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Convictions and ambivalences: theorizing power at a Cairene feminist NGO

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CONVICTIONS AND AMBIVALENCES:

THEORIZING POWER AT A CAIRENE FEMINIST NGO

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ABSTRACT

In this project, I attempt to conduct an "ethnography of theory" among women activists in an Egyptian feminist non-governmental organization (NGO). In doing so, I follow the calls for grounding theory of gender and the Middle East in day-to-day lived experience, through ethnography rather than "polemic" (L. Abu-Lughod 2010). This model takes women to be active participants in the creation of their own subjectivities and focuses on the analytic frameworks they employ in understanding this process. The Cairene feminist NGO, New Woman Foundation (NWF), is a forum for a range of professionals, young students, and activists who together encompass a range of experiences and perspectives on feminist work. In particular, I examine interpretations of discourses and institutions of power and a woman's navigation therein. As I describe, power is understood to manifest and function in various forms, through human rights and feminism, the family, the state, and in the structure of NGO work itself. This project analyzes the changing, often complex and contradictory, individual frameworks that women employ in their reflections upon such forces. All in all, a dual set of strong convictions and ambivalences come to characterize women's perceptions of their work. As this project's participants continuously reassert the necessity of intellectual and moral commitment to women's rights, they simultaneously must in some way come to terms with the limitations and contradictions in their work. Through analyzing these different groups of women's reflections on their work, I locate the daily experiences and contemplations of NWF participants in wider debates on feminism in the MENA region.

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Introduction

Cairene civic participation is positioned within the vibrant and contested space of civil society in the Middle East. Structured by the interplay of international governance and its resistance, it is simultaneously grounded in the everyday practice of a civic activist herself. Both touted as instigator of democracy and critiqued as collaborator of the status quo, civil society is often pegged into two polarities. In this project, I plan to shift from questioning civil society's "true" character in the Middle East and move instead towards an examination of the embodiment of civil society through its activists and general participants. I believe Lila Agu-Lughod's "plea for ethnography, not polemic," is especially relevant to discourse surrounding civil society, as the inconclusiveness of such polemical questions of civil society as either absent or present, repressive or liberating, only points to the flaws of such simple questions (2010).

Following this call for ethnography, in this project I locate myself at one long-standing and openly feminist Cairene organization, New Woman Foundation (NWF). Both the quantity and scope of Cairene NGOs are vast, coming together to form a complex network intimidating to approach with anthropology's traditional eye for the "local" and intensive ethnography. At this project's inception, I was thrown into the thick of this sea of organizations and networks at the "Collective Work on Women's Rights" conference hosted by the major development foundation, German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), in December 2009. At this conference, I was struck by the heated debates arising among participants that touched on concerns of the social sciences. These questions centered on how to discursively frame development work, how to remain connected to the grassroots base, and how to navigate potentially hostile actors like the Egyptian state. Despite my familiarity with scholarly critiques of development, civil society, feminism, and other notions debated here, I felt ill-equipped to enter such discussions. Through

my observation, I was struck by the way these widely discussed concepts literally come to life in forums such as this. I decided to further trace these debates outside of conference settings: into an NGO itself and extending specifically to the life worlds and analytic frameworks of the variety of persons participating in that NGO. This line of interest lead me to conduct ethnography at NWF, as it is specifically a research-oriented organization overtly focused on questions of theory behind women's rights.

The bulk of this project's fieldwork was conducted in December 2010, just prior to the January 25th, 2011 revolution, though I have continued to speak with most of my key participants during and following these events. This project speaks to the tensions and frustrations that many working in the field of women's rights experience, to the friction emergent between deeply felt moral passions and a consciousness of limitations and obligations, both coerced and desired. In general, women described the heavy weight of repeated disappointment as coexistent with tenacity resultant from their moral and intellectual commitments. The timing of this project aligns poignantly with a greater moment of uncertainty and tension in Egypt generally, as such an atmosphere emerges saliently from participant accounts.

In this project, I will argue that the most nuanced method of examining theoretical concepts like power, structure, and agency in civil society is through the embodiment of its myriad of participants. As I will discuss, civil society can be a vague and monolithic term, encompassing a broad range of organizations, from political parties, labor unions, religious groups, to NGOs. This project does not seek to address or evaluate civil society as a whole, as I argue for the advantages of a more detailed ethnographic approach. In focusing on civil society's embodiment through its participants themselves, I draw upon Foucault's conceptualization of power as

existing through its *practices* rather than in the abstract (1982). Theories of power after all cannot be examined in a purely conceptual sense, as theory has an active life through which it is constantly transforming. In order to explore this perspective, I focus on a particular branch of Cairene civil society: women's civic participation of a specifically feminist orientation. In such an arena, activist women themselves are primary interlocutors in these wider debates, as theoretical critiques and its responses are constantly transforming civil society. Drawing again on Abu-Lughod's terminology, the "social life" of theory can be seen in a number of activities: the drafting of shadow reports, conference debates, community roundtables, training sessions, etc. In examining all of these different manifestations of civic activism, a more complete picture can be drawn of the strategies women employ in performing their work.

Women activists and civic participants cannot be understood only through general theoretical debates on civil society, development, or human rights, as their daily activities continuously re-define what these disciplines look like on the ground. As Marnia Lazreg succinctly notes regarding development, "women in this field are as much its agents as its objects" (2002, 123). Because such models are so dynamic, ethnography is integral in analyzing both women's activism and the surrounding theories themselves. As I will discuss, women's status as both subjects and objects does not preclude the significance of power. In fact, examinations of power and structure help us to explore questions of agency, another other key concept in this project. In the field of civil society, practices of power are performed on a multitude of levels by a host of different players: the UN, international funding agencies, community-based organizations, NGO staff and rank-and-file membership. As my preliminary research has shown, however, the location of power in such contexts is never as clear as it may initially seem. Power itself becomes

subject to contention and debate, as women civic participants are deeply engaged in the theoretical debates that surround their work. In this "engagement," women think about, discuss, argue, develop, and transform their analytic frameworks and personal philosophies on a range of contentious scholarly topics: feminism, human rights, civil society, development, etc. Particularly at an organization that is specifically research-oriented like NWF, women continuously consider the theoretical foundations and implications of their work, from the direct discussion of controversial topics in conferences or meetings, to the day-to-day activities an organization performs.

Research Purpose and Significance

A common thread runs through the MENA region activism, as the debate over Muslim women's rights has acquired an imagination of its own. Its presence ranges from ubiquitous topic of conversation for Egyptian daily talk shows to a necessary speaking point for foreign dignitaries in the Middle East. This fascination of course extends outside the Middle East, and as anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod notes, nearly everyone in the United States and Europe has an opinion on the status of "Muslim women's rights"(2010). In such an abundance of discussion and scholarship on gender and civil society in the Middle East, the question arises as to the fruitfulness of further inquiry into the vagary of "Muslim women." I believe that new scholarship can still be insightful and even necessary here specifically due to anthropology's traditional eye for detail—for rich ethnography based in day-to-day experience that can fine-comb the specific context in which women's civic work is performed.

Research Questions

The overarching question that guides this project asks: how do women's performances of civic work at NWF enrich and embody social theories of power, structure, and agency? In order to explore this wider concern, I take on to answer a set of specific research questions:

- How do NWF activists and general participants perceive the structures of power that inform their work?

- Where do women locate their own civic work and personal identities in relation to these discussions of power and structure?

- How do women civic participants and activists then navigate, reinforce, and modify these structures of power?

I take power as my theoretical object of study in this project because power is so actively contested in debates on civil society and gender among activists and scholars alike. With my research questions focused on power, I hope to elucidate the complex relationship between power and agency, as expressed through women's civic activism. In this proposal, I will first outline the social theories I plan to engage. Next, I will survey and critique some of the most relevant literature produced on women's activism in the Middle East. Drawing upon this conceptual framework and literature review, I will then outline the specific methodology I have compiled in order to explore the research questions posed above.

At New Woman Foundation: An Anthropologist Among Activists

In order to understand and contextualize these critiques and approach my research questions, I have argued for the necessity of intensive and contextualized research. To achieve this degree of detail, anthropological fieldwork traditionally is located at a specific field site. With a topic like women's civic activism, drawing geographic boundaries is not straightforward and possibilities are vast. The structure of civic activism is itself a web— linking NGOs, state governments, and funding agencies across the globe. The challenge of orienting a project towards civic activism is to maintain anthropology's eye for detail while still accounting for the layers of connections that inform this work. In this chapter, I will outline the logic guiding my choices in this project's location, its variety of participants, and the techniques then employed in engaging these participants. Finally, I will integrate reflections upon my own positionality into discussion of my methodological decisions.

New Woman Foundation

New Woman Foundation is a unique forum in Cairo. Not performing development or charity work directly, NWF considers itself above all a research center. In this function, it focuses on education, training, and awareness-raising of feminist and human right issues. This entails a number of projects specifically: holding weekly seminars and roundtable discussions for the public, conducting training sessions for smaller Egyptian NGOs, accumulating resources on maintaining a diverse library. I initially learned about NWF through their reputation as a vocal and energetic group, an organization that used the controversial language of human rights and feminism. NWF was also prominently featured in anthropologist Nadje Al-Ali's outlining of the Egyptian women's movement. In her introduction, Al-Ali mentions a unique feature of NWF and

her relationship with the women there, noting that in her participation there, "feminist theory and activism merged." Al-Ali's role in the organization was similar to my own, as she presented seminars on gender in social science at the organization, becoming an interlocutor at the organization, an active intellectual participant, rather than simply observing NWF from a scholarly perspective (Al-Ali 2000, 13). This facet of Al-Ali's relationship would then become a central premise of my own project.

I was able to meet one of NWF's founders at a women's rights conference, who then extended an invitation to come and visit the center. Soon after that, I learned that a colleague at the American University in Cairo had experience volunteering there, and she offered to put me in touch with their CEDAW coordinator. These introductions were immediately indicative of the centrality of networking and trust in this kind of activism. A personal meeting with a central figure or referral from a friend can help in establishing rapport in initiating a relationship with an NGO.

Founded by a group of feminist professionals in the 1980s, NWF expanded exponentially in the last decade. Officially sanctioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs in 2004, NWF grew from its core group of founders to its current large offices in Mohandisseen supported by full-time professional staff. Initially started by political activist women, often on the left, as a forum to discuss women's issues, NWF has retained this core goal though expanded to include a more diverse range of women. An organization like NWF has specific concerns—the reduction of violence against women, greater access to birth control, the extension of sexual education, etc. In learning about NWF some immediate questions came to mind: What kind of tools are employed in trying to attain these goals? How can their navigation of powerful discourses and

governmental bodies be understood? My background in scholarly critiques of NGO work in human rights and development grounded my awareness of certain problems such organizations could face, as well as possible structural inhibitors to their capacity for long-term substantive change. In speaking with members of NWF, I could examine what human rights and feminism looked like in the context of a feminist NGO in Cairo.

I approached this research with a strong interest in theory and curiosity as to how the vocal women activists in an organization like NWF would answer to scholarly critiques of NGO work. However, this project's specific research questions emerged only after already spending months at NWF. If my preliminary research was located elsewhere, it's likely that this focus on active theory may not have developed. This is not to say that women in other organizations are any less self-reflexive, but in its capacity as a research organization, NWF is particularly direct in its interest in theoretical concerns, pushing my research accordingly.

Methods

In order to explore contestations of power through the multiple contexts and participants NWF provides, I have undertaken the following activities:

- Participation in the day-to-day tasks of the organization's CEDAW sector

- Formal interviews with organization staff and seminar participants

- Transcription and analysis of weekly seminars and community round-tables

- Content analysis of organization reports and publications

Intensive work at NWF began with participation in the day-to-day tasks of the organization's CEDAW sector. Performing this function allowed me both to develop rapport with staff and also experience some of the challenges of activist work firsthand. The tasks I was assigned varied greatly: sifting through potential grant applications online, compiling a listing of sexual education manuals, creating a database of CEDAW Shadow Reports from the MENA region, and accumulating materials used for training Egyptian judges in a human rights framework. My greatest assets in all of these projects were my English fluency and experience with research online.

My supervisor, the organization's CEDAW coordinator, was excited for me to attend her weekly seminars. At these seminars, she would host a feminist public figure, an author, lawyer, or other prominent professional or celebrity, to give a talk and then lead a discussion on a particular issue. Separate from these seminars was then the Young Women's Forum (YWF), a long-running group of young people who would consistently meet throughout the year at NWF or other sites around the city. YWF activities vary, including lectures conducted by the group's leader, typically a professor from Cairo University, movie nights, putting on theatricals, hosting dramatic writing workshops. As I would learn, much of the younger generation of NWF staff was recruited through the YWF. Participants of both sets of seminars were enrolled both from within and outside of Cairo, through networks of friends, and through cultural sites like Zamalek's Culture Wheel.

After establishing myself at the organization, I began conducting formal interviews with staff members and attendees of the Young Women Forum and other seminars, widening the breadth of this project's participants. While I did have a number of standardized interview

questions, I used these structured questions merely as initial tools, used both to establish a rapport and a certain level of comfort in our conversations. My aim was to develop a dialogue rather than conduct an interview, as this intellectual back-and-forth suits the theoretical orientation of my project.

Unfortunately, I was only able to attend and transcribe seminars and YWF in Spring 2010, as after the forum took a break for the summer and Ramadan, its leader quit to get married. Sometime in 2011, they hope to get the forum started again with small activities, like a monthly movie night. Later, I learned that many in the organization held doubts about viability of YWF, with some noting that its best times had past. The CEDAW coordinator also held seminars in Spring 2010, but again after the summer and Ramadan, activities tapered off, this time as a response to diminishing funding. In order to capture a part of the group dynamic the seminars create, I have held small informal focus groups, usually of about 3 or 4 former YWF members.

Participants

As this project is based on day-to-day ethnography, the majority of NWF staff members, volunteers, and seminar attendees have contributed to my project in some way, texturing the daily workings of the organization as a whole. These participants are primarily women, though there are scattered men volunteers and seminar attendees. They range from late teens to their seventies, with two marked generations: the older generation of the organization's founding members and the younger women in their twenties and thirties, most of whom began participating at NWF through the Young Women's Forum at the organization's expansion a decade ago.

As NWF is part of many formal and informal human rights networks, my work at the center has also lead to contact with staff at other local NGOs, like the Egyptian Women and Memory Forum, and transnational networks and technical agencies such as the Euro Mediterranean Human Rights Network and the United Nations Development Program. In my capacity in the organization's CEDAW sector, I have also participated at conferences along with NWF staff, as well as attending meetings and events on their behalf. Staff at these outside organizations have also peripherally participated in this project, as nodes in the networks through which NWF works. As networking is so integral to the function of contemporary feminist organizations, these less direct participants provide a necessary contextualization in understanding work at NWF. Knowledge and experience within these networks also allowed me to direct interviews at NWF in more incisive ways. Subsequently, I could gain more insightful responses and also garner a respect from NWF participants who may be skeptical of my real interest and commitment to women's rights.

While these more indirect participants set the stage for my project, interviews then allowed me to discuss theoretical concerns and navigations in a more straightforward manner. About fifteen of these participants agreed to provide more intensive interviews. I initially conducted interviews with staff I worked most closely with like the CEDAW coordinator and one CEDAW-focused activist founder. I then asked for referrals to other staff who may be interested in sharing in this project, trying to snowball this participation to other spheres of staff. Initially, participants assumed that I would only desire to interview the staff working in positions more outwardly directed towards scholarly feminism, the most vocal and intellectual. While interviews with the organization's founders and figureheads are important, I also wished to hold

discussion with the rank-and-file staff, most frequently the younger women. After spending more time working and participating less formally at the organization, I was able to recruit interviewees from this younger generation. In addition to these staff members, my attendance at the Young Women's Forum and other seminars in Spring 2010 allowed me to meet other young people interested in participating in my project. At these meetings, I introduced myself and my research, and typically after each session, new young women would approach me with interest and a desire to help.

As these interviews grew, I developed deeper relationships with particular project participants, with 4 becoming key informants. I held multiple interviews with these key informants, also conversing with them less formally in my work at the center and in other settings. These four participants reflect the varying characteristics of women at NWF in general. The first, Dr. Amal, is one of the organization's activist founders. A physician by profession, she later obtained a women's studies graduate degree in the United States. Other project participants referred to Dr. Amal as the organization's expert on CEDAW issues and a rights-based approach in general. Another key informant, Samira, works closely on CEDAW projects and was my immediate supervisor in my capacity as volunteer. Samira is of the younger generation of NWF and is one of the few staff members who lives outside of Cairo, commuting hours each day to the organization's Mohandiseen office. This project's other two central figures are not currently NWF staff themselves. The first, Hend, is a young teacher and artist who first discovered NWF through Samira's CEDAW seminars. She now volunteers as NWF in addition to participating in their seminars and events. The final key informant, Marwa, is another volunteer and a younger

member of NWF's board. She currently works in the human rights field and has worked as a researcher for NWF in the past.

I employ pseudonyms for all of this project's participants except for its public figures, like Dr. Amal and its other activist founders, as these individuals are easily identifiable by their positions and backgrounds. In order to keep other participants' identities anonymous, I will at times deconstruct figures into multiple characters. I employ this technique in order to keep personal stories dissociated from more public identities and keep my informants unidentifiable.

Positionality

While assisting the New Woman Foundation on a project, I went into the United Nations Human Development's Cairo office to speak with two of its managers. As I was acting on NWF's behalf, the UNDP staff I spoke with asked if I were also an activist. Perhaps this question was raised because I did not seem activist to him in the way I spoke and carried myself, possibly my reserve and personality did not mark me as the kind of activist he envisioned. I replied that I was activist in part, but that I was also a scholar working through NWF to study civic participation, an explanation that satisfied him. An anthropologist's position is often complex in our characteristic method of participant-observation. We are often many roles "in part" to our sum role of anthropologist. Understanding the relationship of this multi-faceted perspective to our research is then an equally complex task, a task to which I hope to show feminist methodologies can provide substantial insight.

In her review of feminist research methodologies, Maithree Wickramasinghe points to "the significance of the researcher's subjectivity as an all-encompassing aspect" of a feminist

methodology (2010, 57). A particular body of these feminist methodologies is called stand point

theory, emerging in the 1970s as a reaction to projects that seemed to follow good scientific

procedure but consistently produced sexist results (Harding 2008, 114).In the 1970s and 1980s,

scientific knowledge itself became the object of critique as its privileged objective status came

under debate, with feminist stand point theory consistent with this shift. The "stand points" the

theory refers to are those of both the researcher and the researched, calling for, among other

things, the inclusion of the researcher's perspective into her own scholarly analysis. The

researcher's stand point does not simply describe the limitations of her access to objective

knowledge. Instead, this position is embedded in the entire research process, from the questions

the researcher poses, the methods she selects to address these questions, and the conclusions she

draws. A focus on a researcher's positionality does not necessitate an epistemological alliance

with an extreme form of relativism, as such a polarity between relativism and absolutism is both

needless and misguided. Taking account of one's own perspective as researcher can lead to

better work, giving "validity, methodological rigour, and credibility to a research study"

(Wickramasinghe 2010, 55).

Analyzing a researcher's perspective and relationship with her work is by no means a

straightforward task. The researcher is not a unitary subject, but instead a "fragmented self"

made up of a "complex web of interests, identification, and impositions that are related to

another" (Wickramasinghe 2010, 146). Reflecting upon my own positionality has been integral

in the development of this project's research questions and my relationship with my subjects.

Anthropology has used a number of terms to describe its "people," from "informants," to

"respondents," and now commonly to "interlocutors". These different characterizations reflect a

shift in how anthropologists understand their work—from harvesting data, to creating knowledge in a co-production between the researcher and the researched. The term interlocutor aptly describes the participants in my project, as I came to this study through my own ambivalence towards NGO work. I hoped the insights of the many perspectives of the participants of an organization like New Woman Foundation would help me sift through the hopefulness and skepticism intertwined in civil society's critiques: uncertainties about its connection with the state and international interests and its dominant discourses of human rights and feminism. The participants of NWF are not only activists, feminists, or any other one kind of subject. They reflect a variety of perspectives on and experiences with this massive and vague notion of civil society. As NWF directly takes on and discusses theoretical concerns, it is an especially appropriate setting to explore the different ways women reflect on the intellectual questions that emerge through civic work.

Another equally compelling focus of stand point theory is its push towards, in Harding's term, "science from below"(2008). This entails grounding one's work in women's lives themselves. Instead of beginning from grand theories and then fitting women's experiences into these theories, standpoint theory calls us to "study up" from women's day-to-day lives. This model does not mean that a researcher should try and come into a project theory-free, as that is both impossible and undesirable. A researcher's theoretical background is a key part of her particular positionality. Theory informs a researcher's guiding questions and methods, and is inextricably tied to every step in the research process. Stand point theory can differentiate between "grand" theoretical models that leave no room for social complexity and the theory in intellectual concerns that are at the core of any research project. Theory as "static

conceptualizations of social reality… never capture the complex dialectics shaped by living people," and as such, tend to flatten social life (Schrijvers 1993: 59) In this strict and flattening form, theory can become off-putting and intimidating, as reflected in one Sri Lankan anthropologist's interview with her academic colleague in women's studies and the colleague's confession that questions about theory left her anxious, "sweating a little" from their difficulty (Wickramasinghe 2010). In my view, "studying up" entails a certain kind of humility and openness to the experiences and opinions of a project's interlocutors. As this project centers on analyzing civic participants' own analytic frameworks, my methods on no level are theory-free. Theory is integral in fleshing out and understanding my interlocutor's intellectual perspectives. Though theory can become misleading in its grand empirical form, this project looks for ways in which theories are embodied.

Another advantage of standpoint theory or "studying up" is that in its openness and deliberate avoidance of overarching theoretical narratives, it better suits what John Law characterizes the "mess" of the social world. Law poses the question, does a rigidly ordered methodological framework inherently distort "messy" social life? (2004). This argument makes a valuable point, as when scholars take part in the production of knowledge of the social world, they impose some kind of order upon social space. Law suggests the format of social science may be too inherently discordant from social life to ever accurately describe it. While Law's position takes an infinitely chaotic social world as its foundational assumption, his argument also offers considerations to less radical epistemological views. The complexity of the social world, its contradictory nature, means the tools social theory provides for social analysis are fundamentally limited. When ordering the social world, the wide range of ways to arrange and

pattern phenomena leaves room for widely varying interpretations and perspectives. Disconcerting for a discipline that in part considers itself a science, anthropology has no sure or certain theoretical footing to stand on. "Studying up," at least takes these limitations into consideration, conscientiously avoiding the distortions inherent in social science, attempting to bring social experience closer to attempts of scholarly analysis.

In moving towards a greater engagement with her interlocutors, an anthropologist faces the conundrum of bias. To try and act as detached and unbiased observer is itself an inherently flawed position, contradictory to anthropology's nature as a fundamentally social discipline. An anthropologist can try to understand to analyze her own positionality, but this reflection then does not remove herself from her work. The complex question of bias in part owes itself to anthropology's location between the sciences and humanities. Anthropology is in some ways scientific, in its rigorous and meticulous methods, for example. Bias can be addressed more simply here, as interviews must be transcribed accurately and questionnaires created thoughtfully. Thorough research methods are important to the quality of research. Still, subjectivity creeps unavoidably in, and not necessarily should be avoided. There is no easy boundary between what should be more or less objective or subjective in anthropological research. This places the burden of judgment onto the anthropologist herself, as in each situation, an anthropologist must determine a project's best path.

Conceptualizing Power: Theoretical Models through NWF

The theoretical concepts I employ here serve a dual function in this project. I first draw upon this framework to demonstrate the similarities between social theory and women's own reflections on their work. I also employ these concepts to then analyze and locate patterns among

such emergent theoretical perspectives. I deal primarily with three social theorists in this task, Bourdieu, Turner, and Foucault, and, as I will demonstrate, these thinkers' conceptual models parallel debates and experiences of NWF participants. Such models can also then be reflected back upon these discussions to further tease out and clarify the emergent tensions and ambivalences women experience in this field.

Bourdieu's Fields of Power and Capital

Bourdieu locates power as a field of forces within a multi-valent social world, forces which are comprised of both "intrinsic properties" and "relational properties." Intrinsic properties refer to the effective set of possibilities a person is dealt, while relational properties refer to the ways in which this context shifts through a person's navigation and choices. Power is therefore dynamic and multilateral, but a social space still entails "a set of objective power relations that impose themselves on all who enter the field and that are irreducible to the intentions of the individual agents or even to the direct interactions among the agents" (Bourdieu 1985, 724). In entering a particular social field, an individual is not entirely free, as her position is in part determined by the structures of power already at play. Ultimately these structures have been constructed by individuals and individuals will continue to reinforce, reshape, or breakdown a system, but the tools available to them have always been in some way pre-determined. Application of this model to a particular context like civic activism means sifting through the fixed and the fluid, though there will be no final designation of power's intrinsic or relational constituents. Bourdieu's division of power into these two components of course doesn't necessitate a clear delineation and subsequent location of either. In fact, Bourdieu's theory of power can be most fruitful if it is applied in layers, breaking down and digging deeper

into the mutually constitutive elements of the intrinsic and the relational. To try and take on either the intrinsic or the relational constituents of power on their own can in fact be misleading.

A good example of the problem of picking out and locating an intrinsic component of power can be found in the role of foreign funding in Egyptian NGOs. Foreign funding is not simply a monolith with fixed sources and agendas. Interestingly enough, the perception of foreign aid as such a monolith has greatly shaped its surrounding debates. One founder of a long-standing Cairene NGO recounted to me previous debates in which to accept any kind of foreign aid was considered a scandal, making an organization into an agent of a foreign state. She noted that these debates have since cooled down, making room for the nuance of what exactly foreign funding entails. Perception of something like "foreign funding" as a reified entity, as an exclusive representative of Bourdieu's intrinsic component of power, shaped how organizations receiving monies from abroad were received. In the case of this organization, each potential source of funding is now evaluated by a committee and consensus determines whether or not the source will be considered. This evaluation is based on the politics and morality of such funds, as a recent discussion centered on funds from a government that had at a time backed the Iraqi war, but has since withdrawn its support and apologized for its initial position. A potential sponsor's positions on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel are particularly important. Currently, USAID and World Bank funds are uniformly excluded. This strategy is not perfect, as USAID and the World Bank are such substantial and ubiquitous donors in the region that the monies may still yet reach other sources indirectly. Still, organizations are conscientious of the implications and agendas of their funders and navigate these dangers accordingly. This example goes to show that within every apparently "intrinsic" component of power, it can again be deconstructed to discover its

relational elements. A particular structure of power does exert influence—but this influence is dialectical and filtered through power's relational manifestation. Analyses of these structures, be it the UN system, or funding availabilities, or national civil society regulations, must be careful not to be too blunt.

To further break down and analyze these fields of power, Bourdieu also employs the metaphor of the market to examine the interchange of capital that occurs in the "situated encounters" of variously positioned actors (1991). Capital here is not limited to economic resources and is rather extended and deconstructed into many sources of power including cultural, symbolic, social, as well as economic capital. These many types of capital point to the connections among economic opportunities, cultural and linguistic competencies, and social positioning. The metaphor of the market also allows for an examination of the processes of exchange that comprise relational power. Bourdieu analyzes the social world spatially, and within a given space, each actor stands at a certain set of coordinates that reflects her positioning among these different types of capital (1985).

Connections between forms of capital are obvious to those involved in NGO work, and many NGO participants express frustration and skepticism regarding such linkages. One of the most immediate discussions of such capital exchange and its potential injustices emerges in questions of NGO funding. To return to the previous example of NWF funding policy, the process of obtaining and maintaining grant assistance requires the navigation of many forms of capital. Two NWF staff members are primarily responsible for seeking out and applying for funding opportunities. One of these staff members points to an initial boundary set on this search, as NWF's orientation towards human rights and women's rights lends itself towards

foreign sources of funding rather than domestic. NWF has never received any type of local grants, and this staff member explains this due to the fact that Egyptian funders, Banque Misr for example, are typically oriented towards social development and rarely include a gender focus. A focus on human rights and women's rights can be a potential form of symbolic capital, but this is dependent upon context, as foreign and Egyptian funders are looking for different things. As NWF is comprised of many units working on different projects, when they do apply for funding, it is usually project-specific. Organization leaders decided it may be most effective then for each unit to compose a basic funding application for their specific project, as each unit is the most knowledgeable on their particular topic. This process, however, did not run as smoothly as planned, and many of the resultant proposals were disappointing. Each unit, while experts on their respective project, did not necessarily possess the needed skill level in English or writing skills to compose an effective grant application. Cultural capital is in this way tightly linked to economic capital, as potential funding dollars depend upon the skill with which NWF can compose a grant application.

The types of capital exchange structuring NGO work are visible to both scholars and those working in the field. While explicating this system is no new claim, I hope to use these discussions to further explore the tensions between capital and moral conviction, as women's rights exists as a field for "those who believe" yet still, this commitment alone is not enough. One former NWF participant who went on to establish her own feminist and human rights NGO experienced such tensions markedly. She regretted not possessing the social capital in order to gain the "trust" of large funding organizations, although she was advised such capital can be obtained by hiring a well-known consultant to attach as a famous name to the project. She is

unsure if this is a maneuver she should undertake, and it strikes her as ethically questionable, making NGO work simply a game of capital exchange. I will now move to argue that through these reflections on power, there emerge tensions that can be further explored through Turner's concepts of structure, anti-structure, and their synthesis in *communitas*.

Turner's Structure and Anti-Structure

With NGO functions deeply intertwined with powerful institutions, many women activists question their potential for transformative change. As activists and scholars have both noted, the demands of these institutions often seep into the structure of the NGO itself, potentially making an organization overly bureaucratic and hierarchical (Campbell and Teghtsoonian 2010; Incite! Women of Color Against Violence 2007). In Cairo, debates linger on the issue of professionalization in the field, with the critique being that such professionalization detaches an NGO from its grassroots base. NWF itself began as a discussion group among feminist professional women, and in the past decade, has expanded exponentially through employing a professional staff. While in itself this professionalization is not undesirable, the consequences of this shift potentially detaches NGO work further from the social movement in which it originated. In Cairo, an activist stressed to me the importance of making women's rights into a social movement, connecting with the poor and middle-class. Islah Jad concurs and regrets this disconnect in the "NGO-ization" of the women's movement in Palestine. She first distinguishes NGOs from social movements, defining social movements as originating among a large grassroots base, in contrast to NGOs potentially directing social agendas from the top-down, drawing on the power and connections of elite NGO professionals. She concludes that "in order to effect a comprehensive, sustainable development and democratization, a different form

of organization is needed with a different, locally grounded vision, and a more sustainable power base for social change"(Jad 2007, 188).

For some, this skepticism for NGO work has lead activists to attempts to step outside of structure and claim spaces of their own. Amara Perez suggests that activist organizations may be more efficient if they are unstructured and ephemeral, working through a social movement, then subsiding and cooling with the movement. One of the founders of the American Indian Movement, Madonna Thunder Hawk similarly notes, "once you get too structured, your whole scope changes from activism to maintaining an organization and getting paid"(2007, 104-105). One participant of NWF's seminars who later established her own NGO recognizes both the advantages and disadvantages of professionalizion. Right now, her organization is entirely voluntary, but this is out of necessity rather than choice, as so far she has been unable to obtain significant funding. While she says ideally an organization could remain voluntary, practically speaking, this is very difficult to maintain and support. Still, she expresses disdain when recounting her experience with one top official at a transnational funding agency who told her he no longer "believes" in women's rights, that his position had for him simply became "just a job." She notes this complacency betrays those who do work with passion, that the field of women's rights should be "left to those who do believe."

A marked ambivalence emerges in these debates over professionalization, of the relationship between women's rights as a career path and as a social movement. This tension is heightened by deep personal commitment women ascribe to this work, the intellectual and spiritual passion considered necessary to be successful in a transformative way. In this ambivalence, Victor Turner's discussion of structure and anti-structure can be helpful. Turner

insists on the mutually constitutive nature of a concept and its apparent opposite. He discusses the mutual "play of forces" that defines strength and weakness, also making room for the constructive potential of power. In his fieldwork in Tanzania, he notes that opposing principles "(reinstitute) against one another in the transcendent, conscious, recognizant unity of Ndembu society" (1969, 84). Likewise, the presence of power and strict hierarchy allows for the possibility of the experience of its opposite. Turner's concept of *communitas* speaks to a desire to throw off the constraints of power, to reverse social hierarchies and experience social unity. The key to *communitas*, however, is that it is only thinkable because of the presence of its opposite, power. In fact, because of *communitas*' close link to power, it is necessarily ephemeral, and soon falls back under the mantle of power. An experience of *communitas* cannot be maintained forever, because power, which makes *communitas* possible, simultaneously makes it fleeting. Turner charts the emergence and decline of *communitas* in spiritual movements around the world. Participation in an NGO can likewise aspire to this experience, as many women ascribe deep personal meaning to this work and its associated discourses of feminism and human rights. Social unity is aspired to through a vision of equality between men and women and among the networks of women who work for such equality. Whether or not this equality is achieved, however, is not a simple question, as this period of liminality is always linked back to structure. In practice, women reflect on these ambiguities and tensions, articulating a complex relationship between their desires for equality and the flaws of the NGO paradigm.

Turner's structure and anti-structure, hierarchy and *communitas*, make way for further linkage between power and agency, as the meaning of one concept is contingent upon the presence of its opposite. An agent is dialectically related to the structures of power that shape her

imagination of possibility and change. Again, the exact application of this theory is what is up for debate in contention in civic society. Do powerful institutions like the United Nations provide civic activists the tools to reform international justice, or do they simply reinforce oppressive structures by restricting systemic change? Turner provides a counter-argument to Audre Lorde's famous critique of attempting to "dismantle the master's house using the master's tools" by stating that a knowledge of the blueprints of this master's house is indeed to most effective way to de-construct its power (1984). As one critic of the United Nation's push towards women's equality notes, "The vision and values of women's groups and organisations across the world have been translated into a series of technical goals, to be implemented mainly by the very actors and institutions that have blocked their realisation in the past"(Kabeer 2005, 22). What are the implications of civil society's attempt towards equality and unity, if within Turner's argument, *communitas* necessarily falls back into the structure from which it emerged? I hope to explore such questions through the debates emergent among civic participants themselves.

Foucault's Power as Practice

In this project I draw upon Foucault in two primary ways: his analysis of power as not an object, but as relational and processual, and his opening up of power to creative potential. I hope to employ and synthesize these two modalities of power to further explicate women's theoretical understandings of their work and the ambivalences therein. As I will argue, Foucault is particularly insightful in analyzing such ambivalences, as his connection of power with creativity offers a tool to examine the emergent tensions with simultaneous experiences of apparent contradictions. The partnering of such contradictions, of conviction and skepticism, passion and disappointment, emerges again and again among this project's interlocutors as a key problematic.

Foucault's notions of power are in some ways very similar to that of Bourdieu, as he recognizes power's fixed and relational components. Foucault, however, stresses power not as a static object, but as embodied practice. He notes that power is always "exercised by some on others… even though, of course, it is inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures"(1982, 340). He explicates power in that "certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions," with the creation and manipulation of signs being a primary exertion of this power (1982, 343, 337). This modality emphasizing process and relationships is important to my project in two ways. First, it is consistent with my key premise that theory itself has an active social existence, embodied through the philosophies and debates of social actors. Also, this fluidity of power corresponds to the active role I ascribe to the woman civic participant herself, her continuous navigation, reflection, and re-framing of her work.

In Foucault's earlier works, he focuses on this symbolic power of science as a particular rationality in shaping knowledge, delineating normal and non-normal, the sane and the mad (1965). In the case of civil society, there is never just one imagination of the normal. Rather, this conception of normal is tied back to a particular valence of power. Different settings dominated by particular powerful regimes produce different determinations of the normal.

In the context of women's rights in international law and multi-lateral agencies, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is the norm. NWF likewise works to support and implement CEDAW's principles. In the vein of other universalist discourses, CEDAW calls for complete equality between men and women, both formally through the law and substantively through economic and social reform (Merry 2006a). Even in its apparently most explicit requests, however, interpretation of CEDAW is still up for

debate. Most states in MENA hold some kind of reservation against CEDAW, typically on the issue of personal status laws. In the case of inheritance and nationality, some states hold that different, Sharia based statuses for men and women in fact benefit women more than CEDAW's proposed equality (AWID 2009). Outside of law, interpretations vary even further, with certain "hybrid" cases of international human rights discourse merging with local concerns and cultural paradigms converging into unique community projects. Although such variations do exist, they still must include some of CEDAW core premises of "individualism, autonomy, choice, bodily integrity, and equality—ideas embedded in the legal documents that constitute human rights law" (Merry 2006b, 49). Indeed many of the critiques of human rights are likewise relevant to CEDAW, as David Kennedy disparages human rights as dominating the "field of emancipatory possibility" and Talal Asad unveils its misleading political naiveté (2002; 2003). CEDAW, linked with human rights, has become normative in debates over women's rights. At times, CEDAW is rejected or viewed skeptically, with its roots embedded in an imbalanced system of international law, tilted deeply in favor of the Global North. Its prime position does not go unchallenged, as even in mainstream conferences in Cairo arguments commonly emerge over the role and value of CEDAW in framing civic work.

Foucault's decentralization of power makes room for his description of governmentality, the diffusion of the state's means of control into the logic of the everyday, into apparently benign systems of organization and bureaucracy. Scholars have traced the more subtle presence of these means of control to many of the structures that set the stage for NGO work. Specifically, a lens of governmentality can be employed to analyze civil society's embedded relationship with the state, a system with its own set of limitations and inherent injustices. Wendy Brown explores the

pairing of radical feminist activism and the state system, asking "If the institutions, discourses, and practices of the state are as inextricably, however differently, bound up with the prerogatives of manhood in a male-dominant society…what are the implications for a feminist state?"(1992, 8) Along the same lines as this argument are numerous critiques of human rights and feminist organizations' focus towards changing laws, with Hilary Charlesworth posing the question, "Do legal rights really offer anything to women?" (Cook 1993, 232)

Such a model of power can be applied to analyze other actors in the NGO arena as well. Michael Merlingen provides an account of the function of International Governmental Organizations (IGOs) through a framework of governmentality, as such organizations exert influence "not by using force but by inciting, inducing, seducing, making easier or more difficult, more probable or less"(2003, 376). Merlingen uses a relatively obscure and apparently power-less IGO as his case study in order to explicate the more subtle processes of power at work in such settings. In the case of a more prominent IGO like the UN, power operates in more overt ways in addition to the "inciting, inducing, (and) seducing" that Merlingen refers to. The UN sets agendas and controls funds that in turn shape NGO work in a very direct way, in a type of governance that structures both activist work and state policy. The activities of IGOs like the UN set funding opportunities for NGOs, as well as establish guidelines for reporting on and evaluating their work. At the same time, IGO power is felt through the actions of the state. For example, NWF activists cite UN pressure as the primary reason reforms in Egyptian law in favor of women's rights are pushed through at the time of CEDAW committee meetings. Though they admit such reforms may be a kind of token to avoid having to address more pressing human rights issues, still, such changes provide activists with another tool to press their agendas further.

In a Foucaultdian frame, these overt and material forms of power are not as effective as the more quiet cultivation of the normal. To apply the framework of governmentality to its fullest extent in NGO work, I have argued for the necessity of looking at power's many manifestations, in the more overt shaping of economic and political agendas as well as the more subjective inculcations of knowledge and the normal. Combining this discussion of governmentality with more of Foucault's later work on the self and agency provides further nuance to power's function. After first drawing upon Foucault to explicate the convoluted path and diffusion of power in civic work, power's repressive character is then re-imagined into a potentially creative force of society. Moving away from the question, "How could we seek to be slaves?," he asks, "If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?"(1982, 342; 1999, 120) This is a provocative question as power reflexively cultivates the very desire it requires. Foucault explores this question in his analysis of the modern state functioning as both an "individualizing" and "totalizing" project (1982). Otherwise put, the modern democratic state is premised on the idea that it is comprised of the individual masses, rather than above them. In this way, the modern state functions "inside" the individual and therefore requires instruments of power that are likewise inside the individual. Foucault traces this development rising from Christian pastoralism, as while cultivating the salvation of the individual is the pastor's ultimate goal, the faith also becomes a Church, a structured system of power. Still, people do obey these structures of power, getting something other than repression, other than just "No" from them. Foucault does not mean to say that power does not employ a certain set of instruments in cultivating its obedience, as in fact these instruments reach beyond brute force, law, and economic threat. Power, however, is not simply repression; power cultivates desire.

As modern power is located inside the individual, likewise oriented are its instruments of implementation. Such modern systems' instruments of power lie in their interest in individual welfare and salvation. In this way, they are positioned towards the "private;" towards the inner life of morality and thought. Though the democratic state is so posited in the division between public and private, its very existence blurs these divisions, as its public power rests on private belief. "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse"(1999, 120). In this way, power and desire are two sides of the same coin; as along with power's repressive component, its creative function must also be acknowledged and explored. As an analytic framework, this relationship is very tricky to unfold; if it is applied too loosely, repression and creativity can falsely appear interchangeable.

Both in my preliminary research and review of other anthropological texts, this interplay between restriction and creativity in civic work emerges. In women's organizations in Kazakhstan, for example, anthropologists find that although new strict processes of measuring aid effectiveness encourage overly bureaucratic and managerial NGO structures, they also give women a new path to critique and transform NGO work as a whole. In this case, researchers specifically noted the women's admirable enthusiasm (Campbell and Teghtsoonian 2010). In another dimension of civic participation, one seminar participant at NWF draws upon language of human rights to compose poetry and prose. Though human rights is a complex and politically-loaded language to draw upon in Egypt in general, in this context, a woman uses human rights as a creative tool in artistic expression. Civil society and its associated discourses must be

problematized, but within this problematization, there must still remain room to acknowledge the personal appropriations that make NGO work so appealing and powerful to its participants.

This model pairing of power's repressive and creative capacities is insightful in the case of women's civic participation as it can help account for tension in the partnering of apparently contradictory states. This tension speaks to the ambivalences experienced in NGO work, as the same systems women use as tools for change simultaneously impose certain restrictions. A framework of governmentality implicates power's ubiquitous presence, but do such critiques serve only to undermine the efficacy of NGO work? In allowing for power's creative potential, this question is opened up to a more complex answer. Returning to examples of governmentality discussed earlier, to Brown's critique of the state and feminist activism and Merlingen's analysis of the function of IGOs, some productive component of power can be gleaned. First, while Brown concludes that feminist activists are both simultaneous subjects and objects of state power, ultimately the state is not "monolithic but deconstructible… something feminists may be able to exploit and subvert if we comprehend in order to strategically outmaneuver its contemporary ruses"(1992, 31). Likewise in an IGO like the UN, debates may push UN activity in new ways that may in some way shift the institution itself. For example, the growing awareness of the importance of UN reporting in the production of knowledge in the Arab world lead to the 2005 Arab Human Development Report on Women being drafted in a very unique way. The report's authors came from a range of disciplines, including some scholars and activists authors typically skeptical of the UN system itself (Lila Abu-Lughod, Adely, and Hasso 2009).

Although still much criticism surrounds this document, Palestinian scholar Islah Jad notes the new "vital points" the report addresses (2007). Even though an organization like the UN is

embedded in a state system that may itself be inherently unjust, through this new report, "it portrays the state as a space for conflict and contestation, not as a solid, unitary unit representing a hegemonic, uncontested power"(Jad 2009, 62). Sites of power like the state or the UN are not fixed spheres, as activists produce change by working to shift the boundaries of such systems.

In a model of governmentality, power permeates all facets of life. At the same time, power creates meaning and cultivates desire, delineating tools and establishing boundaries that make activism and social change possible. Li provides an insightful case study in her examination of development organizations in Indonesia, as she details the way in the development industry parallels models of control initiated by Dutch colonialists and later co-opted by the Suharto regime (2007). Still, activists working within this framework are not naïve actors, as "they establish sovereign spaces against government policies; they pursue development funding in full knowledge of flaws in the funding structures, and, perhaps most powerfully, they continue to sustain themselves against very great odds"(de Leeuw 2009, 398). NWF activists act in a similar manner in navigating the problems of the NGO system, aware of the limitations of such work while simultaneously pushing against them. By connecting the model of governmentality with power's productive potential, these pairings of repression and creativity do not appear as just a sad irony undermining work for change. Instead, it speaks to the necessary tension and ambivalence emergent in a social world where power is ubiquitous, though difficult to locate. At an organization like NWF, women work to alter structures of power they find repressive, yet, as their frustrations reveal, new problems continuously arise. Again, I do not argue that this makes their work meaningless, but on the contrary, that inconsistency and doubt are inherent partners to the passion and conviction emergent in working for social change.

As I have outlined, Foucault argues for a focus on practice. To a certain extent, all theory is based off practice. No one would argue directly that women's discourses are disembodied from their actual lives. However, to be actively conscious about grounding discourse in practice requires a certain epistemological reflection. I would tie this epistemological rigor to the same concerns of positionality and humility that I return to numerous times. In the case of this project, the practices on which I focus are the actual theoretical reflections that NWF women make. All theories are tied to practice in some degree, but in taking this a step further and moving closer to the words and actions of women themselves, we are in a better position to take women's everyday lives as our starting point.

Locating Agency

As I have argued for the nuancing of the structures that inform civic work, I hope to further examine how exactly a woman civic participant navigates these fields of power. As such, the concept of agency is also integral to this project's inquiry, drawing upon Michel Foucault and Judith Butler as its primary interlocutors. I will ground this exploration specifically through Foucault's tool of the technologies of the self. This framework juxtaposes two metaphors of cognitive activity and production: knowing oneself and taking care of oneself. My research so far has suggested that through NWF seminars and other work, women come to know themselves in different ways and develop this new identity. Sharene Hafez stresses the applicability of the "self-care" metaphor in her work in another NGO arena, among women leaders in Cairo's mosque movement. Foucault posits greater perfection or purity of the self as the aims of this care, and Hafez cites the motivation of Islamic women activists as their goal of becoming closer to God (Foucault 1988; Hafez 2003). Saba Mahmood similarly uses the term "docile agents" to

describe such individuals whose agency lies in their quiet, but concerted and diligent, cultivation of the self (Saba Mahmood 2001). Here, Mahmood positions agency not through resistance, but instead through embracing certain cultural norms and meticulously submitting to their ideals. I will argue that this phenomenon is not exclusive to religious identity, though in the case of NWF, it is certainly not such a "quiet" agency that is always being developed. Judith Butler describes a paradox implicit in this bisection of resistance and oppression through what she terms "subjectivation." Drawing on Foucault's earlier work, Butler notes that the subject is emergent through resistance, but that resistance can only be expressed pending the existence of larger oppressive structures (Butler 1997a). Whether the oppression comes from the Egyptian state or a neoliberal economic system, activism in part gains its meaning through this push against power. Still, this push does not capture the full nuance of civic participation, as the metaphor of "self-care" also serves to understand these women's motivations and philosophies. It would also be problematic to frame such creativity as simply a manifestation of resistance made palpable against oppression, as again, the role of such women's imaginations and desires give meaning to such expressions.

While I doubt any of the women I work with would describe themselves as docile, I will show that cultivation of the self is still an important part of women's civic participation. One NWF seminar participant attends these sessions and other cultural events around the city mainly because of her intellectual and creative interest in feminism, though she does not work in development or women's rights herself. Even among those who would describe themselves as activists, their work towards social change is linked to their own personal goals and fulfillment. Through the relationships I have developed with key interlocuters, I hope to push further into the

personal connections, the satisfactions and the frustrations, that women experience through civic work.

Just as power is not definitively located, agency is likewise complex. Agency is not a state of being; it is emergent in specific contexts, inextricably tied to power, but resistance or submission alone should not be fetishized as agency's source. As my preliminary research has shown, women activists are frequently put in the position to defend their agency—to maintain cultural authenticity and refute claims of being Westernized or agents of a foreign state. Such questions of agency are integral in the practical debates in civil society itself. At the same time, women use civic participation as a way to develop and express deeply held moral and intellectual values. Even if their potential to transform society may be doubted, this form of self-cultivating agency should not be discounted.

Locating Women's Activism within Debates of Power

Critiquing Civil Society

Civil society is a concept that I employ and simultaneously problematize. Any term will carry limitations that are important to understand. Despite its critiques and exhausting polemics, I still believe it is a helpful analytic category. First, "civil society" again avoids generalizing and labeling work as activism, development, charity, etc. Though NWF is publically perceived as an activist organization, this term does not necessarily characterize all of its various women participants. Continuing to use civil society also allows this project to break down its monolithic identity, moving towards an examination of its embodiment through its participants. It is not the term civil society itself that is a problem, rather it is the extreme positions that can emerge in misguided debates about its true nature.

In exploring the specific case of female civic participants, scholarly discussion and critique of civil society and development projects in the global south voice unique tensions. Civil society is a widely debated concept among scholars of the Middle East; some describe civic activism as an indication of increasing democratization and an abrogation of authoritarianism, while others critique its existence and relevance in the Middle East entirely (Putnam 1993; Al-Sayyid 1993). When civil society is employed, its boundaries are vague, referring to any organization that is not run directly by the state. In practice, however, civil society discourse tends to focus specifically on grassroots activism possessing varying ties to the state and other governmental agents (Ferguson and Gupta 2005). In the Middle East in particular, a range of acronyms are employed to reflect the multitude of affiliations civic organizations hold: government organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGO), bank organized NGOs (BONGO) international NGOs (INGOs), community-based organizations (CBO), and private voluntary organizations (PVO) (Carapico 2000). Even after confronting civil society's elusive boundaries, its primary discourse is also problematic. Krista Masonis El-Gawhary disparages regional, Western, and international officials for "touting (civil society) as a cure for almost every malady afflicting developing societiespositEl-Gawhary 2000, 38). Other scholars assume a more ambivalent position as civil society in Egypt can effect both democratic and nondemocratic results, as many organizations can hold illiberal and radical values (Berman 2003). In practice, I will argue that such simplistic subjects rarely emerge. In the case of NWF, for example, women are encouraged to enter the "public sphere," to learn to critically engage and analyze, yet at the same time the organization stands against the neoliberal economic paradigm that developmental models of democracy and civil society espouse.

Maha Abdel-Rahman further problematizes the idealistic space of civil society through its much adulated function as epitomized by its "quintessence," the NGO. She notes that such organizations can simply recreate structures of power that have created and maintain inequity. She points to civil society as, "this idealized space where the weak are supposed to be fighting their battles for freedom and justice… hijacked by segments of the (petite) bourgeoisie who have found a niche in the growing sector of NGOspositAbdel-Rahman 2002, 23). Invocations of freedom and other ideals are an important source for analyses, as they locate a transcendental sphere of civil society that is potentially problematic. Galal Amin offers a critique sympathetic to Abdel-Rahman, in which he expresses skepticism in the paradigm of civil society that assumes continuous, historical progress towards an improved society. In this discussion, he remains critical of the apparently benign idealism that underlies this assumption (2006). Numerous similar critiques have been leveled against specific aspects of this paradigm, particularly human rights and development. Such critiques argue that this paradigm de-politicizes global injustices, and acts as a distracter from systemic economic inequality (Escobar 1995; Asad 2003; Ferguson 1990). From another angle of critique, human rights also hegemonically "occupies the field of emancipatory possibilitypositKennedy 2002).

Activist civil society also comes under critique for its pace and personality, commonly perceived to be fast and aggressive. Upon beginning this project, I intended to focus my research on women activists. When I began preliminary research, I came to realize that activist itself is a contested and problematic term. Explaining my activist focus to one informant, he responded that I would then be based primarily in human rights NGOs. Women working in various sectors of NGOs categorize the temporality of their work in different ways. Activism does not mean that

particular women work harder or are more deeply committed to their cause, or any more "active" in this sense. With this definition problematized and the scope of my research further defined, I could not rely on the term activist to describe the range of women who staff or otherwise participate in NWF. I therefore utilize multiple terms to categorize these women, with civic participant being the most general. I employ this term in order to refer to the organization's constituent women most broadly, avoiding grouping participants' conceptualization of their work and identities prematurely.

Again, many women who work at an organization like NWF express discomfort with this label. Asef Bayat similarly addresses pace in his examination of the strategies of informal people which are generally excluded from civil society discourse. In examining informal settlements in Egypt, Iran, Peru, and others, he finds that communities estranged from political means to power will mobilize in a myriad of ways in order to survive. This typically does not entail political cries for rights or entitlements, but rather exists at the more quiet level of everyday struggle. Civil society discourse, however, leaves out these daily strategies of survival. Bayat notes that, "precisely because of this largely silent and free-form mobilisation, the current focus on the notion of 'civil' society tends to belittle or totally ignore the vast arrays of often uninstitutionalised and hybrid social activities which have dominated urban policies in many developing countries" (Bayat 1997, 55). He also notes that because of their long-term sustainability, these politically quiet movements can more effectively improve living conditions, as opposed to a revolution's short burst of energy and upheaval (Bayat 1998).

In this project, I engage these critiques with anthropological theories of power and agency through my ethnography among women activists. As I have discussed, activists

themselves are active interlocutors in these discussions of power. I hope to engage anthropological models with critiques of civil society through their ultimate embodiment in women's performance of civic activism itself. As these critiques detail, any notions of empowerment or development or rights risk diminishing the importance of the wider economic and political structures that contextualize such discourse. It is easy for such well-meaning concepts to become mere tokens replacing any effective change. At the same time, the utilization of this terminology does not necessarily entail an activist maintaining and reproducing such a simplistic analysis. As an exploration of anthropological models of power, structure and agency are tied in complex ways. By engaging debates of power in women's civic activism directly, I hope to further explore this interconnection, engaging theoretical models through ethnographic research.

Transnational Networking

"Networking" is on the lips of nearly every activist I have spoken with, understood as a necessary component of achieving women's rights. Whether it is a domestic network connecting Egyptian NGOs, or a regional network linking groups in the MENA region or further abroad, networking is considered an integral function for women's organizations. While some kind of networking among women's groups has always existed, Kent and Sikkik argue that only recently can these networks truly be called transnational (1999). Linkages between organizations in the global north and south have increased substantially in the past few decades, in part due to the growing with the frequency of international conferences and accords that allow for the meeting and communication between groups around the world. Moghadam refers specifically to the Nairobi conference of 1985 as the watershed for the formation of these transnational groups,

attributing this growth to technological advances in communication and a growing frustration with the world economy (2000). These network connections tend to arise particularly in situations where channels between local groups and the state are cut, with these groups then employing what Kent and Sikkink refer to as the "boAhmadang effect" to influence the state (1999). Like a boAhmadang, a local organization may gain leverage on the state not by pressuring it directly, but through bypassing the state and appealing to a "transnational advocacy network (TAN)." These transnational advocacy networks then link up local organizations with foundations, media, and governmental institutions abroad. Typically, these networks come together due to some shared issue or morality, a specific topic like female genital mutilation or a wider value paradigm like feminism or human rights. As demonstrated in heated debates at network conferences or concerns over the interests and agendas of foreign parties, these moral perspectives may not always align exactly. While these tensions are unavoidable, my work supports the primacy of some kind of shared moral foundation in any network.

New Woman Foundation is a part of a large number of domestic, regional, and global networks, and itself functions as a network for its participants. NWF partners with Egyptian NGOs to draft CEDAW shadow reports, links up with MENA organizations to push for CEDAW implementation in "Equality Without Reservation," and draws on the support of TANs like the United Nations and European foundations. Just like a transnational NGO is based on shared values, in its function as network, NWF provides a forum for intellectually-like minded women to discuss issues of their shared concern. In this function, NWF links up women of diverse backgrounds and occupations with an interest in a feminist paradigm. Participation in these seminars is itself a result of other networking, as NWF will recruit from other cultural

events, NGOs, and schools. To expand participation, these seminars draw on any kind of network connections its members have. NWF functions as network on another level also, training women from other smaller NGOs in advocating for CEDAW and human rights, thereby connecting local organizations.

While Kent and Sikkik's posit a shared moral foundation as the basis of the transnational advocacy network, my work thus far would support expanding this foundation to other types of networks. One of my informants recalled a conversation with a high-ranking official at a top NGO who no longer "believed" in women's rights. She described this encounter with a feeling of betrayal, and noted that women's rights is "not the field for those who do not believe in it," that he should leave the work to those who do in fact "believe." In such an emotionally and intellectually charged field, shared values are considered key across any network. This sentiment is recalled over and over again by the range of this project's participants. Of course, networking emerges from pragmatic necessities as well, but my project reiterates the importance of this common moral base.

Networking also often diverges from the "boAhmadang" path, as in practice local organizations and networks face a number of different obstacles in achieving their goals. Zippel, for example, describes the process of implementing sexual harassment law in the European Union as more of a "ping pong" effect. Networks would need to approach policy on many different levels, bouncing from level to level to accomplish their aims (Zippel 2004). An advantage of this "ping pong" approach is that it is not exclusively focused on the state, and can therefore more widely approach challenges of a law's implementation and enforcement. Marshall notes another example and its demonstrated advantage of diverging somewhat from the

boAhmadang strategy. In her study of Turkish feminists, she found that activists' continued pressure on the state combined with appeals to foreign networks and the United Nation to ultimately bring about change in the Civil Code. Many activists she encountered noted the importance of Turkish women's direct pressure on the state, as "external pressure on a state can backfire, especially when there are strong local forces such as staunch nationalists who oppose such pressure"(Marshall 2009, 372). Such a navigation of the local and external, the national and the foreign, is likewise necessary in Egyptian networking. At NWF, its activist founders recount similar dilemmas, as partnerships with organizations abroad would mark a group as some kind of foreign agent. Though they note this kind of talk has softened in the past decade, some kind of navigation between "us" and "them" is ever present.

As many of the studies discussed reiterate, much of the connections forming a transnational network are based on some shared moral consciousness. As such, discourses tend to have a "supra-national" form, de-emphasizing national boundaries in favor of a kind of global citizenship and ethical camaraderie. Kent and Sikkink note that women "participate simultaneously in international and domestic politics," drawing upon both as resources when necessary (1999, 90).This "transnational public sphere" is not as straightforward as it may first appear, however, as each participant in this space is not necessarily endowed with the same resources to speak and be heard (Fraser 2009). Anthropologist Ruba Salih, for example, notes the danger of discounting the significance of state boundaries and citizenship in appealing to the transnational sphere, as "parameters based on territoriality and national citizenship reinforce the unequal access to resources that women experience around the globeposit2010).

Women's participation in the contested realm of civil society is then complicated further by the global significance of a modern female subject as an indicator of general social well-being and legitimate government. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG), for instance, identify empowering women as a primary target in alleviating global poverty (UN Department of Public Information 2008). MDGs are a key framework for multilateral organizations and national governments in setting development priorities and budgets. With women's status existing as an important space for political discourse, Foucault's discussion of governmentality provides a framework to engage the structures of power guiding and normalizing women's civic activity. Both the state and international bodies utilize civic welfare to "help to secure their legitimacy, to naturalize their authority, and to represent themselves as superior, and encompassing of, other institutions and centers of power"(Ferguson and Gupta 2005, 5).

Women's increasing participation and networking through NGOs has been described as a "political awakening" for women, providing an alternative to the male-dominated sphere of traditional politics (Moghadam 2000). Whether or not this growing civic participation is indeed an awakening, the growing feminization of the NGO sector is clear. In the past four decades, women have become central to the discussion of NGOs, development, and civil society at large. Shifting development agendas, the drafting of CEDAW, various UN conferences on women, and later the Millennium Development Goals all mark the practical and symbolic significance of women's presence in civic arenas.

With the Percy Amendment in 1973, United States aid agendas first began to explicitly shift towards women's integration into the economy (Razavi and Miller 1995, 3). Beginning in

the 1970s and the United Nations' Decade For Women, a growing concern with male-bias in economic development was addressed through the "integration" of women into development programs that were otherwise unchanged (Koczberski 1998, 396). Referred to as the Women In Development (WID) model, this paradigm follows the logic that development can be attained through the further integration and participation of Third World women in the neoliberal economy. This paradigm was effectively "sold" to foundations and state governments by stressing the widely felt economic advantages of bringing women into development (Razavi and Miller 1995, 6). Results arising from the model, however, were not as advantageous as first promised. The paradigm assumed that previously women in fact were "outside" of the economy, their un-paid contributions to the household and the private sphere were effectively discounted. Likewise, this model overestimates women's homogeneity as subjects and as an economic group (Koczberski 1998). As a response to the stymied results of the Women in Development model, discourse shifted instead to Gender and Development (GAD). Gender and Development seeks to move the category of women out of isolation, to instead focus on gender relationships and women's identity as part of a marriage and family. The real results of this discursive shift, however, have yet to be seen, as in practice a focus "gender" and "gender mainstreaming" again has the potential to side-step transformative agendas. Naila Kabeer stresses the importance of women's participation at the level of policy making and institution building, beyond what she refers to as the "project-trap" which effectively limits the scope of transformative change. In such cases, women's issues are used simply as "an entry point for their work within the community, rather than tackling structural inequalities head-on"(Naila Kabeer 1995, 113).

Such discussions of WID and GAD set the stage for the entry of feminist organizations like NWF. Established in the 1980s following this new focus on women's participation in the

NGO sector, NWF's growth and success was no doubt enhanced by these shifts in funding agendas. Still, NWF's activist founders note that they were working on and discussing these issues well before the UN's Decade For Women and CEDAW. Despite the critiques of these various models of women and development, as Kabeer again notes, each NGO differs in the way it interprets and enacts a "woman-focus" through its actual goals and projects (1995b). This variation of practice reiterates the importance of ethnography and in-depth study of NGO work itself in order to both contextualize and untangle it from such over arching discursive models.

Feminisms in Motion

Feminism is often referred to in its plural form, feminisms, acknowledging the variety of goals and perspectives that still together share key characteristics that maintain feminism's core. In this plurality, feminism is very much an active analytic model, shaped by the projects and goals of feminists on the ground as well as discursively in debates both with feminism's critics and among feminists themselves. When discussing feminism, it is important to look for these social processes, instead of assuming "feminist philosophies in a vacuum"(Pereira 2009: 263). Feminist agendas are shaped by the specific contexts of the location in which they are at work. Different contexts will then hold different demands on feminist activism, as the emergent needs of a community vary. One long-time staff member at NWF agrees, as she recounts the different issues on which each generation of Egyptian feminists have focused. The way in which feminist rhetoric is perceived is likewise contextual, depending both on feminism's history and the contemporary political and economic climate. In this project, I will draw upon certain critiques of feminism that parallel debates among Cairene women as well as briefly unpack feminism's history in MENA and the third world.

Judith Butler offers a piercing foundational critique of feminism as a project, critiquing its assumed commonality between culturally constructed categories of gender and sex (1999). In considering this critique, feminists must reflect on whether or not "woman" is in fact a universally experienced category of identity. While most women active in Cairene NGOs do not read Judith Butler, they are faced with similar critique, whether or not "woman" is a consistent and comparable enough of term to make feminism a cohesive project. A turn towards gender and a more relational analysis of women's identities attempts to address these concerns, yet still, debates about what comprises the core of feminism remain.

In MENA and elsewhere outside the West, feminism has a specific history. Packaged as part of the civilizing project of European colonizers, "liberation" for women became part of the moral justification for straightforward European economic and political domination. Inside MENA, one of the most widely discussed features of this feminism of the European colonizers is the push for the removal of the veil. In this Orientalist vision, women could only achieve freedom through a protection from their own society. In South Asia, Gayatri Spivak analyzes perhaps the most famous pairing of European colonialism and women's liberation in the campaign against widow emollition, what the English would call "suttee." While she does not want to justify widow burning, she is critical of the "saving" discourse the English employ and the real results this discourse has on third-world women. She notes that the word "suttee" literally means being a good wife, and in using this term to describe widow burning, colonial officials actually solidified what being a good wife entails. She characterizes this process with scathing bluntness, noting that "white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men, impose upon women a greater ideological constriction by absolutely identifying, *through discursive practice*, good wifehood with self-immolation on the husband's pyre"(1994, 101).

Feminism is loaded with history around the world, and any employment of feminist rhetoric must carefully weigh its consequences. My activist interlocuters articulate these dangers and ponder such cautions. One woman reflected that she only recently came to call herself a feminist, and even now she does not consider feminism as woman-centered, but rather as more generally inclusive.

In all of my interviews, I ask respondents if and why they self-identify as feminists and their feelings and experiences with this term. NWF openly refers to itself as feminist and employs this language actively in its publications and seminars. With NWF as my research locus, likely many more of my interlocuters identify as feminist than if this project were based at the majority of other Egyptian NGOs. In my first interview with one of NWF's activist founders, she showed a frustration with this question, a frustration revealing her many travails with debates over "womanism," "feminism," and other categories that have arisen to characterize woman-focused work. Her tiredness with this debate reflects its ubiquity in Egyptian NGO discussions. Still, in her opinion, all of the different terms to describe a focus on women are not mere equivocations. For her, feminism is an analytic world view that places women and gender critique at its core. In being openly feminist, she says NWF can reclaim feminism from its negative connotations. NWF staff and participants all have particular ideas about what feminism is made most clear through their articulations of what it is not. An activist founder recounts that contrary to popular belief in Egypt feminists are not "man-haters, lesbians, and sex-obsessed." Another staff member reiterated that some believed feminism entailed taking rights away from men. One seminar participant associated feminism with Egypt's long history of woman rulers, from Cleopatra to Shagaret Al Durr. In her view, feminism's dismissal stemmed from the Egyptian state's fear of women again taking up power and pushing for changes that challenge the

status quo. Another seminar participant pointed to encouraging awareness of feminism in order to dispel these myths and stereotypes.

These women's discussions of feminism and its challenges show a pattern of frustration in the disconnection between feminism's "true" meaning and its misconceptions. Though there are many debates among feminists as to what feminism really means, for my interlocuters, the meaning of feminism is most clear when it is juxtaposed to what it is not. In their views, feminism is not more widely embraced because it is misunderstood, feared, or too rigorous. Among this variety of women who ascribe as feminists, I hope to look towards the nuance of feminism's meanings. I do not necessarily seek to point out contradictions in these feminist women, but such apparent contradictions further reveal the richness of feminism's many embodiments. Spivak warns of re-telling and re-working women's voices into feminist parables, as this framing again distorts subaltern women. Women may not always behave strictly along feminist lines (Spivak 1994). Many women, for example, carry heavy obligations to their families, whom they discuss with both love and ambivalence. One NWF seminar participant, for example, is now earning a salary working full-time and expresses her desire for travel, but regrets that her family would not permit it. She also maligns the restrictions her family and community place on dating. It would be too simple to dismiss these family ties as repressive or un-feminist. There are many advantages, emotionally and practically, for a woman who is a part of a close family. Another seminar participant's family supported her travels alone abroad, so the experiences of women with their families do vary.

As I will discuss in the following chapter, this project's participants embody their vision of feminism in a myriad of ways. While there are certainly key overlaps among convictions of NWF women, their personal navigations of feminist teachings of course vary among individuals'

analytic frameworks. In discussing such reflections, I hope to further explore ambivalences in feminism by examining how women make sense of these tensions.

Activist Stalwarts: NWF Founders and their Protégés

As New Woman Foundation was conceived in the 1970s and officially established in the 1980s, its earliest members have been working in the field of women's rights for decades. Perhaps arising through this longevity, I soon noticed that NWF's stalwart founders displayed much less ambivalence regarding their work and position than its young staff. There are still many different personalities among this generation, but in general I was struck with the firm conviction in which they consistently held their work throughout our discussions and time together. My own role at the organization was framed by their strong commitments, as to one particularly ardent founder, I was both an "angel" and a "traitor" for my help and ultimate time constraints. The fact that I would not be committed to the organization for many years undermined my position which, in her eyes, demanded complete devotion. Though particularly extreme, this type of passion and moral fervor resonates with other project participants' perceptions of the demands of work in women's rights.

With their tenacity demonstrated so overtly, these women's stories reflect numerous, even continuous, expressions of resistance against forces of power. However, following Lila Abu-Lughod's caution towards highlighting resistance as a primary source of agency, these expressions do not define the crux of their work. Instead, resistance for NWF founders is a means to an end, a component of everyday life as a feminist activist. Rather than being

empowering, at times, these repressive forces in fact exhaust the women working against them. At the same time, moving away from highlighting resistance does not mean such women fit Saba Mahmood's model of the "docile agent," quietly "subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their own interests and agendas" through the cultivation of traditionally feminine characteristics (2001, 205). Quite the contrary, NWF activists are anything but docile. I will detail these activists' reflections on their work and navigations with power. While resistance does have a place in such frameworks, resistance in itself is not considered necessary to the feminist perspective NWF provides. While NWF activists are certainly concerned with making outward changes to Egyptian society, they also focus on a cultivation of the self through exposure to feminist teachings and debates. Resistance and the cultivation of the self are in fact linked in such a view, as NWF activists argue that in developing a critical gender perspective, social change can be achieved. Through these activists' contemplations on their work and the influence of power structures therein, I will analyze the contributions such positions make to contemporary understandings of feminist subjectivities.

In this chapter, I review the reflections of the most ardent activist group of NWF's participants. Among this group are two of the organization's most active founding members their protégés. These protégés are in between the generations of the founders and of the organization's base of young women. Though their backgrounds differ, these younger women working directly under the older activists expressed many shared perspectives with their founder mentors. In general, discussions with these women focused on very different concerns than their younger cohorts. NWF's activist women are independent practically and morally, as they are much older than the organization's young women still living at home and dependent upon their families. Its

generation of founders are hardened activists, having experienced substantial hardship through their decades of activist work. As such, their reflections on the sources and processes of power varied substantially. While the youngest NWF participants focused on their families, relationships, career, and religion, such questions were behind its activist founders.

Emerging from Early Feminist Roots

Since the beginning of Egyptian feminist activism, its members have been in constant navigation of gender ideologies at work. Scholars of gender in the MENA region acknowledge women's tenuous symbolic roles, noting "the way that in the postcolonial world women have become potent symbols of identity and visions of society and the nation"(Abu-Lughod 1998). While taking on these salient symbolic roles, feminist activists simultaneously "actively participate in these debates and social struggles"(Abu-Lughod 1998, 3). Women's symbolic potency creates unique tensions which women activists must navigate, as such symbolisms at times contradict. Nadje Al-Ali, for example, points to women being seen both as carriers of authentic cultural traditions and as modern rights-bearing citizens, with women working both "against and through the state"(2000, 218). As histories of MENA feminism detail, feminist activism in Egypt developed in cooperation with nationalist movements, as did much of feminism in the Middle East in the early twentieth century (Margot Badran 1995; Al-Ali 2000). In tandem, feminist concerns became linked with wider goals of modernization and development (Al-Ali 2001, 219). This first generation of feminists provided much of the intellectual foundation upon which NWF would later be founded. As Margot Badran describes, turn-of-the-century writers and activists Huda Sharawi, Bahithat Al-Badiha, Nabawiyya Musa began to publish seminal feminist works, cited by many contemporary activists as prime sources of

inspiration (1988). Reflecting this significance, NWF's founders draw on early feminist writer Qasim Amin in choosing the phrase "new woman" to name their organization (Al-Ali 2000, 183).

NWF's activist founders are part of the second generation of Egypt's twentieth century feminist activists. Departing from their first generation sisters in certain ways, these women's commitments to feminism formed in their experiences in the student movements of the 1970s and were cemented in the obstacles they faced as women in their various professions. In her history of the Egyptian women's movement, Nadje Al-Ali details these divergences, citing first generation activists' focus on nationalist agendas, charity, and welfare, with newer organization's increasing independence from national movements and push towards women's rights and oppression more explicitly (2001, 223; 2000, 90). NWF founding members are also generally of a leftist political background, perceiving "women's exploitation as part of structural inequalities which are rooted in class divisions, capitalism and imperialism," instead of relying simply upon reforms in legislation and education as would their liberal counterparts (Al-Ali 2001, 219).

Initially unified in the student movement of the 1970s and Personal Status Law campaigns of the 1980s, the diverse ideologies and personalities among NWF's founders created an organization schism in the early 1990s. With more intensely socialist members pushing for a focus on working women's issues and others preferring to concentrate on more abstract questions of self-expression, eventually certain founding members split away to form their own organization (Al-Ali 2000). Still, one of the activist founders recounts to me that still now NWF's members do hold a plurality of opinions, differing in opinion over such issues as abortion

or even the validity of secularism in general. She noted that this variation of opinion is unavoidable and beneficial to organization debates. These divergences at times become more striking volatilities, as one of my interviews with a board member was abruptly cancelled due to her recent disassociation from the group.

Human Rights as both Normative and Flexible Discourse

Following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted in the wake of World War II, human rights became the most common discourse of addressing issues in social justice in an international forum. Steeped in questions and implications of political legitimacy and cultural hegemony, human rights became a heavily symbolic space for any actor to enter. With its normative position, human rights takes on a powerful role, both ideologically and politically. Taking this power into account against its innocent façade, critiques of human rights advocacy posit many problems within the discourse. David Kennedy lists many of these concerns, with the primary criticism being that, "human rights occupies the field of emancipatory possibility"(2002). In this monopolization of justice, a particular rights-bearing citizen-subject is established, limiting the domains of justice. As Talal Asad notes, disjuncture arises as the "human" of human rights is most frequently in reality a political citizen-subject, though the movement commonly appeals to an individual's "bare humanity" (2000).

Karen Engle refers to the "crisis mentality" of human rights, drawing upon Ken Cmiel's characterization of the movement's reliance upon "thin description" rather than complex detail to convey the urgency of a situation (2007). Integral to this framework is seminal philosopher John Rawls' positioning of human rights as the boundary between "decent" and indecent states. In such a model, a state's violation of human rights becomes the only legitimate justification for

military intervention (Rawls 1999). As evidenced through the normalized model of Rawls, human rights hold the stakes of legitimate sovereignty. In the Global South, human rights critiques commonly entail critiques of the state. Within this discourse, a state's sovereignty is potentially called into doubt, presenting an uncomfortable parallel to a colonialist governance project. Important economic or military support is also manipulated depending upon a state's human rights record. Engle describes international policy as consistent with this Rawlsian approach since the popularity of human rights discourse took hold in the 1990s. She also points to the relationship between human rights and feminist discourses since this time, as women's rights came to be commonly equated with human rights in activism based in the United States and Europe. She points to the specific case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, during which feminist activists equated rape with genocide in attempts to provoke international military intervention (Ibid). In order to establish the direness of a situation, it must be framed as a human rights problem rather than a feminist one.

Lila Abu-Lughod refers to a similar conflation between feminism and human rights in the discourse surrounding the United States lead coalition invasion of Afghanistan. In popular discourse in the US, women needed to be "saved" under the Taliban, and the way to accomplish this rescue would be through military intervention. Abu-Lughod also notes here the infusion of Islamic discourse, as in the context of United States media and politics, Islam is commonly positioned as an antithesis of feminism and often human rights (2002). Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind similarly argue that the United States' media reports on Afghanistan have focused exclusively on the human rights violations occurring under the Taliban while ignoring similar hardships prior to Islamist rule (2002). These arguments speak to the overlap between

discourses of human rights, feminism, and Islam, as well as the potential problems that can arise in these relationships. When the "thin description" posited as necessary for the function of human rights is applied to a particular location such as Afghanistan, the location is simplified and its historicity lost. Here, discourses of Islam are defined and reproduced, while contextual details are pushed aside. This positioning then becomes even more problematic when understood within a Rawlsian framework of human rights and war. Again, within this now normative framework, human rights violations are understood as just reason, or even obligation, for war. This logic has shaped the imaginations of politicians and activists, as war has become the appropriate justice in situations of human rights infringement. As Engle points out, ironically, is that destruction of infrastructure and forceful upheaval of daily life are hardly long-term solutions to violence (2007). In this discussion, human rights discourse can frame a situation as urgent, but much of its contextual specificity is lost.

Taking up human rights discourse entails entering this problematic space. With all of these implications of power in mind, human rights becomes in Bourdieu's terms both a "structured" and "structuring" structure (1989). Human rights emerged from its particular history, and itself then became a normative discourse shaping and creating new structures of power. The implications of this process, however, are up to contestation. In the case of NWF activists, such implications are considered and debated directly.

Through my work with the CEDAW Coordinator, I first met one of NWF's older activist generation. Dr. Amal Abdel Hady was trained as a physician and worked in medicine before taking time to focus on her family. Like many of NWF's founding members, Dr. Amal worked in a profession that was difficult for women to enter, these trials forging her commitment to

women's rights. In one of our first discussions, she was tired of discussing the critiques against feminism, dismissing them as over worn and politicized. Though constantly under attack with claims of inauthenticity, Dr. Amal scoffs at the notion that NWF is un-Egyptian. NWF's history is intertwined with Egyptian nationalism and its members had been participating in feminist movements well before they received political support. She argues, as would most scholars, that any claim to history is contextualized by the contemporary setting in which it is made. Of course, she noted, both feminism and human rights emerge from a particular history, a history that places such discourses in the shadow of colonialism. But does a critical and historical understanding of human rights necessarily undermine its resonance and applicability? Through NWF, staff tries to reclaim a positive meaning of feminism, against the stereotypes of feminists as "man-haters, lesbians, sex-obsessed" and the like. For her, true feminism was about taking on a woman-centered perspective on all things, regardless of the title ascribed to it. After her career in medicine and since establishing NWF, she worked to complete an MA in women's studies at a university in the United States. She believed that the contemporary feminist scholars she was exposed to in this graduate program accurately described this true meaning of feminism. Discussions of whether a person was feminist, woman-ist, or any other variation of the term, were shallow, as the root of the issue is the presence of this all-encompassing gendered perspective.

In Dr. Amal, I met one of the strongest proponents of human rights as a system of international law and moral solidarity encountered in this project. Dr. Amal discusses human rights in a passionate, zealous manner, not at all as a dry or bureaucratic instrument utilized simply in appeals to the tastes of the West and the UN. She is considered to be an expert on

CEDAW, reiterated by the other staff members at NWF as well as by others in the women's rights field. In discussing questions of human rights with Dr. Amal, her many past confrontations with its critiques become evident. She could certainly cite hypocrisies in the way human rights discourse is employed, pointing at the United States' double-standard on human rights in Israel, for example. Still, these inconsistencies did not undermine her belief in human rights in general, as instead NWF would shift its own policies to avoid US-based sources of aid. She believes that the actual values behind human rights like equality and dignity cannot be reduced to the political and historical development of human rights per se. In this statement, she acknowledges the particular path human rights has taken to emerge in its contemporary setting, but does not believe that this development necessarily makes the discourse invalid. She describes with frustration the many accusations human rights and women's rights have faced, seeming tired to even address these conflicts with me in our discussions. NWF is the oldest feminist organization in Egypt, she notes, so no one can rightly accuse them of being foreign. Such accusations have indeed wavered and the situation for organizations like NWF has recently improved in certain ways. In the 1990s, she recalled, it was seen as scandalous within the Egyptian NGO circle to accept foreign funds. She notes that in the past decade, this sentiment has turned, with more and more organizations accepting foreign funds, thusly reducing its stigma.

She provided a scenario to illustrate her point regarding the mis-steps of aid organizations hesitant to employ human rights language. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is one of her favorite topics to discuss, and I use this terminology to be consistent with the language of Dr. Amal and the organization. She notes that FGM is most often portrayed by other NGOs as an issue of health. In trying to portray FGM as primarily a threat to women's health, its dangers of

death and labor obstruction were exaggerated. People familiar with FGM, however, knew from their experience that such claims were overblown, thereby reducing NGO credibility. The intelligence of rural people was underestimated, a fatal flaw in any development project and indicative of a patriarchal mindset in general. FGM campaigns' approach of educating the ignorant is incorrect and condescending. In Dr. Amal's mind, a move to a human rights framework that stresses dignity, respect, and trust can more honestly and effectively address women. Dr. Amal believes that a human rights framework can call a spade a spade, moving also to address women's sexuality as a right, jeopardized through the practice of FGM.

A human rights approach does not necessarily take an issue out of its political and economic context. On the contrary, Dr. Amal understands FGM to be a matter of necessity. Mothers must have their daughters circumcised in order for them to marry and have a son, thereby achieving practical stability. This necessity is particularly marked by socioeconomic situation in rural communities, as more men emigrate to find work, leaving their wives and family behind. Dr. Amal believes a human rights approach can be used to address the practical imperative families face, as well as broach issues of trust and respect that she argues women lack. Ultimately, Dr. Amal contends that in order for social change to occur, wider contexts must change. In this, she argues that many development and aid organizations are short-sighted. While other NWF staff maintain that such organizations have their own place and role, Dr. Amal believes NWF and human rights activism hold a broader, more comprehensive view of how social change is achieved.

Another of the organization's activist founders, Nawla, provided her considerations on the flaws of the human rights system. To the sentiment some women in the field felt regarding

the corruption in human rights, she notes that corruption is rife in Egypt in general. It follows then for corruption to exist in Egypt's civil society. She does not find that this corruption is particularly salient in human rights organization or that it discredits human rights work in any way. She also sees the way in which powerful buzzwords take over development agendas. Again, the fact of a term becoming a buzzword does not diminish its real importance. She gives "empowerment" as example, as though such language may be hijacked by the state or corrupt institutions, it still can be used to examine access to resources, flow of knowledge, and diversity of choices. All in all, such discourses and buzzwords hold the potential for their meanings to become flat and distorted, but that does not diminish their potential to be utilized sincerely.

Yasmina, one of the founder's protégés, reserved most of her criticism for development, not for human rights, making a clear delineation between the two. She recalled working for a development organization and feeling strange, then moving to NWF that she differentiates as activist. Development, in her opinion, provides services while NWF acts as a think-tank. Furthermore, she stresses that human rights work entails advocacy—teaching people to speak for themselves and address the core of the injustices they experience, while development merely addresses symptoms. Nawla is more accommodating in this distinction, arguing for cooperation, development from a human rights perspective.

The activists discuss human rights' connectedness to the grassroots in different ways. Human right's elitism and subsequent disjuncture from everyday people is a concern and point of contention among those working in the field. As one high-ranking official exclaimed to me in frustration, human rights must gain political or cultural legitimacy with the people on the streets and become a social movement. Nawla recalled that in her decades performing activist work,

most human rights organizations were hesitant to work with large groups of the public. Many, she notes, still maintain this hesitation. NWF, however, has been somewhat peripheral among Egyptian human rights organizations, as women's rights have not been completely embraced as human right within the field. She and the other activist founders had a strong desire to work with the grassroots, but were unsure how to proceed. In the coming years, NWF would begin supporting rural protest movements, moving towards this social connectedness its founders desired.

When she participates in such work, Nawla does indeed explicitly employ rights language, insisting that people are receptive and in fact smarter than most aid agencies give them credit for. She notes that "people have the knowledge, but are not aware of it," implying that the vision of social justice behind human rights is experienced well beyond those who can speak its language. Another activist is less likely to employ human rights language directly in working with rural or suburban people. Yasmina compares using such language in a village to "wearing phosphorus orange," and that women would have every right to shut the door on her. More than the specific rights and language of human rights and CEDAW, she pushes people to think, to criticize, and to use logic. Working with human rights among the grassroots then becomes a matter of navigation on the part of the activist.

Network Webs

As reviewed, networking among individuals and organizations is integral to the functioning of feminist activists. NWF is no exception to the growing prominence of network linkages among NGOs. As Keck and Sikkink first detail and many other scholars follow, women's rights organizations are increasing bound through the moral and economic solidarity of

worldwide networks (1999). In the case of NWF, there are many layers of network participation, from transnational bodies like the UN to the local cooperation of young students and professions in its community seminars. In its emphasis on intellectual collaboration and engagement with feminist teachings, networking on some level is in fact core to NWF's mission. Along the same lines as questions of normativity and power in human rights discourse, questions of the influence and efficacy of such networks also arise, particularly in high-stake arenas like the UN. As I will detail, each set of networks has its own set of potential advantages and restrictions which are considered and navigated by its participants.

Dr. Amal is highly optimistic and supportive of the UN system. Though she and her colleague NWF founders had been working on the same issues before the Declaration on Human Rights and CEDAW were issued, they have found support and solidarity through the UN. She regretted many Egyptians' impressions that the UN is exclusively a Western body, intimidating and unapproachable. She recalled a project funded by a European aid organization that sent women from various Egyptian NGOs to Geneva for the presentation of Egypt's 2010 report on CEDAW. She described this as a very moving experience for the women involved, as they felt a part of the UN system. The recommendations the women made on the report to the UN committee were then presented by the committee as the official UN suggestions to Egypt. This process, Dr. Amal noted, demystifies the UN for Egyptian women, as it shows them they can be a real part of UN actions. Still, navigating the UN requires particular skills and literacy, and allows space for only certain discourses. While such a system leaves room for variation among its participants, such variation must occur within a particular set of restrictions. In Dr. Amal's opinion, the primary obstacle to the cooperation between Egyptian women's groups and the UN

is the intimidation such groups experience. All in all, Dr. Amal believes that despite the UN's normative and economic powers, it is a vital entity that should be utilized in the advocacy of women's rights.

In general, NWF's activists find participation in the UN and other large networks to be beneficial to their work, providing material and intellectual support. Some expressed to me, however, the limitations of wide networks, and NWF's refusal to compromise on issues stymied by deadlock in network opinion. One activist recalled NWF's former membership in a network of regional NGOs sponsored by a foreign aid agency. Too many competing interests led to few agreed upon demands pushed by the group as a whole. Because they found this system ineffective, NWF left the network, though its staff still participates in many of its activities. Network memberships are fluid, and in the case of salient disadvantages, such linkages are broken.

In addition to these more formal networks, NWF also acts as a kind of artistic and intellectual network bringing together women with various creative dispositions. As transnational networks provide moral solidarity for women activists, local networks likewise offer such solidarity on a more social and personal level. Two of the activist founder's protégés, Sara and Yasmina, expressed a similar path to discovering and working for NWF. While the youngest generation at NWF tended to be quietly reflective and gentle in their personalities, these women working most closely with the founders came across as more single-minded and ardent. They appeared to me as existing in between the two generations, not just in age, but in background and ideology. Sara, NWF's CEDAW coordinator, is one of the organization's most unique and vocal members. She collaborates closely with Dr. Amal, as she works on compiling

CEDAW shadow reports, training local NGOs in CEDAW protocol, and networks with wider human and women's rights organizations. When describing how her relationship with NWF began, she notes that "they found her," as staff members were impressed with her creative talents and spirit. She is one of the few staff members raised in a rural area, and she still now lives in a small village hours away from Cairo. She recalled that she had always felt what she called the "stirrings of feminism and inhibitions as a woman" before participating in NWF. Yasmina recollects similar sensations in her own youth, believing there was something "genetic" in her personality leading her to such a career. She was always interested in reading and attending cultural activities. When her family would give her gifts, she would always want books. She also felt less inhibited wearing trousers rather than skirts, laughing that her religious father supported this choice as her trousers would be longer than most skirts.

In these ways, Sara and Yasmina's reflections on their youth parallel many of the experiences and inclinations recalled by NWF's younger staff. Both women, however, had moved on from that stage of life and now had successful families of their own. Yasmina tells me that she teaches her own children about human rights, amusedly reflecting on the uniqueness of such an upbringing and how strange such language may seem to other children. She sees her own family as a way of cultivating change, as she will allow her own daughter to travel on her own and in general have her own experiences out of the family's control. Her extended family may not be supportive of her feminist causes, but they can see external symbols of her success in her frequent travel and the statements she makes on television. Sara likewise describes a situation of familial support. Her husband is particularly encouraging of her work, and her extended family

has now come around to acknowledge her unique successes. She notes that her family are happy and proud that she is special.

Role of NGOs in Social Change

In general, NWF's activists expressed much less ambivalence regarding the role and efficacy of NGOs in achieving social change. Sara responded to doubts about NGOs' strength by comparing the status of civil society today to the situation 10 years earlier. She noted that the public and the state thought then that an NGO could not wield any power, yet now NGOs are pressing the government with their demands, drawing on the power of protest movements. The large number of NGOs in Egypt does not demonstrate any lack of efficiency as different NGOs were suited towards different tasks. To exemplify the power of NGOs, Sara recalled a recent campaign against early marriage. Particularly, she describes the problem of poor rural or suburban Cairene women who would be pressed to marry wealthy Arab men found by their families through matchmakers. This situation would be difficult then not only psychologically for the young woman, but creates serious problems for her children who then do not have a claim to any nationality. The pressure placed on the state by NGOs then made this practice illegal. Though Sara acknowledged this campaign did not solve the issue completely, as after all the poverty and desperation of such families are not alleviated, at least it shows the capability of NGOs in achieving legal change.

In talking with Yasmina about NGOs in Egypt, I sensed her exhaustion in defending civil society as it seemed to be a frequent case she must defend. She asks, "Who is to say if NGOs are effective? Where can you see social change?" She then explains that different generations work on different issues, with the fruits of each movement being harvested in later years. I had heard

this response among many of NWF's participants, though the youngest would make this claim with some hesitation and conflict regarding their work. Even in certain reports the organization would submit, they note that certain results are immeasurable and difficult to judge now.

Not all of NWF's activists shared Yasmina's explanation of the unknowability of NGOs' success. Nawla acknowledged that at times it is difficult to gauge the impact of a particular action or campaign. When the organization gives a television interview, for example, they do not know how many viewers they receive or the viewers' opinions. However, over time she can see shifting public opinion and diminishing taboos that do evidence the impact of NWF's work. NWF was the first NGO to publically address domestic violence in 1993. Now, nearly twenty years later, she sees many organizations that have projects geared towards abuse. In breaking silences, she has seen the mood and concerns of the public transform.

The State as Ultimate Obstacle

While every participant in this project unanimously cited the Egyptian state as the primary impediment to women's rights, NWF's activists are especially vocal and experienced in critiques of the state. One founder nodded to me nonchalantly that it was likely state officials had bugged their offices, as NWF has had continuous run-ins with the state, not the least of which being the state's initial denial of NWF's NGO registration (Al-Ali 2000). Striking parallels arise among activists' descriptions of the state and Foucault's omniscient panopticon. Although while Foucault's panopticon functions with a subtle, disciplining power, NWF activists work knowing full well the state's observation and exert opposition to such attempts. I spoke with her further about the state's control of NGOs through legislation, particularly in the new NGO law circulating parliament at the time. This law would potentially siphon NGO funding through the

Ministry of Social Solidarity, naturally allocating funding to the "good organizations." Nawla informed me that rumors of this new law have been swirling in the NGO community for about three years, following an initial leak of an early legislative draft. Still, she did not express too much concern over this law, as this kind of hostile environment is one women's rights activists have always faced. And while she does acknowledge the difficulties such legislation would create, since NWF is so well-established, it does not experience such a threat as severely as would a smaller, younger organization.

With the January 25th revolution immediately following the bulk of this project's fieldwork, NWF activists express continuing skepticism as to the role of feminist agendas in any newly formed government. Dr. Amal noted the conspicuous lack of media coverage on women protestors, making the young men appear to be the foundation of the revolution. Nawla shared such misgivings, recalling past revolutions in which women's issues were soon put aside with the formation of a new government, as women organizers had not come together with their specific gender-based demands. The role of the new state in women's activism remains unclear, with NWF staff assessing the situation day-by-day with a critical eye.

Conclusions

Among all of NWF's participants, its stalwart activist founders and their protégés display the least confliction about the aims of their work. While they certainly doubt their work's ultimate consequences, they express moral certainty that their activism is the correct moral path. The model of agency as resistance only fits NWF activists in part, as although they resist certain institutions and social phenomena they consider patriarchal, they embrace and utilize powerful organizations like the UN to achieve their aims. The forces of repressive power they work

against are clear-cut: an oppressive state and patriarchal culture. Discourses like human rights and feminism are understood as normative, but their normativity does not necessarily undermine their efficacy or applicability. NWF activists consider critiques of their work, but in their many years of experience and obstacles, they are not moved deeply by such ambivalence. Yasmina, one of the most out-spoken activists derailing any critiques against human rights, told me that she used to be disturbed by the kind of questions such critiques raised. Through the years, she came to believe that human rights and feminism's critics were in fact asking the wrong questions. She still acknowledges the limitations of their work. She tells me, "You cannot change (society) by yourself, but still you must work." In this sense, her work is driven in part by a deeply personal component, repeated in her descriptions of her love for NWF's founders and her insistences that she could work in no other field. NWF activists utilize normative institutions and discourses of power to gain intellectual and practical support, converging into work that is both deeply personal and socially transformative.

Balancing Convictions with Obligation and Desire: Hend and the NWF Young Women

Perhaps owing to my age, some of the closest relationships I struck at NWF were with its younger participants. The strength of these relationships may also be due to the fact that these young women conduct much of the daily activities of the center and account for much of its seminar audiences. Overseeing the younger women's work, the older activist women envision this new generation as taking on the mantle of feminist work for the future. With many of these younger participants not self-identifying as activists, or even feminists in some cases, NWF participation takes on varied roles in their lives. In talking with these young women, I am struck with their multi-faceted reflections on the function of power upon their lives and work. All of the

women reserve their most unilaterally critical view for the Egyptian state itself, viewing it as the simplest form of power, monolithic and unreachable, controlling through might and violence. In a Foucaultian perspective, the Egyptian state appears to fail in the strategies of modern welfare-based governance. As time would soon tell, the state in fact comes to crumple entirely. Almost unanimously, NWF participants cite the Egyptian state as the primary obstacle to women's well-being in their failure to alleviate the day-to-day economic and social problems Egyptian women face. While this project's young participants understood power functioning simply in the role of the state, they recount a more complex situation in other forces of power at play. In the arenas the dominate most of their day-to-day lives, in family, friendships, religion, and romantic relationships, young women narrate a story of ambivalence. In this chapter, I focus on these more subtle and nuanced discussions of power, as these settings are so salient and meaningful in the participants' daily lives. Interwoven with these accounts are articulations of an intellectual and moral commitment to feminist work reiterated again and again throughout the project.

Arriving early to one of NWF's community seminars, I soon struck up conversation with another young participant, Hend, before the talk began. Introducing ourselves, I explained my project and position at NWF and learned that Hend was introduced to the night's event by our mutual friend, the CEDAW coordinator. Talkative and opinionated, yet soft-spoken and cheery, Hend and I found each other fast friends. As I will detail, Hend's participation at NWF and in civil society in general spans a broad range of activities. She is not a professional in the field of women's right per se, as she is a teacher by training and devotes her free-time to reading and creative writing. Though not the stereotypical activist, Hend's passion for literature and art intertwines with her commitment to feminism and human rights. Like all of this project's

participants, she holds a complex relationship to these ideals, balancing them with doubts about NGO work in general as well as with her other obligations in life. As I met other young women at NWF, both staff members and seminar attendees, I found parallel experiences of this balancing act. In this chapter, I will draw upon Hend's reflections on her activities as an artist and feminist, elaborating this perspective with shared stories experienced by other young women at NWF.

NWF considers artistic expression an important component of feminist thought and incorporates creative elements into its projects and seminars. At our first meeting, Hend and I had come into the organization that night to hear a woman lawyer speak on a dramatic piece she had written on the struggles faced as a woman in her career. Asking her what piqued her interest of this particular seminar, I learned that Hend had studied English literature at Cairo University and was enthusiastic about any kind of dramatics, poetry, and novels. She had a particular appreciation for British women authors, and was eager to tell me that her favorite novel was *The Mill on the Floss*, a story about a taboo love affair, that she confided was a life-changing read. In addition to this unconventional pick, she loved to read Virginia Woolf, considering Woolf to be a foremost influence on her own progress as a writer and thinker. A number of the young women active in NWF do have an education in the social sciences, but overall the staff and participants come from a diverse background, many of an artistic and creative vein. Many of the young women staff at NWF have such a background in the arts and did not expect to find themselves working in women's rights. A tendency towards an artistic perspective is shared among many of the young women, contributing to the friendships and personal connections emerging through their work at NWF. One young woman speaker at a Cairene feminist conference differentiated

friendships from networks, and considered friendships to be the future of women's rights work. In the case of NWF, friendships may indeed better describe many of the relationships among members of the organization. Sharing intellectual and creative sensibilities, friendship defines the tone of many of the young women participants. Perhaps possessing some of the loftiest artistic goals, Hend shared with me her dreams of becoming an actress, and jokes that perhaps through this project, I could make her famous. Though I laughed and admitted the project would make neither of us famous, I hoped instead to be a sounding board to her thoughts on the challenges and rewards of feminist work.

At our initial meeting and first seminar, Hend feared I would not be able to follow the quick pace of Arabic the speaker would use, and suggested she help translate. As the crowd filtered in that night, I saw that most of the attendees were around Hend's age, many of them her peers at Cairo University. The meeting was obviously for many a social event, both meant for fun and intellectual stimulation. With a handful of men in the audience, Hend pointed out to me that one was even a famous film producer, likely a personal friend of the speaker. After the talk ended, the group discussed together the speaker's optimism for women's future in Egypt, though some, citing the recent ban on women in the judiciary, couldn't share her sentiments. With a diverse mix of attendants and a lively debate, the night proved to be a lively event, and I could understand its appeal to artistic Hend.

In her early twenties, Hend is young, animated, and earnest in our many meetings and talks. She struck me first in her vibrancy, her smile and eagerness to talk with myself, the stranger in the room. I would learn this to be typical of her character, as she enjoys lively discussion with people of different perspectives. As one of the first women I met through NWF's

cultural gatherings, we would develop a relationship over the year, meeting dozens of times for walks around the city, sitting in coffee shops, and enjoying the view of the Nile at Zamalek's ElSawy Cultural Wheel. Hend became a main informant in this project in part due to her tendency towards the philosophical. She loved to discuss abstract ideas, from bonding over our shared appreciation of literature, to the complex manifestations of feminist thought in her own life. Unlike many of the older professional women at NWF, she would not call herself an activist. She avoids demonstrations and prefers the quieter forums of intellectual and cultural events around the city, at NWF and elsewhere. When I asked why these activities suited her so well, she laughed and explained that because she was opinionated and talkative, that she always had something to say. Though her family and friends at work and school did not attend cultural seminars, Hend still talked frequently with them about issues she considered feminist, though in a more practical sense. In fact, though, she preferred discussing feminism in its more everyday manifestations than in political issues. As many of her friends and sisters, for example, were considering marriage, Hend noted that they all experienced the same shared pressures as women. For her, feminist ideals are most salient through these practical challenges faced by women. She would see what she calls the "crisis" of traditional marriage through the experiences of her peers who would marry without getting to know their partners, "wearing masks" built by societal pressure. In talking with Hend, she often uses such metaphors from drama and art, and fuses feminist teachings from NWF into her own analytic framework. As I met other young participants at NWF, I found that many of them possessed similar cheery and vibrant personalities, making the organization a lively workplace full of chat and laughter. It struck me that these younger women seemed unique in their lightness compared to the older generation of founders.

An Artist First

Unlike many of this project's participants, Hend had never been formally employed by NWF. She had volunteered at various organizations and became acquainted with NWF through a friend on staff. Through this friendship, she began to attend NWF meetings and seminars. Like many of the women there, she participated in the organization in a number of ways. In addition to roundtable attendance, the CEDAW coordinator also recruited her help on research projects, and the two of us would often come into the offices to work together. As NWF, like many NGOs, functions through the support of networks and friendships, this variety of work is typical to many of their participants. Women volunteer research as a favor or attend a meeting to support a friend. As none of her work was paid, bringing Hend into this project allows me to get the perspective of a different kind of participant in the NGO scene. In this project's introduction, I described the many facets of civil society, and Hend's experiences cover a range of these activities. She is a writer and an artist, and as NWF tries to attract such types, is attracted to the organization's intellectual orientation.

In her career, she has been perseverant and lucky, as over the year of our friendship, she ultimately obtained a job she enjoys, teaching English. She recounted the tense years of her education, the fierce competition brought on by students' awareness of the few spots available in top universities and the even fewer jobs beyond. Her temperament didn't suit this competition, one of the reasons she decided to study English literature instead of the more aggressive sciences. She side-stepped the more competitive students, graduating from the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University, then took on the pressing task of trying to find work. After some time of working difficult, unsteady jobs, she applied for a training institute offered by an international

organization on a whim. To her surprise, the organization accepted her application and awarded her a scholarship to cover her expenses. Following the training session, they then placed her at a university to teach. Though she is not a professional artist, she attends cultural forums at NWF and elsewhere around the city to meet other like-minded young people.

During one of our first conversations, Hend, prone to the philosophical, asked me my opinion on the "American Dream." I gave her my skeptical estimation of the disappointment many feel when their dreams don't materialize despite an ideology that says otherwise. She nodded, acknowledging this point, yet still pressing for the value of this mentality. She told me that, "in Egypt, we do not have this kind of dream," and that came to meetings like the one we were then attending in order to dream. She would go on to later confide in me the many problems she feels women and Egyptian society in general face, as well as the challenges in her own life. In our first talk together, she confesses disappointment in her own life, as she dreamt of becoming an actress, half-joking about becoming famous, and able to express her artistic sentiments to a public audience. I found her spoken disappointment about her life an interesting juxtaposition to her vibrancy that struck me so immediately. As our friendship and her participation in this project deepened, so would my understanding of her complex reflections on her life and work at NWF and as an artist and teacher.

Familial Obligation and Support

Of the younger generation of NWF participants, most were unmarried and lived with their parents. As such, family played substantial roles in their day-to-day lives. Family then acts as a strong force of power in these young staff member's lives, with mothers raising their daughters to become young feminists or encouraging them to serve their fathers and brothers. Of

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course, family does not exert power only in a unilateral or coercive sense, as perhaps most apparent through the range of families who have raised and produced NWF staff. In their families, these young women describe mixed experiences of support, doubt, and obligation. Like most forces of power, family both empowers and delimits. In its interwoven components of creativity and restriction, family is an almost paradigmatic form of Foucauldian power. Foucault describes the most effective forces of power as those that foster desire and love in its object, and love is central to family. In their descriptions of their relationships with family, young women do not describe a situation of coercion. Though they acknowledge the restrictions their families place on their social and work lives, these feelings are balanced with love and gratitude. While it is doubtless that family plays a powerful roles in participants' lives, they describe this power functioning in a multi-faceted, Foucauldian way.

Another pattern arises through young staff and their families, as through debates with family members, women verbalize reflections on their work. In their interactions with their families, yet another setting emerges through which women staff must theorize and communicate their own perspectives on feminist work. While many of this project's young participants are not public figures and are of quieter dispositions than NWF's stalwart founders, these day-to-day articulations are important instances of their analytic frameworks. In many women's cases, they needed to defend NWF's activities to claims facing NGO work in general, that it represents a foreign infiltration, is grossly ineffective, or merely a social diversion for those involved. Hend and another young staff member, Mai, note the general negative opinion of NGOs that they believed Egyptians held. Laughing sardonically, they recall a recent soap opera which poked fun at NGOs, making NGOs seem silly and annoying. While they are quick to admit NGOs

limitations and failings as I will review later in this chapter, they ultimately believe strongly in the power of their work and defend it to their families and others.

Hend talks of her family with a kind of ambivalence stemming from an obvious love yet also perhaps a disappointment at the restrictions her family holds upon her. She recounted to me with pride the story of her own mother's life. After her husband died, instead of returning to her extended family, she decided to continue living in Cairo and to raise her children on her own. Setting an example for Hend, she presses her daughter to be financially independent and to be able to take care of herself. Hend admires her mother's tenacity, though still her mother follows certain norms that frustrate her. She cannot yet convince her mother to allow her to stay out at night. She dreams of travel, yet knows that even if she saves enough money, travelling by herself would be unthinkable. She also must answer to a barrage of questions regarding her activities. Still, Hend ascribes this vigilance to her mother's concern for her safety and reputation. Hend's mother may push certain boundaries in raising her daughter, but her alternatives are limited. In this description, Hend's mother appears as an actor of Bourdieu's framework of relational and intrinsic power, navigating a stage already set by powerful actors with whatever resources she can obtain. While her manipulations may alter this stage, she hits certain limitations defined by the intrinsic capacities of her position. Her mother may be able to break certain norms, but others are more pressing from the weight of her community at large. Hend's dreams of becoming an actress, for example, were not only stymied by her mother, as she fears she would be rejected by her entire community if she attempted that path. Hend expresses a respect for her mother's wisdom in the awareness of her own limitations. As she acknowledges, many levels of change would need to occur in order for this possibility to be opened for her. Though I do not know if

Hend has the talent or attributes to become a successful actress, she is more disheartened by the absolute impossibility of any attempt. Still, her family is supportive of her artistic expression as long as it rests within acceptable boundaries. She expresses gratitude that no opposition is made to her participation at NWF. Though Hend describes herself as the odd one of her family, she still holds a deep friendship with her sisters and brother and warm respect for her mother.

Another young project participant and NWF staff member, Mai, shared mixed feelings regarding the role of family in a woman's life. She holds that patriarchal culture is an "inheritance," passed on through the family by a mother to her own daughters and sons. In her opinion, women can become tools of their own repression. A mother will teach a boy to be served by his sisters, for example, setting up such patterns and expectations for life. Wesam cites similar occurrences in her own family, and as a child she would refuse to serve her brother. These early experiences cemented her reaction of unease towards status quo gender relations, but she could not yet put a name to her feelings. In this perspective, family relationships perpetuate cultural traditions in a static fashion, moving from one generation to the next. When asked if this cultural inheritance was inevitable, she pauses and gives the example of her own parents as an alternative. Her own mother and father, she notes, conscientiously raised their children against these standards, though still treated her differently than her brothers. She unfortunately finds her parents as an exception to this rule of cultural inheritance, leaving the majority to follow this cultural imperative. Pressing to further understand her model of family and culture, I ask why this process occurs. She explains that most people do not like change, and for many mothers, there are simply no alternatives. The lack of alternatives is key in her explanation, as a family's ability to offer their daughters other options depends upon possibilities determined by the wider

community. In her opinion, family relationships perpetuate patriarchal culture, yet parents who are able and brave enough to break away from this norm can create and foster social change.

Talking with yet another young staff member, Wesam, she describes her mother as her biggest obstacle to working at an organization like NWF. She explains that her mother simply does not approve of women's rights and understands them to be a foreign influence. Wesam must defend NWF's agenda to her mother on these charges. She argues that NWF's activities are not dictated by their foreign funders. Instead, NWF simply takes the money of these agencies, co-opting any possible foreign agendas and continuing to set their own plans. Still, Wesam has not won this battle with her mother, though she does not go so far as to prohibit Wesam's participation. Sitting with Wesam and another young staff member, Shaimei, they laugh about their shared experiences with their mothers. Nearly all young women who participate in NWF describe their temperaments changing through their experience at the organization, becoming more argumentative and less willing to stand down when offended. Their families, they remark, also notice these new tendencies and do not necessarily approve this shift. Both Shaimei and Wesam's mothers chide them that their new feisty temperaments acquired through NWF would not serve them in trying to find husbands. Mother and daughter agree that in general Egyptian men prefer women who are meek and agree to do whatever is asked of them. Still, Wesam proved her mother wrong as she was recently married to a colleague of hers from university, showing that not all men fit this rule. She laughs that her husband's opinion was easier to change than her mother's.

Dina describes some of the strongest opposition faced by family members. Raised conservatively, Dina faces accusation by her mother and sister that she is not as religious as she

once was. Her sister openly dislikes the women staff at NWF, noting that many of the women are irreligious as they smoke and don't wear hijab. Shaimei notes that her mother holds a similar concern regarding religion and NWF, wondering if the funds they use are Islamically maintained. In addition to this line of critique, Dina's family then also wonders what work she really performs at the organization, suggesting that much time is wasted. Despite these critiques, Dina feels the quiet support of her father, who agrees with her new tendency to withhold judgment on "good" or "bad" girls. Her experiences with her family are mixed, moreover her father admires some of her acquired values, while the women of her family are most vocally opposed.

While all of this project's young participants clash to some extent with their families, they still express much love and respect for their families' support. In this sense, their reflections on their families' influence parallel Foucault's description of the duality of power in the modern era. This duality softens the notion of power, as the family is not simply a coercive form, but is paired with love and desire to please and satisfy. In Hend and Mai's cases, their parents already diverged from the norm in raising their daughters. Hend and Nivene are appreciative of their upbringing, although they may have frustrations with the norms their parents still do not break. Other young participants, like Dina and Wesam, feel their family's disapproval more harshly, though they are grateful to be raised by their families into the women they are today.

Experiences of Religion

NWF publically orients itself as a secular organization, though through different participants, I observed various expressions and utilizations of religious faith. Though many projects on NGOs in the MENA region rely heavily on the distinction between secular and

religious organization, I find it more useful for the purpose of this project to examine the ways in which religion is discussed and reflected upon by individual participants. Like the family, religion is not understood by young staff members as exclusively a form of coercion. Similarly, religion as a form of power can be best understood in their interpretations through a Foucauldian lens. Although many voice criticism on particular religious judgments and claims that stand in opposition to their goals, they are not unilaterally critical of religion's role in feminist work.

Like many of the younger women at NWF, Hend dresses modestly, wearing hijab and covering her arms and legs. She considers herself a religious person, though perhaps not in the same sense as though more conservative. While she does fast during Ramadan and tries to keep prayers each day, she confessed a distaste for those who are overly-religious and use religion as a reason to keep women at home. One day, we meet up with her male friend, Ahmad, whom she describes as one of these overly-religious types. Still, he also enjoys writing poetry and prose and has on occasion joined her in attending NWF seminars. He came to the seminars in order to meet new people and "enter a new world." Not trying to push buttons with his differing opinions, he preferred to simply listen and mostly kept quiet during the talks. While not unsympathetic to NWF's concerns, he would not describe himself as a feminist, as problems in Egypt were not exclusive to women. In trying to purchase a house and car so he could marry, he was undermined by the socio-economic conditions that oppressed both men and women together. He was quick to reiterate Islam's high evaluation of women as the "source of life," though believed feminism unnecessarily and harmfully separated women's interests from men's. Hend playfully disagreed with his arguments undermining the importance of gender-specific problems, but this did not negatively affect their friendship, as they planned soon to publish poetry together.

Dina, another young project participant and NWF staff member, explained that her religious beliefs do at times come into conflict with NWF's agenda. Many times, however, she believes her experiences at NWF make her a better Muslim. Frequently drawing upon religious texts and metaphors in our discussion, she does believe that NWF has changed many of her opinions to be more consistent with her religious values. For example, she is slower to judge what activities make one "not a good girl," and will call out her friends who make derisive and judgmental comments. NWF also changed her perspective on the relationship between Muslims and Christians. While she never had any problems with Christians in the past, she had heard that she was not to unveil around Christian women or eat in Christian homes and followed these proscriptions. Through NWF, she rethought these issues and came to believe them to be unnecessary and artificial boundaries. Now, she will push others on issues of tolerance, as she recounted a recent trip to Alexandria during which Muslim locals complained about the dress of Christian visitors. She told me that Islam calls for its followers to treat others based on how they treat you, and not off of superficial criteria. In these ways, NWF has transformed her experience of religion, and in her opinion, making her a more sincere and thoughtful religious person. Still, she holds certain religious beliefs that do at times come into conflict with NWF's agenda. She cited, for instance, NWF's support for the legalization of abortion, as an occasion of this conflict. Even though she may not agree with some of NWF's general opinions, this does not diminish her support of the organization, as disagreements often emerge among members. While these disagreements have at times led to quarrels, in Dina's case, it does not detract her overall commitment to her work. Dina's participation at NWF demonstrates the unique way NGO work can shape an individual's analytic framework. Although women consistently cite NWF's influence in making them more vocal in social critique, one of the organization's stated goals,

these goals manifest themselves differently among distinct individuals. In Dina's case, she would not call herself a feminist, as she hasn't read feminist theory and isn't familiar enough with what feminism really means. Also, among her conservative family and friends, feminism holds a common stigma, so she believes calling herself a feminist would be damaging to her position and argument. Dina relates as a Muslim more than a feminist, and her time at NWF has both shaped and reiterated her experience as a religious person. Participating at NWF has not diminished Dina's desire for religion, though it has altered the way its power functions upon her. She described her position in religion now as a more active one, critiquing what she hears as right or Islamic instead of accepting it without change. In becoming a more active agent in religion, she believes her sense of religiosity becomes more sincere.

Navigating Marriage and Romance

In discussing the challenges they have faced participating in an organization like NWF, most young women brought up the topic of marriage, often with a sardonic laugh. In this project, the forces of power active in NGO work are woven throughout its participants' personal and inner lives, with reflections on marriage emerging as another salient topic. As I have described among NWF participants, NGO work is experienced by many in a deeply personal way, described with the same kind of passionate language as romance. Though many described a typical Egyptian man and prescribed behavior for a wife, a number of them still achieved success in finding a husband who was not against their participation. Like their descriptions of their families, they understood these men to be exceptions that proved the rule of patriarchal culture. NWF's young women acknowledged romantic relationships to be structured by normative social expectations. They experienced these norms through their frustrations with finding suitable

marriage partners. Still, all young participants expressed desire to marry and establish their own families despite the obstacles. No one expressed a desire to deviate from the model of marriage dramatically, but rather to shift a traditional framework to support their feminist ideas and work.

Hend said she was disappointed in the failure of traditional courtship and marriage. Young people would often marry without getting to know each other well, yet in her mind few alternatives were available as she believed any Egyptian man would divorce his wife if he learned of any past relationship. I asked if there were exception to this depending on a man's temperament, and she firmly held to the opinion that this was simply the Egyptian mindset. Like many of the young women at NWF, she finds it very rare to find a husband who would accept and encourage her participation in a feminist organization. She confided that she could not compromise on such an issue, and would need to marry this very rare sort of man.

One day, Hend and I met up with another young staff member of NWF, Fatima. We discussed again the difficulties of finding a husband who would be supportive of a woman's participation at NWF. Fatima recounted multiple failed engagements before finally marrying her husband. She explained that working at NWF altered her perspective in that she could not marry a man who would not allow her to speak her mind. Hend noted the rarity of broken engagements, admiring Fatima for her bravery for sticking to her beliefs.

Manifesting Human Rights

In all conversations with project participants, we entered into discussion regarding human rights, as I attempted to glean their personal perspectives on such a prominently debated subject. I wondered if NWF's younger participants would have different opinions on human rights than

the older activists. While such variation did exist, all participants expressed favorable opinions on a human rights framework in general. With David Kennedy's critique of human rights strong-arming the realm "emancipatory possibility" in my mind, I found that NWF's women visions of social justice were in many ways consistent, but not so simply dominated as Kennedy may argue (2002). When talking about human rights, different women take the discussion in different directions, showing a variety of manifestations that a human rights framework may take. While these alternatives overlap in many ways, they discount the notion of human rights as simply a dominating and homogenizing discourse. Not only do women's discussions of human rights vary, they also evidence a strong personal resonance many NWF participants experience.

Dina understands human rights to be a framework to take on issues from an angle of "basic needs as a human," with women "needing to be treated like human beings." We talk further as to what this entails exactly. In her option, this does not correspond to political or legal rights necessarily, but can be used to approach a wide range of topics. Citing discriminatory family law as example, she acknowledged that legal changes are important. Still, some of her greatest concerns in Egypt are the lack of sexual education in schools and the prominence of sexual harassment. Interestingly, she suggests the UN involve itself in these matters, imagining UN staff providing human rights based materials and training Egyptian teachers in sexual education. Many scholars cite frustration with the UN system and its efficacy, but women at NWF generally support the institution, breaking down what they believe are stereotypes impeding the participation of women in developing countries (Englund 2006). Dina also believes that when utilizing the language of human rights, an organization may jeopardize its trust and

confidence within a community as well as create more problems for itself with the Ministry of Social Solidarity.

Another young staff member and friend of Dina and Fatima, Rebaa believes that a human rights perspective has infused her perspective on daily life. Human rights reaches beyond simply a political framework and into her analysis of day-to-day issues. She regretted that most do not connect their daily problems and sufferings with a particular political situation. In line with the feminist doctrine of transforming the private into the public, she noted that personal problems always have some kind of politics guiding the situation. She sees this boundary maintained on many levels, from social interactions with her friends and to NGO work in general. Her friends will be caught up with the kinds of concerns that young women are expected to hold, like finding a husband, without considering the "bigger picture" guiding their options. In another example she gives, NGOs will need to publically maintain they are nonpolitical in order to operate without trouble. This orientation makes an organization less effective, as she notes that of course, politics can't be split away from the problems of daily life. In her opinion, human rights offers an intellectual framework for the connection between the realms of politics and everyday life.

For Hend, the basic needs of being human and a woman's status as human take on a more artistic and visceral tone and usage. Though Hend sighed with disappointment at her dreams of becoming an actress, she still describes a very active artistic and intellectual life. She enjoys writing poetry and prose both in English and Arabic. She predominantly uses language that is not explicitly religious, but more secular humanist, though written in a very intense and dramatic style. In one of her titles, she asks, "What am I?" and gives the answer "Human," imploring the reader to consider her as human first and foremost. Her language is reminiscent of human rights,

though perhaps recalling a different notion of human than is typically posed. As Hend is not as passionate about political issues as she is art, human in her usage doesn't refer to a legal-political subject, but rather to a more cerebral and intuitive notion of shared humanity. Though human rights talk is very common at an organization like NWF, the voice Hend uses in her poetry creates a more visceral and gripping sense of what being human means. She works with a network of friends to publish and disseminate this work. Currently, they are trying to find a publisher for a compilation of poetry and prose they have named, "A Bit of Light." In this way, the language of human rights has been allocated to an artistic perspective and has provided a basis for friendships and creative collaboration.

Problems and Navigations in NGO Work

Though they all ascribe great personal meaning to their work at NWF, young women participants also acknowledged certain problems in the NGO system. Nivene notes the presence of a wider patriarchal culture within NGOs themselves, even those oriented towards human rights. This bias results in men dominating leadership positions in NGOs, and in Nivene's opinion, NGOs need to look to themselves and their own prejudices before working to change society. Nivene and Hend also believe that some NGOs are simply "names" and work for prestige and media recognition. Hend noted that NGO work was a good inroad to politics and fame, perhaps then attracting some disingenuous figures. Explaining the large numbers of NGOs in Egypt today, Nivene cites Egypt's high populations, and argues that if more citizens were involved in civic projects, such numbers would be even higher. Additionally, various organizations served assorted functions, with each fulfilling a different service. She

acknowledges that is unlikely that every organization truly works hard or is efficient, but this does not shake her personal commitment to NGO work in general.

Rebaa, the young staff member who described human rights as a deep reaching perspective and personal philosophy, frequently participates in street protests and other grassroots based movements. She believes that in her position as an activist in a feminist NGO, she cannot interact with the rest of society, with "real society," as activists are an isolated group. In her reflections on the limitations of NGO work, she balances the acknowledged restrictions of civic organizations with the strengths of protest movements. While an NGO may not have the visceral power of a mass gathering in the streets, Rebaa notes that protest movements are more disorganized and unable to plan for long-term strategies as NGOs can. Street protests and civic organizations, however, are not mutually exclusive. NWF participates within protest movements, and Rebaa believes that NGOs must work together with such movements to establish planning and a clearer vision. She presents an interesting cooperation that harmonizes the flaws and advantages of structured and unstructured forms, between bureaucratic NGOs and powerful, but perhaps short-sighted, protest movements. In this balance, she does not doubt her participation in NGO work as overly technical or detached from the grassroots. Instead, working at NWF and participating in street protests allows her to take part in social activism in different ways, drawing on the strengths and downfalls of each approach.

At NWF in particular, young staff members express ways in which they hope the organization to develop further. Some dismay at the ability of the scholarly magazine the center produces to influence a wide new audience. Instead, many cite art as a way to reach more young people. The integration of artistic mediums has been a new direction of a number of NGOs and

follows with NWF's creative orientation. Participants believed their opinions were taken into account in directing the organization's agenda and anticipate more artistic projects being incorporated in the future. Others also hoped for greater inclusion of men into NWF's activities. While there are some men volunteers and a handful of male seminar attendees, participation in the organization is generally dominated by women. Nivene notes that gender issues involve both men and women, and for conditions for women to change, men must likewise be included in the process. Rebaa reiterates this concern, noting that the most difficult task is to change "our own minds," referring to the NGO world itself.

Conclusions

In the varied group of young women at NWF, participation in NGO work makes meaning in their lives in myriad of ways. Though many of them did not intend to work at an organization like NWF, all of them cite their participation there as personally and intellectually gratifying. Navigating their love and obligation to their families, sense of religiosity, and intellectual sensibilities, these young women discuss power in multi-faceted ways. Their reflections on human rights talk reveal the diversity in manifestation of dominant discourses among different individuals. At the same time, these women's experiences with their families and religion provide nuance to any process of domination. Although women acknowledge limitations they act under, their love and commitment to their parents, friends, and faith make this process much more dynamic than simple coercion. In this chapter, I have drawn primarily upon Foucault to explicate these reflections, as I hope to have shown that Foucault's framework of power best coincides with these young women's nuanced perspectives.

This project's participants comprise a variety of voices, and as such, fit models of feminist work in different ways. Blurring commonly held assumptions of women's activism, Margot Badran, for example, describes a growing cooperation and subsequent lack of differentiation between secular and Islamic activists (2005). NWF's younger staff likewise demonstrate a more fluid identity, as so many of them hold both a commitment to women's rights and their religious beliefs. I do not attempt to discount the intellectual and practical tensions experienced in these dually-held beliefs, but NWF's young women's perspectives do support the growing synthesis between the two assumed categories of activist work. In line with Badran's argument, experiences of NWF staff, especially its youngest members, break down a diametric opposition between secular and Islamic feminists. For many of NWF's young women, their experiences with feminism are part of wider longings for self-realization and creativity. These young women do not experience the boundaries between secular and religious or authentic and foreign in their own theoretical frameworks, but rather through the critiques leveled against their work by family and friends. While its founding members generally deny invoking any religious frameworks, the weight of such a delineation is not borne as heavily by the younger generation. Transnational discourses on women's rights in fact permeate and circle within religious conceptions of self. In her work Laura Deeb notes the "the necessity of considering transnational discourses on gender and Islam in our analyses of piety," as religious are well aware of the high-stakes of their self-representation and engage with transnational discourses accordingly (2009, 112). NWF young women express these many discourses through the lens of personal experience, through multiple strongly-held loyalties and longings.

Staking Out on Her Own: A Young Activist's Reflections on her Work

This project's final ethnographic chapter focuses in on a woman who does not fall squarely into the category of stalwart activist or young staff. Marwa is, as I describe in the chapter's title, "staking out on her own" from NWF, and her perspectives in this liminal period have proved particularly fruitful. Marwa and I first met following a session of the newly formed Young Women's Forum. She inquired further into my research and expressed an interest to help, as she was involved in women's rights work through NWF as well as her own NGO. As testament to the strength of global ties in development and human rights, she would soon be departing for an internship in Europe and would remain there a few months. We met up after her return to Cairo for what was to be a 30 minute interview, but continued on for hours and marked the beginning of a key friendship in this project. She remarked that this first interview was a kind of catharsis for her, that with me she could talk through her heavily felt frustrations. In this chapter, I will outline Marwa's reflections on the forces of power structuring NGO work and her own position within such systems. To do so, I will draw upon social theory paralleling her own analytic framework and then build upon this theory to further explore the frustrations emergent in her work.

Like most of this project's participants, Marwa speaks passionately about women's rights. Yet woven within this passion is a tension that gives nuance to her experience of dedication. Though she is morally committed to the ideals behind human rights, the realities of the work gives her pause. We connected over our shared hesitations in human rights work, mine experienced mainly as a scholar reading critiques of human rights' reiteration of the the status quo, and with hers as a practitioner in the field. As she so often expressed frustration in NGO

work, I was also intrigued as to why she continued in this career. She obviously committed much thought to charting the field's limitations and contradictions, and surely this disquiet remains with her through her day-to-day work. Still, she continues on in a career that she believes demands full dedication and personal passion. Through our relationship, I would try to tease out the intricacies of Marwa's critiques, skepticisms and ultimate commitment to NGO work for women's rights.

Growing Misgivings

Over the course of our relationship, Marwa's disappointment in NGO efforts grew. She recounts her initial experiences in the field through NWF as quite different from those she faces now. As a young student, Marwa participated in the Young Women's Forum (YWF) at its peak during NWF's period of expansion a decade ago. The stated goal of YWF is to create the next generation of NWF's feminist leaders. Many expressed hesitation as to whether or not the forum truly reaches its lofty goals, yet still, many of NWF's most passionate staff members began their careers at YWF. In particular, many of NWF's current younger staff members are Marwa's peers as members of this first generation of the forum. The forum was lead by a Cairo University professor and explored scholarly topics such as historical concepts of civil society, the waves of feminism, and legislation like CEDAW. Following this academic focus, Marwa recounts inspired intellectual debates on women's issues which left her feeling sincerely moved and transformed. After moving to a smaller city for university, she found the atmosphere much more conservative than Cairo and at NWF. Still, when she broached the subjects of feminism and human rights, her friends were interested and asked where she learned about such topics. These encounters inspired

Marwa to try and create a space like YWF in this smaller city. With this enthusiasm, she and her friends decided to establish their own NGO in the same vein as NWF.

As she would find out, the process of starting an NGO and obtaining government approval is long and arduous. In Marwa's case, further difficulties arose from the politics of the project's location. Set in the Suez region, the area is heavily militarized. Even in the city itself, military bases have a conspicuous presence. Obtaining government certification is already a tricky matter, even more so for an organization oriented towards human rights. Even NWF itself, already a long-standing and reputable organization, was initially denied approval by the Ministry of Social Solidarity. Obtaining funding would also prove difficult. At the time of Marwa's initial idea, she knew of no NGOs in the area who had succeeded in obtaining foreign funding: checks from foreign organizations are routinely sent back by intercepting government or military agents. Still, she persevered in her attempts, and the organization's registration was finally approved four years later.

While she envisioned the NGO's work to be in the field of human rights, she excluded the phrase from the organization's official materials to prevent further delay in registration. Still, she considers the organization to be working primarily under the framework of human rights and women's rights, as she, like most in the field, considers women's rights a subset of human rights. Through the organization, she aimed to support area women working under harsh conditions, noting sexual harassment as a particular problem. She would try and teach these women frameworks of human rights and CEDAW in order to seek redress for such problems. Like NWF, her aim was for this NGO to act as an advocate for women, providing tools for them to work for their own goals and interests. She is clear that advocacy is their primary goal, making

them different from other more development-oriented agencies. Marwa's organization, like NWF, seeks to stand behind and support the issues women already express interest in, rather than impose its own agenda.

Uncertainty and the State

Among all the actors restricting and guiding her NGO work, she discussed the Egyptian state as the most inflexible system of power she encounters. She has no point of entry to navigate the state; she has very little relational power to draw upon. To try and gain any traction, she must shift her given power, her intrinsic power, and bolster her standing through hiring a famous consultant. As I will further discuss with her reflections on networking, she finds manipulating her position in this way suspicious and antithetical to her moral convictions as an activist.

The future of her career rests upon certain actions of the state. As difficult as it already is to obtain foreign funding in the Suez region, a new harsher law governing civic funding has been circulating among the NGO community. While no concrete knowledge exists about this new law, various legislative documents have been leaked and rumors emerge surrounding its content. With what is currently known, the new law would require all foreign funds to be filtered through and distributed through the state, potentially making the direct application and receipt of foreign funds impossible. While NWF staff expresses less concern about this law, in the works of the legislature and the rumor mills of NGO networks for years, its passage stirs serious alarm for Marwa, as she is still trying to establish the footing of her fledgling organization. She sighed at the Egyptian state's power in its cultivation of uncertainty. Such uncertainty creates difficulty for her own navigation of this powerful system, as she must remain unaware of her own relative position and potential options.

Marwa described the inflexibility of the state and its control of her ability to act within its confines. Her perception of structuring agents like the state is then linked to her own perception of herself. In this project, I ask how women navigate and reinforce structures of power as well as where women locate their own personal identities to these systems. With Marwa, these two processes are coupled, as her sense of self is tied into how she interacts with these powerful actors. In relation to the state, she understands her own position to be somewhat fixed, helpless and dependent upon the actions of the state. The sense of helplessness emergent from this power relationship creates a layer of her experience of NGO work.

The Double-Edged Sword of Networking

As Marwa described, the function of regional and transnational networks possesses two faces, providing resources to NGOs while also maintaining stasis through its growing bureaucracies and support of established partners. Throughout her career as student and activist, Marwa had made multiple attempts to work and study in the United States or Europe through development agencies. Finally, an opportunity came for an internship in Germany through a women's rights organization. This program allowed her a rare and exciting chance to travel as well as work as a researcher. She found time in this organization and Germany in general to be intellectually stimulating, motivating her to continue on her work in Egypt. After returning from her internship in Europe recharged and ready to immerse herself again her NGO, she soon became disheartened at the frustrating realities of women's rights work in Egypt.

Speaking with her after this return, she expressed ambivalence regarding the role large transnational networks play in shaping human rights work. On one hand, her internship in Germany and her camaraderie with her European colleagues exemplifies the shared moral and

intellectual outlooks that characterize linkages among networks in women's rights. After finishing this program and returning to day-to-day work in Egypt, however, she experienced more of the underside of network relationships. In the field of human rights and women's rights, funding is mainly obtained through foreign sources. NWF, for instance, is just beginning to look into local funders, as one of their funding coordinators noted, foreign agencies are much more likely to be specifically oriented towards women or human rights as opposed to more general social development. For Marwa, there are two primary problems in obtaining this funding. First, as mentioned, the NGO's problematic location in a highly militarized zone and the government's unwillingness to allow the flow of foreign funds therein. Marwa was aware, however, of a recent exception to policy, as an area NGO with a famous and respected figurehead had been allowed to receive foreign funds.

This exception links up to the second problem she has faced in establishing a new NGO, earning the "trust" of large funding organizations. In her attempts to obtain funding, she has found that prominent organizations prefer to fund NGOs whom they have funded in the past or have received funds from another large organization. Many agencies she approached would not accept applications for NGOs they were not already working with. Establishing a record of trust with these large agencies was necessary to be approved for funds. The problem remains of trying to obtain this trust initially as a new and untested NGO. Marwa stands undecided as to going about this process. She has been advised by friends and colleagues to solicit a well-known public figure to attach himself to the project. She is told that this is the method a young NGO typically employs in getting its foot in the door of funding agencies. Still, Marwa expressed concerns about this method, in that she feels guilty to draw upon her network connections in this way.

This system of trust that such networks rely upon can potentially encourage homogeneity and stasis in new NGOs, as they attempt to appear reliable and stable to foreign funders. While in recruiting the assistance of a reputable figure to gain this trust, Marwa believes she may be compromising her project's authenticity.

The linkages of trust in networking can potentially produce an atmosphere inhospitable to activists pursuing radical social change. While taking steps to gain network trust does not immediately or necessarily inhibit her potential for activism, she does not like what she sees in many long-standing figures in development and human rights. Marwa recounted a conversation with one high-ranking official in the field who informs her that he "no longer believes in women's rights." She expresses disdain at this sentiment, as women's rights is not the field for those who view the work simply as a job. It is a field better left to "those who believe." She later confides to me that it is common knowledge among those in the field that corruption is rampant in human rights work in Egypt. She believes activists choose to focus on less controversial government-approved topics in exchange for monetary or legal security. This suspicion is repeated by many of the project's participants, and while here I do not corroborate or refute this claim, it reflects a widely felt sentiment, coloring the atmosphere of human rights work. Ideally, Marwa noted there would not be a need for foreign funding, that the work could all be performed on a voluntary basis. However, working strictly on a voluntary basis as her NGO does now limits her ability to plan long-term, as she does not know what kind of resources she will have in the future. She experiences ambivalence in the way that NGO networks function as a "business," as such a model appears contradictory to the ideals of her vision. She also refered to NGO work as

a "game," referring to the steps you must take, such as the famous consultants you must recruit, in order to be successful.

As Campbell and Teghtsoonian cite in Kazakhstan, international organizations are increasingly concerned with aid effectiveness. In their study, they find increasing bureacratization of NGO work as resultant from this shift. This leads to increasing homogeneity and standardization among NGO projects, as well as further reiteration of social hierarchy that favors the elites (Campbell and Teghtsoonian 2010). Marwa was unaware of the recent turns in international agenda towards increasing regulation and evaluation of aid monies through the Paris and Accra accords, yet such new policies may exacerbate the problems she experiences in structures already in place. Too often, she notes, the "old partners" are favored over newer NGOs without an established record of measurable success. This idea is reiterated by a funding coordinator at NWF, as she notes one of the primary concerns of a funding organization is the recipient's demonstration of long term sustainability. Such focus on aid effectiveness and viability is not necessarily an unproductive step of funding agencies, as Campbell and Teghtsoonian point out again in Kazakhstan that many women in fact draw upon these new regulations to improve and monitor their work. Another consequence of this process, however, is that young people like Marwa working in untested NGOs may have difficulty succeeding unless they can establish necessary connections and trust.

While Marwa is by no means opposed to the presence and assistance of foreign organizations, she recognizes their double-edged nature with ambivalence. She has made friends abroad through networking links with other women who share her commitment to women's rights. Through these organizations, she has gained both economic and intellectual support. In

Marwa's opinion, discontinuities arise through the emergent structures network activity forms. She described some donors as "machines," who must give out a certain amount of money and trust old partners who can reliably provide them with proper reports and good evaluations. Still, she acknowledges the necessity of their presence.

The importance of network connections is not exclusive to the transnational level. Even within a local organization, Marwa notes that more long-standing members may be unwilling to yield any power to younger participants, also potentially stifling new ideas and discouraging young women. In a highly-charged field where networking is central, power does not only manifest itself at the levels of funding and state intervention, but in the disputes among personalities and rallies for authority. Network connections stand as a valuable form of social capital, ready to be exchanged for economic capital. Relationships among individuals and organizations guide access to opportunities and funds. This power is managed delicately, as Marwa recalls situations in her own work when colleagues have been hesitant to give out contact information in fear of offending another party, handling such information with care and deliberation.

Marwa's criticism of NGO networks stands consistent with the perspective of a number of women activists skeptical of the structuring role of networks. While this attitude was not the norm at NWF, it is not an uncommon sentiment. Another activist, a young Lebanese woman, writes to distinguish between networks and friendships, ultimately arguing that such friendships are in fact the future of women's activism. Interestingly enough, I met this young woman at meeting in fact organized by a transnational network NWF had participated in. The compilation *The Revolution Will Not be Funded* presented some even more extreme critiques of the

bureaucraziation professional networks creates (2007). As I reviewed in the project's conceptual framework, this criticism of NGO networks' eventual fall into highly structured bureaucracies reflects Turner's description of *communitas* and the intrinsic link between structure and anti-structure. The spirit of unity that guides *communitas* must inevitably regress back to its origins, and in Marwa's perspective, NGO work follows this pattern as old agencies dominate funding, coming to favor established partners, encouraging a bureacratic system of reporting and evaluation, that all in all come together to create a system slow to change. Turner's point in his theorization of *communitas* was not to criticize those working in the spirit of human equality or to argue the impossibility of social change. In its subtleties, communitas leaves room for tension in the mind of an activist working for her vision of justice while simultaneously aware of the limitations on her work. Marwa describes the many levels of structure that emerge in the idealistic field of human rights, from the rigid requirements of funding agencies or inflexibility of older activists. Still, as I will discuss later in this chapter, she continues to work in full knowledge of these limitations, intellectually navigating her own ambivalence.

A Nuanced Approach

When first approaching this project, I expected to hear many stories of ideological conflicts arising when employing a human rights and CEDAW framework while promoting women's issues. Most women, however, were tired of discussing whether or not CEDAW was more culturally authentic or applicable to Egyptian women, as if it were an argument of little resolution or productivity. Marwa told me that when confronted with such a debate, she found the question a moot point. She asks instead for the alternative, "what is our plan, if we are to follow our own agenda, be ourselves?" without receiving sufficient answer.

The exhaustion with this debate, however, does not preclude difference in opinion as to how human rights and CEDAW should actually manifest and be utilized in NGO work itself. Although most of the women I spoke with were quick to point out that they needed to be intelligent and adaptive in using rights language, disagreements remained as to how flexible exactly they could be. Most women I spoke to noted matter-of-factly that in order for their work to be of a human rights and CEDAW perspective, they do not necessarily need to use such language explicitly. In their work, women use language in different ways, more or less directly referring to human rights. Marwa criticized some organizations as being too "shocking" in their rights-based approach. She is careful not to promote the negative stereotype of a feminist, not to look or behave in a strikingly different manner, particularly in communities outside of Cairo. She recounted an incident working with another Cairene NGO travelling to a rural village, and expressing dismay that staff would smoke and bare their shoulders. She disapproved of this not because the behaviors in themselves were inappropriate, but that this was too shocking to the local women and subsequently made the NGO's work more difficult. Although even in an organization like NWF many of the younger staff dress more conservatively and behave in softer ways, Marwa believes the field of feminist activism has yet to fully embrace the traditional feminine. She believes that human rights work could be more efficient if it could avoid superficial stereotypes and become more inclusive of a wider range of women.

"Activism is not a career"

In one of our final meetings, Marwa and I discussed her future at her NGO and in human rights work in general. She noted with disappointment, that in her work in the field she had acquired no skills useful in the private sector and did not know how she could support herself as

an activist. She was working on a graduate degree in development, but expressed concern regarding its progress and completion. All research conducted through public universities requires government approval, and just like the process for NGO registration, this approval process is lengthy and precarious. Marwa does not know whether or not her project will be approved, leaving the outcome of her graduate program uncertain. Even if she is able to successfully complete her degree soon, she is still then faced with the challenge of obtaining a job in the field, or of finding sources of salary through her own NGO.

She mentioned a desire to start a family, but the cost of living and real estate in Cairo made this task daunting. Marriage could help her financially, but as many of the women in this project mention, most men would not be supportive of a woman's career in human rights. In fact, the majority of her friends who participated in the NGO initially are now too busy after their marriages with their own families to continue their participation. Marwa regretted the lack of feasible model of activism and family, that she knows of very few prominent activist women who also have a traditional family. This is due both to the dangerous and demanding character of human rights work. Most men would find this an unappealing line of work for a future wife. Marwa and others cite only one woman as having found a husband to support her in activist work, with him exemplifying the exception that proves the rule, that "he truly loves her" and would follow her in any endeavor. This kind of husband, she notes, is rare, but the necessary partner to a woman who wishes to remain in human rights work.

Persevering with Doubt

After one of our more dismal conversations, I ask Marwa why she continues at her NGO and in the field of women's rights in general. She took pause at this question, as in some ways

she is unsure of these reasons herself. Her relationship to her work is complex and by no means un-reflexive. She stressed, as she does often, that her successes as an activist are hard to define. Certainly there have been occasions in which she has doubted her position. While working as a researcher for NWF, for example, she was giving a talk on CEDAW to a group of women in Dar Es Salam, a very poor neighborhood in Cairo. A woman asked her, if she could not put food on the table for her children, then what was CEDAW and human rights to her? Marwa was embarrassed by this question, as she is aware of these women's dire circumstances. She repeated this sentiment to me again, how miniscule CEDAW's importance appears in the shadow of the daily challenges of survival. While Marwa acknowledged that the economy and the price of food in particular as the biggest problem Egyptian women face today, she still views CEDAW and human rights framework as tools to address and alleviate these greater problems. Perhaps they may not seem relevant in the face of the immediate and most important daily concerns of women with no economic options, yet she does not believe this does not mean they are not helpful at all. Again, she noted, the situation and her successes are in her words "complicated."

Considering her successes further, she says some of the greatest satisfaction she experiences in the field is sensing the desire of women for change. This is a desire she says she "sees in their eyes." After all, many women working in the factories she meets are highly-educated. They have graduated from university, but because of dismal job prospects, must take on low-paying positions. As much of the staff at NWF is quick to reiterate, these women are smart and have active intellectual lives, peaked by discussion of their rights. Marwa noted the obstacles to women workers taking up human rights and making cases for themselves against their employers. After all, employers can be quick to fire them as many others would be willing

to take their places. Still, she will receive a call from a worker asking to be in touch with further legal aid. Marwa cited such experiences as moments of motivation.

Through our friendship, I notice that some of her most powerfully felt experiences in the field, both good and bad, center on personal relationships. Her feelings of intellectual and moral camaraderie with her colleagues in Egypt and abroad as well as with her NGO's client are recounted as most satisfying. At the same time, her disappointment and disgust with old, staid figures who no longer "believe" in human rights or corrupt NGO officials who accept government bribes represent some of her more devastating experiences in the field. These positive and negative experiences among networks and clients gain particular significance due to the unique character and demands of NGO work. For Marwa, women's rights requires a level of passion and commitment that many other careers do not demand. If an activist is to lose that zeal, she loses credibility. She is disappointed in her friends working even within her NGO, that they are not truly committed to human rights. They are inconsistent on questions of women's rights, often favoring a focus on simple issues of charity and development rather than taking on more controversial topics. Harking back to Kent and Sikkink's description of the common moral underpinning of networking in general, those working in women's rights are supposed to share moral conviction as well (1999). At the same time, the day-to-day frustrations with funding and government wear down a young woman like Marwa, creating ambivalence and doubt about the field and her place in it. A pressure emerges in this tension, between what women's right work should be and how it is really experienced by young women like Marwa.

NGO Work as a Technology of Self

As I mention earlier in this chapter, for Marwa, her navigation of power is closely linked to her personal identity. In Marwa's opinion, work for women's rights and human rights requires a moral and intellectual commitment and passion unique to the field. This sentiment is echoed among other project participants at NWF. The expressed importance of moral commitment and activist authenticity links women's rights work to Foucault's technologies of self, "techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselvesposit1993, 202). Foucault traces the techniques of Christianity and the act of confession through this model, though notes that each society will have set of available technologies of self-care. While Marwa does not call herself religious, she is highly morally conscious, as she believes anyone in the field should be. Through interacting with clients, NWF staff, YWF peers, or agencies abroad, sharing moral connection among networks of women is integral to human rights work. As I will discuss in later chapters, women in different positions apply these techniques of the self to cultivate themselves in different ways, yet the personal connection to NGO work is ubiquitous. In this way, the process of cultivating morality and developing the self can be applied clearly to Marwa and this project's participants in general.

In the case of women developing their moral consciousness through activist NGOs, this development of the self is linked with the structures of power that govern human rights work. This model of the technologies of the self can then be analyzed along with analytics of power to explore the tensions produced in women activists like Marwa. As she is well aware, NGO work

is enacted within a web of state and international interests, transnational networks, and personal egos that color and delimit its possibilities. In Turner's description of the mutually constructive relationship between relational and intrinsic forms of power, the endeavors of a powerless actor in turn reinforce structures of power. While there is room for social change in this navigation, Marwa sees it more likely that she will simply reinforce the status quo. She is dismayed by corruption in the field and believes her authenticity as activist is jeopardized by a complacency implicit in her participation.

Marwa's perspective raises the question, how does an activist cultivate their moral identity with work they find restricting and corrupt? This inquiry speaks to the tensions Marwa experiences in her work. While she is developing her morality through activist work, she suspects the heavy forces of power at play may corrupt her efforts. This line of inquiry also calls to mind questions regarding the nature of such technologies of self. In some cases, is this cultivation of self a kind of coping method within oppressive structures of power? If that is the case, scholars must be careful not to employ technologies of self to intellectually liberate women who are working under truly restrictive conditions. To do so would be to discount the substantial powers of actors at play in NGO work. This warning calls to mind Valentine Moghadam's critique of Saba Mahmoud's vindication of Islamic feminists in Cairo's mosque movement. Mahmoud employs Foucault to demonstrate the personal and moral cultivations that women in the mosque movement achieve while working within a patriarchal system (2005). Moghadam remarks that Mahmoud's attempts to paint religious women as transformative leave her "not persuaded." Though she does not contest that religious women leave rich and meaningful lives, she stops short of calling them agents of change (Moghadam 2006).

Foucault seems to nod to this tendency as well as he reflects on the prominence of philosophy of the subject in the mid-twentieth century. Focus on the inner life of the self liberates the individual from dark circumstances as Foucault succinctly remarks, "Given the absurdity of wars, slaughters, and despotism, it seemed then to be up to the individual subject to give meaning to his existential choices"(1993, 202). While leaving room for techniques of self to act as coping mechanism, he argues for a more complex relationship between power and the self. In his own analysis, Foucault does not focus on the subject's inner life exclusively, noting instead the necessity of "interaction between those two types of techniques—techniques of domination and techniques of the selfposit1993, 202).

Conclusions

As I have detailed in her thorough reflections and sophisticated analytic framework, Marwa is well aware of the complex system in which NGO work is embedded. It would be naïve and misleading to argue that her work is defined simply through the solipsistic ways in which it cultivates her mind. Still, as I have demonstrated, the moral and intellectual component of NGO work is integral for a young activist like Marwa. As such, I argue against technologies of self necessarily acting simply as a coping mechanism. It is possible for individuals to employ such technologies under a range of circumstances, but just because a person can be analyzed in this way, the other forces of power working upon them are not dissolved. In Marwa's case, her sense of self and its cultivation are in fact linked to these forces through her own theorizations of power.

In this chapter, I have explored a young activist's reflections on the forces of power at play in NGO work and her positioning therein. I hope to have demonstrated the unique tensions

that may arise in a field that allows little room for ambiguity in the minds of its activists, but is itself is riddled with contradiction. I have drawn upon models of power as well as technologies of the self in order to explicate Marwa's perspective and tease out the tensions she has experienced. As I have discussed in previous chapters, not all participants in human rights NGO work experience this ambivalence so markedly. At NWF, the older activist-founders in particular are not as disturbed by such tensions as are Marwa and other younger women. Understanding the conflicts experienced by Marwa requires analysis on two levels, as articulated by Foucault's later work. He calls for examination of the "forms of understanding which the subject creates about himself" including both techniques of the self and techniques of domination "(1993, 203). The link between these two kinds of techniques is exemplified explicitly in this project, as Marwa's reflections on her own position take place among her active theorizations on the weight of domination pressing upon her. Though she is unable to navigate the state as freely as she can with NGO networks and funding agencies, her relationship with the state leaves her with a sense of helplessness while network manipulation makes her feel inauthentic, that she is playing a game in a field requiring deep moral sincerity and devotion. Together, these layers of reflection form her unique experience of ambivalence and commitment in working for women's rights.

Conclusions

Through this project, I have aimed to explore the active debates of power that emerge through women's activism in Cairo. By selecting to locate this research at New Woman Foundation, I have traced the different manifestations of these debates through the organization's myriad of participants. Through NWF, my project has included a wide range of women, from its stalwart activist founders, to its new young staff, and to Marwa, a young woman in the liminal

space of her own fledgling NGO. In this project, I have hoped to connect these women's many

voices to scholarly models of power, taking into account "the way that women themselves

actively participate in these debates and social struggles" (Abu-Lughod 1998, 3). Following

Foucault, I argue that such discourses are necessarily embodied through practice—through direct

debate among scholars, activists and the everyday navigations emergent through their civic work.

Through asking how women activists perceive, navigate, and debate questions of power and

agency, I have tried to provide an ethnographic study of the active lives of these anthropological

theoretical models. To explicate these navigations, I have focused on discussions of structures of

power directly as well as particpants' meta-understandings of power's theoretical function.

In the case of NWF's activist founders and their protégés, discourses like feminism and

human rights are debated to exhaustion. Facing critiques from other NGOs and community

organization, these stalwart activists must continuously defend their cultural authenticity and

autonomy. Engagement with transnational discourses in fact comes to in part define their own

perspectives and subjectivities. In discussions with NWF activists, the role of networking on

transnational, regional, and local planes is also explicated. Giving both support and further

nuance to scholarly studies of women's networks, NWF experiences describe the core necessity

of moral and intellectual solidarity in the functioning of any feminist group. Such solidarity is

both the means and ends to NWF's goal of greater feminist engagement and critical thought.

NWF's younger staff holds positions of greater ambivalence than their older colleagues

and mentors. Often unmarried and living with their families, they are not typically engaged in the

same debates and arenas as NWF's activist founders. While they are not attending and speaking

at wide meetings and conferences, they do engage in discussions of power and defend their work

among their family, friends, and peers. This new generation of feminists follows Margot

Badran's observation of the fading divide between secular and Islamic feminisms, as for many

young women, neither secular nor Islamic discourse alone trumps the other (2005).

I refer to the "convictions and ambivalences" experienced by NWF women in this

project's title to index the complex set of tensions and commitments to women's rights described

by nearly all of this project's participants to some degree. In the liminal space of Marwa,

breaking out of NWF and forming her own NGO of the same vein, these frustrations are

exacerbated by the lack of solidarity, both moral and practical, with the system of women's

rights work in general. Networking is linked to personal commitment, and as such, can be tied to

the cultivation of self as described by Foucault, Butler, and Saba Mahmood (Foucault 1988;

Butler 1997b; Saba Mahmood and American Council of Learned Societies 2005; S. Mahmood

2001). Though none of NWF's participants fit Mahmood's model of a docile agent, moral and

intellectual cultivation is integral to NWF's function both on an individual and organizational

level. Technologies of self-cultivation are linked to societal transformation in NWF women's

perspectives. Feminist work is not solely focused on developing the self, as that undermines the

importance of social change as a goal. Still, regardless of the power structures that inhibit the

transformative efficacy of feminist work, moral commitment and creative and intellectual

cultivation maintain its core. Resistance is therefore often a key component of NWF work,

though it is not reducible to such a simple paradigm.

Women's groups in the third world and in the Middle East specifically are rightfully

skeptical of scholarly analysis of their activities. As I referenced in this paper's opening, my

initial interest in this project stemmed from a humbling experience at a conference of women

activists and was reiterated again and again through thoughtful conversations with NWF staff. Using these reflections as my core ethnography, I have tried to be a conduit for the stories and thoughts NWF women have shared with me. I have hoped that through this project I would be able to take these reflections and tie them back into anthropological theory, analyzing the ways in which they can interact with each other, in their similarities and contradictions. In doing so, I have not tried to make over-arching analyses about NWF women, as indeed such analyses by Western observers can be received as naïve or arrogant. Any analysis of a complex individual will always be lacking, and a claim to have captured a person in anthropological analysis is likewise misguided. As my time at NWF was so short in relation to its other staff, I do not attempt to reach their level of expertise in the field of women's activism, as that would be a foolhardy task. Instead, I have tried to utilize my knowledge of anthropological theory to pose questions and create insightful discussion among NWF women that I could draw upon in my research. These considerations aside, staff at NWF were excited about my project and enthusiastic to be a part of my research. The young women, in particular, took much time in getting to know me, and we mutually enjoyed our discussions about feminism, social theory, and our lives. My approach for this project has directly arisen from my concerns of my position as Western scholar as my respect towards NWF women. I believe this respect was registered by project participants and reflected in our relationships and in the quality of the discussions that emerged.

Coincidentally, NWF staff deal with many of the same hesitations in their work as I do in this project. NWF orients itself as a scholarly institute and is likewise open to accusations of aloofness or arrogance. One of their primary sources of references, CEDAW, is critiqued harshly

by Western and non-Western scholars alike for its elitism. When broaching these debates with the one of the organization's founders, she seemed exhausted of such discussions, as if she had given defenses to them repeatedly. She asserts that human intelligent ought to be respected, and that everyone has the ability to reflect. She believes that NWF works from this principle by respecting this universally-held faculty of critique. NWF women must also defend the concept of feminism from its Western heritage, and as another founder argued, although a concept has a particular history, it does not necessarily mean that the concept cannot move outside its original bounds. While Western social concepts always carry their history with them, their emergences in different settings are grounded in local context, with ripe potential for transformation. Discussion with NWF women has reiterated that social theory in fact does "travel well," even though many of this project's participants were not familiar with anthropological theorists or their ideas specifically, they reflected upon the social world in similar ways.

In this project, I move away from questions of civil society's ultimate liberating or oppressive character. As anthropological theory suggests, power and agency are too closely intertwined for such a simple answer to be likely. Through the meta-discourse on power in the debates of women activists and civic participants, I further explore layered perceptions of power and agency's location therein. In doing so, I would like to apply ethnography's eye for detail to a field inundated with polemical claims. Through this project, I hope to have added the voices of a varied feminist group to scholarly debates on gender in the Middle East.

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