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Feminist Research and Civil Society Engagement as Scholactivism

The Case of the Women and Memory Forum in Egypt

Introduction

Feminism as an ideology and social movement can be traced back to Egypt at the turn of the 20th century with the rise in women's awareness of the potential for their developing roles in the public sphere. This can be attributed to the general national awakening manifested in the social reform and national independence project, which included both men and women in the vision of the Egyptian *nahda*. It was the late 19th and early 20th century that witnessed the marked visible and vocal emergence of women in the public sphere, where they developed and practiced what we can call today their activism tools and skills. This 'women's awakening' can be traced in the following areas: the establishment and management of charity organisations; the establishment and management of, and intellectual contributions to, the press; the formation of women's pressure groups working towards decreasing if not eradicating sociocultural and legal discrimination against women, especially through an expansion in the education of women and a reform of laws.¹ The history of the Egyptian feminist movement, hence, can be seen as having developed from within the Egyptian socio-political context, while at the same time seeking solidarity with the women's movement worldwide. I have argued elsewhere² that the Egyptian feminist movement has, from its inception, used the tools of political activism; thus identifying and asserting itself as a social as well as a political movement that can be structured in four waves, based on the main issues raised along the years, addressing not only society, but, most notably, the authorities. By these waves, I mean the organised efforts initiated and followed through by Egyptian women towards socio-political change in the area of women's education, family law, political participation, and women's rights in both the private and public spheres. These included demanding equal educational opportunities; reforms of personal status and family laws; illumination of discrimination against women in work, political representation, and the

1 Baron 1994.

2 Kamal 2016.

public sphere; calling for laws criminalising sexual harassment and domestic violence; and the assertion of women's reproductive rights as well as the protection and their control of their bodies; and beyond.

Throughout these four waves, the start of which can be traced back to the turn of the 20th century, Egyptian women have combined feminist thought with activism. Throughout its history, the Egyptian feminist movement was characterised by theorising and organising; whereby women exposed gender discrimination through writing, publishing, and lecturing; while other women acted on the ground by campaigning, establishing organisations, and planning demonstrations. These two groups were grounded in the shared articulation of their visions in feminist statements addressing the public as well as concrete demands submitted to political parties, the parliaments, and the authorities. Another prominent feature of the Egyptian feminist movement is its continuity, as a quick look at the demands raised by Egyptian women throughout the 20th and into the 21st century clearly indicates that the movement has been raising more or less and developing the same demands across decades and generations. For example, the turn-of-the-20th-century demand to provide women with equal educational opportunities as those enjoyed by men has continued to occupy the agendas of feminists today, who continue to demand equal educational opportunities for women, ranging from making national school education compulsory for both girls and boys, to calls for providing women with access to knowledge on the basis of gender equality and justice. The generation and dissemination of knowledge has become among the most visible and vocal aims of the Egyptian feminist movement in the past few decades – a feminist knowledge that is essentially about women, by women, for women. It is a knowledge that enlightens and empowers; a knowledge that not only exposes injustice, but envisions social change; a knowledge that is informed by feminist theory and grounded in feminist practice.

This discussion paper seeks to highlight feminist knowledge production as scholactivism through a case study of the Women and Memory Forum, pointing out the interweaving of scholarship with activism, and addressing the main achievements worth celebrating and the challenges that continue to face feminist scholarship and activism. The paper will consider the role of academia in feminist scholarship, and the location of feminism within Egyptian civil society. Written from a position within WMF, this paper will reflect on questions related to how WMF perceives itself as part of the continuum of the Egyptian feminist movement. It will also highlight the issues raised within the organization about feminism, scholarship, ideology, and social engagement. Finally, in this discussion, I attempt to formulate a narrative about WMF's contribution to feminist research methods and women's empowerment in the Egyptian context – to feminist knowledge and activism

Feminist Knowledge Production

The location of feminist knowledge production in the Egyptian context and its transformative potential is different from the Western one, especially in the Anglophone world, where the earliest spaces created for feminist interventions are attributed to the rise of Women's Studies in Western academia. It was the establishment of Women's Studies, mostly on US-American university and college campuses, that provided an extension of women's political organising and an effective location for the development of scholarship and feminist consciousness-raising. Women's Studies emerged as an interdisciplinary area for feminism across the disciplines, whereby scholars developed research and teaching strategies: "to continue their ground-breaking research and criticism, challenging the androcentric paradigms that ratify the erasure of women, and to incorporate basic feminist scholarship within traditional fields of knowledge."³ In other words, feminist scholars aiming at transforming the canon adopted reformist and revolutionary tactics, by inserting feminist/gender perspectives within existing methodologies, or by creating their subversive or parallel spaces of scholarship and knowledge. A very clear example can be found, for example, within the disciplines of history and literary criticism, among many others, where some feminist scholars have chosen to use interdisciplinary feminist approaches and the gender lens within the established disciplines, or have opted to establish separate parallel disciplines such as herstory⁴ and gynocriticism⁵.

In the Egyptian context, similar feminist knowledge-production efforts can be attributed to individual scholars, publishing mostly in Anglo-American academic journals and/or working mostly from within civil society organisations in addition to their university affiliations. This can be seen as an outcome of the traditional disciplinary structure of Egyptian academia (unlike the liberal arts and interdisciplinary academic programme structure), as well as the absence of feminist and gender academic research centres in Egyptian universities. On the other hand, many feminist and human-rights organisations developing in Egypt since the 1990s have sought to ground their researchers in feminist research methods; hence the need for the production of feminist knowledge in Arabic. It is in such a sociocultural milieu that the Women and Memory Forum was established in Egypt (in 1995), conceptualised by feminist scholar Hoda Elsadda, who together with a group of feminist academics and activists started a project on re-reading

³ Aiken et al. 1988, xiv.

⁴ Morgan 1970.

⁵ Showalter 1979.

and re-writing Egyptian and Arab cultural history from a feminist perspective. This includes research into the history of Egyptian women's contribution to the *nahda* project (the Egyptian early-20th-century political and cultural renaissance in which the national liberation movement to end British colonization was combined with a general modern nation-building project); the search and recovery of women's roles in medieval history in the Islamic world; representations of women in popular culture; and the documentation of women's oral history in the WMF archive of women's voices, among others.

Gradually, at the beginning of the new millennium, from a critique of the historical and literary canon, the WMF raised the motto 'Towards Alternative Knowledge,' asserting the organisation's vision of scholarly engagement for social change. I have argued elsewhere that scholactivism can aptly describe the feminist translation project conceptualised and realised by the WMF.⁶ This paper, however, seeks to expand on the discussion about feminist translation, moving into the wider arena of WMF projects, and situate the work of the organization, its projects, and its team, within the notion of scholactivism. The discussion below will hence focus on three main aspects of WMF work: knowledge-production and documentation projects, gender education activities, and various publications. These knowledge-production and dissemination projects are explored within the wider framework of feminist knowledge-production, with particular focus on the intersections of feminism, scholarship, and activism. In other words, feminist praxis as scholactivism.

Scholactivism

Scholactivism is a term that was first used by environmentalist scholars who aimed at expanding the knowledge produced in academia about environmental change through its implementation in society. In 2016, environmentalist Rebecca Farnum observed the rise of "a movement of scholar-activists" raising questions about the engagement of academia in social change and "the role of individual academics in public life;"⁷ in other words, the relationship between knowledge-production and its implementation. In her definition, Farnum describes scholactivism as a term combining scholarship with activism, marking a significant development from traditional distinctions between scholars, policymakers, and

⁶ Kamal 2021.

⁷ Farnum 2016.

activists. At the core of her discussion lie the following questions: “Should scientists have a stake in their research? How should researchers share their knowledge? Should intellectuals engage with the public?”⁸ Farnum’s answers do not affirm the roles of academics and intellectuals in society, but further differentiate scholactivists from public intellectuals who “offer commentary on society” and engage with society through making knowledge accessible, unlike scholactivists who work closely with their communities and “believe they have a role to play in creating social justice.”⁹ The concrete model of scholactivism presented in Farnum’s brief article is explained via the example of the Dorm Room Diplomacy (DRD) project, established at the University of Pennsylvania in 2009, involving the creation of communication tools between American and Middle Eastern students through online video meetings. The purpose of these cross-cultural transnational interactions is to shape the views of young people through access to “positive knowledge about the ‘other’ to counter reductionist stereotypes.”¹⁰ Farnum’s questions, implied answers, and description of this experience led to several observations concerning the relationship between scholarship and activism. In the case of the DRD project, scholactivism is located within American academia, and addresses an academic community bound to leave academia and engage in society as individuals rather than a community as a whole. The role of scholars as activists is limited here to university student bodies, without indication of further policymaking towards systematic social change. In other words, it seems to rely on awareness-raising rather than social organising.

When importing the concept of scholactivism to the Egyptian context in relation to feminist activism, one of the main questions that arises has to do with its location. As pointed out in the introduction to this paper, Egyptian feminism emerged and developed in the public sphere rather than in the ivory tower of Egyptian academia. Actually, the university has always played the role of receiver rather than creator of feminist knowledge. Even in the earliest years of the Egyptian University (currently Cairo University, founded in 1908), the Women’s Section created in 1909 by Egyptian feminist intellectuals (prevented at that time from entering academia), managed to survive for just a few years before being closed down, blocking women from higher education till the mid-1920s. This can be only seen as an outcome of early-20th-century Egyptian civil-society activism, represented by such organisations as the Egyptian Feminist Union, the pressure groups working for women’s rights in the constitution and the law, in addi-

⁸ Farnum 2016.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

tion to the role of women in political parties and the women's press in general. Still, although the Egyptian feminist movement continued its struggle along the decades of the 20th century, feminist knowledge was not produced in academia until the early 21st century, and mainly through the efforts of Egyptian feminist academics who only found space for their feminist knowledge production within civil society organisations rather than university departments or academic programmes. These academics have only been able to introduce feminism into academia through their individual courses, whereas the first women's and gender studies postgraduate programme was established at the American University in Cairo, while the other only programme in an Egyptian university is the Women and Development MA programme in the Faculty of Political Science at Cairo University. This was, in turn, conceptualised in cooperation with Egyptian feminist academics working in university while developing feminist knowledge since the 1990s within feminist non-governmental organisations. It is only a few years ago that Gender Studies has been recognised as an academic specialization in the Faculty of Arts of Cairo University – the only Egyptian university acknowledging gender studies as such.

Hence, the main difference between the two examples of the University of Pennsylvania and Cairo University vis-à-vis the rise and development of scholactivism at the intersection of scholarship and activism, the academy and society, can be identified in the location of scholactivism. The Pennsylvania model suggests the location within academia, while the Cairo University model reveals the location of scholactivism within civil society and its direction from feminist organisations into academia. Egyptian scholactivism was developed by feminist scholars outside the groves of academia; although it continued to address scholars, activists, and the public. Through their location within academia and the civil society at the same time, Egyptian feminist scholactivists used their academic training to produce knowledge for social change. This is particularly applicable to the Women and Memory Forum in Egypt (WMF), which is an official NGO and an active feminist research and documentation centre concerned with the production and dissemination of knowledge about Egyptian (and Arab) women in history and society. The process of production can be seen as closely related to the scholarly dimension of WMF research, while the dissemination of this knowledge pertains to the activist sphere in its direct engagement with society and authority/-ies (i.e. societal powers – be it in terms of tangible institutions or via moral codes and norms).

The Case of the Women and Memory Forum

Unlike the Western model, where feminist scholarship developed within academia, the situation took the reverse form in the Egyptian context. It is within the civil society that most of the research and knowledge about women has been produced, and particularly within feminist non-governmental organisations and independent research centres. The WMF was established in 1995 (the decade that witnessed the establishment of several feminist and human-rights organisations) by a group of feminist academics who sought to conduct research on the representation of women in cultural history and the contributions of women in the public sphere.

The WMF is a unique feminist organization in the Egyptian context. It was founded by women scholars and activists trained in the humanities and social sciences, who have been working, since the mid-1990s, on a revision of Arab cultural history, with a particular focus on women's roles and representations. WMF has played an effective role locally and regionally, through its publications in Arabic (all available free online) which address both an academic and general readership; as well as organising gender education and women's oral history workshops (since 2010). The latest of these was held in May 2022, at the *Elles* Bookshop and Workspace in Cairo, attended by a group of young feminists, activists, and researchers (men and women). WMF has also been active within the Egyptian feminist movement, comprising feminist organisations advocating women's rights, and campaigning for reforms in personal status and family laws. The latest example is the *Wilaya* Campaign (concerning women's authority in the domestic and private sphere). WMF is currently involved in the Egyptian feminist campaign propagating reforms in Egyptian Personal Status and Family Law. The originality of WMF as a feminist organization is that it combines both academic scholarship with feminist activism, as the majority of the WMF founders and Board members are academics in the humanities and social sciences affiliated to Cairo University and The American University in Cairo.

The projects have varied across the years, but have maintained the vision of WMF since its inception: feminist knowledge production for social change. This is stated clearly in the "About Us" section of the WMF website: "We believe that one of the main obstacles facing Arab women now is the scarcity of alternative cultural information and knowledge about the role of women in history and in contemporary society."¹¹ The website also lists the main projects implemented by the organization, which include the following: Remembering; Who Is She in Egypt?;

11 Women and Memory Forum "About Us," accessed May 15, 2022.

Archive of Women's Oral History; Gender Education Programmes; Library; Translating Gender; in addition to the numerous publications. Looking at the WMF work from the perspective of scholactivism, this discussion paper will focus on three dimensions: knowledge production, gender education, and feminist activism. I will, therefore, highlight a selection of projects and products that stand as manifestations of WMF scholactivism: the Oral History Archive; the Gender Education Programmes; and WMF Publications.

The Archive of Women's Voices

The Oral History Archive is the product of a long process of feminist scholarship. It involves three aspects of scholarship related to the concepts and methods of feminist historiography, documentation, and archiving. The project is based on interviewing groups of women who have played active roles in the public sphere; it started in the 1990s targeting women in education, women in the arts, and women in politics. Hoda Elsadda, founder of the archive of women's narratives in the WMF asserts the importance of a women's archive, stating that "[w]riting women's stories, recording women's memories and unearthing women's hidden knowledge production [...] have all contributed to a revisionist movement in recording various histories and cultural traditions."¹² She further emphasises the feminist dimension of the whole process being governed by "a framework of feminist knowledge production" informed by a feminist awareness of power relations and the aim of producing alternative discourses about women's roles in the public sphere.¹³

Maissan Hassan and Diana Magdy, two active researchers in the WMF women's archive, have explained the philosophy and history of the documentation of women's narratives as a feminist research project with a socio-political agenda:

Believing in the potential of documenting women's narratives to enhance the lived realities of women in contemporary societies, WMF initiated its first oral history project in the late 1990s. The Archive of Women's Oral History consists of several collections, such as the Women Pioneers Collection, which includes more than 100 narratives of pioneering women in various walks of life such as social work, art, and politics, and the Women in the Public Sphere Post-2011 Collection.¹⁴

¹² Elsadda 2016, 152.

¹³ Ibid., 155.

¹⁴ Hassan and Magdy 2018, 136.

This explanation highlights the activist dimension of the documentation of women's stories with the aim of providing concrete detailed examples of women's roles in the public sphere and hence questioning the cultural stereotyping of women's professional and public contributions to their societies, without limiting their roles to the domestic sphere. It is worth noting, however, that this process is closely connected to scholarly work, in the conceptualization of the whole project as well as in the structure and implementation of the documentation itself.

The oral history project is structured around the research involved in identifying women whose personal narratives would lead to the development of a historical narrative, which in turn requires understanding the sociocultural context in which these women lived and worked. This is then followed by a stage wherein the interview itself is structured and questions developed. These scholarly efforts are reflected in the formulation of questions (from a feminist perspective) in semi-structured interviews that do not rely on a fixed list of closed questions, but rather topics and prompts that trigger the interviewees' memories and reflections. The interviews themselves are conducted by a group of researchers who either have a theoretically-grounded experience in feminist interviewing, or receive a training in that area, conducted by WMF experienced researchers. The outcome of these interviews then undergoes careful editing, revision, and archiving; and selected interviews have been published online.¹⁵ In some cases, WMF has managed to obtain some personal documents, which are additionally organised and saved in the archive of Private Collections and Personal Papers. The scholarship behind the archiving is emphasised by Elsadda, who points out the epistemological framework of the process, which involves the narrator and the archivist:

Archivists are not the sole mediators of narratives of the self. Stories told by narrators are structured and shaped by the context of narration: the specific historical moment at which the narrative is recorded; the wider metanarrative to which the narrator subscribes or supports; the position the narrator chooses to occupy, be it consciously or unconsciously, within the metanarrative.¹⁶

The narrative itself is seen as a product of mediation, selection, and interpretation, influenced by such factors as the narrator's state of mind, memory, and the context of the interview itself.¹⁷ The role of the interviewer is also significant

¹⁵ Oral History Archive "Narrators," accessed May 15, 2022.

¹⁶ Elsadda 2016, 156.

¹⁷ See Elsadda 2016.

in their management of the interview itself. Sharlene Hesse-Biber argues for “reflexivity” as an essential part of the interviewing process, which enables the researcher/interviewer to be “mindful of his or her positionality and that of the respondent.”¹⁸ Similarly, Patricia Lina Leavy states that “[f]eminists often use oral history as a way of gaining rich qualitative data” from underrepresented social groups (such as women), and is used as “a tool for accessing silenced or excluded knowledge, for unearthing this ‘missing’ knowledge.”¹⁹ The documentation and archiving involve the transcription and editing of the interviews, which might take the form of “[e]ditorial interventions [...] to facilitate the text’s readability” in addition to supplementing some historical or factual information that might not be known to the readers.²⁰ These technical, theoretical, and epistemological concerns and guidelines lie at the core of the WMF oral history interviewing and archiving practice.

In their discussion of the WMF interviewing process, Hassan and Magdy highlight the importance of being informed by feminist research methods when planning and doing oral history interviews, not only when selecting the narrators, designing the interviews, and conducting them, but they also stress the importance of the researchers’ reflections on their interviews and narrators:

In order to encourage reflexivity among members of the research team working on the Women in the Public Sphere Post-2011 Collection, researchers were asked to write field notes and share them during the weekly team meetings. These meetings provided a space for discussion, reflection, and learning. The researchers reflected on biases and areas of discomfort that arose during the interviews. Team members regularly shared excerpts from the recorded narratives during the meetings. Most importantly, the researchers not only discussed the recorded interview but also shared reflections on the encounter with the narrators.²¹

This methodology, developed by the WMF oral history project, is informed by interviewing techniques and feminist oral history,²² offers a scholactivist model, where interviews represent feminist praxis, in the sense of being a process of feminist oral history documentation grounded in feminist research theory. In that regard, the WMF archive of women’s narratives is grounded in feminist scholarship, while the actual interviewing practice leads to the production of feminist knowledge. The activism, however, does not stop at the stage of producing this

¹⁸ Hesse-Biber 2013, 117.

¹⁹ Leavy 2013, 154.

²⁰ Elsadda 2016, 157.

²¹ Hassan and Magdy 2018, 140.

²² Anderson and Jack 1991; Hesse-Biber 2013.

kind of knowledge with the purpose of subverting stereotypes of women's roles in the public sphere, nor archiving it at WMF. It moves beyond its institutional boundaries by offering training in feminist oral history methods to young scholars and activists, at the Egyptian and regional level, through the WMF Gender Education project.

Gender Education: Feminist History, Concepts, Research Methods

Gender Education is another important component of WMF work under the broad title 'Educational Lectures in Gender Studies.' This takes the form of intensive short courses in areas of gender approaches across the disciplines, feminist research methods, and the history of the Egyptian women's movement. In addition to concrete trainings that are designed specifically for researchers involved in WMF projects, these courses and workshops aim to achieve the following goals: (1) To provide "a good level of knowledge of the intellectual history of gender studies and the foundational texts of gender theory in a number of fields"; (2) To enable emerging researchers to "familiarise themselves well with the range of theoretical approaches to the study of gender which construct the field of gender studies" and "critically appraise and read research in gender studies; (3) To "acquire awareness of the comparative, historical and biographical approaches to research on gender" and develop the ability to "formulate research questions and operationalise them in order to develop a research argument."²³

The project started in 2009 as a series of workshops organised in cooperation with Cairo University, with the purpose of introducing Gender Studies to postgraduate students in the humanities and social sciences at the faculties of Arts, Political Science, and Media Studies. The programme was also organised in cooperation with the University of Alexandria (2014), including participants from the Delta region, followed by another one at the University of Minia (2014) with participants from Upper Egypt, the University of Beni Soueif (2015), and in the Women's College at Ain Shams University in Cairo (2016). The idea of the gender education programme came to fill the gap in gender studies among young scholars and researchers affiliated to national universities and NGOs. The Egyptian academics in departments of English Language and Literature (specifically at Cairo University) were the first to gain knowledge of the developments in feminist theory and gender studies in Western academia through the areas of Literary and

23 Women and Memory Forum "Gender Education Workshops," accessed May 15, 2022.

Critical Theory. Gender as a concept was additionally introduced in Egypt through international women's organisations, especially upon the UNDP Conference held in Cairo in 1994. It was through the involvement of the informed academics in the conference that feminist scholactivism was born. However, it became clear that big, organised efforts were necessary for the introduction of feminist thought and research methods, as well as gender as an analytical tool, in understanding and changing the social structures of gendered injustice. It was out of this sociocultural context that the Gender Education Programme developed at WMF.

A typical workshop is structured around two to three sessions a day along a week. (When organising regional workshops, the sessions were extended to two weeks.) The sessions take the form of interactive lectures followed by an open discussion. The workshops have titles which reflect the focus of each workshop, such as: Introduction to Gender and Feminism; Introduction to Feminist Research Methods; Oral History and Feminist Research; Reading Historical Documents. Consequently, lecturers are selected according to their areas of specialization, including sociologists and anthropologists, historians, as well as prominent feminist activists, in addition to sessions providing technological skills. WMF researchers comprise the core group of lecturers who design the programme, select the participants, and handle the selection of readings accompanying the workshop. General sessions are therefore included in each of the workshops, regardless of its specified area; these include the following: an introduction to key concepts in gender studies; an introduction to feminist research methods; and a brief history of the Egyptian feminist movement. The workshops are all conducted in Arabic, addressing mostly participants from Egyptian national universities and young researchers in feminist and human rights organisations. The most challenging aspect facing this programme, since its inception, has been the availability of reading materials in Arabic that correspond to the content of the programme.

In that regard, the earliest stages of designing and implementing the WMF Gender Education programme involved research to identify sources published in Arabic that could serve the reading lists of the programme. These included the following: (1) individual relevant books and articles by Egyptian scholars and writers throughout the 20th century; (2) the publications and grey literature available in Egyptian feminist organisations; (3) books on feminism and gender published by the National Translation Centre; and (4) relevant publications by the Egyptian National Council for Women. However, out of a realization of the lack of immediate accessibility to foundational readings in feminist theory and gender studies produced in English across the disciplines, the WMF Gender Education programme has in a way directed the focus of the WMF "Feminist Translations" project (further discussed in the next section). It was through these trans-

lations in the humanities and social sciences that the Gender Education could develop scholarly reading lists in Arabic, in addition to providing foundational as well as state-of-the-art readings in feminism and gender with the purpose of providing young scholars and activists with the latest trends in Western thought; and, hence, more importantly, encouraging them to engage with this knowledge from their positions and locations.

WMF Gender Education has always sought to connect scholarship with activism, through the readings, participants' affiliations, and with the aim of providing feminist knowledge as a source for further knowledge production, as well as an empowering tool to be used by civil society activists on the ground. WMF has therefore published two 'Documentary Manuals' in Arabic about *Documenting the Lives and Experiences of Women from a Gender Perspective* (2015) and *Educational Lectures in Gender Studies* (2016) which explain the processes, highlight the theoretical frameworks, and provide sample readings.²⁴ They are accessible online and can be used as training manuals for gender education and feminist oral historiography. It is worth repeating the idea that "WMF has focused on making alternative feminist knowledge available to researchers, activists, and gender equality advocates as well as to the general public. Linking specialised research and activism has been a persistent goal of WMF. In addition, WMF has actively explored new forms and venues for the dissemination of specialised research to wider audiences."²⁵ Thus, the Gender Education programme has been closely involved in producing knowledge and making it available to wide ranges of researchers and scholars within and beyond academia.

WMF Publications

WMF publications cover a wide range of genres, including conference proceedings, new editions of out-of-print publications authored by pioneers of the Egyptian feminist movement since the late 19th century, research in Islamic feminism, translations of (Anglophone) feminist scholarship on women relevant to the Egyptian context, as well as research papers. In addition to these books, there are less scholarly materials (though all informed by feminism and gender studies), including a gender-awareness booklet, posters with images and words by prominent women across Egyptian history, pins, bookmarks, and tote bags. Apart from paper prints, all WMF publications are available open access on the WMF

²⁴ Women and Memory Forum "Publications," accessed May 15, 2022.

²⁵ Hassan and Magdy 2018, 135.

website, as an expression of the WMF belief in making knowledge about women available and accessible to scholars, activists, and the general public.²⁶ The following is a more detailed description of these publications and their scholactivist dimensions.

First, *conference papers, reprints, and first prints*: WMF published its first book, *Women's Time and Alternative Memory* (1998) as an outcome of the first regional conference organised by WMF in Cairo. This book initiated a series of publications based on papers presented during conferences throughout the years, where questions were raised about theoretical discussions concerning 'women's history,' with particular reference to Egyptian, Arab, and Islamic history. These conferences were accompanied by the publications of works by Egyptian feminist pioneers such as Malak Hifni Nassef (*Al-Nisa'iyyat* 1910, 1998); Nabawiya Mousa (*Tarikhi bi-qalami* 1999, the first and second editions undated but estimated to have been published in the 1940s to 1950s); and Aisha Taymour (*Mir'at al-ta'ammul fil-umur* 1892, 2002). The purpose of these reprints is to revive the writings of these women whose books have been out of print for decades, and have disappeared from public memory; the texts have been preceded by introductions that situate the works and their authors within the contexts of feminism, history, and modernity. However, producing reprints of out-of-print feminist writings was not limited to publications directly related to the WMF conferences, but has also been extended to include Qadriyya Hussayn's *Shahirat al-nisa' fi al-'alam al-islami* (Famous Women of the Islamic World, 1924; 2004), and Hend Nofal's first women's magazine in Egypt *Al-Fatat* (1892–1893, 2007). In addition to reprints, WMF has published for the first time the personal narratives of Gamila Sabri (1887–1962), an activist in the national Egyptian women's movement whose notebooks, *Kurrasat Gamila Sabri* (Gamila Sabri's Notebooks, 2007), were written for family and friends without ever being published before. Similarly, WMF printed the first part of the memoirs of Hawwa Idris (1909–1988), who acted as secretary of the Egyptian Feminist Union for long years. The memoirs are archived in library of the American University in Cairo, and were published for the first time by WMF (*Ana wal-sharq* 2017).

Second, *Women's Voices*: Within the framework of documenting women's narratives, WMF has published two books based on interviews with contemporary Egyptian women who played pioneering active roles in the Egyptian society, with the purpose of highlighting their intellectual and professional achievements. The first of these is *Samha El-Kholy: al-thakira wal-tarikh* (2007), a book based on a long interview with Samha El-Kholy (1925–2006), an Egyptian

²⁶ Women and Memory Forum "Publications," accessed May 15, 2022.

musicologist who reached the position of Dean of the Egyptian Conservatoire (1972–1981) and President of the Egyptian Academy of Arts (1982–1985). Her narrative is presented in her own voice, describing her life, education, and achievements as a prominent figure in Egyptian public life who paved new terrains for Egyptian women. Another book is *Aswat wa asdaa'* (2007), which includes short biographies and extracts from interviews held with Egyptian women (born in the first half of the 20th century) who played significant professional roles in Egypt: Anisa Al-Hifni (pediatrician); Durriuaa Zaki (botanist and environmentalist); Zaynab 'Izzat (charity and social worker); Sawsan Gereis, who tells the story of the German school in the 1950s and into the early 1960s (*Deutsche Schule der Borromäerinnen* Alexandria – DSBA); Fadila Tawfiq (the well-known radio presenter since the establishment of the Egyptian Radio Broadcasting Service in 1960 and into the new millennium); Layla Barakat (who tells her story as a charity worker continuing the tradition of charity work among upper-middle class women as represented by her mother); Nazli Qabil (nurse and recipient of the Florence Nightingale Award); and Ni'mat Abul-Su'ud (first Egyptian certified midwife). These achievements and contributions are published with the purpose of celebrating these Egyptian pioneers, inserting them into the history of Egyptian women, and providing younger generations with role models that dismiss stereotypes of femininity and domesticity.

Third, *Memory Papers*: Another valuable series is the “Awraq al-zakira” (“Memory Papers”), which includes individual papers in the form of monographs focusing on one specific issue. The first two of the series were written jointly by Omaima Abou-bakr and Hoda El-Saadi focusing on medieval history: “Al-nisa' wa mihnāt al-tibb fi al-mujtama'at al-islamiya” (Women and the Medical Profession in Muslim Societies, 1999); “Al-mar'a wa al-hayat al-diniya fi al-usur al-wusta bayn al-islam wa al-gharb” (Women and Religious Life in the Middle Ages between Islam and the West, 2001); the third was entitled “Al-junun wal-mar'a fi misr nihayat al-qarn al-tasi' 'ashar” (Madness and Women in Egypt at the End of the Nineteenth Century, 2004) which included two papers about the same topic: Hoda El-Saadi's “The Change in the Concept of Madness and its Effect on Women and Society in Egypt at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” and Ramadan El-Kholy's “Women and Madnees in the Nineteenth Century.” This was followed by “Al-nashat al-iqtisadi al-hadari lil-nisa' fi misr al-islamiya” (Economic Urban Activities by Women in Islamic Egypt, 2007). The last of the series is “Lamahat min matalib al-haraka al-niswiya al-misriya 'abr tarikhiha,” a shorter English version

of which was published as “A Century of Egyptian Women’s Demands: The Four Waves of the Egyptian Feminist Movement.”²⁷

Fourth, the *Feminist Translation Series*: The “Feminist Translation” series has developed out of a realization of the scarcity of knowledge in Arabic about feminism and gender across the disciplines. As a translation project, it is grounded in Feminist Translation Theory about works translated by women, about women, and for women. The series includes seven books in various areas, each edited by a specialist who selected the articles for translation, with the aim of rendering in Arabic foundational articles and state-of-the-art-research done in the Anglophone world about feminist and gender studies. The translators were also very carefully chosen based on their specialization rather than mere professional experience. The acts of translation were accompanied by a workshop involving all the editors and translators involved in the project to discuss problematic and controversial issues related to the translation of gender-related terminology. The target group has included both postgraduate students in the humanities and social sciences at Egyptian national universities, as well as researchers working in feminist and human rights organisations. The following is a list of the books published in this series: *Nahwa dirasat al-naw’ fi al-ulum al-siyasiya* (Towards Studying Gender in Political Science, 2010); *Al-niswiya wal-dirasat al-diniya* (Feminism and Religious Studies, 2012); *Al-niswiya wal-dirasat al-tarikhiya* (Feminism and Historical Studies, 2015); *Dirasat al-naw’ fi al-ulum al-ijtima’iya* (Gender and the Social Sciences, 2015); *Al-naqd al-adabi al-niswi* (Feminist Literary Criticism, 2015); *Al-nisa’ wa al-tahlil al-nafsi* (Women and Psychoanalysis, 2016); and *Al-niswiya wal-jinsa-niya* (Feminism and Sexuality, 2016). I have elsewhere explained and discussed this project as an example of scholactivism.²⁸

Fifth, In *Words and Images Series*: Unlike most of the publications above, which carry more of a scholarly than activist content, addressing mainly young scholars and researchers, the series of illustrated books *Fi suture wa suwar* (In words and images) has been designed with the purpose of presenting knowledge about women, feminism, and gender in an educational and accessible format. The first book in the series, *Madkhal ila qadaya al-mar’a fi sutur wa suwar* (An Introduction to Women’s Issues in Words and Images, 2002), was the outcome of a collaborative effort of the WMF founders and a core group of researchers, aiming to introduce a general Arab readership to feminism and gender studies through textual descriptions, anecdotes, documentary materials, cartoons, and illustrations. In this regard, it covers various topics, such as women’s education,

²⁷ Kamal 2016.

²⁸ Kamal 2021.

women and the laws, gender equality, the history of women's movements, and cultural stereotyping, among many other areas. The same philosophy and form informed the following volumes, although each addressed a specific topic: *Al-awqaf fi suture wa suwar* (Charity Endowments in Words and Images, 2006), and *Ra'idat al-fann al-misri fi suture wa suwar* (Women Pioneers in Egyptian Art in Words and Images, 2008). The latest in this series is the book about *Bina' wa nidat: min arshif al-haraka al-niswiya al-misriya* (Construction and Struggle: from the Archive of the Egyptian Feminist Movement, 2019) which highlights the roles of women's organisations and the most significant feminist struggles in Egyptian history.

Sixth, *Feminist Stories and Fairy Tales*: One of the earliest projects in WMF was the re-reading and re-writing of fairy tales and *The Arabian Nights* from a feminist perspective. It had started as an exercise in feminist literary praxis in the sense of critiquing the dominant stereotypes of femininity and masculinity in fairy tales, and producing alternative representations in adapted texts. The project that started in the form of regular reading and writing workshops, and developed into public storytelling events, led to the publication of *Qalat al-rawiya* (*Her Tale* 1999) in which the editor (and project initiator Hala Kamal) explained the theoretical frame of writing stories from women's perspective; described the process through which the feminist texts were developed; and offered samples of the new stories and fairy tales that were written during the workshops; followed by an appendix with the source texts. The reading and writing workshops continued for over five years, leading to the publication of a collection of stories (*Hikayaat Huriya* 2003) all written by one of the participants in the workshop (Soha Raafat) centred around the stories of one protagonist Huriya. Another outcome of the group discussions and writing workshops was the collaborative collection based on the imaginative idea of Shahrazad's untold stories in *The Arabian Nights*, published under the title *Qalat al-rawiyaat ma lam taqulhu Shahrazad* (2007). In addition to these texts, which address an adult readership/audience, several stories and collections were developed during the workshops as children's stories: *Sitt el-shottar* (The Smartest Girl 2002); *Al-ayyam al-sab'a lil-shatter wel-shattra* (The Seven-Day Adventure of the Smart Boy and the Smart Girl, 2002); *Misbah Ala'eddin* (Aladdin Lantern 2002); and *Hikayat Farida* (Farida's Stories, 2007). In 2019, Mounira Soliman (a member of the WMF storytelling group) wrote about the project in retrospect, and pointed out its role in introducing the ideas of feminism and gender to the general public through the books and storytelling events, as well as

in initiating the feminist storytelling model, which has taken various dimensions over the years.²⁹

Seventh, *Posters, Pins, and Bookmarks*: Apart from the dissemination of feminist knowledge and thought through publications, workshops, and storytelling events, WMF has, in the wake of the Egyptian January 2011 Revolution, ventured into a new space with the aim of sending feminist messages through bookmarks, posters, stickers, and pins. Under the motto “Women Will Liberate Egypt,” the artist Heba Helmi created an artistic form for the WMF feminist messages. These include posters of prominent women of different generations, backgrounds, and varying fame: Amina Rachid, Doria Shafik, Genvieve Sidaros, Inji Efflatoun, Laila Doss, Latifa al-Zayyat, Lotfia El-Nadi, Marie Asaad, May Ziyada, Mona Mina, Nadia Lotfy, Qadriya Hussein, Rashka al-Ridi, Samira Ibrahim, Shahenda Maklad, Wedad Mitri, and Zainab al-Ghazali. All these posters included a picture of the woman, accompanied by one of her sayings, together with a biographical note; set against a faded background with the running motto “Women Will Liberate Egypt.” Some of these were further selected for pins, while the same motto was used with a series of stickers with sayings by Egyptian women carrying a political/feminist message. Furthermore, during the Egyptian 2011 Revolution, several graffiti murals in downtown Cairo carried images of women from ancient Egyptian times; these too were used, together with other graffiti images of rebellious and revolutionary women, as bookmark designs. Even these objects carry the two-fold features of scholactivism, as they rely on research into history, the selection of sayings to convey specific messages, as well as reaching out to the public and thus indirectly subverting unjust stereotyped representations of women by providing alternative images and messages.

Conclusion: Achievements and Challenges

In this discussion of scholactivism as represented by the mandate and work of the Women and Memory Forum in Egypt, feminist activism combines research with knowledge production and civil society engagement. As shown above, WMF has succeeded over the years (since its inception in 1995) in interweaving scholarship with activism, for which it deserves laudation as much as it struggles with challenges on its way towards achieving its vision. Through its core group and affiliated researchers, WMF has straddled the worlds of academia and civil society, situ-

²⁹ Soliman 2019.

ating itself at the intersection of feminism. As scholars and members of the WMF, we see it as a continuum of the history of Egyptian feminism and an active agent in its present scene, with its overlapping spaces of scholarship and activism. It is therefore crucial to reflect on the contributions of WMF to the Egyptian feminist movement from the position of knowledge production and dissemination.

Feminist scholars have discussed the challenges and achievements of women strictly within academic settings. Gesa Kirsch describes the established challenges facing women in academia to achieve the following: “The first goal is breaking traditional female norms [...]. The second goal is challenging traditional approaches to research scholarship, and teaching.”³⁰ If anything, these two goals, highlight the marginality and volatility of women’s (and particularly feminist women’s) position in academic institutions, as described earlier by Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington in terms of “Outsiders in the Sacred Grove,” the subtitle of their book *Women in Academe* (1988). This outsider position is consequential to the “strong thread of resistance by women to academic conventions establishing the boundaries of knowledge” and their resort to interdisciplinarity.³¹ In their research the authors come to several conclusions as to the areas of academic specialization and potential advancement for most women in academia; namely in areas in which the social context is relevant to their research and where they can have transformative effects, leading to “a strong preoccupation with seeking social change through transformed consciousness.”³² It is not common in Western academia, however, for scholars to combine their academic affiliations with civil society organising. The familiar models involve either leaving academia for a commitment to civil society systematic activism, or practicing activism on university campuses.

In that regard, WMF offers a unique model in the Egyptian context of scholars who, while teaching at their universities, ventured into establishing an independent organisation in which they form the core group of researchers, and train a younger generation of researchers and assistants. It is also worth noting that interdisciplinarity is a key feature here as well, whereby professors of English and Comparative literature become leaders of research projects in history and archiving, in addition to their engagement with feminist and civil society committees, campaigns, and projects. It is definitely an achievement, yet it also creates an extremely challenging situation in which, at times, professional pressures and expectations at the university career level may interfere with the activist commit-

³⁰ Kirsch 1993, 3.

³¹ Aisenberg and Harrington 1988, 100.

³² Ibid., 98.

ment; or the other way round, as commitment to activism may delay academic advancement – not to mention that it may threaten career advancement. In the Egyptian case, this becomes even more challenging due to the state interference in civil society organising, and repeated changes in the laws of association, which cause delays (if not extended halts) in the work of civil society organisations as witnessed specifically in the past few years. It is a general atmosphere of oscillation, whereby, practically-speaking, academics (with tenure) cannot easily take the decision of devoting all their time and efforts to civil society organisations.

In her article about the archive of women's participation in the Egyptian 2011 revolution, Hoda Elsadda describes the archive as “An Archive of Hope” whereby it “tells a story of hope as it highlights the agency of women as political actors effecting change within their immediate circles as well as in the larger body politic.”³³ I wish, therefore, to conclude this paper by extending Elsadda's words to refer to the whole Women and Memory Forum as an embodiment of feminist scholactivism and as a space of hope.

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