

**The role of women in the juxtaposition between
Islam and Political Islam**

Unveiling Arabian Nights

Enrico Matteo Rosati

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Thesis Advisor:

PhD Giulia Daniele
Invited Assistant Professor CEI - Center of International Studies
ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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Resumo

O ressurgimento do Fundamentalismo Islâmico determinou um novo interesse pelos países muçulmanos. O Islão tornou-se um foco de análise para estudar o compromisso desses países para o caminho da democracia.

O papel das mulheres no Islão é de suprema importância, até porque a interrelação entre religião e questões de género é matéria fértil não só na discussão académica, mas também nas políticas nacionais/transnacionais, análises colonialistas e pós-colonialistas, na afirmação de poderes políticos e económicos, e na definição de identidades.

Esta tese de Mestrado foca-se em temáticas essenciais que realçam a igualdade de género no Alcorão e na Sunnah, a pesar de que a Sharia é cumprida com base numa interpretação histórica e patriarcal dos textos sagrados.

Não há um único Islã político e a condição das mulheres varia de país para país, de região para região.

Este trabalho visa uma melhor compreensão da miscelânea, da variedade, da sobreposição da moral e da legislação no mundo Islâmico a partir do estudo do Hezbollah, do Hamas e da Irmandade Muçulmana. Também realça as dualidades duma sociedade baseada na ética do care, num Islão Progressista e num Feminismo Islâmico, assumindo de que cada ser humano é único e é o que nos enriquece.

Palavras-chave: Islão, política Islâmica, igualdade de género, ética do care, Feminismo Islâmico.

Abstract

The resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism determined a new wave of interest about Muslim countries; Islam became a privileged category of analysis to investigate the commitment of these countries through a democratic path. Women's role in Islam is extremely relevant since the relationship between religion and gender issues has become a fertile ground of discussion in academia, and also in local and transnational politics, in colonial and postcolonial analysis, in the affirmation of economic and political powers, and in the definition of identities.

This Master thesis unfolds some pivotal issues to highlight the Quran and the Sunnah's gender egalitarian attitude. Thus Sharia is enforced on the base of an ahistorical and patriarchal interpretation of the sacred texts.

Moreover, there is not only one Political Islam, and women's living conditions vary notably from country to country, from region to region.

This work aims at understanding the miscellany, the variety, the juxtaposition among Islamic morals and legislation in three case studies: Hezbollah, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Additionally, it tries to overcome several dualities offering an approach to a society founded on the Ethic of Care, on Progressive Islam and Islamic Feminism, on the base that each human being is different from others and that differences enrich us.

Keywords: Islam, Political Islam, Gender Equality, Ethic of Care, Islamic Feminism.

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1. Unveiling Arabian Nights

“The darkness is at its deepest. Just before the sunrise.”

Voltaire

The Islamic dictates, in Muslim countries, through the application of Sharia, regulate the family law and ascribe different, gender-based roles to men and women, where different means inferior, in most cases, for the latter. The aim of this thesis is to highlight that women's issues as well as gender¹ inequality are neither specific of the Islamic countries nor of Islam in general terms.

1.1 Gender and Religion: a resurgent question

In the wake of the terrorist assaults on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, a new wave of commentary appeared, especially in the United States, that questioned the capacity of Muslim and especially Middle Eastern countries to establish modern, democratic, secular, and gender-egalitarian social systems[...] A study by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris asserted that cultural fault line dividing the West and the Islamic world had to do with gender relations, the position of women, and attitudes toward sexuality. (Moghadam, 2013, p.4-5)

Woman's prominent roles, common to the major world religions, even if emerging with varied nuances in different historical and geographical contexts, are those of wife and mother. These roles have affected the political, social and cultural conditions of women all over the world and have animated the feminist debates in the East as well as in the West. Nonetheless, the religion's influence on the political and social sphere has had different outcomes due to several variables, in Eastern as well as in Western countries.

There is not only one Islam and there is not a stereotypical Islamic woman in all the Islamic countries, the image of Islamic women varies extremely from place to place.

In some Muslim countries, women are not permitted to travel if not accompanied, are not permitted to unilateral divorce and are not permitted to work (Afary, 2004). A strict conduct code regulates their spaces, their clothes, their permissible social interactions. The

¹ Scott defined gender there as “a social category imposed on a sexed body,” and stated, in a line that has since been quoted by scholars in many fields, that “gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power”. Meade, T. and Wiesner-Hanks, M. (2004, p.1).

fundamental rights (as explicated in the “Universal Human Rights Chart”, and ratified by several Muslim countries) to civil and social participation, are denied or strictly limited to them in several cases.

The central question is: can these unequal women’s conditions be ascribed to Islam?

The mediatic worldwide appearance of the “Islamic question”, after the resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism² since the 80s, and the dramatic, terroristic attacks, conducted during the last years in several Western nations, determined a new wave of interest about Muslim countries and in particular about the MENA region, motherland of a massive number of immigrants in the West. Meanwhile, it has stimulated a response from the part of the Umma³ that perceived it as a threat to the Muslim identity. The very term of “fundamentalism” is questioned, and some authors refer to this recent movement as “extremism” (Wahiduddin Khan, 2018). In this work, I use the term fundamentalism as related to its characteristic feature: the strict adherence to Quran and Sunnah principles as literally read. Due to this feature and to the interpretation of the basic principles of Islam, enforced by Fundamentalists, Islam has become a privileged category of analysis to study, to explain, to explore and to investigate the commitment of the Muslim countries through a democratic path. The role of women is central in this analysis.

Religions have created and legitimated gender, enforced, oppressed, and warped it, but also subverted, transgressed, transformed, and liberated it. It is because of this complex interrelationship that the topic of religion and gender provides such a fascinating object of study. (Meade & Wiesner, 2004, p.71)

1.2 Women and Political Islam

1.2.1 Emerging Debates

Islam/women issue has become a fertile ground of discussion and confrontation for Eastern and Western scholars of very different perspectives and point of views. It is embedded in

² Islamic Fundamentalism is a broad term that refers to the philosophical or theological approach of certain groups within the Islamic tradition who hold that the Qur'an is the inerrant and literal word of God, and that Muslims are required to strictly adhere to the religious practices and moral codes found there hold that there should be no distinction between religious and political life. See the following definition <http://www.patheos.com/library/islamic-fundamentalism>

³ The whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion. Oxford Dictionaries | English. (2018).

local but even in transnational politics, colonial and postcolonial analysis, nationalistic struggles, anti-Western stances, affirmation of economic, political and gender power.

Current feminist debates are explored in one of the chapters of this work, “Political Islam”. These debates, from inside as well as from outside Islam, focus on women’s rights issues. “The reality for all women, religious or non-religious, is that they live in patriarchal cultures” (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2008, p.100).

The two prevailing theories, different but not antithetical, aiming to the implementation of egalitarian policies in Islamic states and Muslim communities are the Islamic feminism and the secular feminism.

Islamic feminism is a new area of scholarship that engages with Islamic sacred texts (the Qur’an and Sunnah) and its interpretive tradition (i.e. exegesis, jurisprudence, Hadith compilations, etc.), driven primarily by the question of gender justice and methodological reform. This scholarship consists of studies that critically revisit and unpack dominant religious interpretations that are patriarchal and discriminatory against women, and aim to produce new knowledge that makes the case for gender equality and justice from within an Islamic paradigm. (Al-sharmani, 2018, p.83).

Muslims’ secular feminism first arose on the soil of various emergent nation-states [...] Secular feminism emerged as a composite of intersecting secular nationalist, Islamic modernist, and humanitarian discourses [...] located within the context of a secular territorial nation-state composed of equal citizens, irrespective of religious affiliation. (Badran, 2009, p.7).

The emerging paradigm of the Islamic feminism, while working side by side with the secular feminism, intercepts themes and methodology common to progressive Islam⁴ so that the intrinsic equality of all human beings can be traced in the Quran and in the Sunnah through a direct reading and interpretation of the sacred texts. In this direction, the principle of tolerance towards diversities (including gender diversity) has been expressed by the recent movement

⁴ “A progressive Islam by not adopting sectarian approach is respectful of entire humanity and human dignity as per Qur’an” (17:70). He leaves mutual differences, ideological and theological to Allah alone and does not condemn anyone who differences from him/her” Imtiyaz Yusuf(2011) cited in Kersten, C., Kersten, C. and profile, V. (2018). *What makes a Progressive Muslim?* [online] Caroolkers Available at <http://caroolkersten.blogspot.com/2011/04/what-makes-progressive-muslim.html> [Accessed 3 June 2018].

of moderate Islam⁵, a current highly criticized both by Muslim “traditional” believers and by skeptical Western commentators. It was interpreted as the need to take distance from the radical positions so strictly associated with terrorism.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, a recurring injunction within the American commentary on Islam has been for Muslims to condemn any and all acts of violence committed in the name of their religion. The demand for ‘moderate Muslims’ to please come forward and reclaim their religion has also featured heavily. (Mandaville, 2006, p.20).

The Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, driven by economic reasons, tells The Guardian:

The ultra-conservative state had been “not normal” for the past 30 years... We are simply reverting to what we followed – a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions”. The changes have tackled head-on societal taboos such as the recently rescinded ban on women driving as well as scaling back guardianship laws that restrict women’s roles and establishing an Islamic centre tasked with certifying the sayings of the prophet Muhammed. (Chulov, 2017, p.X).

1.2.2 Religious Knowledge

Moderate and progressive Islam, feminism - both secular and Islamic, and radical Islamist positions, while proposing different and even antithetical interpretations, base their analysis of Muslim societies on questioning the legitimacy of Sharia, of the application of Islamic dictates to state law, of Political Islam, by looking at cultural and civil aspects. What is at stake, in this analysis, is the multilevel and multi-process foundation of Sharia.

Sharia is based on two Islamic revealed sources, the Quran and the Sunnah, and on other two cultural aspects, Ijma and Qiyas or common consensus and juridical analogy that find legitimization through the reasoning over the interpretation of the first two.

These interrelated aspects of interpreting, reasoning and translating religious dictates into the political sphere, had different outcomes related to the various historical, geographical and cultural contexts and resulted in contemporary different, and often incompatible,

⁵ There is not a unique definition of moderate Islam. The term moderate is intended to lighten the term extremism and to underline the tolerance of this approach.

interpretations. In the words of Mandaville (2007), the religious knowledge process in the Islamic tradition, being the resultant of texts, narrative discourse and personified knowledge, conjugated with the absence of a central, formal Church. This is a process based on a multiple relation of variables, intensified in the last decades by the expansion of time, space and authoritative persons and sources determined by globalization. The question he poses is: “Who speaks for Islam?” (Mandaville, 2007, p.20), highlighting the facts that each of the possible interpretations about Islam works as a “geopolitical and geo cultural affiliation” (Mandaville, 2007, p.21).

Following the Islamic Feminism paradigm, the thesis at the base of this study is that the Quran does not legitimize gender-inequality laws and that the minor status assigned to women, in most of the Muslim countries, derives from the application of Sharia, based on a patriarchal reading and interpretation of the Sacred Text.

The issue at stake is about the reasons at the base of this process.

Insofar as all texts are polysemic, they are open to variant readings. We cannot, therefore, look to a text alone to explain why people have read it in a particular mode or why they tend to favor one reading of it over another. This is especially true of a sacred text like the Qur'an which has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary, and psychological contexts and then been continually recontextualized in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors... In particular, we need to examine the roles of Muslim interpretive communities and states (the realm of sexual politics) in shaping religious knowledge and authority in ways that enabled patriarchal readings of the Qur'an. (Barlas, 2002, p.7).

1.3 Women and Islam

1.3.1 Methodology and the Exegetical Approach

In the following chapter “*Women and Islam*” I present some passages of the Quran to support the thesis. As mentioned above, the exegetic approach⁶ and the egalitarian reading of the Holy Book are features shared by Progressive Islam movements and Islamic feminist theories.

The narrative discourse of Islamic feminism is that the Quran enhances gender equality as well as class, ethnic and religious equality. It underlines that the traditional Islamic

⁶ "Critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially of scripture." English Dictionary, Thesaurus, & grammar help | Oxford Dictionaries. (2018). Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>

jurisprudence was influenced by the patriarchal view of the society during some specific historical periods and in some geographical areas, common to East, West and Middle East. The modern and contemporary recalling of those traditional male interpretations and the following application of religious dictates in the political sphere is questioned by Islamic feminism as a way to keep the patriarchal power. The fundamental claim is that ambiguous passages of the Holy Book, interpreted in a gender-biased way, turned from contingent to universal while others passages, affirming the universal equality of all human beings, were discarded.

The analysis of pivotal passages of the Quran is followed by the stories of two preeminent women living, side by side, with the Prophet, as protagonists.

The reading of the tales of Khadijah and Fatimah is encompassed in the exegesis of the second revealed sacred source, the Sunnah, as the “established custom, normative precedent, conduct, and cumulative tradition, typically based on Muhammad 's example” [hadith]⁷. “The actions and sayings of Muhammad are believed to complement the divinely revealed message of the Quran, constituting a source for establishing norms for Muslim conduct and making it a primary source of Islamic law.” (Esposito *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*).

With regard to the hadiths, Islamic feminists challenge the authenticity of some of them while, in other cases, point out how, depending by the political orientation of the jurist, some of them are selected to justify the specific application of the fiqh (jurisprudencia) (Tonnessen, 2014).

The same claim was sustained by Fazlur Rahman (1982). He proposed a new study of the Quran, challenging its traditional, literal interpretation. He advanced, on the contrary, a contextualized reading of the Text to establish the general principles and to distinguish them from those enforceable only under historical, specific circumstances. Then, he suggested the application of universal principles to modern societies. This methodology tries to overcome the duality Islam/modernity advanced by secularists. Following the author, the reason of the inappropriate fracture between modern and Islamic is due to the educational system where the religious and the secular practical teachings are separate and the first ones are fixed in rhetoric and dogmas (Rahman, 1982).

⁷ “The term “hadith” has acquired in Islamic literature the very specific meaning of reports about what the Prophet said, did, approved, and disapproved, explicitly or implicitly. Retrieved from <http://www.quranicstudies.com>

1.3.2 Overcoming Dichotomies

The debates are nowadays biased either by an anti-western or occidental rhetoric and clamorous prejudices are at work. As we cited the divide between the religious and the secular perspectives in Islamic interpretations, which characterized the feminist debates and its recomposition, is at the base of the new, contemporary discourses of a modernizing and modern Islam. Riffat Hassan, for example, challenges the assertions that human rights can only be read and implemented in a secular framework and traces the fundamental human rights in the Quran.

What is essential, in my opinion, is to overcome this divide to eradicate prejudices that cannot work to enhance women's situation living in different parts of the globe under regimes of gender inequalities. Following Margot Badran, "Islamic feminism rejects the dichotomy between east and west, and between secular and religious. These dichotomies were nurtured by colonialism and later politicized by Islamists as rigid and implacably adversarial identities." (2008,p.X).

To try to reconcile these dichotomies and to overcome prejudices that see secular feminism as Western-oriented and the Islamic feminism as a contradiction in term, I tried to experiment a new reading of the biographies of Khadija and Fatimah, through the lenses of liberal feminism. Assuming, as Moghadam states, the universality of the patriarchal order in the all major world religions, I traced the common issues of the women question both in the Islamic and in the Western tradition and proved how the lives of the two women, if contextualized in time and space, were incredible emancipatory, for Islamic as well for Western standards. Following Kymlicka, "many feminists believe that the principles [at the base of an "egalitarian plateau"] which were developed with men's experience and interests in mind are incapable of adequately recognizing women's needs or incorporating women's experiences." (2002, p.377). The three arguments that the author takes into consideration, with the purpose of analyzing and to explaining the failure of male-biased feminist theories, are the "difference approach", the "dominance approach" and the "ethic of care".

The "difference approach" aims at a sex-blind society and so to the implementation of laws granting equal access to social benefits and jobs position to gender-neutral persons. The problems arise when job requirements have to be compatible with women's domestic labor and childbearing. This approach does not consider discriminatory job requests as freedom from child caring responsibilities because these requests are not based on sexual discrimination even if, de facto, they force women in part-time and underpaid jobs while being economically dependent on men. Therefore, sex inequality is at work, justified by a real

sexual difference. “This, in turn, results in a system of cultural identification in which masculinity is associated with income earning and femininity is defined in terms of sexual and domestic service for men, and the nurturing of children” (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 382).

Catharine MacKinnon’s in her *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* criticized the formal equality of the difference approach. She proposed a legal theory drawn from women’s point of view and targeted to challenge patriarchal hierarchies in social relationships, from which derive mainly subordination suffered by women (MacKinnon, 1979).

The “dominance approach” proposed by MacKinnon tries to overcome the male domination. She states that women have to enforce the same power to create non-gendered roles and to move from a formal equality to a substantial, effective equality. Nevertheless, the substantive equality, does take account of the difference? Alternatively, we are again in a male-biased interpretation of justice? In relation to this, in her article on Islamic feminism, Kausar challenges Islamic feminists on the base of two main arguments.

Islamic feminists reject the notions of complementarity that is on the contrary accepted by Islamic scholars, since feminists oppose difference in treatment on the base of recognized sexual and biological difference, in the private as well in the public life. Moreover, Islamic feminism opposes, following Kausar, even a full gender equality that refuses to take into account gender differences and so granting gender-neutral equality in the access of public realm. This kind of “blind” equality leads to the concept of “equity”. Both these concepts are embedded, following Islamic feminism, in the patriarchal structure of the society where we live in, and resulted from a male-biased interpretation of equality (Kausar, 2016).

“Islamic Feminists claim that they believe in gender equality while also accepting the gender difference and rejecting complementarity. This is self-contradiction.” Kausar, 2016, p.10).

If we can interpret such self-contradiction in Islamic feminist theory with the necessity to reconcile some passage of the Quran, where explicit is the reference to the gender’s complementary with the concept of real equality, obviously, we cannot interpret in the same way and through the same responses that come from Western feminists.

The critique of the dominance approach comes from Elisabeth Gross. She underlines the necessity to move from the “freedom from” to the “freedom to”. The question she poses: “Is feminist theory best served through its traditional focus on women's attainment of a freedom from patriarchal, racist, colonialist and heteronormative constraint? Or by exploring what the female-or feminist- is and is capable of making and doing?” (Gross, 2018, p.141).

The issue at stake is to abandon the politics of equality to favor the politics of autonomy and to explore the varieties of activities that men and women can perform, alongside with the possibility of creating new standards.

The ethic of care, which is the “feminist philosophical perspective that uses a relational and context-bound approach toward morality and decision making” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018), asserts that the individual moral sensibilities develop differently. These new standards, including care and responsibilities for others, could be fully recognized in terms of power, as well as all the familiar activities that women choose to perform together with the public ones, and relocated in the realm of the public sphere.

In relation to this, Khadija and Fatimah, act, in my opinion, in a politics of autonomy.

The ethic of care, which implies moral dispositions, responses to particular cases, responsibilities and relationships, is juxtaposed with the ethic of justice that concerns moral principles, universal applicability, and fairness. Following Kymlicka, this difference in morality’s development was gender-biased interpreted and exploited from a patriarchal perspective to confine women in the realm of private life or it could even be a consequence of their segregation. Also if contested, this approach gave rise to a debate over the different, often complementary, feelings and thoughts that the individuals develop, issues which deserve to be further explored.

1.4 The Role of Women between Islam and Political Islam in Three Case Studies

The role of women, in the duality among Islam and Political Islam, is explicative as whether a political association is more focused on the development of Islamic norms following the Quran or, differently, bases its agenda on society and Political Islam. This duality will be observed in three case studies, namely Hezbollah, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. In all of them, it is present the “cult of war”, which is defined as the factor of war influencing the growth of a specific party or organization, giving it accolades of recognition based on patriarchal values. One example of the above statement comes from “A Rhetorical Examination and Critique of Hezbollah, The Party of God” in which the author depicts Hezbollah as a patriarchal party, “*indicates the transference of manhood state from generation to the other.*”(Kahil, 2006, p.35). Another important element that the three of them share is the veil as a symbol of revolution and of personal and collective identity. In Hezbollah, the revolutionary upheaval would be considered against the invasion of Lebanon,

and women acknowledging the risk of the latter decided still to wear it as a symbol of patriotism and struggle, especially when correlated with Al-Manar. Differently, Hamas resistance against Israel, and the wearing of the veil imply the idea of rebellion and pride in being Muslim, in a “state” where the biggest of the neighbors, Israel, confined pre-determined sets of individuals depending on their religion. In the last case, however, women wear the veil in order to rebel against the ghosts of colonization, and the rebellion thus is continued and grows against Western values and influence.

Distinguishing itself from the two other political actors mentioned above, the Muslim Brotherhood started their existence in the 20s in Egypt, in order to rebel against British Imperialism. Once the uprising was successful, the country adopted the 20s Arab society as a model for their constitutional changes and developed as a party in a patriarchal structure in which gender inequality was at the base of constitutional reforms. Thus, as Egypt developed through its independence, the Muslim Brotherhood was continuously targeted by the ruling party. For example, in 1948, there were many arrests and death sentences, then in 1954 during Nasser and again in 1981 with the beginning of Mubarak leadership (Sabeel, 2014). Consequently, it grew as a party with revolutionary and military ideas, just like Hezbollah and Hamas. However, differently from the other two stated above, the Muslim Brotherhood did not have a chance to stabilize because of the succession of regimes that were against them, and, eventually, the only time in which they won the elections - almost one century after their foundation - they have been removed from power with a coup. So, both because of the patriarchal ghost still present in the country’s societal view and of the inability of the party to stabilize, they have never had significant women’s representation. The veil, however, has its meaning of rebellion maximized in the Egyptian case because of the great influence that the rebellion against Western values played in the political party identity formation. Beyond the veil, the three political parties distinguish themselves by their correlation of Islam and Political Islam factors: from these different correlations originates different level of gender equality. Hezbollah, for example, has two main dimensions, the social and the political. Regarding the former, women are given the possibility to freely participate in the different organizations of the party even as project-leaders and contribute in distributing welfare and goods to the population living in their constituencies, while being politically confined from running for elections. Thus, if the Islamic principles of equality prevail in the social aspect of the party, still the entanglement of political institutions and religious morals led to a huge share of gender inequality, a characteristic observed in Political Islam. Differently, Hamas does not have a cleavage among political and social life, and this result in

the formation of women's organizations, led by women and willing to seize gender inequality. Concluding with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the oldest of the three organizations, it was influenced since early times by Western values, thus lately developed as anti-western, taking the Egyptian values of 1920 as being essential for the image of the perfect "Arabian". Yet, this was understandably flawed, retrograde and patriarchal but still worked with the aim to unify the Egyptians in order to rebel against imperialism. Accordingly, the image of the Egyptians in the 1920s was taken as an example and, in order to make impossible further colonization, the constitution gave power to a religious institution. Al-Azhar became the source of religious legislation while Islam the religion of the state. Today, in the constitution of 2014 little has changed regarding the religious institutions and this led to almost a century of gender-inequality, especially within the Muslim Brotherhood. However, women started to participate more and demand higher rights, some of them were also elected as members of Morsi's presidency in Egypt.

2. Things Fall Apart

"It is not our purpose to become each other; it is to recognize each other, to learn to see the other and honor him for what he is: each the other's opposite and complement".

Herman Hesse, *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930)

2.1 Women and Islam

The Quran is the Holy Book of Islam. It is one of the most controversial religious books, as it can be inferred by the fact that eventually, Islam embraces different branches and scissions, sometimes in conflicts one with the other, due to the different interpretations given to it combined with the lack of a formal "church".

In addition, the Quran was written in classical Arabic and the reading of this difficult language, nowadays only spoken in few Arab countries, mostly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), may lead to multiple different meanings and conceptions even on every single word. This effect is even amplified by the translations of the Holy Book into other idioms.

Moreover, it is overall important to create a distinction in between the dictate given by the Quran and the future implementation of the Islamic laws into political and social spheres as, in the specific matter, with reference to the role of women.

The role of women in the Quran is quite vague due to the different interpretations that could be attributed to some of the passes of the Book. Some people interpret these passes as legitimating the supremacy of men on women while others, like Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri and those supporting the movement of Progressive Islam,

striving to realize a just and pluralistic society through a critical engagement with Islam, a relentless pursuit of social justice, an emphasis on gender equality as a foundation of human rights, and a vision of religious and ethnic pluralism. (Anon, 2003, p.48).

On the contrary, he asserts that the reading of the Quran can be taken as a base for the promulgation of laws pushing for gender equality. Additionally, throughout history, the conception of Islam as a notion belonging to the Orient, has been greatly discussed, analyzed and criticized by Western Orientalist scholars, so it is Western biased - just to match the claim stating the superiority of the West over the East, in order to legitimize the cultural, social, political and economic domination of colonization.

“If the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, then we must be prepared to note how in its development and subsequent history Orientalism deepened and even hardened the distinction”. (Said, 1978, p.50)

The revival of Islamist movements in 1980 pushed Western scholars into a new wave of interest in Islamic culture. After the terrorist attack of 9/11 this interest spread up in the West and women issues became pivotal in questioning the ability and willingness of Muslim countries, in particular, those of MENA region, to establish a democratic and egalitarian social system:

Their lack of “commitment to gender equality and sexual liberalization” meant that “democracy may not be sustainable in their societies.” (Moghadam, 2013, p.5).

Activists of Islamic feminism⁸, from different perspectives, react to this Western-biased interpretation of the facts and of the development of the narrative discourse over women.

Among them, the Iranian feminist Valentine M. Moghadam underlines the risk that renovate stereotypes can arise and that “because they are testing hypotheses and engaging in arguments

⁸ “It is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence” (Badran, 2014, p.X).

with each other, such studies do not add to wider knowledge of the region.” (Moghadam, 2013, p.5). In her book *“Modernizing Women”* (2013) she recalls the “universality” of the patriarchal social order in the major world’s religions and the diversity in experiences, roles and status of women throughout the Muslim world. She underlines the need to look at the socio-political and economic order, from a Marxist feminist point of view, to understand the status of women, relegating the question about the emancipatory versus the conservative reading of the Quran to a second level.

Riffat Hassan, a pioneer of Islamic feminist theology, in her analysis of the nature of universal human rights in the chart adopted by the United Nations, disputes the Western framework of the bill and the supposed secularity of human rights. These were frequently seen outside or even in antithetical position respect to religion in general and to some religions in particular.

In Muslim countries such as Pakistan, for instance, it is often remarked by secular-minded proponents of human rights that it is not meaningful to talk about human rights in Islam because as a religious tradition, Islam has supported values and structures which are incompatible with the assumptions which underlie the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (1995, p.1).

Actually, the author points out that religion is the major source of human rights for the majority of people, Muslims and Muslim women included. The question she poses is “What, if anything, does the Quran say about human rights?” The answer she offers is:

the Qur'an is the Magna Carta of human rights and that a large part of its concern is to free human beings from the bondage of traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic, or any other), tribalism, racism, sexism, slavery or anything else that prohibits or inhibits human beings from actualizing the Qur'anic vision of human destiny. (1995, p.3).

Fatima Mernissi, a Muslim feminist, proposes a re-reading of the Quran in egalitarian terms. The misogynist tradition, she claims, doesn’t derive from the Prophet but from some earlier hadith in response to the challenges to male identity (Mernissi, 1987).

In the Holy Book women are seen, to a certain extent, as equal to their male counterparts, as demonstrated by Fatimah bint Muhammad and Khadijah Bint Khuwaylid who have become allegorical figures for the position that almost every woman could reach at the times of Mohammad, thus strong, independent individuals capable of auto-determination and eager for respect. The tales of the two women will be analyzed under the light of the major debates that animate the contemporary feminist political theory to show how subordination of women is not legitimized by the reading of the Quran. Even when in the Holy Book different roles are attributed accordingly to the gender, it cannot be read as a forced submission of women deriving from the Quran or Islamic inspiration. In fact, it is a common view to the Western tradition where “until very recently, most mainstream political philosophy has defended, or at least accepted, sexual discrimination” on the base of a natural difference” (Kymlicka, 2002, p.377).

What we can trace reading some controversial passages of the Holy Book is what “Freda Hussein stressed as ‘complementarity of the sexes’ in Islam, distinguishing ‘authentic Islam’ from ‘pseudo-Islam’ and asserting that the former is emancipatory.” (Moghadam, 2013, p.5)

2.1.1 Khadijah Bint Khuwaylid

Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, with reference to the behavior she followed during her life, before and after meeting Muhammad, and as mother and wife, can be considered as a wrecking ball of the assumption that, in the Islamic world, women are in a subordinate position respect to men due to the Quran dictates.

Abdullah bin 'Abbas narrated that one day the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) drew four lines on the earth and asked his Companions if they understood what these lines stood for. They respectfully replied that he knew better. He then told them that these lines stood for the four foremost ladies of the universe. They were Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, Fatimah bint Muhammad, Maryam bint Imran, the mother of the Prophet Issa and 'Asia bint Muzahim (the wife of the Pharaoh). (Ghazanfar et al., 2009, p.22).

The equal status of women and men can also be deduced by the fact that the Prophet mentioned these four ladies describing their histories and proving that gender equality before God is a key factor in Islam. Muhammad would not respect or discredit an individual due to gender but judging his or her actions. It is possible to argue that Khadijah is the most

important woman in the Quran due to her struggles and ownership, which apparently tend to make her equal – if not superior at times – to so many men presented in the Holy Book.

She was born in Makkah in the year 556 CE in a rich family, yet soon after her first marriage, she started to work very hard to create a big business for her husband who, unfortunately, died not long after they had children. Khadijah, anyway, re-married soon. Also, this second marriage was unfortunate and, due to their incompatibility, the couple broke. Since then, she focused completely on the improvement of the business she had inherited from her father.

So far the plot in the story of Khadijah fully emphasizes the strong character and ethics of a woman who is able to help needy people and, meanwhile, struggles to create a business for her husband; additionally, it is significant her capability, at that time, to force the end of her second marriage. Another important detail to keep into consideration is the way in which, after she had improved her own business and had employed the man who would then become the Prophet, eventually, Khadijah considered proposing marriage to Muhammad, thus resulting in an aged and wealthy woman able to propose marriage to a younger and far poorer man.

After the marriage with the Prophet, the tribe they belonged to entered into a deep crisis, this pushed Khadijah to work as hard as she could to exit from this period of economic difficulties, which ended up as the hardest period in the life of the Prophet.

Eventually, in order to help her husband, she gave up all that she had in the name of Islam and its propagation. Muhammad described her as such:

I have not yet found a better wife than her. She had faith in me when everyone, even members of my own family and tribe did not believe me, and accepted that I was truly a Prophet and a Messenger of Allah. She converted to Islam, spent all her wealth and worldly goods in order to help me spread this faith, and this is too at a time when the entire world seemed to have turned against me and persecuted me. And it is through her that Allah blessed me with children. (Ghazanfar et al., 2009, p.22).

So the figure of Khadijah acts as a founding stone for Muslim women, in fact not only she is the first woman who dedicated her life, spiritually and materialistically speaking, to the worship of Allah. She is an example of a businessperson, a self-determined person, a devoted mother, who, violating the costume of sending her beloved newcomer Fatima to be breastfed in another village, took personally care of her younger daughter needs acting in terms of

autonomy. Following Elisabeth Gross, this is the possibility and the ability to redefine social roles. (Kymlicka, 2002, p.177).

Through her figure, a concept of women being complementary to men has emerged. As the Romans' proverb "*Dotata animi mulier virum regit*", on the side of a great man there is always a great woman.

2.1.2 Fatimah Bint Muhammad

Fatimah bint Muhammad, in her representation, at the beginning as a daughter and then as a wife, is an allegorical figure used to provide an identity to Muslim women and to symbolize a standing example on how to behave as a Muslim woman. The period when she was born is considered, following the Quran in the life of the Prophet, as one of the most difficult periods. In fact, after Muhammad proclaimed himself as being the only Prophet of Allah, the majority of the people, even those that respected and loved him, made several plans aiming at killing him. Additionally, a deep feeling of hate was spreading in the area where Muhammad was living with his family and, every time he walked on the road, there were some people throwing garbage and other materials at his direction. One of Fatimah's first memories relates to when, as a young child, she stood before her father in order to protect him from protesters.

Islam, just like any other religion, considers sacred the love for the family and Fatimah is the clear example of the loving child that would do anything to protect her family. Yet the most important characteristic of this child was her stubbornness and character, which strongly clashes with the claims and conceptions of submission, which, instead, should be proper of Islamic women according to certain interpretations.

Once, whilst she was still a child, her father went to pray to Makkah with his companions, meanwhile, the villagers had slain one camel and later on, as soon as the Prophet started to pray, threw its interiors over him. The voice of the joke spread in the village and reached Fatimah that immediately walked to her father and removed all the camel's remaining from the Prophet.

It is important to analyze how the Quran depicts Fatimah, a little child who is not afraid of losing her integrity and that, eventually, is able to make hard choices that could push her even to sacrifice herself just to help her family. In other words, Fatimah is depicted as a strong young woman always capable of making the best choice and strongly determined even to impose herself over the others for the sake of her family.

This latter capacity was well expressed when a man of the village slapped Fatimah on her face without any clear reason. The child went directly to the leader of the village and reported the abuse.

So far, Fatimah is to be considered as a woman perfectly capable of looking after her own duties and so strong to defend herself without recurring to the aid of any male of the family, not even of her dad. De facto, once that the act was denounced the village leader accompanied Fatimah to the house of the aggressor and authorized her to slap the adult back. Thus, a small woman slapping an old man, taking her own personal revenge over him, without the aid of anyone external to the authority in power. This image of Fatimah, as well as her mother, is quite different, if not the complete opposite, from the stereotypical conception of Muslim women, almost slaves and completely dependent from their own husbands or fathers for food and security.

Another important stereotype, which is broken by the Quran, throughout the allegory of Fatimah and her mother, is the fact that wives have no real representation in their families and, once married, they are subject to their men who are supposed to take care of them and to provide for their sustenance.

What above mentioned is confirmed in the Quran, in the passage when Fatimah's husband decided to take as a second wife the daughter of the man that, in the past, had slapped the girl and who had tried to humiliate her father. Once more, the strong-willed girl reported to her father what happened. When her husband was informed by the Prophet, he felt sorry and regret the act that would have damaged the Fatimah's prestige. This concept was further strengthened when problems and discussions arose between the Prophet's daughter and her husband. The Prophet did not enforce any masculine rule but, considering the two halves equally, tried to help the couple to solve their problems, in the same way, it had happened between him and Khadijah. During his life, Muhammad always saw the relationship between husband and wife as being the equilibrium between two equal bodies.

To conclude, Fatimah is an example for all the Muslim women who are supposed to be strong-willed and determined in every aspect of their lives, also including the marital one. The Holy Book provides a clear image of the marriage dowry when talking about the Prophet who decided to marry her daughter to an individual who had almost no money to pay for. When this man sold his shield and brought the proceeds to Muhammad, the latter told him to keep it and to use it to buy some objects for their house. Thus, in the end, Muhammad did not perceive any kind of dowry for his daughter.

Beyond the imagery in the allegorical figures of Khadijah and Fatimah, the Quran text, in general, presents a notion of gender equality. “They (your wives) are your garment and you are a garment for them.” (Noble Quran 2:187)

In this case, the garment is an image used in order to imply a form of shelter and confidence as those provided by the clothes. So, when a man is alongside his woman he should feel as if he is covered, that his integrity is not exposed and that eventually he has found a partner to share everything with and that is dear to him and vice versa.

Yet, one of the main problems arising with Quran is the fact that it leaves too much to free interpretation of the reader, for example when it states: “And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women.” (Noble Quran 2:228)

Here the use of the words is misleading, up until now it has been observed that, regarding the Holy Book, men and women apparently have the same rights and duties and this is what arises from the stories of the women mentioned so far. Yet, why did the Quran uses the word “similar” rather than using “equal”? This use of the lexicon opens the way to many doubts regarding effective/real-gender equality. Similar implies almost equal but with some differences.

For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (Noble Quran 33:35).

It is clearly remarked the equal gender status among believers, so as in the contest of marriage, divorce and property:

O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dowry you have given them - except when they have become guilty of open lewdness. On the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you dislike something and Allah will bring about through it a great deal of good. (Noble Quran 4:19).

This is one of the most important quotes in the Quran because it makes clear the relevance of love and choice within religion, idea perceivable even more in the following quote: “Who so

does that which is right, and believes, whether male or female, him or her will We quicken to happy life” (Noble Quran 16:97).

Yet, Islam is one of the most debated religions in relation to gender issues and women’s rights. If looking at it from an Orientalist perspective it may appear that Islam is the religion that binds women to their own men and that it is the apotheosis of gender inequality.

2.1.3 The Feminist Spectacle

Looking at the society through a liberal feminist lens, means that the society is analyzed from a female perspective as to understand whether women had the same conditions, opportunities and rights than men, and, eventually, it “focuses more on issues like equality in the workplace, in education, in political rights” (ThoughtCo, 2018, p.3). Thus the public sphere is prioritized, while the private one is analyzed only when there are private impediments to the enhancement of women in the former. Given the major and binding influence religion exercises over the private and familiar sphere, Islam can be analyzed as the major factor limiting gender-equality in all public spheres. Authors like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Elizabeth Cady Stanton have provided important contributions to analyze whether the role of women in the Quran and in the current society reflects the liberal feminist lines. In juxtaposition with Eastern countries, Westerns ones considered the increase of women’s rights as necessary for the development of society and implemented anti-discriminatory laws. De facto, consistently differing from many MENA countries where the gap is still relevant, as it is possible to infer from the Gender Inequality Index.



Table 2-1: Gender Inequality Index (Hdr.undp.org, 2018)

The question is if this gap can be ascribed to the Quran dictates and so from legitimate applications of the former to the law.

The Western debates over the women/issue show that women suffer from sexual discrimination due to a variety of causes. The first one is the domestic labor that prevents them of an effective equality of opportunities in the public sphere where good job positions are structured in a gender-biased way. If the difference approach “has helped create” (Kymlicka, 2002, p.379) through the implementation of gender-neutral laws “gender-neutral access to...existing social benefits and position” (Kymlicka, 2002, p.379) has not considered different gender-role specificities. For example, women’s part-time jobs and subsequent economic dependence on men is a common situation in nowadays Western countries where liberal democracies endorsed anti-discrimination laws. On the other hand, the Holy Book describes this situation as:

Within marriage, women’s role in the domestic sphere is emphasized, and other activities are permissible only in as much as they do not conflict with family obligations. Men are cast as providers for and protectors of the family, including children and wives but also female relatives: Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other and because they support them from their means. (Howard-Merriam, 1990, p.18).

Actually, the pass is describing a common situation presents in the Middle East as well in the West and does not preclude other possibilities. Khadijah is a woman that overcomes the duality public-private, the first realm being for men and the second for women, directly related to the amount of time women have to devote in childbearing and domestic labor, in the East as in the West. She is a wife, a mother, but, also as a widow, she carries on a monetary activity; moreover, in public as in private life can she exercises her right to choose.

The second factor limiting gender equality is an unequal attribution of social role and power to male-jobs compared to female jobs, the last deriving from biological nature, social restrictions or free choice. This problem comes to an end through the empowerment of a politics of justice as suggested by the dominance approach. However, while endorsing, as MacKinnon suggests, equal power for women and men, the dominance approach neglects it. By following Elisabeth Gross, “equality implies an acceptance of given standards and

conformity to their expectations and requirements. Struggles for autonomy, on the other hand, imply the right to reject such standards and create new one” (Kymlicka, 2002, p.384).

Autonomy implies the possibility of choosing. Fatimah emerges as a woman determined and able to be recognized for the role she has assumed as well as the exercise of her right of choice. The following quote seems to describe literally what we can trace in the Quran when referring to gender equality: “The argument for women’s autonomy appeals to, rather than conflict with, the deeper idea of moral equality, for it asserts that women’s interests and experience should be equal important in shaping social life.” (Kymlicka, 2002, p.384)

Distinctions ascribed to supposed biological differences do not include, in the Quran, the submission of women to men. Even when recognizing gender difference, the Quran does not suggest a claim to inequality. De facto, as stated above, it mentions the equality of rights and duties.

The research on identity and moral development conducted by Carol Gilligan and her theory of Ethic of Care as a “different voice” recognizes that humans are connected and interdependent (Gilligan, 1982). Addressing the issue in this perspective leads not only to the recognition of different voices of women, but to the identification of individual gender-neutral voice and bring it to the public sphere. Under this perspective, equal doesn’t mean alike but similar and complementary.

“And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ.” (Surah Hood, verse 118).

2.2. Women and Political Islam

"It doesn't disgrace you totally to have people say that," said Layla. "Except when those people are my enemies." "You have no enemies," said Ragab simply, "except the fossilized remnants of the bourgeoisie."

Naguib Mahfouz, *Adrift on the Nile*

Political Islam, one of the greatest forces shaping the contemporary world, is at the base of the development of Islamist movements in the MENA region and it will be analyzed in this work as being one of the main causes of gender inequality.

The thesis sustained is that the dictates of the Quran were interpreted in a gender-biased way, to sustain the patriarchal political structure of society, to maintain power, to react to

colonization and to strengthen anti-imperialist stances, to overcome the failure of the secular, modernist state and for the search of identity in a fragmented, globalized, world.

“A sense of identity is a sense that one’s life is meaningful...The fundamentalist wave is a statement about identity...against the uncontrolled changes in daily life” (Mernissi, 1987, p.X).

Consequently, the veil is intended by Mernissi as the symbol of this identity and of the male power. Some women have discarded the veil; have started to design their future and to challenge the past to succeed in renegotiating new spaces. They do not need to face the choice whether to be Muslim or to ask for equal rights out of the religion and they aim to be Muslim women in a society that grants equal rights to all its members while being good believers. Therefore, women started to challenge the patriarchal, traditional interpretation of the Quran and of the Sunnah, enforcing a hermeneutical approach to the reading of the sacred text.

Men started to ask women to wear the veil, in the name of religion, to protect the whole society from breaking down, to protect the future of their society from the action of industrialization, economic changes, urbanization, proletarianization, education, employment. In order to legitimize the request to conform to tradition, to a “real” Islamic society, they reinforce the literal, traditional reading and interpretation of the same sacred texts. Meanwhile, other men demand women to unveil to meet, through their emancipation, the nationalistic stance, the modernization process, the anti-colonialist struggles. In the meantime, other women started to wear the veil as a symbol of identity, both national and cultural, to oppose Western decadence, to exercise their right to choose.

The Quranic reference to women’s dress code can be traced in the following verses: “Say to the believing men (and women in the next verse) that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them.” (Quran, chap.24, verse 30), and “not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms. (Quran, 24:31)

The most common meaning for Khumur is the veil covering the head that pre-Islamic women in the area used to tie on the back of the head, at the base of the neck. The difference is the suggestion to let it untied to cover their bosoms. “O Prophet! Say to your wives, your daughters, and the women of the believers that: they should let down upon themselves their jalabib.” (Quran, chap.33, verse 59).

The dress code so implies a scarf or veil and a jalabib, a loose, wide dress. The misinterpretations contested regard the fact that it is not mentioned explicitly to cover their hair or the head but only the blossom. It is arguable that if God wanted women “covered from Head to Toe” He would not have said, “not display beauty except what is apparent” (referring probably to private or sexual parts of the body) but simply “cover all your body”. This process of multiple possible interpretations of the sacred texts has been possible thanks to the composition of the Sharia, which is based on both religious and socio-cultural elements.

When providing a definition of Political Islam, Moghadam states “Gilles Kepel has defined political Islam as the movement and ideology of a state based on Islamic law, or sharia” (Moghadam, 2013, p.3). Thus Political Islam is the translation of Islamic religious dictates into institutional terms and comes under the form of Sharia which is composed of four main elements. First of all, the Quran, which is the Holy Book of Islam; second, the Sunnah which is composed by the ‘aḥādīth of the prophet. These two elements, revealed sources, provide the religious foundations of the Islamic law, yet, along with them, there are as well cultural factors correlated to Ijma and Qiyas which respectively are the common consensus as depicted by the consensus of the elders and the juridical analogy. “The two latter are the non-revealed sources of Sharia and are founded in juristic reasoning (ijtihād)” (Kamali, 1999). Several authors, as for example Abu Amina Elias, call for a distinction between the Sharia which “is the collection of values and principles derived from the Quran and Sunnah that form the moral, religious, and legal teachings of Islam” and the Fiqh (jurisprudence) “which is the practical application of those principles in real life.” (Elias, 2013). Anyway, even if encompassed in the word Sharia, following the definition of Kepel, the two parts are at work.

The Quran and the Sunnah contain broad, general rules that are universal and immutable, the “right path” for a Muslim believer and for the community of the Muslim Believers (Ummah). The second two parts, deriving from human reasoning, (ijtihād) are, on the contrary, embedded in specific historic, geographic and cultural contexts. The interpretation of the first two sources and the reasoning over this interpretation that is at the base of the second two is followed by a third passage, the formulation of the state law. So the very process of knowledge and subsequent authority production in the Muslim world is at stake.

To continue, Peter P. Mandaville explained that “there has never been a single, monolithic source of authority in Islam” (2007, p.21) and that “conventional accounts of traditional structures and figures of Islamic religious authority have tended to focus on the interaction between text, discursive method, and personified knowledge, with constructions of the

authoritative in Islam seen as combining these ingredients to varying degrees and in diverse configurations.” (2007, p.1). The author refers to Quran and Sunnah in the realm of textuality, to the development of fiqh as discursive method and to “‘legitimate’ producers and transmitters of knowledge” (Mandaville, 2007, p.1) when speaking of personified knowledge.

Analyzing the effects of the process of globalization on the pluralization of authority in the Muslim World, Mandaville identifies new forms of textuality, as “the personal pious narrative”, new forms of discursive method, as “Quranic reference or modern populism” and new forms of personification. He challenges the assumption that such changes inevitably will promote a process of democratization, as the development of movements as “Progressive Islam” or “Women Living Under Muslim Laws”⁹ seem to suggest. The interrelation between local and global actors, themes and the expansion of space and time provide “opportunities and openings for intervention by a diverse and geographically disparate range of interlocutors” (Mandaville, 2007, p.17), some of them pursuing to re-establish a normative, traditional, radical Islam.

Religious fundamentalism cannot be used as a synonym of Islamic fundamentalism and we also cannot consider the patriarchal order as an analytical category to be applied exclusively to Muslim or Arab countries’ societies, as we discussed in the previous chapter.

Stephen Cowden and Gita Sahgal, in their article “Why Fundamentalism?” (2007), report two events that involve different religions, the Sikh and the Muslim, based on the features of fundamentalism. They cite the crucial role played by the Evangelical Christians during the election of Donald Trump, attracted by political messages appealing to its fundamentalist nature. Anyway, Islamic fundamentalism is at stake due to its spreading and its violent impact on contemporary society after the terrorist attacks of the recent years and the mediatic massive spread of themes and contestation about Islam and Muslim radicalism. Themes such as human rights and democracy, assumed as universal goals, are juxtaposed with Islam, and gender inequality ascribed to religious dictates becomes the evidence of the impossibility for Islamic countries to follow the path through democratization, for incompatibility.

The debate is nowadays so massive that is impossible to highlight all the nuances. The three categories of analysis proposed by Mandaville are at work. Following the spread of Islamic

⁹ Women Living Under Muslim Laws is an international solidarity network that provides information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam. See the following website: www.wluml.org

revivalism, in contrast with Western reactions to it, new movements appeared and new debates took preeminence. Feminism in Islam, seen as a paradox from a Western point of view, developed as an original response to the Islamization process and, differently from the secular Western feminism, refers to Islam both directly in Islamic feminism or, indirectly, in secular Muslim feminism. The two paradigms, while holding specific features, are not incompatible, and their differences, following Margot Badran, (Badran, 2010) are to be traced primarily in the contexts in which they developed. Secular feminism started developing since the late nineteenth century in Middle Eastern emerging nation states while Islamic feminism is a more recent theory and developed as a new discourse based on an independent reading and reasoning over the sacred text. Secular feminism acted as social force aiming to gender equality in the public sphere while assuming complementarity in the private life and so working inside a patriarchal structure. Islamic feminist aims equality in both private and public sphere on the base of the egalitarian principles of the Quran, challenging the very patriarchal structure of society and the contemporary gendering of society in the wake of Islamic resurgence and Islamization of nation-states. However, following Badran, their interconnections are massive and their primary goals shared. “Islamic feminism transcends and destroys old binaries that have been constructed. These included polarities between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ and between ‘East’ and ‘West’ (...) as secular feminisms in Egypt and other Arab countries have always had space for religion. Secular feminism (...) made Islamic arguments in demanding women's rights to education, work, political rights along with secular nationalist, humanitarian (later human) rights, and democratic arguments.”(Badran, 2002)

The methodology at the base of Islamic Feminist investigation is “jihad” (independent investigation of religious sources), and “tafsir” (interpretation of the Qur'an)” (Badran, 2002). The same methodology and the same primary goals are at the base of the movement of Progressive Islam. In responding to Imam Masroor’s claims, in a debate over the conservative/moderate versus progressive positions in the Muslim Ummah (broader community), the progressive Muslim scholar, Akmal Ahmed Safwat, says “is our opinion that the Qur’an’s divine instructions were interpreted and explained by fallible and mortal men who were the product of their time and culture. Early Muslim scholars did their best... But history matters. As contemporary Muslims, it saddens our heart to see how traditionally conservative Muslims today are frozen in time and place. They insist on applying old fatwas unchanged with no consideration to changes in circumstance or location.” (Nancy Graham Holm, 2017, p.1).

Analyzing the contemporary resurgence of religions' fundamentalism across the world, several authors describe inherent contradictions. On the one hand, while being a product of modernity, they share that is a "rejection of the legacy of Enlightenment reason and a corresponding belief in the 'morally corrosive' impact of modernity" (S. Cowden, G.Sahgal, 2017h, p.13)

On the other hand, while denying, "the possibility of interpretation and reinterpretation (...) its adherents engage in both" (S. Cowden, G.Sahgal, 2017, p.14). Stephen Cowden and Gita Sahgal pointed out that the "fundamental truths" cannot be neither a return to the past nor a simple adherence to sacred texts that have to be interpreted, but they underlined the selective process of construction (re-construction) of tradition and of interpretation (re-interpretation) of the Text. Often, other fundamentalist movements, as Wahhabism, have tried to purify religions from more tolerant aspects and "are often engaged in destroying traditional forms of religious practice and culture, while imposing fundamentalist versions of religion that are often entirely foreign." (S. Cowden, G.Sahgal, 2017, p.18). Marieme Helie-Lucas has noted this in relation to the so-called Islamic practice of female genital mutilation (S. Cowden, G.Sahgal, 2017, p.17-19) or acting in a selective way, reinforcing the features of traditional religion as the patriarchal system.

Finally, the dogmatic, traditional, unquestionable truth is promoted through the massive use of technology.

A second common feature of fundamentalisms is the patriarchal character: the control of the woman's body and of her sexuality through strict and codified women' dress code, a public behavior and segregation of spaces. Women are presented as the guardians of the traditions at the base of the moral of the whole community, and, subsequently, rigidly defined gender roles are necessary to promote rewards or punishments, as it is necessary the faith foundation.

"Fundamentalism is thus a modern political movement that develops out of religion, using it to gain or consolidate power [...] and control of women's minds and bodies is at the heart of the fundamentalist agenda [...] but the faithful are enjoined to create an earthly utopia as well. In this sense we need to understand the rise of fundamentalist movements in the context of the collapse of secular utopias, particularly communism and the progressive nationalist movements that arose in the era of decolonization." (S. Cowden, G.Sahgal, 2017, p.20-21).

The other historical process influencing the rise of fundamentalism has been the economic transformation and the subsequent entrance of women into the labor market. Mao wrote about the four authorities of “political, family, religious and masculine” power which acted as the embodiment of the whole feudal-patriarchal ideology and system, and are “the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants” (S. Cowden, G.Sahgal, 2017, p.23). This approach was reflected not just in the development of powerful Communist Parties, but also in the ideas of Nasserism, Ba’th and other currents of Arab socialism in most of Middle Eastern countries (S. Cowden, G.Sahgal, 2017, p.17-23).

It is also important to note that while the nationalist and anti-colonial movements in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, which emerged in the middle of the twentieth century, were not necessarily or exclusively anti-religious, these anti-colonial struggles were conceived by their participants as emancipatory struggles. This is significant when it comes to understanding women’s demands both during and in the aftermath of such anti-colonial struggles.

The question regarding the duality among gender equality and religion, conceived as an indicator of the more general democratic processes, was integrated into the agenda of political and civil national progress of several countries in the MENA region in the post-WWII. For instance, in Tunisia, the president Habib Bourguiba replaced Islamic family law with a civil code law, abolishing polygamy. In other countries such as in Syria, in Egypt, in Iran and in Iraq, women were granted political and social rights and were offered improvement in educational and employment opportunities. This was a male-driven reformist period but several female activists emerged, as reported by Moghadam (2013).

The aforementioned kind of revolutionary model was called by Moghadam “woman’ emancipation or egalitarian model of revolution” (2013, p.81), and usually inspired by the socialist ideals and by the anti-feudal, patriarchal struggle. In this model, the woman question became pivotal with the aim of accelerating social change and encouraging women’s education, unveiling and employment. On the other hand, the religious-woman question, as an indicator of the cultural and national identity, was integrated into the agenda of national unity policies, becoming pivotal in the anti-colonial struggle were women’s proper behavior, modesty and veiling were encouraged. Moghadam defines this kind of revolution “Woman in the Family or patriarchal model of revolution” (Moghadam, 2013, p.82).

With reference to the differences of gender, other countries took, during the legislative process, divergent positions, but the real fact is that women either influence or are influenced by political changes.

3 No Longer at Ease

“A feminist is anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men.”
Gloria Steinem

As seen above, the duality between Islam and Political Islam is clear and comprehensible. The first one aims to develop gender equality and to implement a strong morality toward women's issues, showing that the major focal point of Islam is the non-existence (or lack) of gender differences. On the other hand, Political Islam is more rooted in society and patriarchal values. Political Islam has extended and corrupted the meaning of the Quran through political institutions. As already underlined, women influence political changes and this is important to analyze their influence on the performance of some political organizations, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Being political organizations, it is given for granted that gender inequality affects society and patriarchal culture, on the contrary, these three case studies seem to show an important room for improvements.

Hezbollah is the first case study that I am going to analyze. It is based in a country which is strongly characterized and conditioned by politics in all the different aspects of life; even religion and social organizations are correlated and under the influence of politics. In this context, it is important to consider the two different faces of the Lebanese Shi'a party, the political and the social ones. Starting from the former, Hezbollah is the only party that in 2018 elections did not nominate any woman (Yan, 2018 p.1), thus it is possible to infer that it is still rooted into the effects of Political Islam, as much as in the stereotypes and in the patriarchal morals that come with it. Yet, the social aspect of the party is opposite to the antecedent. Hezbollah is characterized by a multilevel social dimension where, on each level, women are given the same importance and consideration, if not more, than men. In this sense, the Al-Manar TV takes relevance, being the only television in Lebanon that gives the possibility to women to wear the veil. The veil, being related to the forces at the base of the party's rise, takes the meaning of rebellion and resistance, along with freedom from oppression. Thus, while the political party seems to be influenced by the Political Islam

dictates, the social aspect, where women act as protagonists, is slowly influencing politics. In the future, Hezbollah could gain an even stronger political consensus granting also to women the possibility of running themselves for the political elections.

3.1 Hezbollah

In order to understand the Lebanese political situation, it is crucial to consider the pivotal role that politics plays in the country. In Lebanon, due to the fact that the political identity is deeply rooted in the lives of individuals, political parties have a huge mobilization power, that is able, in some cases, even to paralyze the country. It seems that the social and the political status are strictly correlated, thus limiting women from performing any social role within society without being influenced directly by a political party. In this context, a major factor that has to be taken into consideration is the incentives that the Hezbollah party provides for the women's participation in the societal mansions.

Lebanon's second civil war, which lasted from 1975 until 1990, has had a fundamental effect on the role of women. Women of all religious traditions became involved in the war and thereby 'claimed' a place in the public sphere either through combat, support functions, or employment outside the house. (Miller & Wilford, 1998, p.X).

Indeed, Hezbollah, being one of the most important political parties in the country, can be claimed to have given a huge contribution to the women's movement, from a strictly private sphere to a more socially oriented one. Since the foundation of Al-Manar TV and the last political elections, when the Lebanese party was able to win the majority of seats, the contributions to the improvement of women's rights by the Islamic Shi'a¹⁰ party could be considered sui generis, making possible for the party to be described as Islamic Feminist:

¹⁰ Shia and Sunni represent two different factions with disputing beliefs about who should lead the Muslim community after the death of Prophet Mohammed. They go back to a schism that emerged in the earliest days of Islam in the 7th century. Shiites have had a more flexible, adaptive attitude to the practice of some legal principles. For the Sunnis, on the other hand, legal tradition has been much more insular and more closed off from interpretation (Jaafari, 2014 p.X). The great majority of the Muslim world, more than 1.5 billion, is Sunni. In the Middle East, Sunnis make up 90% or more of the populations of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Shia constitutes about 10% of all Muslims, and globally their population is estimated between 154 and 200 million. (BBC, 2016 p.X).

“Which is defined as a cross-border movement that brings together all Muslim women seeking to redefine their identity in a more genuinely modern manner that befits their religion and culture” (Yazbek Haddad and Esposito 2003, p.13).

On the other hand, however, women did not manage to gain access to the political sphere of society yet. This has created a huge juxtaposition among the mediatic role granted to them by Al-Manar and the fact that the party roster for the political elections signed the complete absence of women candidates, differing from all the other parties.

Thus, the role of Hezbollah in the country is quite controversial and cannot be clearly defined as feminist, even though, partially, it seems to facilitate the employment of women into some different sectors of society such as media (as shown in the case of Al-Manar). For this reason, Hezbollah can be divided into two main dimensions: the political one where the party, without any woman candidate, was still able to gain seats, and the social one in which women have crucial roles when dealing with the party’s main issues and its social and territorial administrations.

3.1.1 The Political Dimension

As already stressed, Lebanon is one of the most complex countries to analyze, due to the great control that politics plays in the influence of individual welfare. This prominence is one of the dimensions that must be taken into consideration when assessing Hezbollah and its influence, along with the way in which its power structure has developed.

It is impossible to detach Hezbollah’s success from its history, especially from 1982 war, when Lebanon was invaded by the Israeli army up until modern times. The Southern part of Lebanon was completely destroyed by the invaders. This led to a common feeling of malcontent among the population because they felt betrayed by the Lebanese army and by the governmental actions. As a result, Hezbollah grew as an intra-state force that aimed to compete with the state in providing services to the area that trust in the government. This was also determined by an already existing electoral law which predetermined the assignment of the political seats on the base of religious confessions, by excluding the Shiites from the Presidential and Prime Minister assignments. From the delusion caused by such governmental actions, Hezbollah reinforced its political culture together with the development of a military structure. This caused a shift in the party propaganda that enhanced its chauvinist dimension and developed what could be termed as “culture of war”, so to defend the borders of Southern

Lebanon in the place of the Lebanese Army that had shown its inefficiency. In Lebanon, politics and religion are correlated, and political parties usually represent also a religious belonging. Taking into consideration the fact that, as showed by the chart below, the majority of Southern Lebanon is composed by Muslim believers (either intere Muslim villages or villages in which, in any case, they represent the large majority) the grow of the Shi'a party was natural. In this sense, Hezbollah was able to take over the Southern part of the country, and as explained by Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze community in Lebanon and head of the Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party, it has become a state within the state of Lebanon. "Syria and Iran have done all they can to ensure Hezbollah becomes an independent political and military force that we have to live with" (Euronews, 2008).

The overall voter turnout of 2018 elections was favourable for Hezbollah's coalition, which includes Hezbollah with 13 seats, Amal with 15 seats, while the Free Patriotic Movement and its allies secured other 29 seats (Azar, 2018). Thus resulting in the party with the possibility of having the "veto power" over the matters discussed in the government.

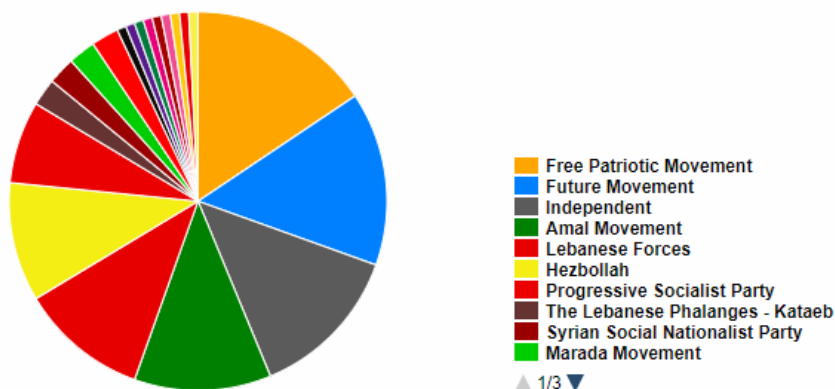


Chart 3-1: The Lebanese Government composition post 2018 Elections (Yakshof 2018)

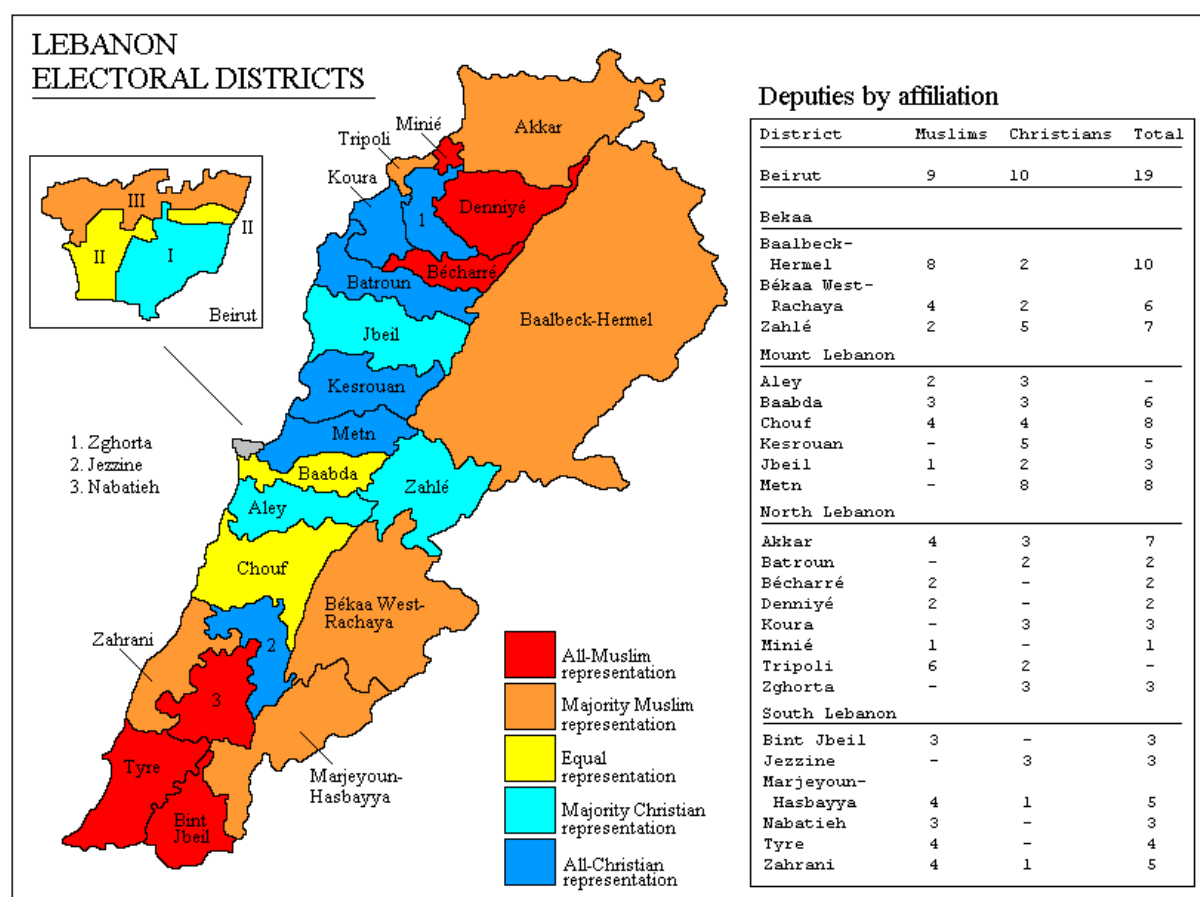


Chart 3-2: List of Lebanese Electoral Districts in 2018 Elections (Geopolitica.ru, 2018)

This led to the creation of an organization where the political leaders, acting also as militia commanders and generals, became international actors capable of making even geopolitical choices different from the official Lebanese one. One example is the regional struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, where Hezbollah supports the former and the Lebanese Government of Prime Minister Sa'd Hariri the latter. Consequently, because of Hezbollah's international choices to grant its support to Iran, to the Syrian government of Bashar Al Assad, to Hamas and to some other extremist political organizations, it is considered either by the US and by other European and Asian countries as a terrorist organization to be defeated. Yet, within its 'jurisprudence', it remains the party offering the majority of social services to the affiliates and zones of representation.

Due to the 'manifesto of war' on which Hezbollah established itself, in addition to the fact that no women were candidates to the political elections in 2018, it seems correct to consider the party as following the dictates of Political Islam. In fact, the political organization seemingly does not respect gender equality and has a patriarchal modus operandi. This is detaching Hezbollah from the Lebanese general tendency that sees an increasing number of

women running for elections. “Of the 587 candidates vying for a seat in Parliament, 86 are women. The ratio is a considerable step up from the 2009 elections, which saw a total of 12 women in the running.” (Yan, 2018, p.1). At first sight, it might appear that eventually women are not given importance, due to the overall Lebanese culture.

Once questioned about the lack of women into his party, the Leader of Hezbollah claimed that “lawmakers are not judged by political or legal competence but by their proficiency in giving condolences and favors [...]. We as Hezbollah do not have women for this job” (Yan, 2018, p.3). Further claims were made by women activists of Hezbollah that agreed with the vision that their leader, Hassan Nasrallah, gave about the parliamentary members. Shortly after those words, another political figure of Hezbollah, Dr. Rima Fakhri, followed up with his leader’s point, claiming that:

The woman is a woman. She must work to realize the main goals she exists for. These are not different from those of men. But the difference is in the details. [...] She has a home, She is a mother and must bring up generations. This takes a lot of the woman’s time. (Yan, 2018 p.3).

If Nasrallah’s speech could include different interpretations, the latter eventually brings the point that Hezbollah, politically speaking, is still a patriarchal party that does not open its door to women interested to run and to participate in elections. As of today, it seems to be the only party that still is not able to join the progressivist movement, not considering women as possible electoral candidates and therefore missing a huge window of opportunity. Miller & Wilford, which have been mentioned in the general introduction of the chapter, prove that women’s commitment in fields that usually are considered stereotypically masculine increased during the war and, at that time, many of the Hezbollah fighters were women. At this point, a major question may arise: why are women a viable option when it comes to war and not to electoral campaigns?

Additionally, even if Hezbollah has claimed victory, the party only gained an additional seat, maintaining the previous ones, while its political ally Amal, which put women in its list, had a major improvement in the final result. Acknowledging the fact that women may be working behind the scenes for the Hezbollah party, it is still important to take major enhancements at the political level in order to grant a higher level of representation.

To conclude, the political spectrum of Hezbollah’s party is influenced by its history, namely the influence that the war played and its development as a military and political movement,

and by the context in which it is developing. Overall, it seems that women politically wise are still inhibited from running for higher positions, proving that the culture present in Political Islam is influential even if it is slowly changing. General pessimism towards the Lebanese parliamentary members, either being a real issue for women's elections as it appeared from Nasrallah's words or just a pretext, must be avoided. Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah declared that he admired the role played by the women elected with Amal and congratulated with its ally (Yan, 2018 p.5). This shows that Nasrallah, in spite of being critical with the political roles of society, mainly considers the legislators as being corrupted and, to protect women from any possible form of corruption, denies them any involvement in the lawmaking process, causing gender inequality.

From the Lebanese political experience, it appears that the best way to improve accountability among political leaders and the role that they play would be the election of more women, alongside correlated issues such as the fight for equal rights and opportunities. This controversial situation is due to the fact that Hezbollah cannot either be considered a completely anti-feminist or patriarchal actor when taking into account the role that women of the party play in the social spectrum of the country.

3.1.2 The Social Dimension

The social dimension of Hezbollah seems to be completely different from its political side, which is chauvinist and does not provide any tangible role of influence to women. The party is active in the news coverage and it remains one of the most important service providers in the country for the zones of his supporters. Services like Al-Manar TV, funds given to martyrs, free medical care, and many schools are all programs that Hezbollah has pursued. This seems to be part of the political culture of Lebanon as seen in the next quote:

Hezbollah may distribute or facilitate access to social services to fulfil altruistic commitments, present itself as the protector and guarantor of well-being, gain supporters or consolidate control over territory and people. In short, specific political goals, as well as charitable motivations, likely underlie the provision of social services by Hezbollah and other groups in Lebanon (Cammatt, 2014).

Cammatt argues that there is an important cultural factor beyond the provision of goods to society, and indeed the party has been exploiting its network for political international propaganda. This in order to maintain and support their international allies as stressed by

Ignatius' words: "Many of the Arab media delegates said they have, as one speaker put it, a 'patriotic and national duty to support the Palestinian resistance.' That certainly is the view of Hezbollah's television station, Al Manar" (Ignatius, 2003).

Yet it is important to understand the social involvement between the mediating role of TV and women's associations in Lebanon as Hezbollah-affiliated media group opened an important "strata" of society to women and made them active participants in it. Al-Manar TV could be considered one of the reasons that led Hezbollah party to victory, through the major gender-equal women's involvement. On the other hand, many social organizations, apart from those ruled by political parties in Lebanon, could be considered almost irrelevant (Fontan, 2004). This proves that on the overall Al-Manar case could be relevant with reference to the Islamic Feminist principles of equality, of opportunities for increasing the role of women within Lebanese society. The fact that women were provided with a special channel where to cover up stories is significant especially due to the Lebanese structure of society and the role that media play in it.

Lorfin's schematization of the media, NGOs and power in Lebanon

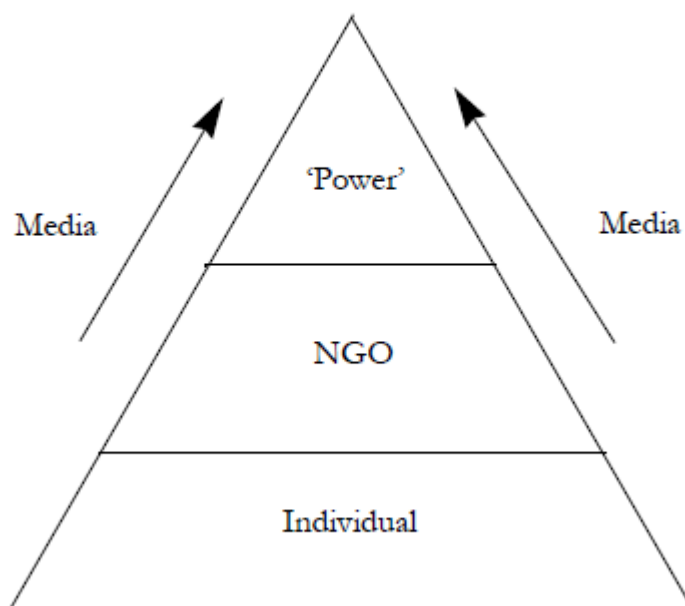


Chart 3-3: The Power structure of the Lebanese Society (Fontan, 2004, 164)

As we can see from the table both individuals and NGOs seem to be directly into the influence of political powers, and thus the only checks and balances present remain the media. This fact increases the importance that Al-Manar plays within the political spectrum of Lebanon, since it is providing women with the tools to check and express their voice beyond

the way in which they would usually be represented through other social structures. The relevance of Al-Manar is amplified as well by the composition of Lebanese politics, where the majority of seats are already assigned depending on the religious confession of the leader. Thus, in a system where the political succession of candidates is stagnant, and where the courts and, more in general, the whole judiciary system is to be considered mostly corrupted by some religious and political affiliations, media are the only means capable of unveiling determined causes that otherwise would be shaded. In general, there has been a diversification between the work of social organizations regarding women's issues within the context of civil society and the power influence that women play in politics. In this context, women's participation cannot be easily assessed, mostly due to the cultural influence and the multiple dimensions that need to be considered, such as for example the absence of women candidates as well as, at the same time, the commitment to increase their roles as political party members (Yan, 2018).

In order to understand the huge involvement of Hezbollah and Al-Manar TV in Lebanese society, it is important to take into consideration a geographical and political outlook of Lebanon. During the war and the invasion, as reported by Al-Manar TV reporter Zeinab al-Saffar, supporter of Hezbollah, the party-affiliated television was one of the few that broadcasted from the invaded zones, having workers to risk their lives in order to provide an efficient and effective news coverage (Everywoman - Women of Hezbollah, 2007). During the conflict, the reporters of the television were very often victims of aggressions conducted by the Israeli troops and often also some cables and technical appliances of the television were destroyed, together with some acts of aggression and damaging of the private houses of the reporters. Thus, the social dimension of the party seems much closer to women and indeed is one of the few televisions of the country that allows the veil, gaining a huge meaning in this context. The possibility to wear the veil in a context where the Israeli army persecutes Lebanese Muslims in the Southern parts of Lebanon becomes a statement of being brave and rebel against the invasion. This has reached a very symbolic importance in terms of a revolutionary tool used by Zeinab and other women that are representatives of Hezbollah and work within the social initiatives provided by the party.

For these women, the ratio of employment within Hezbollah seems to be incredibly high, as possible to see from the words of Hanin Gheddar "employees in Hezbollah's institutions [around 65 percent of whom are women]" (Gheddar, 2016).

With the increasing actions of the party and the expansion of the war expenses, there seems to be an implementation in the limitation of expenses of the services provided to their

employees. Yet it is impossible to argue that, differently from the political dimension where the party seems to not host any female representative, a 65% ratio is incredibly astonishing, even many of the European countries or Western party organizations today are quite far from reaching the above mentioned ratio.

Another important, yet controversial service, which is offered by Hezbollah, is represented by the funds given to women who have lost their relatives and consequently are 'elevated' into the state of "Bride of a Martyr" or "Mom of a martyr" as mentioned by Gheddar. Anyway, distinctions are made among the compensation to those that have been members of Hezbollah since a lot of time and others that are relatively new. As much as patriarchal of an idea, it is important to take into consideration that it applies also to women martyrs and that participation in the war has not been only masculine. Such services provide the possibility for women to survive and work in the resistance even after having lost her beloved one in the resistance. Additionally, it increments the multilevel structure of affiliations that the party maintains at the social level with supporters and members living under the constituencies on which they rule.

The complete and genderless involvement on women into the resistance and causes of Hezbollah comes from the stories found in the commentary "Women of Hezbollah" where a woman claims as follows: "a woman can give the money [...] A woman is as much a part of the resistance as the men are"(Everywoman - Women of Hezbollah, 2007).

To conclude, Hezbollah as a political movement has developed in a patriarchal cultural environment, reflecting the dualism between Islamic and Political Islam dictates. In the first aspect covered by the party, the political dimension, Hezbollah has shown a patriarchal modus operandi when handling the relationship between women and politics, keeping them distant and not electing any of them. This may be the reason why it grew less, in percentage, than its ally that allowed women to run for political offices. This shows how culture and patriarchal values can limit the growth of a party, considering culture as one of the elements of Political Islam. On the other hand, when taking into consideration the social dimension of the party, which is the closest to the religious affiliations, Islamic values and morals seem to be applied and the women ratio in political organizations is extremely high. This demonstrates that when gender equality is applied it would result incredibly difficult to lose seats: this is mainly proven by the fact that Hezbollah never lost any seat since its foundation, and the affiliation of members to the party is among the strongest in Lebanon. As a result, Hezbollah can be described as a hybrid in the juxtaposition between Islam and Political Islam. It is a party where the majority of its social organizations are led by women but still too

attached to patriarchal ancient cultural values to evolve the positive performance from the social to the political level, and, moreover, it can be seen as a mirror of the failure of Islamic values of equality to be reflected in the actual political reality.

3.2 Hamas

Hamas, similarly to Hezbollah, seems to have a party structure which differentiates itself from its political commitments and brings forward a duality among Islam and Political Islam, more specifically, between the morals supported by Islam and the politicization of the patriarchal structure present in the country. In 2006 Palestinian General Legislative elections, Hamas was the party that, unexpectedly, politically dominated the majority of the votes, winning a great parliamentary majority and, consequently, installed on power and organized a huge political takeover on Fatah¹¹. When describing Hamas, some of the words are: “A Hamas variant of the Night of the Long Knives saw a victorious Hamas seize complete power across Gaza”(Wage, 2012, p.9). Yet, even before the electoral results, Hamas had already created its own internal security force divided into six brigades (Wage, 2012, p.9). These troops were also deployed to Syria and to the countries of other political allies to ensure great influence in the Middle East and support for their cause, creating an international network of affiliations and sympathies. Hamas’ longevity is to be mainly attributed to this network that allowed its leaders freedom of movement to clandestinely entering and leaving Palestine, considered the “biggest open air prison in the world”, easily escaping from international police forces and to seek for aid while hiding in other countries.

¹¹ Fatah is a secular movement, founded in the late 1950s by, between others, Yasser Arafat, as a response to the creation of Israel over historic Palestine and the subsequent Palestinian diaspora. Fatah became the backbone of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), an umbrella organization that intercepted the emergence of a new Palestinian national identity alongside with a pan-Arabism inspired by Nasser. After the Arab defeat in the 1967s war, the failure to gain Palestinian goals, the departure of Arafat from Lebanon, the major role of Hamas during the Intifadah, and then, Arafat’s death, the PLO in general and Fatah in particular lost consensus especially in the Gaza Strip. This determined the victory of the Islamic party Hamas in the elections of 2006. However, today Fatah is still the major political party in the West Bank area. (Mkhaimar, 2010)

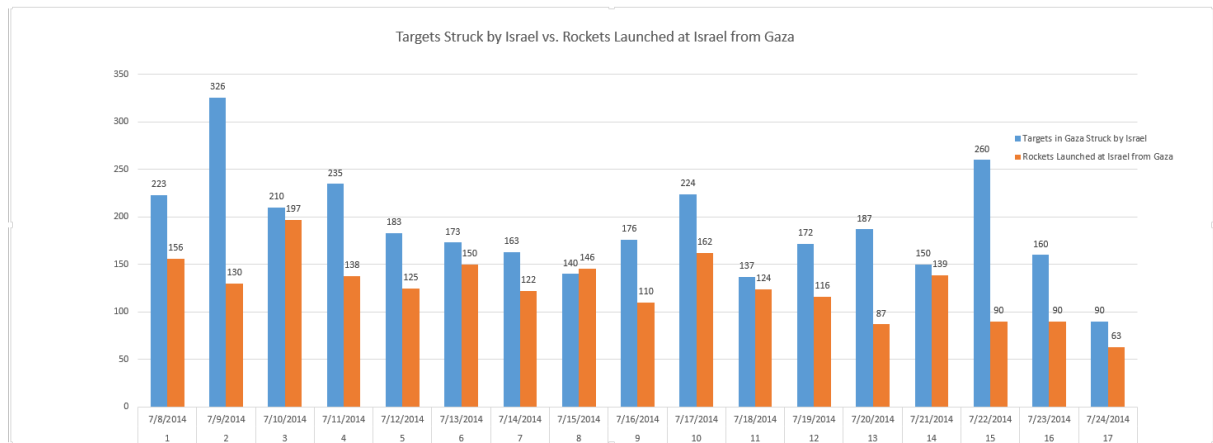
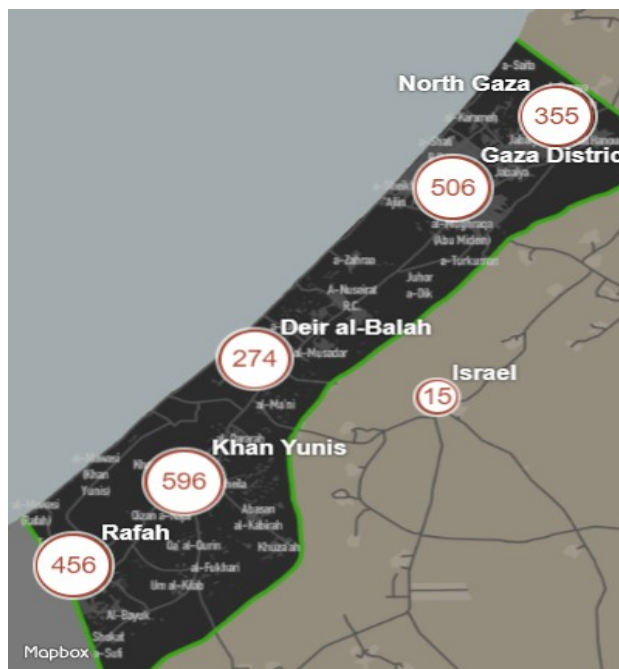


Chart 3-4: Targets Struck by Israel vs Rockets Launched at Israel from Gaza in 2014. (" Hamas | Stats, Data, and Visuals", 2014)

The above graph, from 2014, shows the data on missiles and bombings from and to Hamas. In July 2014 the so-called *Operation Protective Edge* was considered one of the most terrible massacres that took place in the Gaza Strip and eventually passed unseen. Israel, which is considered as a military hegemony in the region, bombed the Gaza Strip and led to a huge number of casualties, which were more than two thousand from the Palestinian side and 15 on the Israeli side. This proving that, on the overall, Hamas developed under a culture of war and insecurity, alongside with rebellion against Western values and countries that supported Israel, and its growth was shaped by multiple conflicts (B'tselem, 2016 p.4)



Graph 3-5: The Number of Fatalities from the Operation Protective Edge. ("50 Days: More than 500 Children - Facts and figures on fatalities in Gaza, Summer 2014", 2014)

Similarly to Hezbollah, the party developed and structured its governance within the framework of the culture of war, present since its election, and of the patriarchal structure, this last causing a backfire toward gender equality and human rights. However, this apparent connections with values correlated to Political Islam collude with gender egalitarian morals, as demonstrated by the presence of women in leading positions within the Hamas party structure. Women like Sameera Al-Halayka, Jamila Shanti and Huda Naim provide a different perspective showing the actual commitments pursued by the party to grant gender equality and opportunities so to enforce Quranic principles.

3.2.1 The Hybrid Spectrum

The political dimension of Hamas is complex and touches some major topics of discussion, starting from the influence that the Sharia and the patriarchal system already played in the country, influencing the approaches that women have toward politics, being contradictory as stated by Islah Jad in her work. In this section, I analyze “the contradiction between the marginalization of women within Hamas’ organizational structure and their mobilization in the civil society of the West Bank” (Jad, 2010). The involvement of women in politics is applied according to the Sharia and thus it is to be considered delusional yet it sees a huge manifestation at the social level in the West Bank.

One major example comes from the interview carried out in 2010 by Sameera Al-Halayka, an elected member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and a journalist for more than 10 years. When she was questioned whether women received an inferior treatment within Hamas, her answer outlined the discourse of Jad, in the way she described Hamas as being based on gender equality, but at the same time showed some patriarchal flaws still present in it.

Rights and duties of Muslim women emanate first and foremost from Islamic Sharia or law. They are not voluntary or charitable acts or gestures we receive from Hamas or anyone else. Thus, as far as political involvement and activism is concerned, women generally have the same rights and duties as men. After all, women make up at least 50 percent of society. In a certain sense, they are the entire society because they give birth to, and raise, the new generation. (Amayreh, 2010 p.3).

In the first part of the interview, it is possible to notice how she does not make any distinction between the cultural and the Islamic fundamentals of the Sharia; she refers to it as something

already present and that has been not given or granted by Hamas. As in the previous chapters, the composition of the Sharia was explained as being composed for half by cultural elements that logically change depending on different countries, it is possible to argue that in Palestine the Sharia is more influenced by its religious elements than by the cultural ones. This fact stands out in Amayreh's interview when she argues that regarding political involvement and activism there is equality of rights regardless of gender.

However, the aspects and influence of the patriarchal society become evident by the way in which she motivates her statement, claiming that women are more than half of the society, and indeed they can be considered the whole society because of their role in raising new generations. Thus it is possible to infer that politically, even if women's rights appear to be respected and there is a gender neutral political activism behind Hamas, the soul of the party is, by nature, patriarchal.

Nonetheless, this is still an improvement if compared to the huge division present within Hezbollah. In Hamas there is a sort of gender equality motivated by patriarchal values, in Hezbollah the ancient chauvinist mentality impedes women from having the same political opportunities than men when running for elections. This exposition of patriarchal values is also present when Sameera Al-Halayka analyses the situation since 2007: "women, especially women activists, are now hostages to a political reality that is not of their making. In short, there are thousands of women activists who are suffering the consequences and ramifications of the rift between Hamas and Fatah." (Amayreh, 2010 p.4). This shows that eventually, from the beginning, there has been a scarce political participation of women in Hamas and today they are suffering such consequences.

Another nuance of such a patriarchal society, arising from the discourse by Mrs. Al-Halayka comes when, referring to the situation present in Palestine, when being questioned about gender equality under Hamas, she answered:

Well, this is mainly attributed to the way women are raised and educated and also to the harsh conditions resulting from the Israeli occupation which make all Palestinians, including women, more resilient. In many instances, women find themselves facing a situation where they have to take over the job of the husband/ father due to his absence as a result of arrest, assassination or constant hounding by the Israeli occupation authorities. So, in general, the peculiar Palestinian situation makes women tough, resilient and more creative in coping with harsh realities." (Amayreh, 2010 p.4).

Again, the words present in the interview convey the impression that the values of equality promoted by Islam and by the patriarchal societal norms, which are characteristic of Political Islam, coalesce in the contemporary Palestinian society. One example of this controversy is the fact that while in some instances women see their status of activist being respected through moments of engagement with Islamist positions, other times there are also many contradictions that may lead to a closure towards women, eventually a step-back into traditional ideas which see them “solely as reproducers of the nation” (Jad, 2010).

Nonetheless, an additional reason in support of the loyal respect of the Sharia can be found within the personal background of the interviewee, which cannot be seen as a fully representative of the party. Furthermore, other voices coming from Hamas may be important to demonstrate how in general politically wise, the party follows an Islamic gendered policy. Overall, it remains one of the few political organizations that host a “Women Department” in charge of ensuring the propaganda of the party and drifting away from those societal values which may be corrupted by the patriarchal influence. In 2010, the head of the department was Jamila Shanti and her claims clearly prove the above statement:

This is probably the reason why Hamas has been able to receive widespread support from people. Hence, I can say that Hamas’ philosophy stems from Islam which gives women their rights and dignity. So, it is only natural that the status of women within Hamas is very advanced as women are considered a fundamental component of the movement. (Amayreh, 2010 p.8).

Her recognition of the commitment that women show to the party and the acknowledgment of the Islamic morals behind Hamas’ political agenda appear to open the perspective of a new feminist interpretation of the movement beyond the patriarchal framework of society.

Nonetheless, the last parliamentary elections could not prove the gender equal propaganda that Hamas and the two members of the party praise, as only 6 women were elected in spite of the 74 seats in parliament (Fisher, 2006), showing that the vision of the first speaker, elected member of Parliament, is much more shared within the country than the second. This could result as being one of the reasons behind the strong level of women's unrepresentativeness into Hamas. Yet, another explanation may be the fact that the whole Palestinian society is still under an intense struggle to gain independence, and one of the two ways, in order to reach such goal, is perceived as military power and resistance. This, as claimed by Tahhan, is the option that Hamas chooses to follow more frequently “Strategy towards Israel: Hamas -

Armed resistance” (Tahhan, 2017), the second, negotiation, she claims has been more Fatah’s agenda. Differently from Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood, that are already established in their respective countries and are expanding their influence into the rest of the Arab Region, Hamas still faces a big struggle against those considered as invaders, so being the mission to be mostly accomplished through the use of the military power. Moreover, it took preeminence emerging as the Islamic alternative to the secular Fatah, and the divide between the two is still alive. It has intercepted the disillusionment for the failure of PLO to reunite Palestinian population in a Palestinian state on the 1967 armistice borders and offered an Islamist possibility. From this perspective, it could be more understandable that masculinity and patriarchy are still the major moral values present within the Gaza Strip and within Hamas itself.

The relevance of the military force for Hamas is prevalent under every different perspective of the party, including its name, as Levitt states that is “both an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement) and an Arabic word meaning ‘zeal’” (Levitt, 2007 p.8). This is determinant when analyzing the role of Hamas and its developments, especially in the Gaza Strip.

In fact, one the main leaders of Hamas, Khaled Mesh’al, affirmed that the role of the party was not opposing Israel’s Judaism, because the land where Hamas wants to develop is home of multiple religions and the party is respectful towards all of them, as seen in the following quote:

We fight those who occupy our lands [...] the basis for resistance is the occupation, not religious differences, especially in Palestine.[...] Palestine specifically has a history of religious diversity and coexistence among civilizations with many different religions [...] naturally coexistence and forgiveness are a general principle [...] and Hamas is part of this environment (Mesh’al, 2017).

As an ideology, resistance is present as well in the Quran where the prophet struggles to resist against the oppression of those that bully Islam, without however using violence. Yet, because it would be impossible to resist to oppression without the use of violence, the name of Hamas further proves the strong influence that masculinity has within the movement. So, even if gender equality is praised, practices to achieve recognition may still seem patriarchal (Jad, 2010). The juxtaposition between the idea of resistance and its application is common in

the Quran and the way in which it is applied becomes distorted by culture and contextualization.

The role that Islamic institutions play within Hamas is huge, and this causes an entanglement between the social and political life, making it extremely hard to create a difference between them. Differently from Hezbollah, political and social commitments in the case of Hamas' women are correlated, and the Islamic dictates are not directly applied as inferred from the Quran but they pass through predetermined institutions being, controversially, distorted.

Hamas has placed Islam at the center of its activity since its inception. While the Charter of Hamas appealed to Islam and identified the movement as specifically Palestinian and Muslim, much of the building of Hamas has come through institutions of Islam. (Religion and Resistance: The Role of Islamic Doctrine in Hamas and Hezbollah Matthew Lawson University of South Florida 29).

This quote shows the dualism previously mentioned with reference to the role of institutions, and this is recognizable also in the difference among the two women mentioned above; while the first insisted heavily on the Sharia, the second stressed the Quranic principles.

A third woman that was interviewed, and whose position opens a third perspective in the role that Hamas gives to women, politically and socially wise, is Huda Nain, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council representing the Refugee Camps in the Gaza Strip. Her presence is of great importance since she is a woman that gives voice to the people she represents, and thus it is possible to assume that she also gives great importance to gender equality norms in her constituencies, which are usually not considered by the political legislators especially from poor areas.

Hamas is an Islamic political movement that is part of the Muslim Brotherhood movement which adopts an Islamic ideology based on moderation. I can say that the founders of Hamas accorded women special attention out of a conviction that the success of any political or social movement depends to a very large extent on the successful participation and contribution of women. (Amayreh, 2010, p.13).

Huda Nain, similarly to Jamila, believes that, notwithstanding the few female candidates at the political elections, the party places extreme relevance on the active participation of women, arguing that it grants “allocated funds and encouraged the growth and development of the women’s department” (Amayreh, 2010, p.13) to female associations. Hence it is clear,

from her words, that the party goes beyond the simple representation within the parliament and tries to allocate as many resources as possible to funding women's associations related to the party. For the first time, the speaker makes a distinction between politics and society, criticizing the second alongside the social traditions that compose Political Islam.

Moreover, the clear Islamic principles upon which Hamas is based has enabled many women to rid themselves of many of erroneous social traditions which significantly restricted women's social and political empowerment. For example, some of our slowly-disappearing earlier traditions would consider a woman activist in politics as "somewhat wantonly rebelling against traditions (Amayreh, 2010, p.13).

As a result, by recognizing the cleavage that does not enable women to compete fairly and equally in the party is one of the fundamental ways to push for the development of gender equality. This leads, eventually, to reach the breaking point where the social norms and conformities will be over classed, showing thoughts possibly related to the Islamic Feminism. To conclude, the social and the political dimensions in Hamas are different from those in Hezbollah, and as the latter seems to be stratified in its society, Hamas is entertaining, with neighboring countries, diplomatic and political relations. The importance of international alliances is underlined in the discourse of Hamas' leader Khaled Meshaal when declaring that they have always been opened to Egypt because considered as a possible ally against the Israeli forces. The idea of resistance, which made up the early political propaganda of the party, is still influent due to the political situation of the country, which has always been under attack, even during ceasefire agreements. This situation has prevented the development of the party in two different dimensions and entangled the social contribution of Hamas, where the controversies explained by Jad are still present and visible among the members that were interviewed. In my opinion, it is very likely that in a time of stability, the future policies of Hamas would be moving toward the implementation of Islamic Feminism and Islam, so moving away from the Political Islam and the patriarchal norms of society. Thus, differently from Hezbollah, the Palestinian party seems to provide a more viable solution and gendered fair system, even if at the last parliamentary elections only six women run as candidates.

3.3 The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood is one of the most important political parties in the Middle East and North African region. It was founded in Egypt, a country strongly conditioned, both socially and politically, by the constant influence of Political Islam. The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 by a schoolteacher called Hassan-al-Banna and, from its creation, its main purpose has been the implementation of the Sharia in Egypt, replacing, with Islamic morals and ethos, the British imperialism (Leiken & Brooke, 2007 p.108). Hence, the Sharia was seen as a way to seek the Arab and religious identity, juxtaposing the culture of the oppressed people with the one of the oppressors. Analyzing these facts, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood can easily be considered as a rebellion that would be probably approved by Edward Said. The party concentrated its forces on the social causes left behind by imperial Egypt, but at the same time, developed an important militia supported by a significant culture of war through a coup d'état and the assassinations of some political leaders. Nonetheless, in few years, the Muslim Brotherhood started shifting away from their first moral values and matured into a party fully committed with the reintroduction of the Islamic norms, raising to the extreme its ideology.

In Egypt, similarly to Lebanon, the political and social life is largely influenced by religious institutions. The most important one, which can also be considered as the major lab for Islamic corruption in terms of societal norms, is Al-Azhar. Indeed, this is due to the strong role that religion has assumed in Egypt to be mentioned several times in the main articles of the constitution, as the first: "It is part of the Muslim world, belongs to the African continent, is proud of its Asian dimension, and contributes to building human civilization", and the second: "Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic Sharia are the principle source of legislation" (Egyptian Constitution, 2014).

Thus, it is explicit the importance that Sharia plays within the country, by being constitutionally described as the main source of legislation. As stated in the previous chapters, two of the components of Sharia are rooted within the traditions of the past and the consensus of the elder. This logically leads to the re-shaping of laws by religious institutions, through the imposition of patriarchal morals and principles extensively criticized by Islamic feminists. However, the huge importance exercised by religion can possibly be understood from the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, thus of a movement that came at the end of the British colonization. Islam was taken as a banner for eastern values and mosques became places of resistance and identity formation. Egypt seems to be the place where such a duality between

Islam and Political Islam started. For this reason, it could be interesting to study the role of women in a country that was completely dominated by the dictates of what could be considered as Political Islam in the last century. However, it must be also taken into consideration that Egypt is a case sui generis, due to the huge repressions that, depending on the period, at times was exercised on and other times was endured by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Political Islam, per se, thus was born as the entanglement of Arab societal norms present in 1928 and Quranic principles of equality as much as rebellion in order to convince individuals to support them alongside performing actions that would eventually lead to the destruction of the regime of the time. Thus, it is important to understand the process that brought to the formation of contemporary Political Islam, which has been identified as being the major reason of gender inequality within the country and then to see the role that women have played in this context.

3.3.1 The Heritage of the “Oppression Culture”

“[The British] said [...] and such actions proved, as if proof were necessary; that [...] deserved subjugation by the higher civilization of European Britain.” (Said. 1994, p.147)

The above quote is from the book *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward Said, and it could be considered as a statement describing the major justifications for oppression: inequality and superiority complex. From its origins, the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to be completely opposed to the role that was being played by the colonizers, providing its support to the suburbs and to those zones of the country that had been discarded by the colonizers. Yet, since the time when the Muslim Brotherhood was created until today, many political attempts were carried out from the party with the utter objective of taking control of the Egyptian political arena (Jones & Cullinane, 2013).

Nonetheless, these coups never gave the Muslim Brotherhood the real possibility to reach power in the country, except for a very short period in 2013. On the opposite, they eventually led to the implementation of controls on the party and to the increasing development of the culture of war and of the political guerrilla carried out by it. However, the Muslim community in the terms of Political Islam, achieved many significant goals, such as for example the institution of Islam as the major religion of the state and the implementation of the rule that the Egyptian President must be a Muslim, excluding from the competition member of other

religions and giving thus huge powers to the institutions like Al-Azhar, acting as a pillar for Sharia and Islamic legislation.

In order to understand the role played by the party, by the political institutions and by the Constitution of Egypt, it could be pivotal to analyze the Muslim Brotherhood before and after it went to power. To begin with, as stated by Paula Złotowska when speaking about the early period of the Egyptian independence, during the 22: “The traditional legal system was based on Islamic law as well as on traditional law that existed in the region” (Zlotowska, 2016, p.115).

This shows how it was not the Muslim Brotherhood that, eventually, forced the Sharia, but the party had to adapt to the already present Islamic jurisdiction, namely Political Islam. The Constitution implied that the Islamic law became one of the two major sources of law, while the other remained the social norms that were at the base of the revolution against imperialism. This application is completely legitimized by the willingness of the Egyptian people to seek independence from the culture and the morals which were imposed by the colonizers. Consequently, the rise of Political Islam, as a system corrupting moral values and norms, is directly influenced by the presence of the colonizer since it was born as a revolutionary movement aiming to the reestablishment the Arab identity.

However, as time passed, the political dimension changed and new institutions were founded, and eventually, the regimes ruling in Egypt were hardly in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood, that tried to remove many of high officials from the government. For these reasons, the party started being considered as a major force of rebellion and instability in the country. Starting from the British decolonization, the idea of having a single man in power was implemented. In fact, the constitutional changes until the 50s¹² increased the power of the King. In Egypt the royals were Muslim and this led to a great consideration of Islamic institutions like the Al-Azhar mosque. This was indeed considered as being the major institution dictating the religious agenda behind Islamic legislation, thus interpretations of the Quran and the Sunnah. While the King would dictate the social components of the law, Ijma and Qiyas, following as well the identity adopted as Arab and anti-colonial. As a result, the major components of the Sharia, alongside with the lawmaking process, came from the period between the ‘20s and the ‘50s (Zlotowska, 2016, p.113, 114, 115). In my opinion, the system still used for legislation dates back of a century and it reflects the “cultural identity” that the King would adopt for his

¹² On 23rd July 1952 there was a military-driven revolution that led to the end of the Egyptian Monarchy and the establishment of a Republic.

law-making process and has never been changed since then. The major reason behind the backwardness of Egypt thus reflects a rebellion against “the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago” (Salih, 1969, p.29), Namely, Orientalism.

The political instability was a major factor of these years. “[Starting] in 1923, the Egyptian system of government was characterized by the strong power held by the King. It has changed in 1928 when the Constitution was suspended due to the domestic unrest. Later, in 1930 the authorities introduced a state of emergency and again the Constitution was suspended” (Zlotowska, 2016, p.116). Understandably women did not play any role of relevance in the process of Egyptian restoration, and always maintained a side-role within the decisions that were taken. Nonetheless, the oppression experienced by the Egyptian people during the British colonization was exactly the same that lately was exercised by the Egyptian monarchy on women. From the colonization to the reformation the Egyptian women did not experience many changes in their cultural lives, with the exception of discriminating dictates and interpretations that initially bound them through the figure of their husbands. Then they became official laws by the monarchy, and this influence of the 20s culture has continued even in the following decades.

“Restoration of the 1923 Constitution in 1936 had coincided with the signing of the Anglo Egyptian Treaty, which had allowed the British forces to stay in Egypt (the Suez Canal area) until 1956” (Zlotowska, 2016, p.117)

Thus, Egypt was completely overtaken by the reconstruction of the country and a very slow process of decolonization, which continued until 1956 and caused the role of women to be completely overshadowed. Once that the monarchy was overthrown, the importance of the religious institution slowly started fading away, and the role of women started being almost reconsidered due to a huge process of Europeanization. At that time, women removed the Burqa, especially many of the elder women of Egypt eventually did not wear the veil and seemed to be even much more open minded than the younger women.

In the 70s, Nasser, along with the Western morals that characterized his leadership, concluded his stronghold of Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood was invited back into the country and re-started to impose its influence into Egyptian politics. The party and many other Egyptians considered Nasserism as enforcing immoral principles. One of the more important, if not the most important, Egyptian writer, Naguib Mahfouz, in one of his books set in Egypt during this period, described the situation with the following quote:

I see you still have your fighting spirit!" she said plaintively.
There is nothing to be ashamed of, if you have found him different. He's still an excellent man. . . .

But he has no morals!

They no longer exist. Not even for Ahmad Nasr. (Mahfouz, 2016, p. 73)

The original context of the Muslim Brotherhood has been changing, initially due to colonization and then by forced modernization where the Islamic and Arab society has been perceived by the leaders of the political movements as being under threat. Similarly to what happened in the past, the uprising of 2011¹³ of the party was based on the ancient morals that were present during the 20s, along with the relaunching of Al-Azhar mosque and University and their importance at the legislative level. Hence, the history of Political Islam, as intended in this chapter, has been a huge correlation between colonization and modernization, and also in a context in which the societal values that seemed to be considered patriarchal resulted as patriotic and Arabs. Even if in a different context, the Muslim Brotherhood claimed to be born in a system where the culture of war was pivotal, similarly to Hamas and Hezbollah, but with the key difference that the former was a case of domestic violence, yet with few episodes oriented to the recognition of women's rights.

Women started being more actively involved with the social life of the party and found a way in which to live and operate within the Muslim Brotherhood. This fact is demonstrated also by their vital participation in the strikes and demonstrations, risking to face repression as much as their male counterparts, as possible to see from the following quote: "Before the 2011 popular uprising as women activists were demanding greater representation within the movement's structure and hierarchy, at the same time, they were also facing the regime's repression." (Mhajne, 2018, p.X).

As seen above, the boost of women's role within the party was popular, but at the same time shows that until that period their level of representation was low as expected due to the reason behind the general level of politics in Egypt. In 2011, the Freedom and Justice Party, which was technically the party of the Muslim Brotherhood, achieved an incredibly high consensus which led, in 2012, to the election of Mr. Mohamed Morsi, a member of the party, as Egyptian president.

¹³ During 2011 there was a major crackdown in Egypt where individuals protested against Mubarak, that similarly to Nasser opened Egypt to Western influence.

In one of the interviews released to Al-Jazeera in 2012, when the new Constitution was being drafted, the spokeswoman of the president's party Sondos Asem underlined the huge improvements that were being carried out toward the Constitution of 2012. As she claimed, "the preamble of the constitution clearly states that men and women are equal in front of the law" (Asem, 2012) and she explained that there were at least four articles in the 2012 Constitution that would provide the equality of gender in front of the law.

Nevertheless, once that El Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood's President of Egypt, was taken down by a military coup the situation in the country continued to be unstable. Moreover, the 2014 Constitution mentioned women only 11 times including the index and the number of articles protecting gender equality was incredibly low.

4. Sunrise

"The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep."

Rumi

Gender and religion are categories of analysis strictly interrelated, both of them profoundly embedded in historical, cultural and social narratives. Different themes have been explored in the sections of this work to unfold some pivotal issues. In particular, referring to Islam, when the gender perspective is enforced to approach religious practices, several and interconnected stances from outside as well from inside the Umma come to life.

On the one hand, the gender inequality question, ascribed to religious dictates, becomes central in the explanation of the gap in the democratic process of Muslim countries and is often exploited from an Orientalist perspective. On the other hand, women's role, as deduced from religious texts' reading and interpretations, assumes importance for a wide range of movements who have developed inside the Muslim communities. All these emerging movements, while claiming different, or even polarized "true" Muslim identities, intercept women's issues that have been developed by two diverse but not antithetical movements of feminism in Arab countries, namely the secular and the Islamic.

The different reading and interpretation of the sacred text is easily explained by the changing knowledge of interpreters, contextualized in different times and spaces. In addition, when talking about Political Islam, that is the aspect that in my opinion directly conditions the daily

life of people, it is necessary to consider the two cultural aspects of Sharia, namely Ijma and Qiyas, which complement the first two revealed sources and that are even more contextualized and subjected to possible misinterpretations. Furthermore, the globalization process has determined an amplification of communicative spaces and themes multiplying the authoritative persons speaking for Islam. In this sense, Islamic Feminism has elaborated an “hermeneutics of suspicion”: through the methodology of exegesis, they have been engaged in a re-reading of the Quran and of the Sunnah, challenging the traditional gender biased reading of the texts and enhancing the egalitarian status of men and women in the pivotal passages of the texts. Actually, it is with reference to the concept of equality that one of the major dichotomies highlighted emerges. Islamic feminism rejects the notion of complementarity which several passages of the Quran refer to and that is, on the contrary, acceptable from the secular feminist point of view. Then, at the same time, Islamic feminism claims that an effective equality cannot transcend gendered differences. This is a debate that has animated even Western feminism through which I read the biographies of Khadija and Fatimah. As suggested by the “Ethic of care” if we replace the politics of justice with a politics of autonomy that favors the possibility of choosing according to one’s morals we can even overcome the gender divide and start to speak of human beings, complementary¹⁴ to each other.

The emerging debates have been presented and analyzed with the aim to elicit the different nuances besides the narrative discourse concerning the gender issue in the Islamic religious tradition and to sustain the thesis that, in contrast to dominant Western prejudices, the gap in gender equality in some Arab-Muslim countries is not due to religious dictates. The gender unequal social and political system is the resultant of a traditional, stagnant reading of the sacred texts and of the subsequent law implementation with the scope of maintaining or reintroducing, in the case of the emergent Fundamentalisms, a patriarchal society.

“Serving as talismans, women’s – especially mothers’ – deportment, dress, and sometimes religiosity guarantees the very survival of the collectivity. Controlling women’s behavior, thus, becomes a life and death issue; and real-life challenges to the nation’s customs or certain women’s insistence on performing as, or refusal to act as, symbols of the nation appears to threaten the survival of the country and of everyone in it” (Temma Kaplan-Meade & Wiesner, 2004, p.170).

¹⁴ “A relationship or situation in which two or more different things improve or emphasize each other's qualities” Oxford Dictionaries | English. (2018).

The role of women within a country is indicative in order to analyze the level of the interaction between Islam and Political Islam, the former relating to religious components of the legislation and the latter to the social ones in Sharia. Three case studies, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are important to show that, even if some steps are being made toward the improvement in women 'participation, social norms still affect the countries performance when it comes to gender equality.

On the overall, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood share the "Culture of War", thus the fact that they developed both as political parties and armed militia, reflecting the cultural situation of the areas that they represent. Additionally, a common base the resistance against oppression, whether it results as intra-state or international.

Hezbollah, or the *Party of God*, was born in Lebanon and is backed internationally by Iran. One of the causes that led to its existence was the conflict that involved meridional Lebanon during the 80s. Similarly, Hamas was born during the first Intifada, out powering Fatah and directly starting a political agenda against Israel and its Occidental allies, claiming that the former was an illegal state. Similarly the two, the Muslim Brotherhood was held in order to rebel against imperialism, and eventually, this agenda led to the banning of its members from Egypt political arena. All of the three case studies present two major dimensions, the social and the political, even if the level of interaction among these two depends on the party. In Lebanon, the social dimension is completely detached from the political, and it sees a huge involvement and interaction of women claiming the Quranic principles of equality and charity. Additionally, Hezbollah provides access to women into a television network, enabling them to participate in the social life and influence it, having a relevant role. However, this is completely detached from the political dimension where the political commitment to women as running candidates is not contemplated for the Party of God. In Hamas, this controversy is present, as noted by Islah Jad, as yet less decisive than in the Lebanese case. In fact, there are many committees set up by the Hamas party so as to include women in the political process. Yet, many women are still precluded from running and from having positions of power. The Muslim Brotherhood is no exception, and while some women are employed at the social level, the fact that it is still in its revolutionary period influences the participation rate in both dimensions.

In revolutionary contexts, gender issues are at stake, as observable in the case studies presented.

Often women, in nationalist struggles, become symbols to fight for, in order to gain political, social and cultural power, to redefine personal or national identity. Consequently, the veil

becomes a metaphor and veiling or unveiling women the focal point of the individual and of the collective action. As a consequence of the revolutions presented in the three case studies, women asked for and gained an increasing role in the social dimension, while being still backward in the political sphere.

In religious practices, as well as in the correlated familiar, social and political sphere, the male perspective has been generalized to include all the possible human experiences.

The sustainable path is to contextualize the reading and the interpretations of sacred texts and remove the “veils” to overcome divides and dualities and to start building on differences a new politics of effective equality.

“Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority.” (Said, 1978).

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