istiqlal is different. There are some similarities and intersections between different mustaqillat’s narratives on their experiences with istiqlal. Nonetheless, my thesis does not introduce istiqlal as a one-pattern experience that all mustaqillat follow. Rather, it highlights different aspects of istiqlal, which share one main purpose that is the need for greater freedom of movement that mustaqillat could find in their families’ homes. Thus, since my focus is on mobilities, and how mustaqillat navigate for it in the context of post-2011 Egypt, further research inquiries are still needed to be investigated, for example, the role of waged labor.
Additional research is necessary to understand the role that *mustaqillat* play in Egypt’s political economy, linking it to the global division of labor. Furthermore, the stories of *mustaqillat* who failed to continue their *istiqlal* experiences and have gone back to their families’ home, are not included in my research. Nor did I include narrative of women who identify themselves as *mustaqillat* while they live with their families. Including such narratives would have enriched my research, as the reasons for either return to the family’s home, or stay in it.
Appendix:

Mustaqillat’s Personal Narratives

Beyond

I am independent because nobody has a say on my life anymore. nobody gives me money or controls any step in my future whether its continuing education or a job, immigration or even an outing. I dropped out of college in year 4 after spending 6 years there failing in something that’s already mutilated and customized to deform your brains. My decision to dropout was postponed since a couple of years, before I knew that college is no good for me or at least the Egyptian education system. I already worked, since I was 19 in numerous part-time jobs; shops, magazines, call centers, customer service, and marketing agencies.

I am not really convinced that independence is a financial or a patriarchal issue. I think it goes beyond that. It is a sort of weapons against emotional abuse. To me, independence was not a feminist decision or a choice of freedom. It was a necessary solution for my physical safety from an abusive father and a history of domestic abuse. I needed a safe place. I needed to protect myself and my mother who unfortunately felt for Stockholm syndrome and left me alone. She promised to come when I figured out a solution for our housing problem, but she never did. I think independence is the deep desire to not be enslaved by those you love, to not be abused, to not be controlled and most of all to not be loved to an obsessive extent. Independence is the only way we can really know whether our relationships are real or our decisions are true representation of our desire. It is a huge tool for having your own identity.

The revolution gave me one huge push. It gave me motive and waved possibility towards my face. If it was one year earlier, I would have never believed I could make it alone in another city without any help with no college degree or anything. As much as it failed on a national level, I believe I lead my own miniature protest to the right path. I have created change, and maybe someday, it will happen for the country.
My mother was opposed to the idea. I lied to my father saying I got a job offer and he couldn’t care less, since he declared his bankruptcy then. When I did it, my relationship with my mother was calmer, since we only met on weekends and we spent the time missing each other more than fighting together. What I did not know is that since I was a lonely child, life was tough to handle alone with my abusive dad. Even though she loved him, she started asking me to come back 4 months later. She started condescending me and accusing me of failure. It was more horrible than when we lived together. A month later, she got diagnosed with 4th stage of cancer and died a year and a half later. My relationship with my father was already on and off, until I decided to cut him off for 4 years. We have just started reconnecting, a few months ago.

My biggest challenges were home, money and loneliness. I’ve lived in more than 13 houses (Downtown/ Maadi/ Mohandeseen/ Zamalek/ Abdeen), to be able to recreate this place I call home, the place I never had with my family that only existed in my imagination. I have had roommates sometimes and other times had not. I have developed attachment to a lot of people who weren’t interested in the family feel I needed and offered. So, I decided at a certain point to live alone and face the fact that this might be the shape of my life from now on. I am a lonely child with a dead mother and a distant father. I am made to be alone and I believe I can equip myself to handle, if it wasn’t for the vulnerability that attacks me every now and then and so I did. As for the money, I found very generous people on the way who lent me almost 30k, to build the life I had in my mind. I was able to pay the full amount back, 3 years later.

The doormen were my greatest nightmare. Neighbors were a bit fine, but doormen were greedy and snoopy. I always had more freedom with moving around and having a sexual life anywhere lived because it was important to me to look for that. I didn’t really care about the prejudice, as long as nobody asked about my life. However, this fact that I had a place made a
lot of my encounters or relationships with men a bit abusive and made their desires untrue. Since, they usually get attracted to women with a place. It is exactly like being rich and people love you for your money, except in that case, independence, they love you for your house.

Family is an elusive concept, or at least that is what I came to understand, when I started living alone. Nobody can replace your real family, not even friends who you consider family and nobody should in fact. This need for having family is decreasing by time. I am now even ready to the idea of never having kids, even though it was once my dream to have 10 as a lonely child. I love the idea of family and the warmth it adds to life. But it doesn’t mean it is an easy thing to create, nor to commit for that long or forever to anyone. The issues you have coming out of a dysfunctional family are better kept to yourself. I have been in therapy for 11 years now, and I know some damage can never be repaired. Yet, I believe I am becoming healthier by time, and only when I am alone, not attached to anyone, and not owned by anyone.

Relocation

I belong to a middle-class family, and in a relationship. I am a 26-years old mustaqilla, independent women, because I live away from my family’s home since January 2013. I financially support myself, since July 2011. I think that Istiqlal means that the person financially supports herself, paying for her life expenses, and have an independent income, be it work, or heritage. The idea of istiqlal has started to hunt me, since I was only 15 years. It was not fully developed back then, and just thought of in terms of finances. I was at my first year at high school in my city, Alexandria. I wanted to have my own money that I earn from work, and never be financially dependent on anyone, including my family. But I was legally a child, with no work experiences, and no one would have hired me. I intended to learn skills required to enter the job market, only in summer vacations from school.
The year 2011 was the year that I would graduate from high school, and be 18-year-old person. Then, the uprising happened, and I was still enrolled in my high school. I participated. I still remember that feeling of owning the world. I felt that I belong to this generation leading change in our country. My desire to be a mustaqilla has increased and changed. The istiqlaI wanted when I was 15, was only financial, but in 2011, I wanted to completely move out from my family’s home, to live by my own. My family fueled my desire to istiqlaI, especially after blaming me, and punishing me for participating in the revolution. I felt there was a gap between us. So, I decided to systematically plan to persuade them with my intention to be a mustaqilla. My plan was to apply for a university that is not located at the same city where they live. I planned to shift my enrollment at the university, from full-time, to part-time enrollment, which would give me enough time to look for a job. My plan was successfully achieved!

My father refused my geographical relocation to another city, where my university located. But with every time he refused something I did, I convinced him with logic, and he agreed, or more accurately, defeated. My family got used to the idea that I travel regularly to another city, and sleep over in dorms during exams, for days, and then for weeks. At the same time, I had a good opportunity to work in a prominent company. And the situation was like I was spending all day out for work, and only came home to sleep. On vacation days, I was going to the university to study and attend my examinations. I was spending almost all my time out of home, which made it easier to persuade my father with my intention to move out. But, he would not have accepted the word ‘istiqlaI’ itself. That is why I told him that the company I was working for, geographically relocated my job to another branch in a third city. Honestly, it was me who asked for this relocation. The city was neither where my family live, nor the city of my university. He strongly disagreed. I persisted. After a while of continuous
attempts to persuade him, he agreed. However, he was not very comfortable with what I was doing.

Only then, I have started my istiqal journey. It was financially hard for me at the beginning, especially that I was still enrolled at my university. Thus, I was obligated to find an additional source of income, a job that helped me to pay for my expenses, rent, and transportations. I was working almost 18 hours per day, until I graduated in 2015. I left the night shift work, and continued to work at the private incorporation, where I occupied different positions, i.e. HR representative, sales, administrative officer, public relations employee, and retail. That was so far from what I wanted, but was obligatory for me to survive my istiqal. Recently, I have shifted my work to content writing that I feel passionate about. It also helps me to pay for my expenses.

Istiqal has allowed me to move freely, without having to take permissions from my father. If I want to travel, I travel. I go out whenever I want, without caring about how my family would react to me being late to home, as before. No one asks me. No one controls me. I am free to move wherever and whenever I want. This would not, and would never be the case, if I was living with my family. Sometimes, I compare my recent status as a mustaqilla who has that freedom of movement, with my little sister, who is still living at our family’s home. Unfortunately, her steps out of the home are counted, and regulated. Other times, I feel guilty and helpless, because I cannot help her.

I have moved to Cairo. I reside at a classy neighborhood, Maadi. I used to rent apartments at fancy places like Zamalek. Few years ago, I had a financial crisis, and I had to move out to a working-class neighborhood, Bein al-Sarayat. I suffered, as the neighbors, local shop owners, and guys who always stand in the street doing nothing but stalking women, were annoying me in person. I could not live there more than one month, during which I have
realized that we buy our freedom with money. I should pay expensive rent at a fancy neighborhood, where foreigners live, to have a little sense of privacy.

But because these neighborhoods require a lot of money to reside at, I cannot rent an apartment alone. I have to share an apartment with other women. I do this, since the beginning of my istiqlal. In some apartments, my relationships with flatmates were not that good, because of the constant violations of my personal space, damaging my personal stuff, or dealing me with inappropriately. As I shared many apartments with flatmates for years, I have had that experience of avoiding abusive ones. This has eventually enabled me to share an apartment with flatmates, where we all respect rules, and make our decisions collectively. We even have become close friends.

One of my istiqlal advantages is sexual freedom. Now, I can have sex, something that would never be accepted for my family, if I live with them. By mentioning family frequently, I want to say that the concept of family itself and its importance have changed after my istiqlal. I feel that I do not belong to my family who rejects my beliefs. I do not feel that I need a family. I can say that I can be my own family. I believe that women can start their own families with people who appreciate and accept them as they are.

Nonetheless, one of my biggest concerns is how I am always required to prove that I am a good and respectful woman, just because I do not live with my family. I have to show that I am serious, non-loose, and aggressive with strangers, because people stigmatize women living alone. They do not accept us. They refuse us, even if istiqlal is not criminalized by law. My position as a mustaqilla is too sensitive. The fact that I should be cautious all the time to these hassles, burdens me.
Elsewhere

For me, Istiqlal was a dream that should be realized. I wanted to have my own space, a room that I can close its door, a closet that no one opens, a locker where no one looks for my secrets. Before istiqlal, I felt that I am always surveilled. I mean that all of my secrets should have never been out of my head, because I have no elsewhere to keep them. This has affected my relationships with my body, my freedom of expression, my ability to write, and other things. The hardest matter about istiqlal is the endless financial pressure. Work is mandatory, even if we do not like it, just to pay our rent, our utilities, and our food. After a while, work gets intensified, and a larger income is required to protect ourselves in safer residence, or to stop using public transportations, avoiding sexual harassment.

All the time, I am between two hard choices, either to live, doing the things I am passionate about, or to build my capacities for work. This has given me the feelings that I am always late. Istiqlal, as it gives us comfort, freedom, and awareness, it also gives us hassles. One of these is that I cannot confront people that I am living alone. The doorman controls my mobility, treating me as a loose woman. Neighbors, and even any police officer, see me as disrespectful, including the cases in which I am reporting sexual harassment. The first question is always: “where is your family?” It is not easy to tell, or write about my istiqlal, because it is full of social and emotional complexities. From time to time, I have a different narrative about my istiqlal experience, which reflects my changing consciousness, and perceptions.

Me and Myself

Today is my first day at this apartment, my own apartment. I always had that dream of owning a space for my own. I lived with my family for 24 years, during which I wanted to have my own place, not theirs, despite our good relationship. I needed a home, where I apply my rules, with all my simple stuff and thoughts, a home where I can go out and get back to,
whenever I want to. It is a responsibility, a huge self-confrontation, but comfortable. I am comfortable that I finally have my space. It is a relief. I am now drinking my first cup of coffee. I made it for myself, and by myself. I insisted to clean it, once I am in, to look like me, cheerful. *Istiqlal* is important.

**Endless Temporality**

I prefer my name to remain confidential, for the sensitivity of my story. I am 26, who was born in Alexandria city. I am single. My social class, I can tell is a bit lower middle-class. I define myself as a *mustaqilla*, since I have moved to Cairo to live by my own. I financially support myself, without any support from my family, or other close people. For me, *istiqlal* is to be self-independent, not to be dependent on someone else. It also means the act of physically moving out from the family’s home, to move to a place that I own. I decided to be a *mustaqilla* for many reasons. Firstly, during my undergraduate studies at Cairo university, faculty of mass communication, I used to reside at the university dorms. After that, I decided to continue what I have started in Cairo during these years, which is to work in press and television sectors. Part of my decision was that I was afraid to lose the efforts I endured during these four years. I did not want to get back to Alexandria, waiting for a foggy future that controls me. When I lived in Cairo, I felt that I can plan and aspire my own future. So, I made the decision to stay.

Another reason for my decision was being sexually harassed by my father, a matter that drove me to run away. I did not want to live in a place, where I could not protect myself, a place where I lost my mental and physical safety. Note to mentions is that I cannot speak out what I was suffering from to any of my family members. I was afraid to be accused of making it up, despite the fact that anyone of them could have easily noticed my father’s sexual interests in young girls of our family. Honestly, I do not hate him. I cannot define my feelings towards him. It is neither love, nor hate. I do not know! But, what I am sure about is
that I cannot forgive him. I am sure that I lost that sense of safety. Also, one of my motivations to istiqal is that I wanted to change my social class. Although my father has money, he insisted in residing at a very sha’aby neighborhood. He has never thought of moving out to another neighborhood. It is his decision, and I respect it. However, I have the right to choose what I want for myself.

The revolution was my eye-opener. It was the first thing that inspired me, giving me better understanding of my political and social circumstances. Before the revolution, I was a reader. But, after it, I discovered that my readings were all about novels. That has pushed me to participate in the revolutionary events, in 2012. To be at the center of them, I got involved in press covering these events. I wanted to read more, know more about what was happening around me, changing the whole country. In 2013, I have decided to stay in Cairo. When my father knew, he threatened to kill me. My mother intervened, trying to persuade him to let me there for work. My publications at newspapers helped me a lot, as these published texts have become a source of honor my family used to show during extended family gatherings. “Our daughter’s name is now officially on newspapers!”

At the beginning, challenges to my istiqal were financial. I was paid only on my published texts, which depends on the personal evaluation I received from my boss. Therefore, I decided to look for another job opportunity, to be able to afford my basic needs, i.e. rent, food, and transportation. Sharing a room, with two other roommates was challenging. It takes time and effort to get used to everyone’s personality, way of thinking, and respecting others. Finding a place to rent, and to practice my daily routines, is not easy at all. I am now working for a newspaper, beside my freelance occupation as a researcher, for many documentaries. I also write for many Arabic news websites, so that I can have additional income to afford my needs. This allows me to be financially prepared for emergencies. Work is necessary for this step, a battle in my opinion.
Of course, istiqlal gives me a freedom of movement. Now, I can travel across Egypt, seeing places I never dreamed to see. I know that many young women in my age and older, have never got out of their family’s home, except for marrying someone. Or at least, this was the norm at the place where I came from. At first, I resided at Bein al-Sarayat, where sharing a room with others was affordable, according to my salary at that time. I was sharing one room with two women. I left, when the owner asked me to share my bed with another renter. I was hosted by a friend in Faisal street, located in Giza suburbs. Then, I moved to rent a single room for myself, in al-Haram neighborhood. However, I was compelled to leave it, when my flatmates left. This was just because I could not pay the rent for the whole apartment alone. I moved to al-Dokki, and then to Downtown. I usually search for apartments and rooms to rent at the Facebook groups.

From my experience, and because I am not a social person, I did not encounter any hassles from neighbors. Nevertheless, there have always been these looks, and questions about if I am Hareba, runaway, or not. When it comes to freedoms, istiqlal has given me the space to decide for myself, to own my life. The concept of family has changed by time for me. Humm, or it has become way unclear than before. I do not want to marry, or to have kids. I almost do not have plans for my personal life. But I do have plans, a lot of them, to continue my studies, and to improve my social status.

As I said before, the challenges I face during my istiqlal are mainly financial. I have to find a place to rent. Same happens with my studies. In light of the current economic repressive decisions in Egypt, this all get harder. Other challenges may be that I do not have permanent friendships, or activities to participate in. My life is temporal. Everything is temporal, starting from the room I rent, to the relationships I have.
Friendship

In 2014, I left my family’s home for almost three months. That was not just because I had a fight with my mom over hijab and smoking. But she was literally policing me all the time. She was rummaging my notebooks, laptop, and cell phone. One day, she took them from me by force. I decided to leave the home. I actually ran away. My friend Heba hosted me, as I was planning to live away forever. Yet, it was really hard, at least financially. After some negotiations, I got back to my family’s home. In 2016, I decided to completely move out. Back then, I was a teaching assistant at a university, a very prestigious position that I did not choose for myself. My family did. When I decided to shift my career, my mom got mad at me. But I had already done moving out, shifting my career, and finding another job that has allowed me to afford living by my own. Surprisingly, my mom and I now have a very friendly relationship!
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