Time, Difference, and the Transnational

Feminist Activism and Solidarities in Egypt and Tunisia

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Feminist Activism and Solidarities in Egypt and Tunisia

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LUND
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract:

This dissertation explores possibilities and challenges to the formation of transnational feminist solidarity in the Middle Eastern context, focusing on Egypt and Tunisia. In particular, it asks how feminist organisations balance the work towards building transnational alliances and support networks with the imperative to remain grounded at the local level and centre local communities in their work, while simultaneously shedding perceptions of feminism as a globalising, Westernising, or neo-colonial movement seeking to dismantle existing value-systems and norms related to gender, sexuality, and family. The concept of solidarity is investigated in relation to three “challenges”: the challenge of difference, challenge of time, and challenge of the transnational. The dissertation posits that these challenges give rise to tensions—which may be productive, constituting opportunity rather than risk—such as emergent black and Nubian feminist groups shedding light on the marginalisation of racialised women within the feminist movement, or fragmentation stemming from a loss of intergenerational knowledge-exchange. Furthermore, a lack of explicit engagement with these tensions constitute a risk which may hinder feminists’ ability to mobilize across borders and ensure movement cohesion and longevity. Using a triangulation of fieldwork, textual analysis, and digital fieldwork, the dissertation uncovers how feminist groups’ engagement with issues of difference, their temporal practices and temporal perspectives, and their transnational interactions comes to shape their work.

Key words: feminism, solidarity, temporality, chronopolitics, gender, contentious politics.

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For mom and dad

Acknowledgement

Dear reader… Please be prepared for a long-winded and sentimental acknowledgement, thanking far more people than one would think reasonable—not to mention that I also thank several cats and one weasel. This is a rare opportunity to go through a non-exhaustive list of people (and cats) in my life, thanking them and acknowledging the ways they have supported me. I am going to take the opportunity, so bear with me or skip ahead if you want!

> *Den mätta dagen, den är aldrig störst.*
> *Den bästa dagen är en dag av törst.*
> *Nog finns det mål och mening i vår färd -*
> *men det är vägen, som är mödan värd.*[1]
> - Karin Boye (1927)

> *It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end.*
> - Ursula K. Le Guin (1969)

> *The journey is usually the part that you remember anyways.*
> - Miley Cyrus (2023)

It is a common trope to describe the writing of a dissertation as a journey (for good reason) and as emphasized by Boye, Le Guin, and Cyrus, it is the journey that matters the most. While it has at times *felt* lonely, I have never been truly alone on this path. I would not be sitting here, writing this, if not for the many brilliant colleagues, teachers, mentors, friends, and cats who have supported me and guided me.

First and foremost, to my supervisors, Karin Aggestam and Rola El-Husseini: Thank you, from the bottom of my heart! I am not only eternally grateful for your steadfast support, but also deeply inspired by your ability to guide and steer me through this project while always making me feel seen and understood. Karin, you understood what I aimed to do with this dissertation probably before even I did. As you know, I tend to get stuck in theoretical musings and protecting myself from critique by remaining abstract or opaque in my writing. Even when you have had to challenge me, steer me towards clarity, encouraging me to concretize (probably the most common word used

[1] "The sated day is never first. The best day is a day of thirst. Yes, there is goal and meaning in our path - but it's the way that is the labour's worth." (Translation by David McDuff).

in our meetings), you have always managed to do so in a way that conveys your belief in me. Rola, I requested you as the discussant for my plan seminar, with the hope that you would become my second supervisor. I am very glad that you accepted both. I probably do not have to tell you how much your experience and knowledge have meant for this project—both your knowledge on gender politics, women's activism, and social movements in the Middle East, but even more so your experience of conducting fieldwork and interview studies on these topics. What I have not told you, however, is how I was initially a bit scared of having you as a supervisor. You can be direct, you rarely sugarcoat things, and I would be lying if I said it did not intimidate me in the beginning. Now I see how deeply you care about your students and their success, and despite my initial fears I have not once regretted having you as my supervisor. I am deeply grateful for the guidance and support I have received from both of you!

There are many more people, at Lund and elsewhere, who have supported me throughout the PhD years, but before returning to them, I would like to go back to where it all started: The Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at Stockholm University. It was there, back when it was still called the Department of Oriental Languages, that I took my first wobbling steps of university study and realized that my experience of school (or rather skipping school to smoke cigarettes and hang out at the mall) did not carry through to university. It was passionate and inspiring teachers like Elie Wardini who made me realize not only that I can truly enjoy learning, but more importantly that I wanted to become a university teacher myself. Elie, I hope you know how much you have meant for me and my journey. I have said it before, but it bears repeating that you have taught me so much about academic life, about critical thinking and analysis, but most importantly about how to lead with heart. You have supported me, challenged me, encouraged me to leave my comfort zone and to explore new paths. These aspects of being a teacher and mentor are sometimes hard to notice, and they are too rarely celebrated. One's academic career is mostly measured in number of publications, citations, or successful grant applications, but I believe the most important impact is the one you have on students. You have so much to be proud of in that regard. That is not to say you should not also be proud of your publication list, but you know what I mean.

It was at the same department that I had the privilege of being supervised by Noha Mellor, first for my BA thesis and then again for my MA thesis. Noha, you remain a constant source of inspiration for me, as much as you also bewilder me. I am bewildered because I do not understand how you manage to

do so much, be such a productive researcher, involved in many journals and academic societies, provide expert commentary in media, act as an advisor outside of academia, and much, much more… and still be so easy to reach and quick to respond whenever I need your help. In short, you are brilliant! From your early support during my first ever fieldtrip to Egypt and supervising me in writing up the resulting thesis, to supporting my graduate school applications, writing letters of recommendation when I was applying for PhD positions, providing encouragement and emotional support through rejections, you have been there for me every step of the way. Not only have you taught me a lot, but you have also provided me with many opportunities to grow as a scholar, not least by inviting me to write a chapter in one of your edited books. For this, and for everything else you have done for me, I am forever grateful!

Towards the end of my undergraduate studies, I came into contact with Daniel Martin Varisco. Although we have so far only met twice in person, we have now been emailing almost monthly for more than 10 years. Dan, I always begin every email to you with the words "Dear Dan," and I really want to convey here that our correspondence has indeed been dear to me. Our conversations started at a time when I was frustrated with how the Middle East was covered (and not covered) in news media, a frustration I quickly learned that we share. So, you helped me set up a blog with the goal of sharing informed commentary, aimed at a general audience, and provided many such commentaries yourself. Since then, our conversations have covered everything from fieldwork, graduate school applications, and academic publishing to updates about daily life and Victorian Christmas cards. Nowadays you mostly brighten my inbox with cat memes, which you know I love. You are a tremendous scholar, writer, and intellectual, so of course I have learnt a lot from your work and continue to be inspired by it. However, what I admire most about you is your passion for anthropology, your dedication to making knowledge available through engagement beyond academia, and your unwavering support for your students (including those who are technically not your students but who still consider you a mentor, such as myself). Please keep sending me all cat-related media you come across!

My time at Stockholm University was not only spent studying Middle Eastern studies. It was also there that I was first introduced to performance studies, which I applied to because aside from my interest in politics, I have also always had an interest in theatre, particularly political theatre. However, until I had Tiina Rosenberg as a teacher, I had not realized that the overlap between theatre and politics is also found in the "theatre of politics," and that insights from theatre studies can have a profound impact on the way we study politics.

Tiina, you have given me so much and really left your mark on me as a scholar. Your teaching, blending theatre and performance studies, feminist theory, queer theory, and your keen attention to both everyday performances and the politics of the everyday introduced me to new ways of thinking about political activism and social movements. This dissertation would not be the same without your lessons. Perhaps most importantly, you are also the kind of teacher who puts your belief in your students into practice, giving space and opportunity for young scholars to grow and learn. You are and will always be a role model for me!

After Stockholm came Cambridge, where I met many brilliant scholars and had one of the most intense but rewarding years of my life, and it was also then that I developed the project proposal that would later turn into this dissertation. In Cambridge, I found a community that has continued to give me strength and support. I particularly want to thank Samuel Williams for supporting me by fiercely challenging me and questioning my reliance on queer theory in general and Judith Butler in particular. Sam, there is so much that I admire about you, but particularly your principled commitment to truth and justice, and your ability to question and challenge ideas regardless of who is expressing them. In many ways, you are the bravest person I know, at least if we are to believe Dumbledore: "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends." (I know you will appreciate the irony of me quoting something J.K. Rowling wrote, which is mainly why I wanted to do it). In all seriousness, you truly do wear your heart on your sleeve in the best way possible, and despite there being a whole world in-between us, you are still very close to my heart!

While my studies in the UK did leave an impact on me academically, the greatest impact was on a more personal level. Jonathon Cushenan and Zuheir bin Zaidon, I think about you both almost daily. Having more free time and possibility to come visit you has been a significant motivator for me to finish this dissertation, and your visits have been crucial in keeping my spirits up. You are two beacons of light, and the darkness of Swedish winter is so much easier to bear when you are here!

Now, finally, we are back in Lund, where I have had many amazing colleagues and friends helping me along the way. Heba Taha and Agnese Pacciardi, thank you for your close reading and insightful comments at my midterm seminar, and for discussions we have had over lunches, afterwork beers, and WhatsApp. Markus Holdo, Magdalena Bexell, Catia Gregoratti, Orly Siow, and Heba Taha (again), thank you for participating in my manuscript conference, kindly offering input and critique on an early draft of this dissertation, all while

contributing to a supportive and encouraging discussion that helped me improve the text but more importantly gave me the confidence and energy I needed to keep going! Markus and Magdalena, I especially have to thank you both for agreeing to be my internal examiners, but also for the work you do at the department. Markus, I deeply appreciate all the work and effort you put into the working group on gender equality, equal opportunities, and diversity. Magdalena, you were the assistant head of department for most of my time here and your support for me personally, and for the PhD student community, has meant a lot! I also particularly want to thank Catia Gregoratti and Ian Manners for providing support and guidance on teaching, especially because—while I do love the research—that was always my primary motivation for doing a PhD. Catia and Ian, you have both taught me a lot about motivating and engaging students, encouraging their learning, and significantly helped me in becoming a better teacher. Your care for the students (including PhD students) does not go unnoticed, and I am deeply inspired by you both.

It should be pretty clear for anyone who have read this far that doing a PhD is a collective endeavour, and my experience would not be the same without the amazing scholars, colleagues, and friends who have walked this road with me. First of all, I would like to thank my cohort; Agnese Pacciardi, Hanna Ekström, Lars Vetle Handeland, Malte Breiding, Marie Stissing Jensen, and Simon Stattin. Along the way, you and all the other PhD students have given me advice and emotional support, provided comments during seminars, and kept me company in the office, over lunches and dinners, and at afterwork drinks. Of those who started before or after me, I want to especially single out Bibi Imre-Millei. Bibi, I probably would have had a burnout if it were not for your support during my year as chair of the faculty doctoral council. More importantly you are the kind of person anyone would be lucky to have as a friend. Your fierce loyalty, your care for those around you, and your principled belief in claiming your rights (and standing up for your colleagues and friends) is deeply inspiring to me. In many ways you remind me of the late Sara Danius, who once said that she is "kind towards the kind, and tough towards the tough." I want to thank you for keeping the spirit of Danius alive!

The PhD students at the political science department really is a community, so I am sorry for not writing personalized notes here but just know that you have all contributed to making my time in Lund so much more enjoyable. With that said, I want to thank Anne Lene Stein, Barbara Magalhães Teixeira, Caroline Karlsson, Christie Nicoson, Daniel Gustafsson, Diana Eriksson Lagerqvist, Dylan Pashley, Evan Drake, Esther Calvo, Georgia de Leeuw, Jana Canavan, Jana Wrange, Julia Qian Mao, Juliane Liebsch, Karl Holmberg, Katja Garson,

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The Department of Political Science is made up of the many incredible people working there. Beyond those already mentioned, I would like to first of all single out Sara Kalm who took on the task of being both director of doctoral studies and assistant head of department. Sara, I deeply appreciate your care, how compassionate and attentive you are, and your diligent, tireless work for the department's PhD students. Thank you, truly, for everything you have done for me and for the department! From the department as a whole—and again I apologize for the lack of personalized notes—I would also particularly like to thank Agustín Goenaga, Amir Parhamifar, Annika Björkdahl, Björn Badersten, Björn Frostner, Catarina Kinnvall, Dalia Mukhtar-Landgren, Daniel Alfons, Fariborz Zelli, Hanna Bäck, Helen Fogelin, Jens Bartelson, Jonathan Polk, Kristina Gröndahl Nilsson, Linda Eitrem Holmgren, Lisa Strömbom, Martin Hall, Mats Fred, Niklas Altermark, Robert Klemmensen, Ted Svensson, Tina Jönsson, and Åsa Knaggård.

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I have had the privilege of two "academic homes" in Lund, and I cannot neglect the significant impact of the Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies for my doctoral education. As an institution, CMES has supported me financially, funded fieldtrips, and enabled participation in conferences, and provided academic stimulation through engaging seminars on diverse topics and given me a forum to present my own work. As such, I would like to thank the director (my supervisor) Karin Aggestam and deputy director Ronny Berndtsson for their stewardship. Among the brilliant staff, I have to first and foremost thank Rafah Barhoum, who kindly tutored me in Arabic and helped with translations. I also want to thank Adam Almqvist, Behshid Khodaei, Dalia Abdelhady, Elsa Hedling, Filippo Verre, Leysan Storie, Lina Eklund, Maria Andrea Nardi, Maria Småberg, Nina Gren, Oliver Scharbrodt, Pinar Dinc, Rami Zalfou, Sami Al-Daghistani, Sarah Anne Rennick, Torsten Jansson, and Yafa Shanneik.

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On a (even more) personal note, there are several people who have supported me in my private life, who have had an equally important impact on me and on this dissertation.

Elin Frimodig and Simon Landeholm, our weekly nights of På Spåret is what gets me through every winter. Thank you for putting up with me never staying in one place, and I hope finishing this damn PhD means less of that and more of you in my life. John Taylor and Julianne Honea, our nights in the basement sauna—and nights cooking together, going out for beers, visiting Bönhamn,

officiating your wedding—reminds me of what is important in life. It doesn't really matter much what we are doing together; what's important in (my) life is you, my dear friends.

Jennie Graflund, without your support (professionally as well as emotionally) I probably would have never even applied to Lund, and it certainly would have been a very different experience without you. Thank you for believing in me, advocating for me, supporting me, and most of all for being a good friend. You know I often refer to you as my boss, even though that is technically not true. Either way, I am happy to call you my friend first and foremost!

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Anna Larsson, it was you who first brought me to Egypt, and where would I be today if you had not? It was there that I fell in love, with the country and with Ahmed. As indebted as I am to you for this, I also hope you know that you have done so much more and mean so much more to me than simply as "someone who brought me someplace."

Ahmed, you know more than most people about the ups and downs of doing a PhD, and all the while facing your own challenges you have always given me so much support and helped me through this. I love you more than I can express! Martin, my metamour, the love of my love. I did not know life was missing something, and I don't think really it was… yet, somehow you have given me that thing that was missing, and now I can't imagine life without you in it. You were the secret third thing all along!

Finally, I owe so much of my maintained mental health to Amir and Rami, my two sweet cats!

Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFC	Association Femme et Citoyenneté
AFU	Arab Feminist Union
AJC	Association Joussour de Citoyenneté
AN	Aswat Nissa
AFTURD	Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement
ATFD	Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates
CEWLA	Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance
CEDEJ	Centre d'Études et de Documentation Èconomiques, Juridiques et Sociales
EFU	Egyptian Feminist Union
FTDES	Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
MSWC	Misr Spinning and Weaving Company
NWF	New Woman Foundation
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
TNAs	Transnational Actors
UMFT	Union Musulmane des Femmes de Tunisie
UNFT	Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne
VAWG	Violence against women and girls
VFTN	Collectif Voix des Femmes Tunisiennes Noires
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WLUML	Women Living Under Muslim Laws
WMF	Women and Memory Forum

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Foreword

I arrived in Egypt for the first time in September 2012. A close friend, who I knew from my earlier involvement with the Swedish Social Democratic Youth Party (SSU), had invited me to come with her to Cairo and stay with someone she knew there. I had just begun my undergraduate studies in Middle Eastern studies at Stockholm University—a programme I became interested in following the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions of 2011, which I had followed from Yerevan where I was volunteering at an LGBTQ+ rights organization—and thought it would be a good opportunity to get to know Egypt beyond what I could read in textbooks. Truthfully, however, I was mainly drawn to Cairo to meet (in-person) someone I had gotten to know online about six months prior.

At the time, Egypt was going through a transition marked by polarization and political tension. After former president Hosni Mubarak had been ousted in the revolution the year before, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power until elections were held in May and June of 2012. In a second round of voting, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won over former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik, and was sworn in on the 30th of June 2012. What followed was a year of protests, partly related to presidential decrees aimed at protecting the president from legal challenge.

When I came back for a second visit in December 2012, large-scale protests were happening almost every day. As a new, fledgling student of Middle East politics and as a person interested in the street-level practice of politics, I was intrigued by these demonstrations of a scale I had never experienced before. However, my anxious and conflict-averse Swedish soul still needed to get away from the crowds, and I decided to go to Siwa, an oasis town near the Libyan border, and then Marsa Matrouh, a port town on the Mediterranean coast. It was then, having experienced both the diversity but also the political polarization of Egyptian society, that I decided to focus my studies on Egypt.

The popular protests in 2013 created a guise for the military to resume power, enabling then Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi to oust President Morsi. Adly Mansour, the president of the Supreme Constitutional Court—who had been confirmed by Morsi only days before—became interim president until Sisi could officially be "elected" in May 2014. I continued making several shorter trips to Egypt before me and my partner got a rental flat in Dokki, which became a temporary home while he finished his philosophy degree at Cairo University, and I began my first extended fieldwork between 2014 and 2015.

During this time, the military presence was noticeable not only on the streets and squares of downtown Cairo, but also in news media and popular culture, and I decided to write my undergraduate thesis on how military masculinity was constructed in Egyptian media. I also began writing down reflections on the hugely popular pro-military pop songs that dominated the Cairene cultural scene at the time, which after five years had given me enough material to publish an article on the role of pop music in Egyptian politics—again with a focus on military masculinity. Gender politics had always been an interest of mine, both academically and in my own political activism, and it fell naturally that it became a thematic focus for my studies. As I was largely introduced to Cairo through my partner, the circles I would move in mostly consisted of other queer people who are themselves often politically involved, particularly within the feminist movement. As such, in some ways, this dissertation began almost ten years before I officially began collecting data and conducting interviews.

My first introduction to Tunisia came later, in March 2017. I had graduated from the bachelor's programme, enrolled in a master's programme—also in Middle Eastern studies at Stockholm University—gotten hired as a teaching assistant, and then promoted to adjunct lecturer, and then promoted again to deputy director of studies. It was in this capacity that I got the opportunity to go to Sfax for a closing conference of "Sfax – Capital of Arab Culture 2016." Through my previous engagement with Middle Eastern and North African feminists and LGBTQ+ activists in both Egypt and Sweden, as well as through my participation in a youth leadership programme run by the Swedish Institute, I already had a few friends living in Tunis, but I had not yet considered it as a potential place to extend my studies. I had, however, decided that I wanted to continue teaching at university and knew that in order to secure a permanent university teaching position, I would need a PhD degree. Since I had already made a couple of unsuccessful applications, I decided to apply for a master's programme in the UK, hoping it would increase my chances.

I applied to the University of Cambridge with an idea for a project on men's participation in feminist movements in Egypt. I got accepted but—arriving in Cambridge—I was immediately told that I had to change my project. Since this was shortly after the brutal murder of Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge PhD student who had been conducting fieldwork in Egypt, the university (understandably) would not allow me to go to Egypt. Instead, I chose to work on how women's rights and feminist activism in Saudi Arabia is portrayed in global news media. It was then that I became interested in how feminist activism is practiced, and how it is impacted by global discourses on what constitutes a feminist cause. While in Cambridge, I began drafting what would become this PhD project.

This brief, personal background is meant to give some idea of how I arrived at writing this dissertation, but it is also a metanarrative in more than one way. Narrating past events in order to explain the present—essentially what this is—tends to smooth out the bumps and portray a straight-forward, logical sequence of events. Trust me when I say this was not the case; there were many bumps, and the path was anything but straight. The point is to tell a story, and while it is true and it is the story (as I see it) of how I arrived here, it is not complete. More than likely, both me as a researcher and this dissertation are shaped just as much by the failures, rejections, detours, disappointments, and so on. It does not make for a good "sales pitch," and it makes the story messier, but in some contradictory way I also find messy stories comforting and instil more hope. So, in an attempt to embrace messiness, the story I want to tell is simply this: I am a high school dropout who was once set on studying at a mime school in Paris and becoming an actor. Then I changed my mind, changed directions many times, tried many different things, and some things stuck with me while other things did not. And while I never did study at that mime school in Paris, I carry with me a commitment to the three principal skills taught there:

Le jeu, *complicité*, *et disponibilité.* Playfulness, togetherness, and openness.

That and embracing the messiness, but I'm still working on that one.

Joel Wiklund Abdelmoez, Lund, 2025-11-03

Chapter 1: Introduction

I am walking down Huda Shaarawi Street, in downtown Cairo, named after the founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union. I had not yet realized the name of the street, but I am on my way to meet with Sabah to talk about feminist histories and activism in Egypt.[2] Sabah is a member of the Bread and Freedom Party, a democratic socialist party which started as a split from the Socialist Popular Alliance Party in 2013, and a worker's rights activist particularly advocating for female workers. I had reached out to her on suggestion from a mutual friend, and we decided to meet. I asked Sabah for a quiet and not too crowded café or restaurant, partly out of safety concerns—talking about political topics, particularly worker's rights, can get you into trouble depending on who is around to listen—and partly because my impaired hearing makes noisy cafés difficult. She suggested we meet at Le Bistro, on Huda Shaarawi Street.

Coincidentally, Le Bistro is also one of the first restaurants I ever visited in Egypt, more than a decade ago. This, too, I did not realize until I stepped inside. The restaurant looks exactly the same as it did in 2012. Sabah arrives shortly after me, and I tell her about this realization, to which she responds that "they haven't changed their playlist either." After chatting for a bit about the ways in which Cairo has changed and not changed in the last ten years, we move on to talk about the current political climate, the state of the Egyptian feminist movement, and what issues she is engaged with at the moment. Her focus right now is mainly on women in the labour movement. She tells me that women in the labour movement typically do not consider themselves feminist. "But they fight for representation," she adds. "The textile workers at Mahalla are mostly women, but the union leadership are men."[3] She is referring to a recent strike at Misr Spinning and Weaving Company (MSWC), in Mahalla El-Kubra. MSWC is the largest industrial plant in Egypt, employing tens of thousands of workers, most of whom are women, and in February 2024 they went on strike.

[2] All names of interlocutors have been pseudonymized for their protection.

[3] Sabah, in-person interview, March 4, 2024.

Striking in Mahalla El-Kubra is not new. In 2008, the textile workers took the initiative to strike in response to low wages and an increasing cost of living, just as in 2024. In 2008, however, the initiative was picked up and promoted by activists who began sharing it on social media, encouraging people to strike on the planned date: 6th of April. This led to a general strike and, perhaps more importantly, the formation of the April 6 Youth Movement, which remained influential during the political and revolutionary mobilization of 2010-2011. As such, this strike that began at the textile factory in Mahalla El-Kubra is sometimes credited for establishing a "culture of protest" and kickstarting the political movement that led to the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 (see for example el-Mahdi 2011; Beinin 2012). Sabah does not have much hope for a positive outcome on the strikes' intended goals but says that it would still be an important victory if the female workers at least will be able to make gains in terms of leadership within the Egyptian labour movement. Therefore, she believes it is important to support and promote the strike. Sabah claims that this is a feminist issue, that supporting the strikers is a cause for feminists, and she emphasizes that the female workers face a dual struggle of fighting for living wages and better working conditions for Egypt's working class while also fighting for representation within the labour movement itself. The sad fact is, however, that the established feminist organizations and prominent figures within the feminist movement did not pay much attention to the strikers at all. Sabah and I move on to discuss why this is not considered a feminist cause, neither in public discourse about the strikes nor by the strikers themselves.

The question of what makes a feminist cause, or what mode of action is considered authentic forms of feminist activism in the Middle Eastern context, is central to this dissertation. It is not a question that I intend to answer in any meaningful way, but it lies at the heart of what I do investigate, namely the tensions and challenges faced by feminists wanting on the one hand to build broad, transnational alliances grounded in a sense of solidarity, while also wanting to work locally, close to the communities that are most marginalized or most affected by gender inequality, and promoting a view of their work as rooted in Egyptian and Tunisian society, rather than as a foreign import.

What "qualifies" as feminism or as a feminist cause is not entirely clear-cut. While it is obviously subjective, this question is simultaneously central to the practice of feminist activism yet surprisingly under-discussed, or the answer is simply taken for granted. It manifests in many different contexts and ties into debates about the place, positioning, and authenticity of feminism in the Middle East and North Africa. It also relates not just to the priorities of feminist activists themselves and the internal movement dynamics but also to how the

general public perceives feminists, and to their external relations with the broader civil society and foreign feminist organizations. There is a widely held view of feminism in Egypt and Tunisia as being bourgeois; something that mainly concerns educated, secular, upper-class women in the urban centres. Campaigning against veiling is generally perceived as a feminist cause, but campaigning for improved working conditions for female workers is not.

Connected to this is also an intellectualization and institutionalization of feminism, leading to a containment of feminism within elite and/or academic circles which risks misrecognizing what could be considered feminist practices—indeed, emphasizing practices rather than labels is a central concern of mine. Furthermore, many Egyptians and Tunisians (as well as many Europeans) view feminism as inherently "Western," originating in Europe and then exported to the rest of the world. Transnational feminism, as such, is often thought of as the unidirectional travelling of feminist politics, practices, and ideology from the Global North to the Global South.[4] More than that, feminism is sometimes viewed as an anti-Islamic and cultural-imperialist project, aimed at imposing "foreign" norms and values on Middle Eastern societies.[5] This perception is largely what gives rise to the debate about the *authenticity* of feminism in the Middle Eastern context, in turn pushing those fighting for social, political, legal, and economic gender equality to distance themselves from the feminist label and to frame their activism differently. The question of authenticity is perhaps particularly salient for Islamic feminists, who challenge hegemonic and misogynist interpretations of Islam without rejecting religious

[4] I hesitate to use the terms "West" and "Western," as I believe that they rely on a dichotomized worldview which also requires an "East" and "Eastern." I follow Edward Said (1978) and Stuart Hall (1992), in viewing these terms as part of a larger political project to discursively construct an "Orient" that can function as Europe's "Other." Furthermore, I find the terms vague and imprecise, both in terms of geopolitics and in terms of their historical object of reference. However, as these terms are widely used by the scholars that I am engaging with, for example in Mohanty's work on "Western feminism" (1988), I will not be able to avoid it. I try my best to always be specific in my own usage but may rely on these terms when discussing works that use them. Similarly, I also believe that the term "Third World" is equally imprecise, originally referring to non-aligned countries as opposed to the US and their allies (First World) and the Soviet Union and their allies (Second World). As with "Western," it is unavoidable when reading postcolonial literature of the '80s. So, when I use "Western," it will refer mainly to the United States and their Cold War allies, and "Third World" refer mainly to what is today often called "the Global South"—potentially just as imprecise as the rest, but I need to draw the line somewhere in order to say anything at all.

[5] See for example statements made by one of the organizers of Muslimah Pride Day, saying they want "to show the world that we oppose Femen and their use of Muslim women to reinforce Western imperialism" (quoted in Eileraas 2014, 49).

influence on politics and society. They have sought to offer an "indigenous" feminism, yet are still accused of inauthenticity and westernization, at least by religious conservatives and male scholars who view new approaches to exegesis as an attack against their interpretative authority (Wielandt 2018).

It is not my intention nor in my interest to impose labels on anyone, to declare who is and who is not a feminist, but what interests me here is partly what this view of feminism *does*, and partly how feminists may overcome it. Feminism, in my view, is indeed deeply embedded in transnationalism—especially through the concept of feminist solidarity, and in the Middle Eastern context with an added emphasis on the shared history of anti-colonial resistance—yet this does not entail inauthenticity, cultural imperialism, or a unidirectional flow of feminist ideology, norms, and practices from Europe and North America to the Middle East and North Africa.[6] Instead, transnational feminist activists take the local and specific challenges as their starting point and draw from the experiences and support of feminists in other contexts, both across borders and across time, to overcome them.

Exploring the transnational, the temporal, and the question of "difference" within Egyptian and Tunisian feminist movements—particularly analysing the challenges to feminist solidarity evoked by spatial, temporal, and embodied borders—is therefore at the heart of this dissertation. Combining fieldwork, interviews (both during fieldwork and through virtual means such as Zoom and WhatsApp), digital fieldwork, and other means of data collection, and drawing from social movement studies, transnational feminist studies, and performance studies, I narrow in on the intersection of transnationalism, temporality, and difference within feminist activism in Egypt and Tunisia since the uprisings of 2010-2011, looking particularly at how these activists and organizations construct, narrate, and interact with local, regional, and global histories of feminism. By examining the narrative construction of transnational relational communities and solidarity networks, as well as feminist activists' conceptualization of their movement's historical development and trajectory, I believe we can better understand the role of transnationalism, time, and difference within contemporary feminist activism; how do feminists situate their activism in time and place? How do they construct history, conceptualize the past, and envision the future, both within a specific context and in relation

[6] My argument here is not that feminist norms and practices "flow" from the MENA to Europe or elsewhere, as I am not looking at Europe or any other part of the world at all nor wishing to centre Europe in my view of feminism. Instead, I simply mean that feminist knowledge-production does not only happen in Europe, and that the politics, ideologies, norms, and practices of feminists in Egypt and Tunisia are, in a sense, largely "homegrown."

to national, regional, and global feminist histories? More importantly, how does this conceptualization of past, present, and future, impact their activism, particularly their work towards building transnational feminist solidarity?

I argue that overemphasizing European origins of feminism obscures more prominent influences in non-European contexts, at the same time as it generates resistance by reifying a view of feminist ideologies and practices as "foreign" to particular contexts. Relatedly, I also argue that emphasizing and highlighting non-European histories of feminism(s) is necessary in order to move beyond debates about the authenticity of feminism in the Middle East and North Africa. As such, the aim here is to explore how organizations grapple with tensions stemming from transnational, temporal, and differential dimensions within the practice and construction of feminist solidarity in the Middle East, using Egypt and Tunisia as my "field." I do not structure this as a "two-case study," but rather a nested comparative study of transnational feminism and feminist solidarity as practiced in and in-between these countries, as well as the temporal, ideational, and practical links between Tunisian and Egyptian feminists with broader, regional and global, histories of feminism, and using contemporary cases from these contexts in order to study the narrative construction of transnational feminist movements. While perhaps this could broadly be understood as a study of epistemic debates about the naissance, development, and situatedness of feminism in the Middle East—with particular attention on the concept of transnational solidarity—the real aim is much more personal; to understand, deeply and personally, feminist organizing (and feminist practices, strategies, knowledges, etc.) in order to learn *from* these feminists, rather than learn *about* them.

Aims and Scope

The central crux of this dissertation, the *problématique*, is an essential concern to those organizations I study, yet it is not always explicitly articulated: How can feminist organizations balance the wish to build transnational alliances and support networks with the imperative to remain grounded at the local level and centre local communities in their work? Based on this question, my primary aim is to investigate the challenges feminists face in their work to build broad, transnational alliances grounded in a sense of solidarity, while also striving to work at the local level, close to the communities that are most marginalized or most affected by gender inequality. Secondly, I ask how this can be done most effectively while simultaneously shedding a persistent perception of feminism

as a globalizing, Westernizing, or neo-colonial movement seeking to dismantle existing value-systems and norms (particularly as related to gender, sexuality, and family) in Egypt and Tunisia. I do this by looking closely at the concept of feminist solidarity, and how the work towards constructing and maintaining bonds of solidarity is challenged on three fronts, which I term (1) the *challenge of difference*, (2) *challenge of time*, and (3) *challenge of the transnational*.[7]

The first challenge, difference, is something feminists have long grappled with (see for example Dean 1996; Mohanty 2003, Steans 2007; Wickström et al. 2021; Smolović Jones et al. 2021). In her personal and emotional reflections on political solidarity between women, bell hooks rejects the idea of "common oppression" experienced by women and summarises the challenge succinctly, writing: "Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices… Some feminists now seem to feel that unity between women is impossible given our differences" (hooks 1986, 127). Difference becomes especially salient when moving from the local to the transnational, as the boundaries of the movement expands, contextual commonality diminishes, and new potential risks of disagreement and fault-lines emerge. This gives rise to questions such as whose voices are heard, whose struggles can fit within the movement, and which causes are considered outside the scope of feminism. Difference can be theorized along a multitude of axes, such as class, sexuality, or religion—all of which are relevant as I study organizations focusing on these and interview Marxist, queer, and Muslim representatives of organizations. However, the main axis of difference I focus on is race, both because it is largely missing from existing research on Middle East feminist movements, and because black feminism is a growing movement in both Egypt and Tunisia, providing a particular challenge to regional movements based on a shared Arab identity which historically has been predicated on a separation from Africa.

The second challenge, time, is less theorised in the feminist literature, but I argue that temporality constitutes a critical (albeit complex and less visible) challenge to the concept of feminist solidarity. In its most apparent form, intergenerational dynamics and tensions arising from generational turnover challenges the construction and maintenance of feminist solidarity, as it pertains to questions of what we as contemporary feminists owe to previous

[7] Importantly, I do not consider "challenge" to be a purely negative term. Instead, I view it as something which produces tension that could be productive just as well as destructive, meaning it could function as *either* an opportunity or a risk. For example, I believe Mohanty (2003) is correct in asserting that difference can be a resource for feminists to draw from rather than an obstacle to overcome. Yet, it nevertheless necessitates acknowledgement and strategies to handle, in order for it to become a productive resource.

generations of activists, the extent to which we build on someone else's legacy and need to honour that, and how we deal with ideological shift over time. Another temporal challenge is the legacy and impact of problematic histories, for example histories of colonization, racism, classism, and so on, which ties into the challenge of difference as some feminists view such histories as irrelevant to their activism, while others see it as imperative that we acknowledge and engage with them. This may also overlap with intergenerational tensions and ideological shifts, as younger generations of feminists abandon previously celebrated feminist icons due to a perceived complicity in systems of oppression—such as some younger feminists dismissing the legacy of Doria Shafik due to what they view as an elitist, exclusionary, or class-blind brand of feminism forwarded by Shafik. However, it may also simply relate to the temporal perspective of feminist activists, as some consider history completely irrelevant to their work or that envisioning the future is futile and that the focus of feminists should be providing urgently needed services to marginalized communities. These are all *chronopolitical* concerns—pertaining to the relationship between time and politics—which impact internal movement dynamics, and the possibility of building strong, sustainable transnational feminist alliances built on solidarity.

The third and final challenge I investigate is the challenge of the transnational. This too overlaps to some extent with the challenge of difference, in that it relates to contextual specificities of feminists' experiences, although not necessarily along the lines of race, class, sexuality, and so on. Instead, the challenge boils down to how we can truly and effectively work and collaborate across borders, creating transnational solidarity networks which informs feminist practice rather than becoming non-performative discourse—e.g., statements of standing in solidarity without practices to back it up. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, transcending borders and building transnational alliances requires creating networks and fostering a collective movement identity, inevitably forming clusters which in turn may contribute to a regionalization or the discursive construction of a "region" defined by its (implicitly problematic) gender relations. Such regionalization risks reifying Orientalist analyses, catering to US- and Eurocentric liberal feminist readings of Middle East gender politics, and thus exacerbating the perceived "Western-ness" of transnational feminist activism. Simultaneously, such Orientalizing discourse also risks distancing, pacifying, and Othering feminists in the Middle East and North Africa and thereby inhibiting the possibility of transnational feminist solidarity, at least in terms of North-South solidarity.

Empirically, I analyse how Egyptian and Tunisian feminist organizations present themselves; how they narrate their organizational history, the history of their movement, the history of feminism beyond their movement, and their work both on the local level and collaborations or interactions across borders. This research design builds both on an understanding that the narrative construction of organizational history and movement history is central to the construction of a collective movement identity, in turn providing the basis for a cohesive, transnational feminist movement, as well as to counter accusations of cultural inauthenticity. This means that rather than providing a descriptive study of feminist history in itself, I focus on the *uses* of local, regional and global histories of feminism, in the *practice* of transnational feminist activism. In other words, this dissertation explores the role played by feminist histories—or more accurately feminists' constructions of historical narratives—from different regional contexts in shaping today's feminists and their activities, particularly in terms of collective identity and the relational communities between feminists. How do contemporary feminists construct, relate to, and make use of histories from other contexts and countries? How does their temporal perspectives, timing practices, conceptualizations of the past, and envisioning of feminist futures influence the contemporary practice of feminist activism, setting not only temporal boundaries but indeed spatial boundaries? How does time and place converge to enable or foreclose particular forms of activism, practices, identities, or communities?

While much has been written on transnational feminist solidarity networks (see Moghadam 2005; 2000; 1998), and feminist activism in the Middle East in general (see Sundkvist 2022; Pratt 2020; al-Ali 2000), I believe there is still work to be done, especially on the temporal aspect of transnational feminism; how feminist groups draw from diverging local, regional, and global histories in shaping their activism, and actively situate themselves within these while navigating and countering perceptions of inauthenticity or cultural insensitivity. A different way of wording this aim could be that I study the temporal within the transnational, and the transnational within the temporal. As such, the aim is to explore how transnationalism and temporality intersects to shape the performance of contemporary feminist activism in the Middle East today, which has broader implications for studying social movements through a lens of chronopolitics.

State of the Art

There is a large literature of transnational feminist studies, a field which has waxed and waned since its inception in the 1990s, as well as research specifically focusing on feminist movements in the Middle East and North Africa. This literature includes research tracing historical roots and early women's rights movements, as well as works exploring contemporary actors. Of course, the field of Middle East feminist studies is broad and inter-disciplinary, including everything from political science research on women's political participation (Shalaby 2016), anthropological work on marriage, family, and love during precarious times (Inhorn and Naguib 2022), and media and communication research on digital LGBTQ+ activism (Gorkemli 2012). Even limiting ourselves to only focus on Egypt and Tunisia and only on feminist's political practices, there is still an abundance of books and articles detailing feminist repertoires, including essay-writing and publishing (Booth 2013; Hatem 2011), unveiling protests (Badran 1995; Baron 1989), parliamentary occupation (Al-Ali 2000; Nelson 1996), rights-based approaches to activism (Refle 2024), online blogging (Snoussi et al. 2023; Cattane 2021; Elsadda 2010), crowdmapping street-harassment (Grove 2015a; Abdelmonem 2015), and nude protesting online (Kraidy 2016; Grove 2015b; Mourad 2014; Mikdashi 2011), and that is only naming a fraction. This is to say that I acknowledge the breadth of the field and find its interdisciplinarity to be a key strength. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this dissertation it is necessary to narrow the scope, focusing on research frontiers specifically related to the central themes investigated in my own research.

One area that has been extensively covered in previous studies is the role of gender in the protests, uprisings, and revolutions taking place in 2010-2011 and how feminist activism in the region has changed (or not changed) since then. However, despite the long history of feminist scholars theorizing on difference—particularly in terms of race and racialization—surprisingly little has been written about this in the Middle Eastern context. Even less has been written on the intersection of race and gender or race and feminist organizing. Intergenerational and temporal elements of Middle East feminist movements are also still largely understudied, although with some important exceptions (such as Pratt 2020). Importantly, what I believe is missing from the literature is the intersection of temporality and transnationalism, especially how *chronopolitical practices* influence feminist activism in the region and how feminist histories are constructed, narrated, and organized on local, regional, and global levels, and how this comes to shape contemporary feminist

organizing in the region and the possibilities or limitations of transnational feminist solidarity.

As this dissertation deals in broad terms with feminist transnational activism, time and temporalities within social movements, and feminist organizing across difference, there is, of course, a wider literature than that focusing on the Middle East and North Africa. It is therefore important to place the dissertation within this wider field, detailing debates and developments with implications for studying transnational feminist solidarity in this specific context. What follows is a necessarily condensed assessment of the existing literature, divided thematically in order to cover the three main challenges—the transnational, the temporal, and the question of difference, as they have been studied within the larger fields of political science, feminist studies, and social movement studies—highlighting research trends and directions, and detailing how the study at hand builds on and contributes to this literature.

Transnational Feminist Studies

Largely building on earlier postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholarship, transnational feminist studies emerged in the 1990s as an alternative to discourses of global feminism (see Basu 1995; Moghadam 2005; Savcı 2021), Third World feminism (see Mohanty et al. 1991; Arat 2025), and cross-cultural or multicultural feminism (see Shohat 1998). This development "coincided with a commitment to address the asymmetries of the globalization process" (Nagar and Swarr 2010, 3), and the existing "variations" of feminisms reflect tensions stemming from a growing resistance to the way mainstream feminism had relied on a "universal woman" which was not universal at all. Furthermore, postcolonial scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha successfully raised awareness not only on the orientalist representation of the "Third World woman" but also how such representations were inevitably warped by colonial history. In short, transnational feminism "argued against both the claim of a 'global sisterhood' between women that would be united in resisting patriarchy (Morgan 1996) or the claim that non-Western patriarchies were the source of all problems for women outside the West" (Grewal 2023, 94). Interestingly, within the type of postcolonial analysis described here is an implicit temporal element which is not particularly developed in the literature. Mainstream feminisms relying on both a universalization of women's experiences, and a simultaneous Othering of "Third World" women, means that the Othering is likely to be temporal, i.e., situating the Other in a past time, based on a teleological view of development.

In other words, perceived differences in women's experiences of oppression, patriarchal violence, sexism, or misogyny, are only really reconcilable with the universalization paradigm through temporal Othering. This would indicate, as I explore further in the next section, that critical analysis of hegemonic, linear temporalities is indeed fundamental to post/decolonial, transnational feminist research, even as it has not been explicitly theorized.

Desai et al. (2010, 46) write that transnational feminism has focused "primarily on a particular domain of inquiry, namely on intersubjective relations of power as they affect collaborative knowledge production," specifically advancing questions regarding "the social acts of individuals as they negotiate their locations within institutional and state apparatuses," and "the geopolitics of knowledge production." Due to the focus on *locating*, *spatializing*, and *mapping* processes of knowledge production, transnational feminist research has largely adopted a language of geography, utilizing "metaphors of cartography, boundaries, and border crossings to capture the complexities of working through difference and material inequalities" (Desai et al. 2010, 46f).[8] This, they argue, has yielded significant insights, but also foreclosed other perspectives, particularly on the relationship between theory and practice. Instead, they turn their attention towards the field itself, unpacking and interrogating key concepts within it, in order to understand "how the transnational and the feminist come to be available to the university as objects of knowledge" (Desai et al. 2010, 47). Similarly, Alexander and Mohanty (2010, 24) explore what "the transnational" does in feminist contexts, specifically "the relation of the transnational to colonial, neocolonial, and imperial histories," and the practices that constitute the transnational at this particular point in time. These approaches represent a shift in transnational feminist research, away from the social acts of individuals, instead highlighting and interrogating the assumptions embedded in concepts used by transnational feminist researchers (as well as activists) and the structures underpinning them.

Self-reflexive scholarship on transnational feminism (e.g., Desai et al. 2010; Conway 2017) highlights a conceptual divide within the field, whereby "the transnational" is on the one hand understood "as an empirical referent to feminist cross-border organising" (Conway 2017, 205f) and on the other hand "as a normative discourse that, since the 1990s, has consolidated as an analytic

[8] A clear example of this can be found in Carty and Mohanty (2015, 82): "While we knew this could be only a particular (and partial) story, we were interested in a generative dialogue and wanted to map a critical feminist geography of knowledge production, organizing, and solidarity building across multiple layers of difference in the current neoliberal context."

and methodological approach" (207). This could be described in other words as a tension between "transnational" functioning as an empirical descriptive or as a normative prescriptive. In this sense, it may indeed be both an empirical term denoting border-crossing, diasporic, or migratory forms of feminisms, but not exclusively and not entirely, as it can equally be understood as a normative and epistemological framework for questioning and challenging the universalization of feminist subjects, without rejecting feminist solidarity across differences (see Mohanty 2003). This aligns with Tambe and Thayer (2021, 4) who understands transnational feminism as "a flexible and evolving framework rather than a rigid set of prescriptions frozen in time. It is an analytic lens that, we insist, has been constructed through mutual engagement between scholars and activists in many parts of the world." As such, transnational feminism cannot be seen as transcending or having subsumed Black feminisms, Third World Feminisms, Indigenous feminisms, and so on. Desai et al. (2010) emphasize the necessity to acknowledge distinctions—as well as coherence—between various traditions of critical feminist political thought and transnational feminism, while also maintaining that they are not mutually exclusive or stand in opposition, lest transnational feminism becomes another vehicle for universalizing feminisms.

Grewal (2023) provides a slightly different view of the field, instead proposing three forms of transnational feminism as used within academia. The first aligns with Desai et al. (2010), viewing it as an academic formation which is "predominantly focused on knowledge politics, disciplinary questions, and research methodology" (Grewal 2023, 95). The second approach understands it in terms of identity formation or a positioning of scholars and activists, emphasizing solidarity. Finally, the third approach focuses on "solidarities, inequalities and activism between feminists across national divides, and across academic and activist spaces" (Grewal 2023, 95). Grewal acknowledges overlap, particularly noting that all three approaches aim, to varying degrees, at breaking down binaries "such as activist/academic, modern/traditional, domestic/international, and 'local-global'" (Grewal 2023, 95).

In the broader social movement studies literature, transnational activism has been extensively covered, particularly in relation to increasing globalization, migration, and the impact of new media and/or digitally mediated activism (see for example Flesher Fominaya 2014; Della Porta et al. 2006; Tarrow 2005). Despite some overlap, shared concepts, terminology, and perspectives—such as both acknowledging and questioning "the nation as a source of constraint and a locus of identity and possibility" (Tambe and Thayer 2021, 4)—transnational feminist scholarship rarely builds on work from the social

movement literature and vice versa, and these two fields emerged somewhat independently of each other. Social movement researchers generally tend to build on the work of Sidney Tarrow, Donatella Della Porta, and Jackie Smith, who in turn did not particularly engage with, for example, Grewal and Kaplan (1994) or Alexander and Mohanty (1997).[9] From one point of view, this could be understandable, as the cited pioneering works of transnational feminism was mainly presented as interventions on feminist theory rather than geared towards developing an analytical framework for studying feminists' transnational activism, although they still offer key insights on precisely this. While social movement studies at the time did include analyses of women's transnational activism, it often lacked in terms of feminist theorizing, not to mention intersectional analysis and incorporating race, class, or coloniality in their work (see for example Della Porta and Tarrow 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1998), leading to this epistemological gap. In recent years, this has started to change (see for example Bonu Rosenkranz and Della Porta 2025; Smith 2024) although the lack of engagement between the fields is still noticeable.

Digital Activism and Cyberfeminism

Although often described as "recently emerged" or a "new development" (see for example Tazi 2020) cyberfeminism has been around since the 1990s and can be further traced back to the 1980s through its theoretical ties to Haraway's cyborg feminism (1985). The coining of the term is often credited to British feminist philosopher Sadie Plant in 1994 (see Hawthorne and Klein 1999). In 1996, Canadian artist and cyberfeminist, Nancy Paterson, laid out the defining principles:

> Cyberfeminism is not just the subject matter, but is the approach taken to examine subject matter. For example: Cyberfeminism can be a critique of equality in cyberspace, challenge the gender stereotype in cyberspace, examine the gender relationship in cyberspace, examine the collaboration between humans and technology, examine the relationship between women and technology and more. (Paterson 1996)

Even if we were to delimit ourselves to the Middle Eastern context, cyberfeminism has been applied within the literature for more than twenty years, such as in Shahrzad Mojab's "The Politics of 'Cyberfeminism' in the Middle East" (2001). However, following the uprisings of 2010-2011, research

[9] The outlier—as one of very few scholars we can place in the centre of a Venn diagram of transnational feminist studies, social movement studies, and Middle East feminist studies—is Valentine Moghadam.

on digitally mediated activism, including transnational feminist activism, has proliferated (see Al-Rawi 2014; Sakr 2019; Esposito and Sinatora 2021). Similarly, the 2009 uprising in Iran inspired research into digitally mediated activism, investigating how activists in exile launch online-campaigns, sustain ties with activists and others on the ground, and how digital platforms enable them to "exercise their agentive potential by maintaining a presence and relevance in domestic debates on gender equality and feminism" (Batmanghelichi and Mouri 2017, 53). However, Batmanghelichi (2021) also argues that the move from on-the-ground activism to cyber-feminist projects "has proven to be both uneven and stunted" (127) at the same time as online feminist activism has given ordinary Iranians access to feminist discourse and provoking "a kind of feminist consciousness that previous women's activists of the post-revolutionary era did not typically champion" (126). Scholars of LGBTQI+ activism have similarly produced insights on digital developments within Middle East social movements, particularly looking at the interplay of digital and on-the-ground activism. For example, Kiliç (2021) explores the complex entanglement of online and offline activism during Istanbul Pride, highlighting the role played by online activism in rearticulating queer place in Turkey. In the Lebanese context, Cowdell (2025, 21) shows how social media "constitute a site of immense Lebanese queer creativity," while also cautioning against techno-optimism by highlighting socio-economic and infrastructural barriers.

Development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), the rise of new social media platforms and the increased embeddedness of digital technologies into daily life, coupled with democratic backsliding and authoritarian backlash in both Egypt and Tunisia, has indeed made "the digital" an increasingly salient topic of inquiry for social movement researchers in the region. Despite the risks associated with resisting autocratic regimes, feminist organizations do continue to work, only that they must find new strategies—and new spaces—to conduct their work. Social media is one such space which the literature on transnational feminist activism started to catch up on in the last decade, although technological development and digital media trends often outpace the ability of political scientists to react. For example, even though TikTok was launched in 2016, reaching 41.3 million users in Egypt by 2025, and has been widely covered in news media due to Egyptian TikTok users being arrested for "immorality," a literature search for scholarly articles

dealing with TikTok in Egypt gives scant results.[10] A wider search for research on digital activism and TikTok in the Middle East and North Africa yields some more results, mainly focusing on the Woman, Life, and Freedom-protests in Iran. Even so, research is limited and mainly contained within media and communication studies, focusing on issues such as media control or language, rather than, for example, political mobilization and activist organizing.

"The digital" has also become an important space for younger generations of feminists to gain widespread attention and rally support for their causes and has been particularly useful in overcoming or navigating real-life spatial inequalities. These developments and their impact on transnational feminist activism require more attention and research. However, one recurring issue with existing research on digital transnational activism is an over-reliance on digitality which risks reinscribing digital-material binaries, treating digital spaces as existing independently from embodied resistance. While some digital anthropologists caution against methodological approaches that solely focus on the digital (see Miller 2011; Horst & Miller 2012; Hjorth et al. 2017) there are also those who argue for taking digital spaces seriously in their own right, just as we do with traditional, on-the-ground fieldwork (Boellstorff et al. 2013; Boellstorff 2016)—i.e., few would bat their eyes at ethnographic research which excludes the digital, but the inverse is likely to be derided as "armchair anthropology" and, on the side of the activists, online activism is often viewed as a "lower form of political engagement" (Kiliç 2021, 732). Relatedly, feminist scholars have challenged the techno-optimistic idea that cyberspace provides a "gender-free space," enabling interaction between people without the constraints of gender or biology, and instead emphasize that digital spaces and virtual worlds are still created by people who are themselves influenced by their own gendered norms and expectations—for example by designing platforms and technologies with a certain user in mind, often someone like themselves (see Bromseth and Sundén 2011; Landström 2007). Digital spaces are reflections of (and co-constitute) the "real world," though designating the digital as less "real" than the non-digital can be contentious.

While political scientists and transnational feminist scholars alike have begun engaging with "the digital" in their studies of social movements, I see mainly two issues with existing research. The first is that a significant portion of previous studies employ a "digital-only" approach, without critical reflection

[10] For data on TikTok users in Egypt, see Kemp (2025). For media coverage on TikTok arrests, see Fangary and Mahfouz (2025). Surveillance and media control of TikTok by the Egyptian state is further covered by Cosentino (2025).

on the implications and limitations of such an approach, which risks re-inscribing digital-material binaries and tend to neglect embodied resistance. The other issue is the prevalence of what Cowdell (2025) calls a "cyberutopian" view of social media—or, as I call it above, techno-optimism—which essentially means viewing and studying new ICTs and digital technologies through a romanticized lens. Digital trends, communication strategies, and social media are important dimensions of transnational feminist organizing, and should be considered when studying these organizations, but it cannot be treated as detached from either on-the-ground activism or from structural constraints present in the context. As such, I see a need for more holistic research on feminists' digital activism, which considers the digital as a facet only fully understood in relation to the non-digital.

Frontiers of Feminist Transnational Studies

While the field of transnational feminist studies is continuously expanding, certain key areas are still underdeveloped and under-theorized. Transnational feminist scholars have made important contributions, exploring issues such as translation (and mistranslation), highlighting south-south knowledge exchange and co-production of knowledge beyond academia, and advanced critiques of neoliberal and capitalist co-optation of feminist discourse. These are all fruitful endeavours, often clearly attuned to—and aligned with—feminist activists on the ground. What I am aiming to do here may then potentially be perceived as more theoretical and/or less pertinent to the actual work of activists, although I do not believe so, for a number of reasons. Firstly, assessing the field, I note a need to further develop transnational feminist thinking on the tensions, contradictions, and competing priorities related to the interplay between "the local" and "the transnational," the ever-present challenge of reconciling local epistemologies with the work towards building a cohesive movement founded on a collective feminist identity and sense of solidarity. This challenge remains central to feminist activists in the region yet appears less central within transnational feminist scholarship, which I believe calls for new directions and, more importantly, rethinking how we conduct transnational feminist research.

Furthermore, the direction of the field in recent years has trended towards the more introspective and self-reflective; unpacking and deconstructing key terms and concepts of transnational feminist research itself. This, I believe, is healthy and necessary, but also cannot be the main line of inquiry, and needs to inform empirical research in order to not further deepen the divide, as detailed above, between more empirically driven studies and the analytical or normative work

of transnational feminists. With this in mind, this dissertation contributes to the field methodologically by developing an approach to studying transnational feminist activism empirically, analytically, and holistically. By "holistically," I mean both in terms of incorporating multiple dimensions of feminists' organizational and transnational work—their formal communication and activities, their more loosely organized networks and connections, their on-the-ground activism, and their digital activism—as well as in terms of a methodology adapted to capture these multidimensional dynamics, by triangulating interviews, traditional and digital fieldwork, and textual analysis. In this sense, I am following an established tradition of transnational feminist research, focusing on the construction and reproduction of boundaries and feminist subjects, while also testing out new possibilities and opening up for new directions in terms of how such research is conducted, particularly that it should be done from the "ground up" rather than beginning at the transnational. Lastly, this dissertation contributes empirically by introducing to the field of transnational feminist studies an explicit focus on temporality (further detailed in the next section). As previously noted, critiques of temporal Othering can definitely be found within transnational, postcolonial, and decolonial feminist research, but it is rarely studied with explicit attention and theorization on the temporal. In this dissertation, I show how investigating chronopolitical practices of feminist organizations in Egypt and Tunisia, as they converge with "the transnational" dimension of feminist activism and with the "challenge of difference," can shed new light on both productive tensions and potential risks associated with feminists' temporal perspectives. As such, this contribution may be applied to the study of transnational (feminist) social movements more widely, and in other contexts.

Time and Temporality in Political Science Research

Goetz (2023, 1) notes that "to speak of politics is to speak of time [and] the language of political science is likewise infused with time." While time has long been present within the literature, it is often left implicit or its meaning taken for granted, and temporality has historically been undertheorized within political science research (Hanson 2019). There are a few early exceptions, such as George W. Wallis' (1970) paper on "chronopolitics" which details the relationship between political behaviour and temporality, and later—although perhaps more sociological—Barbara Adam's *Time and Social Theory* (1990), emphasizing the social construction of time, the centrality of time to social and political life, and making a case for "time-sensitive social theory." However,

the explicit, systematic, and critical study of time and politics has figuratively exploded since the turn of the millennium, notably expanding beyond theory-heavy work and beginning to inform empirical research in recent years as well. This field of inquiry is now wide and diverse. On the more philosophical side, looking at a global scale, we find Kimberly Hutchings' study of how temporal assumptions rooted in Western political thought shape dominant theories of world politics, delimiting what we can and cannot know (Hutchings 2008). Somewhat more grounded in empirical examples, Elizabeth F. Cohen offers a normative political theory approach to explore the political value of time, how states exercise power through time, and the governance of time (Cohen 2018). However, Cohen is also clear in delineating that what she examines is linear, durational time rather than, for example, conceptualizations of history, or the subjective experience of time. For a historical, interpretive study on personal and collective temporalities, within a much more specific and situated frame, we may turn to Pursley (2019). Through rich, archival research, Pursley examines modernization and development projects in 20th century Iraq, particularly looking at temporal dynamics and constraints in the formation of Iraqi statehood—as well as in articulations of gender and sexual difference—revealing how future-oriented discourses were instrumentalized to perpetually defer political change.

Social movement researchers have also started paying closer attention to time and temporality, in what could be called a "temporal turn" (Bunting 2024). The lack of a conceptualization of "time" was noted already in 2001 by Doug McAdam and William H. Sewell Jr., writing that "much, if not most, scholarship in the field—especially in social movement studies—betrays no temporality whatsoever" (McAdam and Sewell 2001, 90). Yet, any sign of a temporal turn took some time to reveal itself. In a special issue of *Social Movement Studies*, Gillan and Edwards (2020, 501) introduce the topic stating that "until recently, the temporal dimensions of social movements have been left in the background of theories of movement emergence, processes and outcomes." They attribute the increased attention, in part, to "wider intellectual trends in both sociology and political science" (Gillan and Edwards 2020, 501), in line with what I note above. Furthermore, as with the broader political science literature, earlier social movement research did deal with questions of time and temporality, only without really bringing it to the fore. This is mainly evident through emphasis on the historical specificity of social movements—reading "social movements as signifying something important about the socio-political conditions of their historical moment" (Gillan 2018, 517)—and in analyses of social movement dynamics relying on fundamentally temporal

concepts such as "cycles of contention" (Tarrow 1998), "protest waves" (Freeman and Johnson 1999), "sequences" (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001), or "critical junctures" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). However, a closer examination of these concepts also reveals a common assumption of linearity within social movement research, such as reading social movements through sequential phases of mobilization, interaction, and consequences (see Gillan 2020).

For political scientists interested in temporality, it is important to also be aware of recent developments in the philosophy and theory of history. For this reason, I want to highlight a particularly relevant, recent intervention on chronopolitics by historians Fernando Esposito and Tobias Becker, "differentiating between the *politics of time*, the *time of politics*, and *politicized time*" (Esposito and Becker 2023, 4, emphasis in original). This has implications for understanding the nexus of time and politics, wherein the first dimension refers to the regulation of individuals' time, such as "debates about calendar reforms, daylight saving time, and the length of the working day" (Esposito and Becker 2023, 16). Here, time is the object of politics. The second dimension, then, refers to political institutions, or time within political systems, for example election cycles and term-limits. This dimension also applies more broadly to how time "fundamentally structures what is perceived as scope for action" (Esposito and Becker 2023, 17), particularly in relation to "times of crisis" and calls for immediate action. The third dimension has to do with the instrumentalization of time, such as invoking the past in order to advocate for continuity, referencing a potential future to claim urgency and need for change, or depicting political opponents in temporal terms. This last example usually takes the form of temporal distancing, or "the locating of the political or colonial (and national) Other outside of the present" (Esposito and Becker 2023, 19). Temporal distancing is particularly noteworthy as it has been used by Orientalist academics as much as political leaders.[11]

[11] See for example Bernard Lewis' *The Political Language of Islam* (1988, 117) in which he compares "fundamentalism" in Christianity and Islam: "Among Muslim theologians there is as yet no such liberal or modernist approach to the Qur'an, and all Muslims, in their attitude to the text of the Qur'an, are in principle at least fundamentalists." Similar temporal distancing is found in Martin Kramer's *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* (1996, 266) where, in a discussion on the compatibility of democracy and Islam, Kramer repeatedly describes "Islamic fundamentalists" as dreaming of a distant past which they seek to reinstate: "These were people who mixed nostalgia with grievance to produce a millenarian vision of an Islamic state—a vision so powerful that its pursuit justified any means."

Despite critical interventions, such as Hutchings (2008) and Pursley (2019), highlighting the necessity of thinking explicitly about time and being attentive to alternative temporalities, the temporality present in mainstream political science is mainly of the linear, teleological, and unidirectional kind, focusing on things such as causality—what Hanson (2019) calls "objective time." By moving to the subjective realm of human experience, the unfolding of time and how people grapple with it becomes more contentious but also enables deeper analysis of temporal dynamics. After all, key concerns for political science, such as the formation and transformation of identities, concepts of nationhood, or partisan realignment are examples of "political phenomena involving 'cumulative causes' that unfold only over the long run [which] requires at least some engagement with the perceptions of the actors holding such identifications" (Hanson 2019, 180). As such, Hanson (2019, 191) calls for political scientists to pay more attention to "how individuals' subjective understandings of time interact with large-scale temporal structures."

Looking at political science and social movement studies in the Middle Eastern context, there is a similar lack of explicit engagement with temporality as well as a bias towards linearity and "objective time." However, Chamas' (2023) research on the temporality of failure in Lebanon, and activism in *dead time*—a time marked by normalized and seemingly endless status quo following political failure—is an important exception. Chamas (2023, 2) describes studying activism "amid the ruins of political potentiality," specifically the aftermath of Lebanon's garbage protests in 2015, investigating "the consequences of an understanding of the past as characterized by defeat, of the present as permanent, and of radically alternative futures as pipedreams." Here we find the temporal dynamics of a social movement standing at the centre of analysis, rather than as a backdrop, and a close attention paid to the "subjective time" of its participants, which helps to better understand political mobilization and, more broadly, the divergent strategies of political activists in Lebanon. While not focusing on feminist activism, Chamas explicitly draws from queer and feminist theorists, interweaved with anthropological work on time and temporality, showing the utility of studying social movement through a lens of feminist temporality, which I discuss further below.

Feminist, Black, Decolonial, and Queer Temporalities

> Though we are conditioned to see time as a neutral substance through which we simply move in a forward direction, in academic discourse, the term *temporality* registers the collective patterning of stasis and change according to

> various regimes of power: the politics of our *experience* of time. (Freeman 2021, 234, emphasis in original)

In 1981, Julia Kristeva published "Women's Time," in which she details the difference between *linear time* and *monumental time*, a difference she understands as "constituting the separation of the sexes into male and female" (Smith 2015, 988). Although Kristeva's text has been judged as antifeminist (see for example Jardine 1981), particularly in her expression of worry about the disappearance of the familial and her dependence on sexual difference (Bryson 2007; Smith 2015), it nevertheless inspired further feminist critiques of conventional, linear conceptions of time, and remains commonly cited in the literature. Building on—and critiquing—Kristeva, as well as drawing from anti-colonial critiques of modernity (e.g., Bhabha 1991; Chakrabarty 2000; Hartman 2012), feminist scholars have explored the ways in which gender, power, and historical narratives shape temporal experience (see Hunfeld 2022; Kennedy 2023; Olufemi 2024). This field of research, which we may term "feminist studies of time," includes studies on the political economy of time—e.g., the unequal distribution of "free" time and unpaid labour (Floro 1995)—genealogies of feminist activism (Fahs 2024), and research on generational development of feminist identity (Chen 2014). More recently, the political implications of our temporal perspective, particularly the effect of time on how activists organize politically has emerged as a productive field of inquiry (see for example Chamas 2023).

Scholars like Victoria Browne have expanded the conversation by critiquing the linear "wave" metaphor commonly used to conceptualize feminist history. In *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (2014), Browne advocates for a nonlinear understanding of feminist movements, emphasizing the coexistence of multiple temporalities and the importance of recognizing diverse feminist trajectories. Similarly interrogating the wave-metaphor and questioning conventional "timekeeping" in feminist research, Prudence Chamberlain's *The Feminist Fourth Wave* (2017) examines how contemporary feminist activism is shaped by emotional and affective experiences, proposing that these affective temporalities play a pivotal part in mobilizing feminist activism.

As noted throughout, particularly within a broader political science literature, there is a clear bias for linearity in existing literatures, which is also identified by Lola Olufemi in her recent PhD dissertation, noting "the prevalence of linearity and hegemonic clock-time in conceptualizations of past, present and future as sequential temporal regimes" (Olufemi 2024, 30). Critical scholars—most notably black feminists, decolonial scholars, and queer theorists—have,

however, long challenged hegemonic temporalities and offered alternatives. Works by María Lugones (2003), Jack Halberstam (2005), Saidiya Hartman (2007), José Esteban Muñoz (2009), Mark Rifkin (2017), Kara Keeling (2019), among many others, disrupt hegemonic chronologies, presenting alternative understandings of time that resist teleological, progress-oriented, patriarchal, and/or colonial structures. Particularly decolonial approaches to temporality, such as that by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, examine and critique how teleological, linear conceptions of time have been used to position indigenous and colonized peoples in a perpetual past, thereby justifying ongoing systems of oppression. Smith (1999, 30) lays out a critique against "Western history [as] a modernist project which has developed alongside imperial beliefs about the Other." Following this critique, she argues that hegemonic, Western historiography relies on a set of interconnected ideas:

> Implicit in the notion of development is the notion of progress. This assumes that societies move forward in stages of development much as an infant grows into a fully developed adult human being: The earliest phase of human development is regarded as primitive, simple and emotional. As societies develop, they become less primitive, more civilized, more rational, and their social structures become more complex and bureaucratic. (Smith 1999, 30)

According to Smith, this critique of history—in the form of an imperialist and/or modernist project— is neither unfamiliar to those colonial Others who are targeted by the development discourse, nor is it a product of post-modern theories developed at academic centres in the United States or Western Europe. Non-linear, pluralized, and contested discourses about the past are "part of the fabric of communities that value oral ways of knowing" (Smith 1999, 33). Herein lies a key argument, namely the need to decolonize research and research methodologies to reclaim alternative ways of knowing, something which remains a central concern for decolonial feminists—scholars and activists alike—to this day.

Zooming in to closer examine the field of Middle East feminist studies, we will find that much work has been done on the history of feminism(s) and feminist activism, particularly focusing on Egypt and Tunisia. However, it is important to note the difference in studying "history" and studying time or temporality, and there is indeed a marked lack of the latter. Much of the existing literature on feminism and feminist histories in the region lack explicit engagement and conceptualization of time and temporality, even in cases where critiques against temporal Othering, progress-oriented theories of development, or linear/teleological discourses are retained (Pursley [2019] is the exception).

One example of this—although not a historical study but an ethnography of the women's piety movement in Egypt—is Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2004). Mahmood problematizes prevalent assumptions about Muslim women, as well as "the feminist subject," and by doing so provides a serious challenge to secular-liberal feminist theories of agency, authority, and resistance. Even now, more than twenty years after publication, it is an important intervention in feminist scholarship. However, while explicitly critiquing feminist theories relying on a "pre-defined teleology of emancipatory politics" (Mahmood 2004, 20), there is no explicit examination of temporality in Mahmood's work. Others have picked up this temporal thread, either to "defend Mahmood's work as embracing anti-teleological feminist futures" (Velji 2024, 774) or making use of Mahmood's work to develop a feminist theory of time (Clare 2009).[12] This is a prime example of how absence of explicit examination on temporality does not mean absence of temporal dimensions within the work. Nevertheless, it also shows potentially productive avenues for research dealing with time, feminist temporalities, and temporal structures of feminist activism within studies focusing on the Middle East and North Africa.

Futures of Feminist Temporality Studies

As shown above, chronopolitical practices and temporal dynamics of social movements are present in the literature but rarely theorized in temporal terms. Practices utilized by social movements involve both past and future, such as bringing particular histories to light—for example through restorative history, archival activism, and memorialization—and contesting the future, either in terms of warning about trajectories and claiming urgency in order to mobilize for change, or in terms of envisioning and advocating for alternative futures. Movements engaged in such practices "bring past, present, and future together to mobilize participants and develop strategies of action" Gillan (2022, 3). However, empirical research looking at this dimension of social movements is lacking, and to my knowledge there are no larger studies explicitly engaging with temporality within feminist movements in the Middle Eastern context. Nevertheless, the important contribution of Chamas (2023) stands as evidence of the value brought to social movement research by both paying attention to (subjective) time and by moving beyond linear or sequential time. While social movement research tends to assume a linear temporality—wherein activism is followed by mobilization which is followed by an outcome, and either it has

[12] The use of Saba Mahmood's work to develop a feminist theory of time is explored further in chapter 2, on *Agency and Temporality*.

succeeded or failed in achieving the intended goals—Chamas' work indicates that activists inhabit non-linear, recursive time, in which "failure" is not an endpoint but instead a condition which shapes political subjectivity.

Difference in Middle East Feminist Studies

Difference has a long conceptual history within feminist theory, but before I can begin this assessment of the literature, we need to narrow it down and make some distinctions. First of all, the combination of difference and feminism may lead some to think of the strand of feminism positing an essential difference between the sexes which, ironically, assumes that women by virtue of their gender are generally alike or have a shared experience of womanhood. This is the polar opposite of what I focus on here, which is the critique against claims of universality, such as that by decolonial, queer, and black feminists. Furthermore, since the concept is quite wide, and in order to contextualise within a frame of empirical relevance for this study, I narrow down this overview to focus mainly on how it figures in Middle East political science research and—to the extent possible—Middle East feminist studies. Of course, there are endless frames of difference potentially significant for the practice of transnational feminism and, therefore, also productive to study yet impossible to comprehensively survey.

As such, I begin with a brief overview of research dealing with the concept of difference itself, before zooming in on more empirical research focused on racial/racialized difference within Middle East political science and feminist studies. The justification for this is three-part: First, race is a prominent topic in this dissertation, in turn stemming from developments in both Egypt and Tunisia in recent years, such as emerging black feminist movements, and protests and debates on racial discrimination happening particularly in Tunisia. Second, many of the most important and impactful feminist works on difference comes from black feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Third, race and racialized difference is largely absent within the Middle East feminist literature, and therefore it is necessary to survey what *has* been written about race in the Middle Eastern context.

Parallel to the development of postcolonial and decolonial feminist theories in the 1960s-1980s, there was also a development of theories on race, blackness, women of colour, and indigeneity, which informed the later transformations of transnational feminist studies. Interventions by Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and the Combahee River Collective, among many others, highlighted the race-blindness of mainstream feminisms, arguing that they

largely focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women, ignoring or even erasing experiences of black women (and indigenous women, working-class women, queer women, and so on), effectively defining womanhood in ways that excluded those women who did not fit the mould:

> Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women's rights because we did not see "womanhood" as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification. In other words, we were asked to deny a part of ourselves— and we did. (hooks 1982, 1)

While much has been written on black feminist thought, the overwhelming majority focuses on racial politics, history, and society in the United States. Very little has been written on race, blackness, and racial politics in the Middle East and North Africa, and even less within a tradition of black feminism. This poses a methodological problem, as I believe it is important to avoid generalizations and assumptions based on US racial dynamics and hegemonic conceptualizations of race borrowed from North America. Yet, it is equally important to be aware of globally circulating racial discourses. Black feminist theory developed in the US may still be applicable to some degree, not least because some feminists in Egypt and Tunisia draw inspiration from these.

Race and Racialization in the Middle East and North Africa

There are some early examples of publications on race in the Middle East and North Africa, although these are often either quite outdated or Orientalist (and mostly both).[13] While more critical research on race, racialization, and racism has developed in the last decade or so, Middle East political science research has been relatively slow to catch up on these developments. Instead, much of the work conceptualizing and contextualizing race within MENA-focused research can be found in cultural studies (e.g., Almeida 2016; El Zein 2021), history (e.g., Cleaveland 2015; Hall 2020), and anthropology (e.g., Menin 2020; Scaglioni 2022; Gross-Wyrtzen 2022). For example, one important

[13] See for example Bernard Lewis' *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (1992), which includes definitions of race such as "a group of people sharing certain visible and measurable characteristics, such as hair, pigmentation, skull measurements, height, and other physical features" (16) and declaring that although "the ancient civilizations of the Middle East show considerable diversity, there is no great racial difference between their peoples" (17). Even earlier we find Leon Carl Brown's "Color in Northern Africa" (1967) with such descriptions as: "Northern Africa is and has been throughout recorded time the great border zone where white ends meeting the area where black begins" (464).

intervention comes from performance studies scholar Leila Tayeb who, in a discussion on "whiteness" in North Africa, questions the taken-for-granted geography of the Sahara as a natural border, separating North and sub-Saharan Africa:

> This naturalized division is racialized: colonial scholars painted light-skinned people of the southern Mediterranean as "closer" to Europe both geographically and in terms of civilization. By continuing to describe North Africa as inevitably distinct from "Black Africa," we not only reinscribe this violent hierarchy, but we also prevent ourselves from seeing racialization as processual and dynamic. (Tayeb 2021, 2)

Tayeb continues by arguing that in taking such a division as geographical fact, rather than geopolitical construct acting to stabilize racial distance between Europe and Africa, we "reify a logic that posits racial whiteness as indigenous to North Africa, racial Arabness as contributing to the maintenance of that whiteness, and racial blackness as non-indigenous" (Tayeb 2021, 3). This logic also erases the Amazigh population by racially homogenizing North Africa, defining Tunisian racial identity in terms of anti-blackness. I take this as an important reminder of remaining especially vigilant about assumptions—whether my own or others—that are taken as natural fact, and I largely agree with Tayeb in this argument. Particularly, an important implication of the logic described here, which I find support for in my own research, is that it enables a local articulation of whiteness, predicated largely on anti-blackness, which makes it possible for whiteness to operate as social currency, something that is valorised, even while "Western-ness" is still rejected.

Political scientists—particularly those of us based in Europe or North America—seemingly "became aware" of race in the region around the time of the George Floyd protests in the United States and the subsequent global spread of Black Lives Matters (BLM), which I believe indicates a disconnect from grassroots movements and mobilization in the MENA region.[14] This is also noted by Khalili (2023, 376), arguing that "antiracist revolts in the Anglophone world in the last decade have been followed by scholarly expositions of race and racism in the study of world politics." Similarly, discussing the scarcity of research on race in the Middle East, Ozcelik (2021) writes that the killing of George Floyd "forced issues of structural violence,

[14] In fact, one interlocutor involved in the black feminist movement in Tunisia told me about the frustration she felt at the time when numerous journalists and academics would contact her to ask about BLM protests in Tunisia, only to seemingly forget about the issue a week later and then never contact her again.

racial injustice and racialised collective precarity to the forefront of a global conversation" (2155).

Only in the past few years, political scientists working on the Middle East and North Africa have begun to rectify this shortcoming (see for example Nairi 2025; King 2023). To this end, the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) and the Program on African Social Research (PASR), arranged a series of workshop leading to a publication on "Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East" in September 2021. There is also some early, pioneering work by Shreya Parikh who in 2024 defended her PhD thesis "Mirages of Race: Blackness, Racialization, and the Black Movement in Tunisia." Parikh investigates the contested meanings of "Tunisian-ness," particularly paying attention to how histories of slavery, colonialism, and the nation-building projects of Bourguiba and Ben Ali constructed Tunisian national identity in opposition to "African-ness" and blackness. Despite these recent efforts, however, the scarcity remains, particularly in relation to racial dynamics within feminist movements in the region.

Different Directions of Research on Race

Critical, empirical research on race and racialization is steadily increasing, particularly highlighting historical legacies of colonialism and slavery, the role of race in the formation of national identity, and recent mobilization for the rights of migrants. As indicated above, there is still much to be done on the intersection of race and gender, and even more so on race and feminism, in the Middle Eastern context. To my knowledge, there have been no larger studies on black feminism or racial dynamics within the Tunisian feminist movement, and research on race and racialization is equally limited in the Egyptian case. While this dissertation is not mainly focused on race and racialization in the Middle East and North Africa or within Middle East transnational feminism, it contributes to the field by showing how racial dynamics figure within feminist mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia, influence the formation of a shared, collective feminist identity—as well as the formation of a regional identity—and challenging formations of feminist solidarity founded on a shared "Arab" or "Middle Eastern" identity which has historically been constructed as mutually exclusive and in opposition to "African" or "black" identity.

Defining "the Field"

This is a dissertation in the discipline of political science, although it could also be placed within the broad, interdisciplinary field of Middle Eastern studies. As such, I have to contend with the question of what makes the "Middle East" or "Middle East and North Africa (MENA)" a region, understood to be at least coherent enough for Middle Eastern studies to be a field of study with the region as its object of study? These are, of course, contested and potentially problematic terms. At the most basic level, "Middle East" has been critiqued for being Eurocentric (East of what?) and a colonial remnant, crudely dividing Asia between the Near East, Middle East, and Far East. Some have instead opted for the term "South-West Asia and North Africa," or SWANA for short, although this term has not yet caught on widely. Those opting to use it, for example in book titles and articles, face issues related to marketing and search engine optimization. There is also some critique against the term for being (yet) another word conjured up by academics with little attachment to those outside of academia. Some opt for "Arab world" instead of MENA, though this only works if you exclude Turkey, Iran, Israel and other non-Arab countries, as well as ignore that many people living in this "world" do not identify as Arab or do not speak Arabic.

There are at least two divergent histories for the development of "Middle Eastern studies" as a field of study. In general terms, Middle Eastern studies at European universities grew out of what was previously called oriental studies and focused on humanistic areas of research, such as philology, religion, culture, and archaeology. The first International Congress of Orientalists was held in Paris in 1873, and the following 12 such meetings were held around Europe (including Stockholm in 1889) before it was held once in "the Middle East," specifically in Algiers, in 1905. It took until 1967 before it was held in the United States, highlighting the mainly European nature of the field. Many European universities retained departments and faculties of oriental studies well into the 21st century, and even in the cases where they rebranded as "Middle Eastern studies," their research agendas and areas of teaching remained largely the same.[15]

[15] For example, the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford did not change its name until August 2022, and University of Chicago's Oriental Institute became the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures in April 2023. Meanwhile, the University of London still retains "Oriental" in the name of the prestigious School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), as does the Italian Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale."

In the United States, however, Middle Eastern studies largely grew out of a political interest in the region stemming from the Cold War. Lockman (2016) writes that in the late 1940s and 1950s, university leaders in the US were in close contact with the CIA and other US intelligence agencies:

> They expected, or at least hoped, that the new area studies centers they were funding or hosting would cooperate effectively with those agencies, and more broadly would serve the needs of the state during a protracted period of global crisis and conflict, whether by producing policy-relevant research or by training personnel for government service. (Lockman 2016, 51)

Owing to its close connection to US intelligence services and other government agencies, Middle Eastern studies in its American iteration was less interested in humanistic research on history or philology, instead focusing more on contemporary social and political studies on the region. However, Lockman also cautions against putting too much emphasis on the Cold War, and writes that while the institutionalization of Middle Eastern studies obviously was heavily influenced by the global tensions of the time, it is plausible that the same research centres would have been founded anyway, as "Cold War concerns were never the only rationale for area studies advanced by the field's founders and funders" (Lockman 2016, 52).

So, what does all of this mean for us who are researching the Middle East, or work at centres for Middle Eastern studies? I believe it is important to be aware and transparent of the histories of our field, as well as the histories of the terminology we use—such as the work required to even consider "the Middle East" a cohesive region and a valid object of analysis. At the same time, "the Middle East" is so entrenched that attempting to find new terminology risks becoming ivory-towerism, leading to new and obscure terms that are not even recognized by those who it is supposed to include, i.e., people living in this region. Therefore, I have opted to still use "Middle East" in this study, and while I focus specifically on two countries, I see this research as relating to gender politics and feminist activism in a broader field, as do many of my interlocutors. As such, the broader area of "Middle East" is a necessary while simultaneously problematic frame, as it means that I am myself participating in the reification of this concept/construct/region as a pre-existing reality.

Dissertation Outline

In this introduction, I have presented the aims and scope of this dissertation and provided an overview of relevant research "frontiers" and gaps, within the areas of transnational feminist studies, social movement research, and political science research focusing on the key issues of transnationalism, temporality, and difference. The following chapter outlines the theories I draw from and borrow concepts from, in order to develop a framework to build my analysis on. These theories and concepts largely come from the literatures presented in chapter one, with the aim to develop an analytical and conceptual framework able to contribute towards the identified needs. As such, the focus of chapter two is on defining key concepts forming the building blocks of this study, clarifying how they help me understand the material studied herein. Lastly, in chapter two, I further detail and justify the emphasis on feminist solidarity and provide my theoretical points of departure for understanding solidarity as practice and a form of organizing.

Chapter three describes the methodology utilized, beginning with my general approach to feminist research, emphasizing a fundamental commitment to feminist ethics, positionality, and reflexivity. This is followed by a discussion on the research design more specifically, including case selection, limitations and delimitations, as well as how I go about incorporating "the digital" into this study, weaving it together with textual analysis and interviews. This is based on an understanding of digital and non-digital spaces as co-constitutive. Further, chapter three details some of the challenges with conducting fieldwork in authoritarian settings—including adaptations I have had to make throughout the research process—before moving on to elaborate on the empirical material collected and the application of narrative analysis on that material.

Chapter four, the first of three empirical chapters, explores the challenge of "difference." Particularly I explore local "situatedness" of feminist activism, local and national specificity, and spatial divisions both on the national level and beyond the nation. In this chapter, I note how, beyond grappling with the perception of being "foreign" or "Western," feminist organizations in both Egypt and Tunisia are also struggling with being perceived as mainly focused on urban centres, thereby marginalizing rural (and often racialized) women or neglecting their needs, perspectives, and priorities. I theorize that feminists who are appealing mainly to educated, urban, middle- and upper-class women are generally seen as less challenging to the political status quo, meaning that feminist groups that seek a broader appeal—particularly those appealing to working-class women—face harsher repression. Importantly, this difference in

response to feminist mobilization manifests not only in relation to the framing but also location and timing, and therefore reveals differential, temporal, and spatial dimensions unevenly delimiting feminist organizations and activists. Furthermore, spatial inequalities and issues of urban bias connect in important ways with racial politics, class politics, and the politics of language, as well as contentions around religion and secularism, which are explored in this chapter.

Chapter five details findings related to feminist temporalities and "time work." Here, I present a number of different narratives on how and when feminist movements in Egypt and Tunisia began, noting similarities in national histories (such as emphasis on women's involvement in the independence movements of both countries). At the organizational and individual levels, however, I find many variations and diverging narratives, in turn revealing differences in temporal perspective between organizations. Chapter five also looks closer at the *chronopolitical practices* employed by organizations and their members, particularly noting restorative history, commemoration, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing as key areas concerning the temporal. This leads me to formulate an argument about how temporal perspectives and practices contain significant possibilities for feminist mobilization, particularly when engaged with explicitly by feminist organizations themselves.

Chapter six, the final of the empirical chapters, details findings on the transnational dimension of Egyptian and Tunisian feminist activism. The main argument here is that there is a discrepancy between how organizations narrate transnational engagement and concrete examples of exchange and interaction. Stories told by these organizations tend to exaggerate commonalities and erase differences or disagreements. However, I also argue that solidarity should not be understood as a theoretical concept but as an important foundation for transnational organizing. While I categorize instances of transnationalism as either ideational or practical—meaning they are either based on the idea/ideal of transnationalism or they reflect a reality of practical interaction—I claim here that ideational statements of solidarity also *do* something.

Lastly, in chapter seven, I conclude by summarising the findings in relation to theoretical and conceptual advancement, and empirical insights presented here. The three challenges of difference, temporality, and the transnational are not neatly separated categories and I specifically strive to highlight convergences. The empirical chapters (four through six) weave together in some ways, as findings overlap and specific issues connect in different ways to these themes. For example, feminist solidarity with Palestine is explored in terms of difference in chapter four (looking at how such solidarity manifest spatially and impacts activism in Egypt and Tunisia) and then again in chapter five, only

then with a focus on practical organizing across borders and the ideological centrality of solidarity with Palestine for feminists in the Middle East and North Africa more broadly. I wish to emphasize how difference, temporality, and the transnational converge in relation to feminist solidarity. Therefore, chapter seven also devotes space to clarify this convergence, bringing together the themes explored throughout the dissertation.

Chapter 2: Analytical Framework

This dissertation is theoretically grounded in, and building on, feminist political theory, social movement theory, and transnational feminist studies, with influences from performance studies and research on "chronopolitics." From this broad field, I construct an analytical and conceptual framework that focuses on the work towards transnational feminism founded on solidarity and how feminists in Egypt and Tunisia grapple with challenges related to "difference," the temporal, and the transnational. In this chapter, I present the analytical framework, my theoretical points of departure, and philosophical assumptions. I begin broadly, elaborating on the concept of feminist solidarity, analytically supported by these three challenges, in order to clarify how this framework helps me better understand the impact of these on feminist activism and the formation of transnational feminist solidarity in the Middle Eastern context. I then move on to outline and provide definitions of key concepts, discussing how I define "feminism(s)" and how that impacts this study, such as in relation to identifying feminist organizations or feminist practices. Moving then to the more specific, I detail and define key concepts divided by the three themes: difference, the temporal, and the transnational. In doing so, I aim to justify the focus on transnational feminist solidarity, emphasize the centrality of these challenges, outline the general utility of the concepts, and clarify how I define and operationalize them in the context of this dissertation.

Feminist Solidarity (in) Practice

Feminist solidarity is a form of organizing. This is a theoretical point of departure in this study, emphasizing the centrality of solidarity in transnational feminist activism, and highlighting practice. Wickström et al. (2021) argue that while historically the notion of solidarity has worked to bring together activists and academics—as well as bringing together feminists despite differences of geographic location, socio-economic position, race, sexuality, and so on—we have also seen an intellectualization and institutionalization of feminism,

which alienates activists and practitioners, particularly those outside of the Anglo-American sphere, making it more difficult to effect change. Simultaneously, I note in myself and other feminist scholars a lingering sense of anxiety around the imperative placed on transnational feminist researchers of participating in the formation of broad transnational alliances, and the risks of universalization of experiences to achieve either political coherence or appease hegemonic epistemologies, thereby perpetuating marginalization of groups within the movement. This same anxiety is noted by Ilan Kapoor in a discussion on the impact of Gayatri Spivak on the field of development studies:

> Many of us who work in this field as researchers and/or development workers struggle with the dilemmas that her writing raises. What are the ethico-political implications of our representations for the Third World, and especially for the subaltern groups that preoccupy a good part of our work? To what extent do our depictions and actions marginalise or silence these groups and mask our own complicities. (Kapoor 2004, 628)

There is a risk that such dilemmas lead to a reluctance to engage with difficult questions, avoiding postcolonial contexts altogether, or even denouncing one's own responsibility towards decolonizing feminist research and delegating this work to others. This, I believe, only further separates feminist scholars from those activists who cannot choose to disengage and therefore does a disservice to the causes that the same scholars theoretically support.

Difficulties in navigating transnational feminist solidarities—feminists in-between and between researchers and activists—become most visible within scholarship focusing on non-Western contexts. There is no question that the topic of gender and feminism in Middle Eastern studies is often haunted by the ghost of Orientalist past (and present). In trying to find ways of going forward, Abu-Lughod (2001) looks at how the field has been impacted by, and relates to, the critique offered by Said (1978). She presents four areas of impact: (1) Opening up the possibility to study the gendered aspects of Orientalist discourse itself; (2) strengthening research going beyond the stereotypes of Muslim and Middle Eastern women, and, more generally, stereotypes about gender relations in the Middle East; (3) making way for re- examination of the history of feminism in the Middle East; and (4), situating feminist critique in the global context by highlighting the relationship between knowledge and power, scholarship and politics. As such, my research agenda takes inspiration from Abu-Lughod's four suggestions, particularly the last two: the re-examination of feminist histories and situating feminist critique in the global context.

Following Abu-Lughod's attempt at finding ways out of the colonial double-bind, Mohanty (2003) provides a roadmap for the decolonization of feminist practice and research. Feminism without borders, according to Mohanty, is not synonymous with border-less feminism, but "acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent" (Mohanty 2003, 2). Furthermore, feminist practice means not just collective action centered on feminist politics for social transformations, but also the theoretical work of feminists' knowledge production, and, crucially, practices of daily life, through the acts that "constitute our identities and relational communities" (Mohanty 2003, 4). The work of Mohanty highlights both that the significance and meaning of gender is shaped in relation to race, class, sexual orientation, and so on, but also that that these have material underpinnings connected to imperialism and capitalism. This needs to be acknowledged in order for transnational feminism to "deliver the bases for political solidarity between women across class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and national borders" (Mendoza 2002, 310).

I take from Abu-Lughod and Mohanty that transnational feminist research which is neither Orientalist nor universalizing is indeed possible. However, I believe it must also rest on a basis of solidarity, which I understand to be the operationalization of recognizing and accepting differences yet committing to support. This is also argued by Littler and Rottenberg (2020, 865), who write that expressing solidarity is "to recognize and respect differences without colonizing those differences." However, they also problematize the ways in which solidarity may assume entrenched identities, even as they are cut across, and thereby naturalize those identity categories:

> When one stands in feminist solidarity, in other words, one often does so from a particular identity (and often identifying as a particular gender) in order to express support for the 'other' who is also defined by her identity. (Littler and Rottenberg 2020, 865)

This stands in contrast to Mohanty (2003), who instead argues that solidarity is a communicative process that constructs a "we." Therefore, solidarity is not a precondition for feminist activism, but something that emerges through feminist practice and organizing. This conceptualization aligns with what political theorist Jodi Dean calls "reflective solidarity." For Dean, reflective solidarity constitutes a "mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship" (Dean 1996, 3) and involves an interaction between three persons or entities in which the first stands by the second "over and against a third"

(Dean 1996, 3), highlighting a communicative construction of a "we." In other words, "we" are bonded in our shared relationship to the third entity.

Another way of viewing solidarity in practice comes from Smolović Jones et al. (2020) who argues for conceptualizing solidarity as *embodied agonism*, in which contestation and difference is viewed as a resource rather than an inhibitor of collective action. In order to do this, they draw from Mouffe's concept of agonistic democratic practice and Butler's embodied performativity (Mouffe 2013; Butler 2015). This approach embraces the agonistic point of view that there will always be conflict in pluralistic societies, that there will always be groupings whose differences cannot be resolved, and that "rather than trying to tame this, we should embrace and deploy it to invigorate democratic practice" (Smolović Jones et al. 2020, 919). This allows for alliances to form and re-form over time, yet as in Mohanty's account, it requires work, acknowledgement of difference, and indeed respect of difference. Butler's embodied performativity takes this concept beyond the realm of language, where agonistic democratic practice often resides, by "drawing on potent shared affects such as 'pleasure' and 'rage'" (Smolović Jones et al. 2020, 920). In practice this means that solidarity is embodied, for example, through participation in street-protests, the body enacting meaning through presence. The Butlerian notion of vulnerability is therefore also closely tied to solidarity, as an ontological condition of being human: "Bodies are necessarily vulnerable, that is, temporary vehicles that experience pain and death, which therefore form a basis for empathic understanding and solidarity" (Smolović Jones et al. 2020, 921; see also Butler et al. 2016).

Scholz (2013, 206) differentiates between social solidarity—which refers to mutual responsibility between fellow members of society—and political solidarity—which she defines as "associated with social movements and revolutionary praxis to bring about social and political change." Transnational feminist solidarity, as such, falls in the political category. Scholz further distinguishes between solidarity as a relationship between actors, and solidarity as a shared relationship to a cause. Following this, feminist solidarity could either be viewed mainly in relation to political goals, thus superseding the identity-based model described by Littler and Rottenberg, or it could be seen as "a thick relation with substantial bonds that extend beyond the goals of a social movement" (Scholz 2013, 207). It is my view that reality contains a little bit of both; on the one hand, solidarity between feminists run deeper than simply agreement on particular goals (in fact, disagreement can be quite common), yet considering how transnational feminists are not just women—and even if that was the case, women are not a homogenous category and

support many different positions and causes—solidarity cannot be reduced to shared identity category, unless this category is simply "feminist," which still is a category that builds more on affinity politics than on identity politics.

Key Concepts and Definitions

Forming the building blocks of my analytical framework are key concepts identified through an abductive process, by which I mean continuously going "back-and-forth" between collecting and analysing data, so that new insights inform further analysis. As such, key concepts are never fixed but adjusted and adapted throughout the research process. Most of these appear prominently in previous research, thus informing my thinking at the early stages of research. However, during the process of conducting fieldwork and data collection, some concepts appeared less relevant and were dropped while others remained, and new ones emerged—this was the case with "restorative history," a concept which I was aware of through existing research but had not considered so prominent, which changed when I began collecting data. Some of the concepts outlined in this chapter are broad terms which may not directly inform the practical analysis of data but nevertheless are important to make my framing and analytical assumptions clear. These include terms such as "feminism," and "intersectionality," which are therefore included in this chapter in order to clarify my analytical, ontological, and epistemological points of view.

Feminism(s)

"Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks 2000, viii). This concise definition of feminism, provided by bell hooks, aligns well with my own view. It acknowledges that feminism is, indeed, for everybody, and emphasizes it as a movement to end oppression in a wide sense, one that does not neglect "other forms of oppression such as racism, classism, imperialism and others" (Biana 2020, 13). The organizations included in this study does not all share precisely the same definition—particularly as there is differing emphasis, some focusing more on sexuality/sexual oppression while others focus on women's rights broadly—but hooks' definition is wide enough to fit them all. Most organizations declare some form of commitment to women's rights and/or gender equality, including equality in terms of bodily rights and sexuality. This does not mean that every activist or organization I study emphasizes issues of bodily rights or sexuality, nor that they agree on

what this means, but every organization does to some extent deal with these issues—note also that bodily rights and sexuality is not the same as LGBTQ+ rights, as it may also encompass issues such as the rights of sex workers, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), the right to bodily autonomy, and more. As such, an organization's views on LGBTQ+ rights would not in itself determine whether I include or exclude them. While I would describe myself as a queer feminist, and, to some extent, my own background as a white man from Sweden influences how I view feminism, I am careful to apply my own understanding of feminist politics. Electing to study feminist activism in this context, it was important to me that I did not enter with a preconceived idea of what constitutes "feminism," or what qualifies as feminist practices. I wanted to be able to capture a wide range of activism that may be perceived as feminist.

However, there is some debate regarding the terminology, and as I show in the introduction, there are practices of activism which I believe that we as feminist should support—for example, female workers striking for better working conditions—but they are not perceived through this lens even by those who engage in them. Some women avoid the term "feminism" because of its connotations, or because of its association with white, Western feminists. Furthermore, some of my interlocutors make a distinction between feminist activism and gender activism, wherein the former exclusively focuses on women's rights and the latter may include for example LGBTQ+ rights. For example, Mawjoudin is sometimes referred to as outside of the Tunisian feminist movement, yet I include them in this dissertation. The rationale for this is that I believe gender politics cannot be separated from issues of sexuality (see Mikdashi 2012), just as it cannot be separated from issues of class or race/racism. Furthermore, the work of LGBTQ+ activists in the region is closely linked to feminist politics and history (see Kaedbey 2014), and some mainstream feminist organizations, such as ATFD, advocated for LGBTQ+ rights before there were specific organizations focusing on queer community.

So, the initial plan was to say that I do not want to impose my view of feminism and have that limit who I interview, and that I would therefore only interview self-identified feminists and members of organizations using the feminist label. This would inhibit me from perceiving the female workers going on strike and acknowledging this as a feminist cause. It would stop me from talking to queer activists or Muslim women's rights activists who use a different terminology.

Beyond Women's Rights Activism

Feminist politics is not reducible to women's rights. Neither can women's activism be reduced to feminist issues. In other words, women engaging in activism are not automatically feminist activists—obviously women can and do organize politically around an anti-feminist stance—and feminist activists are not only women. The feminists I have met while living, travelling, and studying in Egypt and Tunisia are not only women, but also men and non-binary people, and I consider men's participation in feminist movements to be an understudied area of research, particularly in the Middle Eastern context.

Zaky (2022) points out the close association in Egypt between "feminism" and "the West," which has led to many activists avoiding the feminist label, to avoid accusations of westernization. This view is also confirmed by several of my interlocutors, although often lamented. Zaky follows Al-Ali (2000, 127) who argues that "the English term 'feminist' evokes antagonism and animosity." However, the view of feminism as inherently Western is an idea that I challenge, and I therefore insist that what I study is precisely feminist activism, and not (as Al-Ali and Zaky prefers to call it) "women's activism." While it may be controversial to call, for example, Doria Shafik a feminist rather than a women's rights activist, I believe the term to be accurate, not because she was educated at the Sorbonne or had been Westernized, but because her participation in the independence movement, organizing an all-women militia to fight against the British colonial forces, and her struggle to establish a government which recognized women as full citizens, with full voting rights and equal pay, exemplifies feminist politics in my view. This does not mean that Shafik represents all Egyptian feminists—particularly younger feminists in Egypt often consider Shafik an elitist, bourgeoise figure who does not represent their politics. What interests me is not whether Shafik would call herself a feminist or if Bint al-Nīl ("Daughter of the Nile") was a feminist organization, and it serves no purpose to impose labels on anyone. What is of interest is the role that Shafik plays for contemporary feminists, how they relate to her as a historical figure, and how her activism is narrated. Here, I take my cue from Dima Kaedbey's study on queer feminist thought in Lebanon:

> Many of the movements I include here, and the women who are part of these movements, are not feminist, and I do not want to impose a feminist label on them. What I do want *is to "impose" their struggles on* contemporary feminists and queer feminism. This is because I do want their stories to be part of our queer feminist history, because I do want these stories and histories to shape our feminism and our queerness. (Kaedbey 2014, 62 [emphasis in original])

In other words, it is the role played by Doria Shafik, Bchira Ben Mrad, Huda Shaarawi—and their respective organizations or movements—in shaping contemporary feminist activism in the Middle East that interests me; how their histories and their activism come to matter for feminists today, and how the narration of these histories function towards constructing shared, transnational feminist identity. Similarly, I do not impose a feminist label on working-class women fighting for living wages and recognition within the labour movement, but I understand and analyse their struggle through a feminist lens. Following Kaedbey (2014), I *do* want to impose their cause on contemporary feminists, but primarily I want to understand the tensions arising when some feminists hold solidarity with the striking women at Mahalla El-Kubra as a key concern while others consider it marginal at best.

This approach influences my inclusion and exclusion criteria (which I return to in chapter three) as I obviously have my own view of what constitutes feminist politics and practices, as detailed above. However, I am careful not to apply preconceived frameworks and instead strive to work abductively and ethnographically, letting my interlocutors lead the way and letting frameworks and definitions arise from fieldwork and from the material I collect.

Difference

While "difference" has been theorized and debated by feminist thinkers at least since Simone de Beauvoir, and later French philosophers such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, the primary mode of thinking I draw from here comes from black feminism. In particular, the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins argued that race, class, and sexuality (and more) *constitute* gendered experience, meaning that "difference" is structural; black women's experience of oppression, marginalization, or injustice cannot be understood as the sum of sexism and racism. In other words, racialized experiences are not "additional" to gendered experiences, but co-constitutive. This intervention served as a critique against liberal formulations of feminism, focused largely on gender equality (or more precisely "women's liberation") which flattened difference and were therefore blind to how non-white women experienced structural injustice. However, the critique also came with a call for recognition that "racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time" (Lorde 1984, 113), meaning we cannot allow racism to be the responsibility of black feminists, or homophobia the responsibility of queer feminists and LGBTQ+ activists.

The question of difference also intersects in important ways with temporality and the transnational. The latter was central to postcolonial feminists launching similar critique as black feminists against the universalization of womanhood, thus erasing geopolitical difference (see for example Spivak 1988, Alexander and Mohanty 1997)—and perhaps more importantly showing how difference in the form of Othering paradoxically functions to reproduce universal images of "Western" women:

> Universal images of 'the third-world woman' (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the 'third-world difference' to 'sexual difference', are predicated on (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives. (Mohanty 1988, 81)

This ties into the other intersection—not as explicitly theorized in feminist scholarship—which is temporal distancing and temporalization of difference. Without explicitly exploring temporal narratives or rhetoric, Mohanty (1988) offers a critique of how "Western feminism" produces and homogenizes the "Third World Woman" as a pre-modern subject, "stuck in time;" difference becomes a developmental lag rather than a coeval, political difference.

Intersectionality

The black feminist tradition detailed above provides us with the concept of "intersectionality," developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a feminist heuristic and a key contribution to feminist theories of difference (Crenshaw 1989; see also Collins and Bilge 2016). Intersectionality enables an understanding of the way social and political inequalities of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. are formed co-constitutively. While never formulated in such a way by Crenshaw, the concept is sometimes understood in the summative way described above. This is a common misuse or misrepresentation of the concept as having to do with how multiple, pre-existing identities add up or compound, instead of as a tool to understand the specificity of the intersection in constituting experiences of marginalization and oppression. Such summative usage of the concept still keeps identity categories neatly separate rather than providing insight into the formation of subjectivities as co-constitutive. To address this, and further develop, clarify, and sharpen intersectionality as an analytical tool, Jasbir Puar combines it with assemblage in order to better understand the dynamic, contingent, affective, and techno-political *making* of difference (Puar 2012). "Assemblage," Puar writes is the awkward translation of "*agencement*, a term that means design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations—the focus

being not on content but on relations, relations of patterns" (Puar 2012, 57). Instead of a "model that produces a constant in order to establish its variations" (Puar 2012, 58), assemblage foregrounds the "event-ness" of identity rather than a constant. Re-reading intersectionality as assemblage, therefore, helps retain and affirm an understanding of identities as liminal, shifting, in motion, and multi-directional: "identification is a process; identity is an encounter, an event, an accident" (Puar 2012, 59).

Race and Racialization

> Racial constructions are often problematically predicated on an Euro-American binary of whiteness and Blackness that masks colorism and that essentializes whiteness and Blackness rather than situates these constructions in relation to specific temporal and geographic contingencies. (Silverstein and Sprengel 2021, 2)

A primary concern in this dissertation is that one cannot generalize about racial dynamics across North Africa. As detailed in the State of the Art, existing literature on race and racial dynamics in the MENA context is scarce, and even more so when limiting the scope to only Egypt and Tunisia. However, Scaglioni (2020) offers an account of the ʿAbid Ghbonton, a black community of Tunisian slave descendants, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing. Scaglioni notes that perceptions of race and blackness in this community are deeply intertwined with historical contexts, social hierarchies, and individual identities, which complicates the conceptualization of blackness "mainly as a matter of absence of Arab lineage" (Scaglioni 2020, 119). At the same time, Bourguiba's vision for Tunisia relied heavily on the separation between North and sub-Saharan Africa, and in recent years we have seen how President Saied is actively working to strengthen this separation. While, of course, not all black Tunisians descend from slavery, there is an ingrained perception that associates blackness with slavery, as well as a perception of black Tunisians as "outsiders" despite communities like the ʿAbid Ghbonton having roots in Tunisia since the Ottoman era.[16] As such, the legacy of slavery also functions to reproduce blackness as non-indigenous, through "a racial imaginary that relies on the histories of racialized enslavement" (Tayeb 2021, 4).

[16] Slavery was abolished in Tunisia in 1846, although remained covertly in some areas. Today, the word for "slave," *ʿabd* or *ʿabīd* in the plural, is sometimes used as a synonym for "black" (see Scaglioni 2020).

Interventions such as that by Scaglioni (2020) and Tayeb (2021) act as reminders to not take Euro-American discourses on race as universal, instead letting definitions and conceptualization arise from fieldwork and from the empirical material. Nevertheless, on a very fundamental, ontological level, I may at least delineate my position that race is a social and political category—racial difference is socially conferred (see Ásta 2018)—meaning that racial categories and definitions vary over time and between geographical contexts. In other words, race is a historically produced, political and material regime, co-constituted with gender and sexuality. Racialization, then, refers to the processes and practices—whether legal, economic, scientific, cultural, etc.—which ascribe racial meaning to bodies (and places), reproducing race and racial difference (Collins 2004).

This framework emphasizes the context-dependence of racial categories. As "racial difference," and the significance of such difference, is socially conferred, it is not independent from human thoughts, attitudes, and practices. This also means that racial categories depend on intersubjective agreement on what defines them. Consequently, race is "real," in the sense that racial categories have social and political implications and can be "objective objects of knowledge: we can investigate them through empirical methods" (Ásta 2018, 107). This conferralist framework takes "an objectivist position in that racial categories, and criteria for membership in them, exist independently of any individual subjective attitudes" (2018, 106). More importantly, however, this means that "despite its constructed nature, the effects of 'race' remain real for millions of people (Collins 2004, 17).

The Temporal

> Temporality has been a ground for women's political movements. (Smith 2015, 977)

Temporality is a large and quite abstract concept, necessitating some work for it to be operationalized. What I wish to emphasize in this study is how feminist activists in Egypt and Tunisia understand, organize, and relate to time. Primarily this relates to individual and collective construction and narration of feminist histories; how feminist organizations make use of the past to construct a collective (transnational) identity, inspire participation in the movement, and what it can tell us about their view of feminism's role in contemporary society. Of course, conceptualization of the present and future are also important elements of temporality, and these are of interest here, but to a lesser extent

than conceptualization of the past. This has to do with my understanding of "the past" not as an objective reference point, but something that is indeed constructed, both to understand and explain the present, and to forge linkages—particularly to forge linkages with past feminist organizations and with contemporary organizations in other contexts—as well as to envision or encourage alternative futures. This may take the form of chronopolitical practices such as periodization or referencing the past as a way to debunk myths of stable, unchanging gender relations in society, and thereby indicate the possibility of alternative futures. As such, the broader concept of "temporality" is necessary to capture how the past (or more accurately constructions of the past) comes to matter in the present and shapes potential alternative futures.

The "temporal turn" has indicated a need for time-sensitive approaches to researching social movements, able to account for continuity and change. To this end, Gillan (2018, 516) proposes the concept of *timescape* to "specify the macro-level spatio-temporal boundaries in which we can locate the action of multiple movements." As with other "scapes," such as landscape or cityscape, "a timescape represents a large-scale vista from a particular perspective, and within the boundaries of a selected frame" (Gillan 2018, 519). Building on Sewell (2005), emphasizing the continuities present through radical historical ruptures, Gillan similarly emphasizes unevenness:

> Movements move within an uneven temporality encompassing both repeated patterns of interaction and the contingent unfolding of historic events; movement actors are implicated in reproducing and contesting both. (Gillan 2018, 519)

Building on Gillan (2018), I propose an understanding of time as a field of struggle, emphasizing how struggles over narrative are also struggles of power. By navigating this field and forwarding alternative—sometimes competing—views of it, organizations and activists engage in timing, participating in the crafting of time and the multiplicity of temporal perspectives. This view pays attention to how chronopolitical practices do political work, by forging links, legitimizing strategies, constructing boundaries, and delimiting coalitions.

The addition of "feminist" to "temporality" has to do with an understanding of time and temporal experiences as gendered, and the acknowledgement that societal conceptions of time are often shaped by gender norms and power dynamics. Furthermore, feminist temporality also emphasizes agency, by highlighting change and historical discontinuity. The past was different than

the present (whether for better or for worse), the present is unjust and inequitable, and the future must be different than the present (for the better). Striving for any kind of change means recognizing that things have not always been as they are, and that they need not stay the way they are. The narration of history involves multiplicity, meaning alternative histories exist in parallel, pointing to the subjectivity of historical narration. In line with this argument, Hemmings (2005) says that "all history takes place in the present, as we make and remake stories about the past to enable a particular present to gain legitimacy" (Hemmings 2005, 118). This is a key analytical assumption in this dissertation; how the past is narrated is highly political and historical narration is often used for political purposes.

Agency and Temporality

Saba Mahmood conceptualizes agency and subjectification largely by building on and responding to the work of Judith Butler. However, Clare (2009) argues that a key difference is found in Mahmood's understanding of temporality, even though she does not explicitly address the temporal implications of her thinking. Butler famously conceptualizes agency through performativity, writing that "the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency" (Butler 2007, xxv), meaning that the subject is constituted in and through performance, rather than being prior to the performance. Furthermore, Butler's subjectification requires recognition and repetition, through which the subject is (re)constituted:

> This means that the subject, who desires recognition, comes into being through the ritualized repetition of acts, gestures, or desires, which, upon recognition, creates the illusion of an essential identity. One is recognizable (and hence a subject) to the extent that one performs recognizable gendered norms. (Clare 2009, 51)

In Butler's understanding of subjectivity, agency enters by way of repetition, as this offers the possibility of "introducing difference into the chain of citationality" (Clare 2009, 51). These gaps therefore enable action, meaning there is an element of temporality that makes agency possible in Butler's thinking. Other feminist scholars have critiqued Butler's theory of agency (see Benhabib et al. 1995; Nussbaum 1999), and Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* also shows its limitations, it nevertheless forms the foundation for Mahmood's thinking. Where they depart, however, is that that while Butler's model works well in recognizing agency through the subversion of established norms, Mahmood's focus is on how agency can also be recognized "in the multiple

ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (Mahmood 2005, 15). A part of this difference has to do with Butler emphasizing signification, the constitution of the subject as a figure that is recognized as such, whereas Mahmood emphasizes desire, sensation, and corporeality. As such, Butler's model has to contend with the "paradox of referentiality"—meaning that if we are to understand the constitution of a subject, we must "refer to what does not yet exist" (Butler 1997, 4).

This leads to an understanding of subjectivity as a series of discrete moments, and by extension a model of *becoming* that relies on a series of *beings*. This has to do with Butler's reliance on signification, which Mahmood's model of agency allows us to move beyond by instead centring desire and sensation. Signification takes on an outsider's perspective; the action of a subject as it is observed and recognized. The observer recounting action (constitution of the subject) views action as a series of points. Sensation, however, takes the point of view of the actor, from whose perspective the action is a continuous motion rather than a series of points. The difference therefore boils down to the notion of becoming: "A theory of agency that captures feminism's feistiness will capture a sense of how worlds *are* not, but continuously *become*" (Clare 2009, 50 [emphasis in original]). By way of *becoming*, as a continuous process, agency is as such necessarily tied into a feminist theory of time.

Mahmood's work, even without explicit engagement with temporality, highlights how differences in temporal perspectives relates to agency and, by extension, influence the organizing and mobilizing of political activists. Although feminist scholars were not the first to theorize the political implications of temporality (see for example Fabian 1983; Osborn 1995), nor the time-agency nexus (see for example Giddens 1979), agency has long stood at the centre of feminist theorization, particularly in post- and decolonial feminist theory (see for example Spivak 1988). As such, feminist interventions in chronopolitics are particularly salient when it comes to agency.

Time and Timing Theory

IR scholar Andrew R. Hom writes that "people are not passive recipients of given time but rather active participants in crafting and changing time itself in order to fit their new realities" (Hom 2020, 12), thus arguing for an agential understanding of time. In Hom's view, the future is not determined by the past, but by human action, including timing practices which serializes events into a coherent whole, making them easier to comprehend and to use for certain purposes: "By timing, humans forge useful links and processes out of the otherwise chaotic welter of existence, and use these to encourage certain

outcomes rather than others, reflective of specific priorities" (Hom 2020, 11). Hom shifts focus from "time" to "timing," placing emphasis on the practical activities and social processes that organize change and create a temporal order. Elaborating on the use of timing theory in understanding upheavals like Brexit or the Covid-19 pandemic, Hom argues that people collectively "craft" time, by taking current events and stitching them "into new paths towards alternative futures" (Hom 2020, 12). Instead of treating "time" as a pre-existing framework (in the sense of clock-time), timing theory focuses on the active, social process of "timing"—how actors relate and order events.

Timing theory, in this context, emphasizes the need to understand temporal aspects in studying contentious politics, social movements, and political change, on several levels. First and foremost, it is important to clarify that "timing" does not mean the same as in everyday usage, nor does it relate to theories of political timing (see Gibson 1999) which deals with how political actors plan and time (in terms of *Kairos*) non-random political events. Instead, timing theory here relates to the explicit, conscious relationship political actors have to the past—both in terms of their own personal past, their previous political activity, the history of the movement or organization they are part of, but also political events or important moments of history from their point of view. Secondly, timing also has to do with the future; clearly, any political activist by definition ought to believe that change is not only possible, but that their own activism can be part of creating change. As stated by Sara Ahmed on the relationship between hope and protest: "Hope is also implicit in the very attachment to protest: it suggests that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible" (Ahmed 2004, 251). However, engagement with potential futures may take different forms, and, following Gosseries (2015), differences may be found for example in relation to how activists view collective and individual responsibility towards past and future generations, which ties into how they conceptualize their activism in temporal terms. Thirdly, following Hom (2020), this dissertation sheds light on the active role taken by activists to "craft" time, their chronopolitical practices or "time work", such as determining what "time" we are currently in, how to delineate it and what defines it. For example, determining what constitutes and defines the "post-Arab Spring" may reveal how activists relate events following the 2010-2011 uprisings to other events, including more recent. Viewing the post-Arab Spring as a time of political opportunity, change, and hope will likely illicit different kinds of temporal relations than if it is defined by authoritarian backlash and democratic backsliding. Consequently, looking at how people understand and make sense of time also enables us to understand the possibilities and delimitations of their political behaviour. Of course, "post-

Arab Spring" is just one example, but the same could be applied to temporal concepts such as "fourth-wave feminism."

Timing theory further highlights that our experiences of time are not only an individual matter—our sense of time changing throughout life and in relation to important milestones such as the birth of a child or the death of a loved one—but that time is also collectively, socially, and culturally produced, with political implications (see Smith 2015; Bryson 2007). Following this, we may also note that time figures prominently in narrative, or as argued by Klinke (2013, 676): "time does not exist meaningfully outside narrative." As such, narrative analysis meshes particularly well with the focus on temporality and the use of timing theory. In this study, I draw from Chamas (2023), Hom (2020; 2018), Smith (2015), Gosseries (2015), Loewen Walker (2014), and Bryson (2007), building on their insights, informing my approach to timing theory, as described above. I follow Bryson (2007) in understanding differences in temporal perspectives as socially and culturally produced, with implications for political activity, and Hom (2020) in viewing people as active participants in "crafting" time. In line with this agential and intersubjective understanding of time, focus lies not on objective, clock-time, or the chronological unfolding of events, but rather how temporal relationships to past, present, and future are crafted and shared between people and across borders.

Periodization

In this dissertation, I define periodization as the practice of constructing temporal boundaries, determining what defines/delineates/demarcates the present, and differentiating between past and present. It is perhaps most recognizable, in this context, in relation to "the calculation that feminism has existed and exists as successive 'waves' of activism" (Smith 2015, 977) but may also take the form of positioning feminist movements on a timeline. Arfaoui's (2007) division of Tunisian feminist history into three eras, marked by the national independence movement, the early post-independent era, and the beginning of an autonomous feminist movement, is an example of this. Identifying practices of periodization provides important context for how feminist activists and organizations conceptualize the past and thus their role in relation to society at large, but may also reveal transnational entanglement, for example through emphasis on broader regional histories, such as the historical influence of French and British colonial rule, common struggles for national independence, or the rise of Pan-Arabism in the 1950s and '60s. Periodization is a common chronopolitical practice (Esposito and Becker 2023). More importantly, it may also manifest as *temporalization of difference*,

with political intentions and/or political consequences. For example, when determining that one belongs to a new "wave" of feminists, this implicitly places other feminists within a "previous" or "past" (i.e., outdated) wave.

Restorative History

Narrating history—particularly national histories—builds on exclusion; selectively authorizing certain narratives over others, which may also require erasure of things that bear witness of alternative pasts (Bsheer 2020). Restorative history, then, refers to a mode of historical narration that seeks to correct the exclusions, silences, or distortions of dominant historical accounts. Rather than treating history as a neutral record of the past, restorative history emphasizes its ethical and political dimensions, aiming to "restore" voices, perspectives, and experiences that have been marginalized or erased. As such, it emphasizes historiography as a political practice (see also Esposito and Becker 2023). Feminists recognize that women—particularly minoritized and racialized women—have been excluded from the writing of history, but more importantly recognize the value of correcting this:

> Conversely, self-conscious attempts by some groups (such as women and minority people in the West or indigenous people in colonised nations) to (re)claim their own past can provide a source of empowerment and a basis for political mobilisation. (Bryson 2007, 16)

As such, restorative history, becomes a powerful tool for feminists and other political activists both to offer counter-narratives against hegemonic histories, but also confront legacies of injustice.

Temporalization

Temporalization can be defined as the practice of identifying objects, practices, ideas, and other "things" as belonging to a particular time. It mostly takes the form of temporal distancing, whereby the thing is identified as belonging to the past. For example, declaring something happening in the present as a "medieval practice," describing a particular political ideology as "backwards," or labelling a community of people "primitive," are all forms of temporalization. From these examples, we may also conclude that temporal distancing is a form of "temporalization of difference" (see Hunfeld 2022). Temporalization is incredibly common in political discourse, even if it often goes unnoticed. Consider, for example, how terms such as "conservative" and "progressive" are essentially temporal designations, revealing how imbued political language is with time (Esposito and Becker 2023). Identifying

practices of temporalization therefore serves to "examine why, by whom, and to what end certain objects or contemporary practices have been identified as belonging to or continuing the past" (Altschul 2020, 10).

The Transnational

At surface level, the term "transnational" refers to cross-border linkages, flows, and connections—whether of people, capital, labour, ideas, identities, and so on. In the context of social movements, the transnational has to do with relational ties and networks connecting actors, causes, or claims, not simply the fact of mobilization for the same cause existing in more than one country. In more technical terms, Tarrow (2001, 11) defines transnational social movements as "socially mobilized groups with constituents in at least two states, engaged in sustained contentious interactions with powerholders in at least one state other than their own, or against an international institution, or a multinational economic actor." This definition is quite state-centric and may be outdated in relation to digital-age activism and less centralized movements. Baksh and Harcourt (2015, 4) provide a more updated definition, focused on transnational feminist movements, as "the fluid coalescence of organizations, networks, coalitions, campaigns, analysis, advocacy and actions that politicize women's rights and gender equality issues beyond the nation-state." What is missing from both of these definitions, in my view, is attention to shared collective identity or the subjective experience of participants that they are indeed part of a transnational movement—even if framed differently, such as "global movement." An earlier definition of (non-transnational) social movements by Mario Diani therefore comes closer to how I conceptualize it in this study, in turn providing a basis for defining the transnational: "A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity" (Diani 1992, 12).

Following this, I emphasize collective identity, the subjective experience of participants, and both formal and informal networks of interaction, in defining "the transnational." This may, of course, take many different forms, but as it relates to feminist activism in the Middle East, and guided by my interest in the work and practice of solidarity, challenges of temporality and difference, and debates surrounding the authenticity of feminism in the Middle Eastern context, I am mainly looking at two aspects of transnationalism, with particular attention to both the organizations' official narratives, and their leading members subjective experiences: (1) collaborations and interconnectivity of

feminists in different contexts and locations, and (2) supranational sources of inspiration, or the impact of foreign feminist histories in terms of influencing local and national activism. These could be understood as "practices of transnationalism" and "ideational transnationalism," although it is important to note that these two aspects are not entirely separate. One practical example of transnational feminism could be, for example, organizing regional women's conferences, aimed at knowledge-sharing, strengthening organizational ties, exchanging ideas, or developing new tools and strategies to effect change. While this is an example of concrete collaboration across borders, it also acts as an incubator for transnational, feminist ideation. Similarly, foreign sources of inspiration can function both as ideation, in terms of inspiring ideas and shared ideology, but also practically, in terms of cross-border replication of tactics and protest strategies. Importantly, both contribute to the construction of a shared collective identity.

Transnational/Global/International/Third World Feminisms

First and foremost, transnational is not synonymous to global or international, although there may be overlap between "feminisms" labelled one or the other. Most of the organizations studied here, and the members I have interviewed, speak of belonging to a "global movement" rather than a transnational one. Still opting for the transnational framing has to do with the level and object of analysis, focusing on "the transnational" as I am not studying the global level. However, as I study narratives, I still refer to feminists "belonging to a global movement" if that is the frame used, but it is the transnational (mainly regional) level within that movement which is the object of my analysis.

Debates around which label feminists should rally behind are far from settled, as new terminology is continually developed, concepts are stretched or take on new meaning, and old terms are reclaimed. Arat (2025, 2), for example, makes a case for the need to "point to the geographical origin of knowledge production," arguing that Third World feminism does precisely that, in contrast to the dispersal of ownership to an anonymous "transnational." Transnational feminism is, in Arat's view, an ideological successor to Third World feminism and retains the same tenets and approach, only that it erases its own origins.[17]

[17] The reading of transnational feminism as an ideological successor to Third World feminism may be troubled by the work of critical International Political Economy (IPE) scholars, such as Adrienne Roberts, critiquing a strand of transnational feminism aligned with neoliberal capitalism, which Roberts (2015) calls Transnational Business Feminism (TBF). However, this could also be viewed as a co-optation of feminist discourse with little connection to the analytical and methodological approach of transnational feminist

As such, beyond erasing collective authorship, Arat argues that the move to "transnational feminism" also erases history and "constitutes an epistemic injustice" (Arat 2025, 16). This argument is worth taking seriously. However, as noted, in a politically charged field of research such as this, there is no term that is without contestation and no guarantee that whichever terminology one ends up using will not go out of style (again), become target of similarly valid critique, or be replaced as the research field develops. In theory, I have no issue with reframing/renaming my own approach, and I do believe Arat is correct in stating that the core notions are the same—at least as conceptualized in the Middle Eastern context, or by the feminist organizations studied here. Yet, for that same reason, I also believe that internal struggle over terminology (especially of an approach we already agree on) can easily become a form of academic navel-gazing and a distraction which hinders, rather than enables, more important and productive work.

As such, there are many different terms to describe the type of feminism(s) I study, and I do not necessarily feel tied to the mast of "transnational feminism." However, when I opted to use this specific term rather than, say, "global feminism," I took inspiration from Zerbe Enns, Díaz and Bryant-Davis (2021, 15) who criticize "global" and "universal" for "articulating romanticized and utopian views of women around the world, offering a single feminist mould for understanding gender issues and underscoring the similarities of women's experiences and oppressions." While I agree that a universalist approach limits us in understanding the diversity of issues faced by women and feminists in different contexts, I am not convinced that "global feminism" relies on such universality. Nevertheless, I also draw inspiration from Mohanty (2003), envisioning transnational solidarity without assumption of universality or the erasure of difference, recognizing that feminism is "situated" and does not exist in a vacuum. Mohanty reminds us that solidarity does not assume commonality of oppression, but rather recognition of common interests, as well as accountability and mutuality. Diversity and difference become central in this account and should according to Mohanty be acknowledged rather than erased; building alliances requires a respect for difference but it also requires engagement with these challenging questions.

scholars, building on the work of Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, among others.

Regionality

Regardless of the terminology, the question of what makes "the Middle East" a region, its regionality, remains. The question is relevant for this dissertation in that it may both influence how transnational activism is shaped and practiced, but also in that the transnational activism may itself reproduce regionality by forging political ties and reinforcing a sense of shared identity. Paul (2012, 4) defines a region as a "cluster of states that are proximate to each other and are interconnected in spatial, cultural and ideational terms in a significant and distinguishable manner." Paul justifies this definition by stating that it is limited to a set of specific variables, while also allowing us to "incorporate perceptions held within and outside on what constitutes a specific region" (Paul 2012, 4). This means that people and states within the purported region should recognize themselves as belonging to it. Other IR scholars sometimes include variables such as sustained interconnectedness, economic cooperation, established high levels of trade, and more. However, in relation to transnational activism and its potentially co-constitutive relationship to Middle Eastern regionalization, I believe that Paul's definition is sufficient, as it focuses on the spatial, cultural, and ideational elements of regionalization.

Conclusion

The key takeaway in this chapter is that I develop an analytical and conceptual framework by borrowing key concepts related to difference, temporality, and the transnational. These are drawn mainly from feminist political theory, black feminist theory, social movement theory, and timing theory, and are filtered through fieldwork in an abductive research process. The result is a mosaic of concepts that relate closely to the themes and topics emerging in the material, even though they may seem quite disparate and scattered taken by themselves. I have opted not to label this a "theoretical framework" or title this chapter the "theory chapter," but rather present it as an "analytical framework" in order to emphasize that this is both the basis for my analysis but also to some degree the results of the research process—i.e., that the concepts applied are not purely derived from general theory that I aim to test, but neither are they observations I use to develop theory. In other words, this dissertation builds on an abductive research process, moving back and forth between observation and analysis. This brings us to the next chapter, where I present the practicalities of this research process and how the conceptual framework is operationalized.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to gain deepened understanding on the intersection of difference, temporality, and transnationalism in shaping contemporary feminist activism and feminist transnational solidarity in the Middle East and North Africa, I employ triangulation of interviews, textual analysis, and both physical and virtual fieldwork. This research design is used to develop comprehensive and contextualized understanding of the organizations studied and the broader movement they belong to, as well as to minimize inherent drawbacks of single methods. The empirical material generated is then analysed using narrative analysis, which represents a relatively common tool within social movement research.

In this chapter, the methodological approach is laid out and justified. The first part of the chapter details the overarching research strategy and my approach to feminist research, feminist ethics, the problem of representation within ethnographic research, positionality and the use of reflexivity as a strategy to overcome it, as well as adaptive and abductive research methods. I then discuss the general research design and justification, incorporation of "the digital," case selection, and de/limitations of the research. Next, challenges related to fieldwork in authoritarian settings are discussed, particularly emphasising challenges of conducting feminist research in Egypt and Tunisia. As fieldwork is often unpredictable, I describe adaptations I have made along the way, and how this has impacted the research. The aim here is to be transparent about the research process, problems faced, and adaptations made.

This chapter also details the empirical material collected, including both the primary sources as well as other sources of empirical understanding. In relation to this, I also discuss sampling strategy and inclusion/exclusion criteria in closer detail. Lastly, I discuss the methodological approach and justification for reading and analysing the empirical materials through a narrative lens and provide detail on the practical application of narrative analysis and operationalization of the conceptual framework detailed in the previous chapter.

Feminist Ethics and Adaptive Method

> Feminist methodologies, both for research and for organizing, impel us to explore connections that are not always apparent, they drive us to inhabit contradictions and discover what is productive in these contradictions and methods of thought and action; they urge us to think things together that appear to be entirely separate and to disaggregate things that appear to belong naturally together. – Angela Y. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom* (2012, 193)

While there is no single method that characterizes feminist research—indeed, as emphasized by Richter-Devroe and Buffon (2021, 131), "feminist research has defined itself largely through the challenges it launches against the epistemology of traditional science on various levels"—the unifying factor lies instead in its emancipatory ethos and commitment towards social justice. In very broad terms, then, feminist ethics could be described as "ethics that has as its aim ending women's oppression" (Superson 2024, 1), although I would make it even broader by saying that the aim should be to combat all forms of oppression, whether based on gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, disability, and so on. Of course, such a broad definition of feminist ethics does not say much about the particular research practices employed, but it still establishes a commitment that guides my research. Narrowing down somewhat, I consider feminist ethics as necessarily breaking down hegemonic distinctions between forms of knowledge or knowing and challenging epistemological assumptions and ontological certitude (see Martín de Almagro et al. 2024). Knowledge is understood as partial, situated, and "positivist claim[s] to objective knowledge and truth is predominantly rejected" (Richter-Devroe and Buffon 2021, 132). In order to further clarify how I put this framework to practice, I believe it is necessary to first explain my position, how I engage with and in the field, and my assumed points of departure.

Positionality and Reflexivity

One strategy to tackle the ethico-political challenge of representation—detailed in chapter two, on *feminist solidarity in practice*—is to employ reflexivity, meaning in the context of fieldwork to actively consider the researchers position in the field and how that impacts the research process. However, as I see it, reflexivity also runs the risk of becoming formulaic statement of positionality as a way of absolving oneself of accountability; simply stating that this is my position and then moving on without deeper reflection on what that position means for one's work. Instead of a way to

uncover potential biases and complicities, reflexivity becomes a form of catharsis, freeing the researcher from the anxiety of (mis)representing the Other, without actually dealing with methodological and political challenges. Reflexivity as absolution is something I want to avoid in my own research, and, as such, I take inspiration from critical, transnational, post- and decolonial feminist thinkers, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, M. Jacqui Alexander, Audre Lorde, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and others, in trying to find ways forward. I reject the concept of reflexivity being used without accountability, while also rejecting the deliberate avoidance of dealing with difficult questions or avoiding working in contexts and countries other than "my own," because of the ethical, political, and methodological challenges that come with it.

Reflexivity can be thought of in a few different ways, and I believe one of the reasons for it being used in problematic ways is precisely the lack of a coherent conception of what "being reflexive" entails (see Lynch 2000). Zienkowski (2019) details four concepts of reflexivity, although mainly one is relevant to what I aim to do in this dissertation: reflexivity as a methodological practice, or "the way researchers (should) acknowledge their own subjectivity and its effects on the production of scientific knowledge" (Zienkowski 2019, 6). Similarly, Violaris (2021) understands reflexivity and positionality as having to do with the knowledge that we are privileged to, and the knowledge that is marginalized by our position—in other words, from where you stand, what is possible to see and not see? If you were to stand somewhere else, coming at the research problem from a different angle or with different experiences and background, how would you see it differently? Without necessarily being able to answer these questions conclusively, being reflexive entails having a conscious awareness and discussion about them and approach the research with a transparency and acknowledgement of your position.

It is my view that there is no "view from nowhere" (cf. Nagel 1986), and that it is therefore important for researchers to reflect on the impact of their position in relation to their research. This cannot simply be left as a preamble, however, but must be present throughout the research process and inform our conduct at every step of the way. I believe that reflexivity goes deeper than simply "mirror mirroring," both in influencing how we approach the field, but also in that it informs our readers of how we arrive at our conclusions, thus aiding the validity and the transparency of our work.

My position is largely shaped by my affiliation to a university in Sweden, educated mainly in Sweden and the United Kingdom. I have a rather eclectic background of academic studies, jumping from different fields of study, leading to a sometimes-reckless disregard for disciplinary boundaries and a

tendency towards "scavenger methodology" (see Halberstam 1998). I benefit from access to academic resources, access to funding for fieldwork, and relative ease of travel. At the same time, through the lens of experience, knowledge, and expertise on feminist activism in Tunisia and Egypt, I am not in a position of privilege compared to my interlocutors. They are the experts, gatekeepers, agents, knowledge-holders, the ones who know the field far better than I do, and I am undoubtedly dependent on them. There are, as such, differences of power on multiple levels. All of this implies a certain distance, yet in other ways I am also entangled with my chosen field not just in terms of academic interest. I have family in Egypt and have been visiting and living on-and-off in Cairo for the past decade. I have friends in both Egypt and Tunisia, some of whom are queer and most of them are internationally engaged feminist activists, a term I would also apply to myself. They help me, accompany me, and guide me through the field. Nevertheless, I do not deny any distance or differences, and as I believe that lived experience is a fundamental source of knowledge, I do not presume to "know" what it is like to be a feminist activist in either Egypt or Tunisia. What I do presume is that knowledge is also relational, and that in the interaction between me, feminist activists themselves, and the empirical material gathered in this study, we may together produce intersubjective insights on transnational feminist solidarity within Egyptian and Tunisian feminist organizations, and the challenges of transnationalism, temporality, and difference in their work.

"Coming Out" in the Field

Being a gay man with a Muslim last name, conducting fieldwork in Egypt and Tunisia comes with both challenges and opportunities. Primarily, it means that although I am typically open about my sexuality and marital status, and dislike having to be dishonest or misleading about it, there are times when I simply cannot be fully open. When I first went to Egypt for fieldwork, in 2014, I had to visit the Egyptian embassy in Stockholm for an interview before getting a long-term visa, and I was nervous about what to say if they asked me about my last name. I discussed it with my husband and determined that—unethical though it may be—it would be safest not to say I am married to an Egyptian citizen. Instead, we came up with some convoluted story about me having family ties to Jordan through my mom re-marrying or something along those lines. To my surprise, the interview did not include any questions of my name. That is, until after it had concluded, as I was on my way out, and was just about the close the door, when the interviewer said: "Oh, your name is Abdelmoez… Is that Egyptian?" I simply shouted: "It's Jordanian!" and then shut the door as quickly as I could. When I later went back to pick up my passport, I noticed

the visa, glued to one of the pages, had omitted Abdelmoez and listed my name only as "Joel Wiklund." So, then I instead began to worry if the border control at Cairo International Airport would notice or question why the visa did not match my name in the passport. Luckily, they did not. However, since then, I try to be open and transparent as much as I can, although I still remain wary of security personnel and border control.

During the fieldwork conducted for this dissertation, I have not had to lie or intentionally mislead anyone with regards to my sexuality or marital status. Most people I meet do not ask me about my name, and I have found out later than some have assumed that I am a convert and took a Muslim name for religious reasons—an assumption possibly making travel to Egypt and Tunisia easier, while definitely making travel to the US infinitely more difficult. However, in feminist settings, I often talk openly about my personal life, and I have found that "coming out" can function as a way to be vulnerable, and indicate personal stakes in feminist activism, which in turn helps in building trust. I strongly believe that it is impossible to form connections with people without some level of vulnerability, honesty, and letting people know who you are. Thus, meeting people for the purposes of this dissertation, I do not only inform them about my research and why I want to meet and speak with them, but I also let them know who I am. For example, cold emailing people ahead of fieldwork, I would tell them that I used to live in Egypt or mention informal connections we may have. This works to indicate that I am not simply doing "parachute research," coming to Egypt or Tunisia to "collect data" and then return to Sweden without any interest in what happens after. To this end, I also remain in contact with the people I meet, such as by following them on Instagram, writing to them on WhatsApp to see how they are doing, informing them of my progress, and emailing drafts I would like their input on.

Adaptive and Abductive Research Practices

The primary methods utilized in this dissertation follow an approach that is adaptive and abductive, for several reasons. First and foremost, fieldwork and interview-based research is inherently unpredictable, meaning some level of adaptation is always necessary. I originally intended to rely more on interviews than what was eventually possible. This meant that I had to refocus, increase data collection from other sources, and incorporate more textual material. Secondly, as noted above, my academic trajectory has not been straight-forward. I have moved between fields and disciplines, making my methodological training fairly "un-disciplined." This comes with obvious

drawbacks but may also be beneficial—especially considering the feminist call for un-learning traditional disciplinary epistemologies—as I pay little attention to disciplinary boundaries and instead make use of whatever methods I think will help gain deeper understanding of the research questions. This also follows Halberstam's "scavenger methodology," which entails the use of "different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour" (Halberstam 1998, 13). That is not to say that methods such as interviews, participant observation, and computer-assisted qualitative analysis of textual material are in any way at odds or even uncommon in political science research, only that it is their utility that led me to them and informs how I employ them.

Building on Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2018) "reflexive methodology," Assche et al. (2021) propose an "adaptive methodology," writing that "more productive, creative and innovative research has to embrace a perspective on method that spurs continued and ever sharpening observation and reflection" (36). In the context of this study, "adaptive" indicates a research design which anticipates and expects modification after the research has been initiated. This allows for an important—and indeed necessary—degree of flexibility. As mentioned, fieldwork (particularly in illiberal or repressive contexts) is always unpredictable. This may be true for all qualitative research, which "usually involves ambiguity, messiness, theory-impregnated data, and leaps of intuition with a post-facto invention of rational methodology" (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013, 250). Furthermore, research conducted as part of doctoral training is perhaps particularly prone to change, as the researcher gets more training, take courses, and receive supervision throughout the research process. It is worth noting, however, that "adaptive" is different from "adapting," in that the former refers to the planning and anticipation of changes rather than the changes themselves. For example, while I had wished for more interviews, it was always the plan to also conduct fieldwork (both digitally and in person) and some form of textual analysis. As such, the adaptation of methodology was merely a change of emphasis in order to compensate for a lower number of interviews.

What I call "adaptive research practices" is also closely tied to the *abductive* approach taken in this dissertation. The distinction lies in that I use "adaptive" to describe methodological modifications, while "abductive" is the approach towards analytical and conceptual development. At the general level, this means that the research can neither be classified as theory-testing (deductive) nor as theory-building (inductive), but instead an iterative process somewhere

in between. It entails moving back and forth between observation and analysis. Timmermans and Tavory (2012, 170) describe abduction as referring to an "inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence." Although it was written about "adaptive theory," not abduction, I understand abductive research similarly to Layder (1998) as allowing "the dual influence of extant theory (theoretical models) as well as those that unfold from (and are enfolded in) the research" (133). Taken together, these combined adaptive and abductive practices leads me to what Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) calls "insight-driven research," wherein emphasis is placed on the hermeneutic process: "The work of interpretation is (more) central here, and the empirical material—texts in various forms—is the subject of attempts to assess meanings and develop revealing insights" (344).

Friendship as Methodology

As previously mentioned, changes and challenges in the field led me to de-emphasize interviews as the main form of data collection, hence making friendship as method less central as an approach to fieldwork. However, friendship still influenced the early stages of research, functioned as a guide during fieldwork, for meeting and engaging with interlocutors, and when conducting interviews. As such, for the sake of transparency, it is necessary to briefly detail how this approach influenced fieldwork.

"Friendship as method" was coined by Lisa M. Tillman in her PhD dissertation from 1998, in which she defines friendship as a "kind of fieldwork," which involves a natural context, practices of friendship—for example hanging out with the research participants in a friendly context—and an ethic of friendship. In a later article, Tillman (2015) further elaborates on the similarities between friendship and fieldwork:

> Both involve being in the world with others. To friendship and fieldwork communities, we must gain entrée. We negotiate roles (e.g., student, confidant, advocate), shifting from one to another as the relational context warrants. [...] We navigate membership, participating, observing, and observing our participation. We learn insider argot and new codes for behaviour. As we deepen our ties, we face challenges, conflicts, and losses. We cope with relational dialectics, negotiating how private and how candid we will be, how separate and how together, how stable and how in-flux. One day, finite projects— and lives—end, and we may "leave the field." (Tillman 2015, 289).

Friendship as method moves from a relationship of subject-object, to one of subject-subject. This approach therefore emphasizes knowledge as relational

and searching for intersubjective meaning rather than seeking to uncover universal truths or verify an observable and independent reality. Rather than nomological knowledge, the goal is emancipatory knowledge, which is reflective, critical, normative and seeks to effect change (see Habermas, 1972). In this regard, friendship as method builds on feminist methodologies—particularly that of standpoint feminists such as Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins—which reject the notion that social research can be objective and free from politics. Following this, the central ethos that I have retained from Tillman's "friendship as method," and that guides my general approach to this research, is a form of feminist critique of representation in social research: "Instead of 'speaking for' or even 'giving voice,' researchers *get to know* others in meaningful and sustained ways" (Tillman 2015, 291).

However, it is important not to view friendship as simply a matter of "gaining access," but rather approaching research participants from the position of friendship, making sure that they are "treated with respect, human dignity, their stories honoured, listened to with empathy, and used sensitively" (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2013, 287). This is the essence of an ethic of friendship. Of course, this should be the norm whether there is a prior relationship or not, as argued by Tillman (2015, 308): "Even in the most empirical, double-blind research, we can treat participants with an ethic of friendship." Furthermore, in my view, the same approach is a core feature of feminist ethics.

Following this, I would speak of friendship as methodology, rather than as method, as the latter may imply an instrumentalization of friendship, which is not the point. Instead, friendship acts as a guide, informing how I relate to and engage with interlocutors and the interview situation. This does not mean that every person I interview is a friend, or that befriending them is a necessity, only that I approach people with an ethic of friendship as a guideline. I also retain from this methodology that practices of friendship are part of the research process, meaning that data is not only drawn from interviews or formal settings directly connected to the feminist organizations, such as their offices or street protests. For example, I learned a lot when two feminists in Tunisia took me on a road trip to Bizerte, or when I went to Iftar with an interlocutor in Cairo, and although I came along as a friend, these also constitute research practices.

Research Design

In order to achieve a contextualized understanding of the intersection of the transnational, temporality, and difference, I triangulate multiple methods, mainly interviews, textual analysis aided by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), and participant observation. The interviews use a semi-structured format, following an interview guide which was developed and tested in pilot interviews conducted via Zoom in April 2022. The semi-structured format proved advantageous in terms of flexibility, being able to adjust questions, pacing, and level of probing depending on what works best in each interview and based on the direction of the answers.

The activists I interview in this study belong to one of two groups: (1) current or former leaders of feminist organizations, such as members of the board of directors or high-ranking staff members, and (2) independent activists and academics who have extensive knowledge about—and are themselves part of—the feminist movement in Egypt or Tunisia and have personal experience of working with these organizations, either directly as members, volunteers, or employees, or as consultants or collaborators. The interviews were conducted partly in person during fieldwork in Egypt and Tunisia, and partly through Zoom or phone (typically via WhatsApp), depending on the availability and preference of the interviewee. Although I have studied both Arabic and French, there is a discrepancy between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and colloquial Arabic (particularly the Tunisian dialect). Furthermore, the interlocutors in this study are mainly university-educated, internationally engaged activists with a level of English far more advanced than my Arabic. Therefore, the primary interview language is English. However, I do make clear in all interviews that if there are any concepts, phrases, references, or anything else that the interviewee cannot articulate in English, they are free to use Arabic or French instead, and most interviews include a mix of all three languages.

While interviews provide good insight into the activists' own understanding of feminist histories, trajectories, goals, practices, sources of inspiration, as well as technical insight on the organizations they are a part of, their structure, history, actions, and collaborations with other organizations, there are other insights to be found in the external communication of these organizations. This relates, for example, to how they interact with other actors, present themselves and their work, and how they construct and communicate their own history and the history of their movement in public channels. This is mainly studied through analysis of online material and campaign material—such as press releases, reports, pamphlets, comics, social media posts, etc.—collected during

physical and digital fieldwork. In the Tunisian context, this material is usually available in Arabic, French, and English, whereas in Egypt it is mainly in Arabic and English, all of which is collected and included in this study.

Lastly, to get a better understanding of the daily practices of feminist activists, I employ participant observation. During fieldwork, I spend time with interlocutors at their offices, get to know their daily work, hang out with activists at cafés and at their homes, and follow along at events such as movie screenings, meetings, and demonstrations.[18] As a lot of the work of activists takes place online, I consider it not only useful but indeed necessary to follow along with what is happening in the digital sphere. For this, I employ digital fieldwork alongside the traditional variety, meaning I apply traditional ethnographic methods (primarily participant observation) to digital spaces. This entails following trending topics and hashtags, following social media accounts of the organizations and key actors included in the study, and analysing online campaigns and responses to them. This has the benefit of not being place-bound, although I do not consider digital fieldwork a substitution for traditional fieldwork, as the latter still provides important context.

The collected materials are treated as narratives; they are accounts of events, histories, practices, experiences, actions, and interactions. The material covers both individual-level and collective-level narratives. Individual narratives relate to how the interlocutors identify themselves in relation to feminist histories, their organization, the larger feminist movement, and so on. Collective narratives relate to community-level identity, organizational histories, interactions between the organizations within the feminist movement at large, as well as cross-border interaction at the collective level. Employing narrative analysis, therefore, serves to "draw out the connection between socially constructed meaning and action" (Rennick 2015, 78), while it also "overcomes key limitations in the framing perspective and illuminates core features of identity-building and meaning-making in social activism" (Davis 2002, 4).

[18] While I detail limitations later in this chapter, I should note here that my limited knowledge of (particularly colloquial Tunisian) Arabic often necessitates help with interpreting and translating, which limits participation. However, as I typically attend events such as demonstrations and meetings together with interlocutors whom I have gotten to know during fieldwork, they often act as interpreters and translators. Of course, this may impede the "natural context" in some settings, such as meetings, while it has little impact on others, such as demonstrations. Because of this limitation, participant observation mainly serves to provide contextualization, or to produce material which I may later discuss with interlocutors in order to gain deeper understanding of particular practices.

Digital Dimensions

Postill (2012) highlights the importance of social media and other digital tools for political mobilization and further points out the lack of attention that has been paid to what he calls "political virals." These are "digital contents of a political nature that spread epidemically across online platforms, mobile devices and face-to-face settings" (Postill 2012, 178). Especially for young feminists in the region, political virals such as content created and shared via TikTok and Instagram have been enormously important in recent years, and in terms of feminist campaigns that transcends borders, political virals are in their own league. While it is not always possible to capture political virals in real-time, as they are trending, a benefit of including the digital in this study is that the source material often remains accessible online.

In an early call for the "virtual turn" of ethnography, Varisco (2007, 28) writes that "[as] an ethnographer whose *being there* has always been *over there*, I now observe the Internet as a critical site for fieldwork." Anthropologists have long emphasized the need for "being there" and "being in the field." Today, however, our lives—not least our political lives—are increasingly digital, and this digitalization increases the need for researchers who are studying political life to also "be there" in the virtual sense. This applies to the study at hand, as feminist organizations also rely on digital tools for attracting attention, rallying support, and effecting change. Importantly, digital activism is not limited to social media and content-sharing platforms, such as Facebook, X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Instant messaging services have also been crucial in enabling activist organizing under authoritarian regimes, particularly those with end-to-end encryption such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal.[19]

To this, we may add web browsers with security features such as disabled tracking and built-in Virtual Private Network (VPN), for example the Tor Browser, DuckDuckGo, and Aloha. Lastly, lesser-known digital technologies used by activists include IFTTT, or "If This Then That," which is a service that allows users to program responses to certain real-world events. This can be used to turn government surveillance and tracking against itself—building on an assumption that digital anonymity can never be fully guaranteed—for example by setting up a program to alert your network if your phone ends up

[19] While WhatsApp claims end-to-end encryption of calls and chat messages, they have been criticized for sharing metadata with their parent company Meta and with law enforcement, as well as for defaulting to unencrypted backups of messages. Similarly, Telegram does not have end-to-end encryption as the default for messages and have also begun handing over IP addresses and phone numbers of users to authorities with valid legal requests.

at a police station (using the location services of the phone), thereby making forced disappearances less likely to succeed. In short, "the digital" permeates all political activity and activism, as well as everyday life, making it an important dimension for studies seeking to understand the conditions for political organizing.

Digital fieldwork, as applied in this study, is documented both through taking screencaps (such as of social media posts and images) and field notes (for example on video material). The material generated are then analysed to get a better understanding of the online practices, outreach, and campaigning of feminist activists—as well as the digital media landscape and responses or debates around these campaigns and around feminist activism in general—but also providing material that can be discussed with the interlocutors to get a more well-rounded understanding of their work. Online material, particularly video, comes with similar language issues as with interview material, i.e. that my knowledge of colloquial Arabic is not up to par. As such, discussing these with my interlocutors, who understand not only the message but also the context, provides a valuable opportunity to both deepen the understanding and correct any mistakes.

Similar to Varisco's call for "being there," even when "there" is a virtual space, Boellstorff (2012) writes that participant observation is the core method of any ethnographic research project, including those conducted on digital platforms. As such, participant observation is also the core method of the digital fieldwork forming one corner of this study. In practice, "participant observation is built on the alignments between engaging in everyday activities, on one hand, and recording and analysing those activities, on the other" (Boellstorff et al. 2013, 69). This entails not simply logging on to Instagram or TikTok, scouring the pages of relevant accounts, and grabbing everything I find, but indeed "being there," following the activity over longer periods of time and documenting my findings in field notes—although scouring Instagram pages and taking screencaps is also part of my everyday activity (usually with the intent of sharing it with my partner). Nevertheless, in this regard, there is little difference between digital and traditional fieldwork, as both entails prolonged participation, and documentation through field notes. As such, in order to get an idea of the digital campaigning, online practices, and digitally mediated transnationalism of feminist activism in Tunisia and Egypt, digital fieldwork is used to supplement interviews, textual analysis, and traditional fieldwork. The aim of this approach is to gain deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of feminist organizations both online and offline.

In incorporating the digital into this study, I take my cue from Daniel Varisco, as well as digital ethnographers like Tom Boellstorff, who disputes the false opposition between the digital and the real, and addresses "the reality of the digital" (Boellstorff 2016, 387). However, following Miller (2011), Horst and Miller (2012), Hjorth et al. (2017), and others, I view conducting fieldwork as requiring both digital and physical presence and consider the digital as no less an important space where politics take place, and a space for political scientists to study. Combining these perspectives, my approach to digital fieldwork is to treat it the same as traditional fieldwork, entailing diligent notetaking, long-term participant observation, and gathering of data which are then analysed in the same manner whether it originate from the physical or the digital field.

Virtual Interviews

While digital research methods, including virtual interview methods, have been around for a long time, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a big boost to digital methods. Of course, conducting interviews via Zoom provides both challenges and benefits. Challenges include for example the lack of context clues, such as body language, that might be easier to notice in person. At the same time, the video recording could equally provide a benefit in that the researcher does not have to rely on their observational skills in the moment but can go back and analyse body language later. Another benefit is that the interviewee can themselves choose a comfortable place, often in their own home, where they are more relaxed. This meant that all but one of the interlocutors who were interviewed over Zoom agreed to being recorded, while most who I met in person did not want to be recorded.

Tungohan and Catungal (2022) also notes that the virtual setting makes it more difficult to establish rapport. However, a crucial benefit of using virtual interviewing is its ability to reach hard-to-reach populations, and the ability to talk to many participants in a short amount of time, as travel is rendered unnecessary. In this dissertation, Zoom interviews became a way to increase the total number of interviews, both because I could conduct them from Sweden but also because some feminists preferred it over meeting in person, either for safety reasons or for convenience (particularly during Ramadan).

That said, virtual interviews should not be seen as a substitute for fieldwork, which include many other forms of data collection, and provides a richness and deeper understanding of local contexts that is difficult to otherwise reach. Furthermore, establishing close connection with the activists and organizations that I collaborate with in this study would obviously be much harder, if not impossible, without being there. As such, I see an inherent value in conducting

"real" fieldwork, although I believe that it is still possible to meet informally, get to know each other better, and utilize Zoom or other video-conferencing programs to conduct interviews, for example if meeting in person would constitute a security risk for me or the interviewee. In this study, I utilize a mix of in-person interviews, Zoom interviews, and phone interviews (via WhatsApp), based on the preferences of the interviewee.

Case selection

Studying transnational dynamics of feminist mobilization in the Middle East, one approach could be to focus on regional movements and organizations—such as the Arab Feminist Union (AFU) or Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)—thereby getting a broader perspective specifically focused on regional transnational feminism. However, as emphasized in the State of the Art, I believe that the existing field of research is lacking in micro-level studies on the transnational, and therefore opted for a "ground up" approach in this dissertation, looking more at how the transnational intersects with difference and the temporal in feminist organizations whose work is, after all, situated in a particular context. While I do not believe that the convergence of temporality, transnationalism, and difference—as challenges to the construction of feminist solidarity—is in any way unique for Egypt-Tunisia, I do believe it makes for a compelling case (explained further below).

Many of the organizations included in this study refer to a "regional feminist movement in the Middle East and North Africa." However, the declaration of a cohesive, feminist movement spanning the region, or a movement based on a shared collective identity as "Middle Eastern feminist," needs to be treated carefully so as to not homogenize or erase differences in terms of context, history, politics, and so on. At the same time, the regional framing used by feminist organizations themselves needs to be taken seriously. As such, taking a "ground up" approach, and emphasizing fluid, networked solidarities, avoids the risk of homogenizing while still paying attention to transnational, regional dynamics. In this sense, Egypt and Tunisia does not constitute two cases, but rather "nested" within a broader, regional feminist movement. "Nesting" or "nested case" can mean different things, depending on the research focus and discipline (see for example Lieberman 2005), but has been used to describe a case which is hierarchically subsumed (nested within) another case (Chong and Graham 2012). Here, I use it simply to mean that if we are to consider a case which may be termed "Middle Eastern feminist movement," the organizations studied here belong to the same single case, though only a form a limited part

of it. Conceptualizing it this way allows for within-case differences between organizations (which may or may not correspond to national borders) while also not placing the larger "case" at the centre of analysis. By treating Egypt-Tunisia as a subsection of a larger movement, I wish to both highlight such delineation as somewhat arbitrary—one could equally study Tunisia-Algeria, or Egypt-Sudan, for example—while also retaining a "ground up" view of the larger movement, allowing the boundaries of such a movement itself to be critically interrogated.

Egypt and Tunisia were selected in part based on my own previous experience and existing networks that I believe would aid in a deeper, richer, and more contextualized account. Particularly Egypt is a country which I have been living in, visiting, and conducting fieldwork in periodically for the past 13 years. My engagements in Tunisia are more recent, beginning in 2017, but this still meant that I already had friends living in Tunis, including friends involved in the feminist movement. As such, prior knowledge and familiarity with the field constitutes one part of the case selection.

However, these two countries are often studied side-by-side and constitute a common pairing in Middle East comparative politics (see Beissinger, Jamal, and Mazur 2015; Grewal and Monroe 2019; Hartshorn 2019). They share similarities in terms of political and economic conditions, histories of feminist organizations stretching back at least a century, histories of labour mobilization and worker activism, authoritarian legacies, and recent political upheaval. Both are relatively religiously homogenous countries (>90% Sunni Muslim), yet both exhibit histories of polarization along secular–Islamist lines. They exhibit some differences in terms of early challenges, strategies, and trajectories after the 2010-2011 uprisings, yet similarities in terms of current political situation, democratic backsliding, and a recent crackdown on civil society organizations. In short, Egypt and Tunisia pairs well in traditional comparative studies following a "most similar systems" design, and although that is not what I am aiming for here, it is worth noting that they are indeed similar in these regards.

As noted by Shalaby (2016), after 2011 and the ousting of President Ben Ali, Tunisian women were successful in making an impact in the transitional period, while women in Egypt have largely been silenced. Egypt has in recent years been arresting feminist and women's rights activists, and, in some cases, refer to such activists as "traitors," while in Tunisia the arrests so far have mainly affected political opposition parties and migrant-rights activists rather

than feminist organizations.[20] The tactic of branding political activists and oppositional voices as "traitors," "enemies of the people," or "terrorists," occurs in both countries. In Egypt, the government has frozen the assets of feminist organizations such as Nazra for Feminist Studies and the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), and other organizations are under pressure from the government, placed with restrictions on funding, and close scrutiny of their activities. As such, it is getting increasingly difficult to openly call for reforms and change, and to organize politically in both Egypt and Tunisia. Although Tunisia was previously seen as a case of successful democratization after the 2011 uprising, this trend has changed in recent years. Nonetheless, in terms of civil society, Tunisia remains more open than Egypt.

Surveys indicate notable differences in awareness of racial discrimination, wherein there is significantly greater awareness of racial discrimination in Tunisia than in Egypt (see Hilizah 2022), and general support for certain women's rights statements, such as a higher belief in women's suitability for political leadership in Tunisia compared to Egypt (see Arab Barometer, n.d.). On the statement "In general, men make better political leaders than women do," 40,4% of respondents in Tunisia answered "agree/strongly agree" compared to 66,3% in Egypt (Arab Barometer Wave VII). Despite this difference, the respective governments have employed similar strategies in attempting to appease some of the calls for women's rights reforms by granting minor provisions and making symbolic gestures, while retaining male-dominated institutions intact. In this regard, Egypt and Tunisia appears quite similar. Furthermore, Egypt and Tunisia share in similar cases of feminist activism, similar repertoires and types of activities, and similarly long histories of feminist struggle, as detailed in chapter five. All these similarities and differences make up, I believe, a compelling pairing. However, since the purpose is not quite to compare and attempt to pinpoint causal mechanisms shaping feminist activism in one place differently than the other, the main determining factor for using these two countries is the last point mentioned: They are two countries with long histories of feminist mobilizing, and active, diverse feminist movements in the present.

This study is structured around three themes: transnationalism, temporality, and difference. While the countries represent two "cases," I opted not to use this as a structuring element, as part of the justification is to explore the ways in which feminist activism transcends borders. Nevertheless, in terms of the

[20] One notable exception is the arrest of Ahlem Bousserwel, secretary general of ATFD, in August 2023.

practicalities of conducting fieldwork, I obviously cannot be in both countries at the same time, and some level of comparison is unavoidable. However, I hypothesize that by focusing on themes and practices, it becomes clear how and when feminist organizations in the Middle East and North Africa engage transnationally, how transnational ambitions constitute a challenge to the construction of feminist solidarity, and how this challenge intersects with temporality and difference, shaping contemporary feminist mobilization in the region. As such, the empirical chapters are structured around these themes, rather than separated by country-cases.

The organizations included in this study were identified through preliminary fieldwork and based on previous knowledge of the field. They were selected to represent the Egyptian and Tunisian feminist movements in terms of their influence and to accurately portray the diversity within these. From the Tunisian case, I initially reached out to Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD), Mawjoudin for Equality, Aswat Nissa, Association Femme et Citoyenneté (AFC), Association Joussour de Citoyenneté (AJC), Musawah, Damj, and Chouf Minorities, as well as several independent activists and academics active within Tunisian feminist circles. As Damj and Chouf were inactive by the time of my first field trip in 2023, they were eventually not included, making a total of six Tunisian organizations.[21] I also contacted the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), Kvinna till Kvinna, and the Swedish Embassy in Tunis to ask for further contacts and organizations, but they had none to add who I had not yet contacted, indicating that the initial connections I had established were sufficient. There are, of course, other organizations that could be included, particularly professional women's associations such as La Ligue des Electrices Tunisiennes, and academic associations such as Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement (AFTURD). However, these were excluded for the sake of retaining a relatively narrow scope, focused on key feminist organizations, while representing a diversity of perspectives.

The organizations and representatives I meet with cover different "strands" of feminism, for example Musawah describing itself as a "global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family," exemplifying an Islamic feminist organization, while Mawjoudin "fights for justice, equality and respect for

[21] Musawah was originally founded in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2009, but operates in many Muslim countries. Musawah is listed with the Tunisian organizations as the members I have met with are based in Tunis and identify themselves as belonging to the Tunisian feminist movement. As an organization, they are at present time more active in Tunisia compared to Egypt.

bodily and sexual rights." I would describe Mawjoudin as a queer feminist organization, although they do not use this label themselves. Many do not label them a feminist organization at all, based on a distinction between women's rights advocacy, which is labelled feminist, and other forms of activism for gender equality, bodily and sexual rights, or SRHR (as discussed in chapter two). ATFD describes themselves as "feminist, secular, and progressive," but aims to be "universalist feminist."

From Egypt, I include the New Woman Foundation (NWF), the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), Women and Memory Forum (WMF), Ganoubia Hora, HarassMap, and Nazra for Feminist Studies, also making six organizations. As with the Tunisian case, these represent different varieties of feminism, with somewhat differing priorities, and include both old and new organizations. However, a criterion for all organizations, Egyptian and Tunisian, is that they have been active since 2011. For example, the Egyptian Feminist Union is the oldest feminist organization in Egypt, founded in 1923 and was associated with the nationalist Wafd Party. However, it became inactive until restarted in 2011. Nazra for Feminist Studies is a much younger organization, founded in 2007, aimed at "contributing to the continuity and development of the Egyptian and regional feminist movement in the Middle East and North Africa."[22] In terms of focus, strategies, and practices, these organizations also differ; for example, the Women and Memory Forum works mainly with documenting and disseminating information about feminist histories and important figures of the Egyptian feminist movement, whereas HarassMap works with documenting and combating contemporary street-harassment and sexual violence against women. All organizations included are listed and described in appendix B.

Limitations and Delimitations

As detailed in the introduction, this study examines transnational feminist solidarity, with a particular focus on the intersection of difference, temporality, and the transnational. As such, while Egypt and Tunisia function as my field, I aim to perceive feminist activism beyond and outside borders of the nation-state, at the same time as the reality of borders does not escape me. It is the *entanglement* of the local, the regional, and the global that stands at the centre, rather than a *comparison* of how feminist activism has come to look in these two countries. I say this mainly to caution my readers that "comparison" may

[22] "About Us," Nazra for Feminist Studies. Accessed March 20, 2025: https://nazra.org/en/about-us

at times overemphasize difference, which is not my intent here. Instead, the case studied is Egypt-Tunisia as a form of "nested case" within a broader, regional feminist movement—which in itself is critically interrogated.

Nevertheless, this study is comparative, both in the sense of employing comparative politics methods to empirically explore the transnational politics of feminist activism in the Middle Eastern context, but also in that there still is an inherent "comparison" in studying these two countries side-by-side. I do still take seriously local specificities, situatedness, and strive to contextualize. In doing so, I always remain open to finding difference even when exploring entanglement; it is not my intention to erase difference, it is simply not the aim of this study to employ comparison as a method of revealing difference precisely along the lines of the nation-state. In very concrete (albeit broad) terms, the categories I investigate in relation to feminist solidarity in these two locations are "the transnational," "the temporal," and "difference," i.e., how does transnationalism, temporality, and difference converge and come to influence the construction of feminist solidarity in Egypt-Tunisia?

An important limitation to note here is the focus on feminism through a lens of contentious politics, which risks introducing bias associated with the question of what "counts" as feminism. Due in part to disproportionate media attention on protests considered shocking—such as the nude protests of Amina Tyler and Aliaa El-Mahdy—but also due to a personal interest in contentious politics, I entered into this project with a focus on highly visible, disruptive, and confrontative activism. Such a focus risks marginalizing subtler forms of resistance, limiting what we see as feminist activism, as if public protesting is the primary field where gender politics is taking place. This limitation is important to keep in mind, and I do not wish to minimize the importance of everyday forms of resistance and subtle forms of contestation, negotiation, and transformation. I nevertheless retain focus on intentional and explicit feminist activism and the collective, political organizing of feminists. There are several reasons for doing so: First, studying feminist movements in both Egypt and Tunisia, constricted by time and the possibility of long-term, immersive fieldwork, it was necessary for the feasibility to delimit the scope. Second, narrowing the scope to focus on the practices of established feminist organizations made it easier to identify interlocutors and collect data, whereas including subtle transformations outside of the public sphere would make data collection significantly harder and more time-consuming. Third, despite this dissertation focusing mainly on the practices and narratives of organizations, the attention to temporality, difference, and transnationalism is not limited to

highly visible or disruptive forms of activism, but includes a broad range of activities that these organizations are engaged in.

Relatedly, the interlocutors included in this study are mainly based in urban centres, they are often well-educated and come from a middle- or upper-class background. This is to some extent unavoidable, as the organizations studied are themselves mainly based in urban centres, and their leadership consists mainly of feminists from a middle- or upper-class background. Prominent feminist activists, especially those working full-time at feminist organizations or sit on the board of directors, are those who have the necessary educational background, material resources, and social/cultural capital to enable a sufficiently dedicated involvement that would in turn lead to a leadership position. This is not to say that they are all universally privileged, that their politics is devoid of class-analysis, or that their activism excludes rural, working-class women. Instead, what I want to emphasize with this is that there are certain socio-economic and racial biases that comes with studying "elites" within Egyptian and Tunisian feminist movements, and to caution the reader to keep this scope in mind.

Absence of Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism has historically had an important role within feminist organizing in Egypt and Tunisia. Challenging a historical exclusion of Muslim women from interpretive agency, scholars like Leila Ahmed, Omaima Abou-Bakr, and Mulki Al-Sharmani have sought to "critically [examine] Islamic tenets in light of their historical locatedness and context, and their textual representation" (Keddie 2018, 524). Through their scholarly work, they have questioned hegemonic, patriarchal, and misogynist interpretations of Islam, while also resisting Orientalist and neo-colonial discourse on Islam perpetuated by many secular feminists. Not only has this academic work had a significant influence on feminist organizing in the region, but many of the scholars were also part of creating new groups. For example, Omaima Abou-Bakr is one of the founders of the Women and Memory Forum (WMF) in Egypt. As such, in the early stages of this project, I wanted to make sure I did not exclude the perspectives of Islamic feminists. However, despite invaluable help provided through the mentorship of Hatoon Al-Fassi, such perspectives are still (relatively) absent in relation to secular feminists in this dissertation.

It was not difficult to get in contact with, meet, and interview feminists who either refer to themselves as "Islamic feminists," express criticism of secular feminist organizations, or at least believe that feminist organizations should be more inclusive of Muslim women and attentive to their experiences, concerns,

and priorities. It was, however, difficult to find feminists who organized and engaged in activism explicitly as Islamic feminists. Instead, they are part of other organizations and use the "Islamic" label alongside other labels, such as "leftist" or "Marxist." It appears to me that the influence of Islamic feminism, as a political movement, has waned in the last decade—or at least decreased in visibility—especially in Egypt. Of course, this does not mean that Muslim women are less politically active, but rather that the discourse of Islamic feminism is less prominent within established, active feminist organizations. Similar observations are made in the Tunisian context by Tchaïcha and Arfaoui (2011, 231), who asserts that in terms of public discourse, "Islamic feminism […] seems unlikely to find co-supporters among this generation of feminists." In contrast, Marks (2012, 134) notes that there is "common ground between secularist and Islamist women in Tunisia," though finds that the latter group reject the term "feminism." More recently, Arfaoui and Moghadam (2016) has examined the Tunisian feminist movement and future prospects, not mentioning Islamic feminism at all, further indicating a diminished significance or visibility in recent years. In short, the presence of an active Islamic feminist movement in Tunisia is clouded in uncertainty.

There is, I believe, less uncertainty in Egypt, where such a movement is even less visible. Examining why that might be the case is outside of the scope of this study. If I were to speculate, it is likely that the brief period of Muslim Brotherhood rule, followed by military takeover and harsh crackdown on any political organizing that could be deemed as aligned with the Brotherhood, created an environment that was impossible for Islamic feminists to organize openly in, at least through the lens of Islamic influence on public life. This is also argued by Mhajne (2022, "Resistance to Reforms"), writing:

> However, Islamist feminists in Sisi's Egypt are wary of publicly engaging in debates with the government or religious institutions. They have been particularly affected by the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood due to public tendencies to connect their activism with the group. As a result, some of them either voluntarily paused their public activism or were forced to do so by the government.

Furthermore, as South-East Asia and especially Malaysia has become a centre for Islamic feminist thought since the early 2000s, much of Islamic feminists' transnational and/or global activism has also become centred there.

I want to reiterate again that I have not intentionally sought out mainly secular feminists, but even as I have spoken to self-identified Islamic feminists, religion has not been an organizing factor for them. As such, without making

too sweeping conclusions, I speculate that the secular-religious divide between feminists is perhaps overstated. This is also observed by Sara Salem, in her analysis of Angela Davis visit to Egypt in the 1970s:

> I would question, however, whether the secular-religious divide was as strong as the leftist/nonleftist divide, in which Islamists would be included in the latter. Indeed, it appears as though many of the feminists who are identified as secular were, in effect, staunch leftists. The women Davis met were representative of the leftist strand, which sheds light on the positions they held during her visit. (Salem 2018, 257)

This aligns in many ways with what I have found, only reversed: The Islamic feminists I have met mainly organize with leftist/socialist groups, still viewing liberal feminists as exclusionary of Muslim women's voices—and a similar distrust from liberal feminists towards the benefits of an Islamic feminism. However, as mainstream feminist groups have become more intersectional and less opposed to religious practices such as veiling, the secular-religious divide has diminished. This could be a result of campaigning by Islamic feminists, meaning that the feminist movements in Egypt and Tunisia, at large, have moved beyond previously divisive issues that separated Islamic feminists from secular feminists. Either way, the relative absence of Islamic feminism in this dissertation should not be taken an as active omission, but rather a reflection of this decreased polarization between secular and Islamic feminists in both Egypt and Tunisia.

Fieldwork in Authoritarian Settings

Conducting fieldwork in an authoritarian setting obviously comes with challenges, both in terms of practicalities but perhaps more importantly in terms of ethics. As I emphasize throughout this dissertation, both Egypt and Tunisia have gone through a period of democratic backsliding and increasing crackdown on civil society organizations, which means that many of the activists I meet with are at risk of repercussions such as getting arrested, becoming a target of legal action, having travel restrictions imposed, or having their bank accounts frozen (to name a few examples). This threat is, of course, based on their activism rather than participation in this study, although it still means that I have a responsibility to ensure that research data, such as recordings and interview notes, are handled and stored safely. In the early stages of this research, as part of the university-mandated course in research

ethics, I made a comprehensive risk assessment, which was later repeated as the project developed and it was time to apply for ethics approval.

As my interlocutors are more knowledgeable and experienced in terms of the potential threats and the risk of participating—they are the experts—I also let them lead the way and to some extent have to trust their evaluation of risks associated with, for example, meeting in a particular location. This follows Grimm et al. (2020, 22), who recommends that context analysis, aimed at identifying threats and threatening actors, should make use of the best available information, "which is usually provided by contacts on the ground, rather than by government agencies." As such, I rely on interlocutors experience on how to mitigate some context-dependent threats, or determine what form their participation should take to minimize risk; for example, some threats may be alleviated by conducting interviews by Zoom rather than in-person, conducting interviews at their private residency rather than a public place, or by not allowing a recording of the interview. Nevertheless, since I am ultimately responsible for this research and any risks associated with it, I have also needed to make decisions for managing risks even in cases where the interlocutors did not consider there to be a risk. One such example is that all interlocutors have been given a pseudonym, even if they did not mind having their name printed, mainly due to the shifting nature of "red lines," meaning that even activism that is seen as harmless in a repressive or illiberal setting at the moment might be considered dangerous at a later point in time. It is with this in mind that I have taken measures before, during, and after fieldwork to mitigate potential threats.

To ensure research data is stored securely, I consulted the chief information security officer, the data protection coordinator, and the section for IT-security at Lund University. Immediately after each interview, the recording and/or interview notes are transferred to a secure, password-protected server at Lund University, only accessible through a Virtual Private Network (VPN), and then deleted from all physical devices that I carry with me during fieldwork. As highlighted by Grimm et al. (2020, 111), it has become increasingly common, not only in repressive and illiberal contexts, for law enforcement and border control agents to "seize and search researchers' mobile phones at checkpoints, border crossings, and even at conferences, for clues about their intentions and networks." By ensuring that no data is stored on devices I carry with me during fieldwork, I can minimize unauthorized access and ensure that even if my computer or recording device were to be confiscated, it would not expose my interlocutors to unnecessary risks. I also make sure not to record or store any data that can be traced to a specific person, and both interlocutors themselves

and people named in the interviews are given a pseudonym in all written notes and transcripts. However, I do not pseudonymize historical figures, celebrities, well-known feminist figures, or political leaders that are named during the interviews. The handling, storing, and processing of all research data has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, including for data derived from the digital fieldwork where I also follow the 3rd version of the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (see franzke et al. 2020).

Challenges and Adaptations

One challenge during fieldwork, ironically, has been timing. During my first trip to Tunisia, there were worries about a crackdown on civil society, following large protests in the beginning of 2023. The protests focused on a speech held in February 2023, in which President Kais Saied pinned the country's financial troubles on immigration, such as claiming that the high inflation was due to migrants buying bread. This was followed by police raids, breaking up migrant camps in Tunis in March and April, and arrests of oppositional voices who were accused of terrorism (enabling the authorities to hold them without trial for a longer time). Opposition parties were branded as enemies of the people, and there has been a growing suspicion pinned on foreign entities and on civil society organizations receiving foreign funding.

Despite this fraught political situation, the organizations, activists, and academics I reached out to were all still willing to meet and speak. This had changed by the time of my second fieldtrip, although by then the challenge was instead connected to the war in Gaza. Many of the people I reached out to, most of whom I had got to know during my first visit, expressed exhaustion and emotional fatigue due to the situation in Gaza, and were much less willing to spend time and energy participating in this project or be interviewed. These challenges made it necessary to adjust my approach, and I was encouraged to be more "persistent" in seeking out interlocutors. This worked to some extent, such as visiting the ATFD offices unannounced after several unanswered emails and increasing my participant observation by attending protests and seeking out people there, but mainly it made me more reliant on existing networks and contacts who helped me set up meetings with other interlocutors.

However, this did cause me some ethical worry, partly because it is not in my nature to be "pushy" or "persistent" in my approach, but mainly because I deeply empathize with the emotional fatigue, and respect people setting boundaries. In other words, if someone tells me they cannot invest energy into helping me, I must respect that and would not push them. Instead, I chose to focus my energy on those who either did not answer me at all (which initially

included every employee I reached out to at ATFD, until I visited their offices) or those who answered, agreed to participate, and then either did not commit to a date, or did commit and then eventually did not show up—in these instances, I had no problem in increasing my efforts and potentially be seen as pushy. Again, it also greatly helped to already have an existing network who I could rely on in these instances.

These challenges also forced me to reconsider parts of the methodological framework. My original plan was a study mainly focused on interviews, with the textual material and digital fieldwork providing contextualization, and therefore placed emphasis on using friendship as methodology. However, the challenges in securing interviews meant that I had to shift focus and make greater use of my other material in the analysis. This also meant that friendship as methodology becomes less prominent, although to some extent it still informed how I approached the interviews and my commitment to an ethic of friendship. However, forced to scale back on the timing, pacing, and practices of friendship left me with a methodological approach mainly centred on listening with empathy, honouring their stories, and treating stories with care, something which could equally (and less controversially) be framed as a feminist ethics rather than an ethics of friendship.

Empirical Material

Primary Sources

This dissertation is based on primary empirical material forming three cornerstones: interviews (including with current and former leaders or high-ranking staff members of feminist organizations, and with independent activists and academics who are themselves part of the feminist movement); texts, images, and other material collected through fieldwork online and offline (including campaign material, press releases, policy reports, and social media posts); and field notes documenting participant observation during traditional and digital fieldwork (including notes from protests, informal meetings, notes about videos shared on social media, and viral digital campaigns). Interviews offer valuable perspectives into activists' personal comprehension of feminist practices, histories, inspirational influences, and provide insights into the organizations they belong to. However, the other two cornerstones instead focus on organizational practices, online strategies, external communication,

and self-portrayal/narration by these organizations, and the broader field within which they work. Rennick (2015, 87) writes that "documentary texts are fixed snapshots in time that represent artifacts of the movement's externally promulgated image and message," which taken together with interviews reveal both individual and collective narratives of the feminist movements in Egypt and Tunisia, in specific points in time.

As this dissertation builds on different types of material, and to ensure that my referencing and use of the empirical material is both transparent and consistent, I have opted to separate academic references and other secondary sources from references to the primary source material which I analyse. In all cases, I follow the 18th edition of the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS). For academic sources and secondary sources (such as news articles, reports, or blog posts other than from the feminist organizations themselves) I use the "Author-Date" system. All such references are found in the reference list, sorted alphabetically. For primary sources, I use the CMOS 18 "Notes and Bibliography" system, specifically using footnotes, with one difference: since most primary sources I reference directly (such as interviews or field notes) are not publicly available online, I do not provide a bibliography of these. Instead, details on all social media accounts followed during digital fieldwork are found in Appendix C, details on all interviews are found in Appendix D, and details on all the studied organizations' websites are found in Appendix F. When I cite or refer to material which is available online, I provide the link directly in the footnote. Note however that these may have changed, or the website in questions may have gone offline at a later time. If, at the time of writing, I find that a link is no longer working, I replace it with an archived (cached) version from the Internet Archive instead and update the retrieval date to reflect the new link.[23] In short, statements, claims, arguments, and conclusions building on the work of others will reference the author in parenthesis, while that which is based on material collected and analysed for this dissertation will reference the source in footnotes. However, it should also be noted that some conclusions are drawn from more general or cumulative impressions and observations, particularly those which build on extended fieldwork, both online and on the ground. While my field notes include such observations when they occur "in situ," they may also appear during later stages, such as while categorizing, coding, and analysing the material. These insights typically lack any specific field note or other source which I can reference. Nevertheless, I strive to be as transparent as possible and make visible what I build my arguments and conclusions on.

[23] The Internet Archive's "Wayback Machine" can also be used to find older versions of websites or to find texts that have been edited or removed: https://web.archive.org

This is primarily done by providing notes to clarify sources and make it clear either in text or in a footnote when claims are based on general impressions and observations over time or if there is any other reason for uncertainty.

Textual and Image Material

One corner of the triad of materials in this study consists of textual and image materials, which are shared by the included organizations as part of their external communication strategy. These provide insight into the organization's practices and tactics, its "public persona" that it wishes to present, how it constructs and represents its own history, and its position within the feminist movement and society at large. The material consists of press releases, public statements, reports, pamphlets, posters, online images, social media posts, artwork, and comics.[24] These "texts" (in the broad sense of the word) are mainly produced by members of the organization, either individually or through collective effort, and require some degree of consensus, at least among the higher-ranking members in positions of decision-making, to be part of their external communication. As such, they reflect the organization's strategies, stated goals, and official positions on certain issues.

The textual and image material covers the same organizations from which I draw my interlocutors. Collection is done through a combination of downloading available material from the organizations' websites, participation in events and demonstrations, meeting with interlocutors and other activists— I have been given material unprompted and asked for specific texts mentioned in interviews— and in some cases they are sent to me later by interlocutors.

Field Notes

Field notes supplement the other material in this study, and acts to record observations on informal meetings, events, practices, daily work, protests, and viral campaigns. These provide information that is difficult to obtain through formal interviews or textual material. Apart from providing useful context, field notes from informal meetings, events, and protests may also reveal contestations and differing viewpoints from the official narratives of the organizations. Therefore, field notes are an important cornerstone of the material in this study.

[24] Some organizations, such as Mawjoudin, frequently use comics (both long and short) to highlight political issues and grievances, or to share important information and knowledge to marginalized communities such as queer youth.

My approach to notetaking during fieldwork is that "everything is important and worthy of being documented until proven otherwise" (Boellstorff et al. 2013, 82). Nevertheless, field notes are inevitably selective, based on what the researcher finds noteworthy at the time (see Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2001). As notetaking might inhibit both the participation-part and the observation-part of participant observation, it is not always possible to do in the moment. In these cases, I write down my observations as soon after as I can, in order to minimize the problem of recall and recollection, which at times means standing just outside an office or sitting in a taxi while writing. As I always carry my notebook with me during fieldwork, I make sure not to write anything that can be traced to any individual and therefore leave out names. If important to remember something related to a specific person, I re-write the notes on my computer as soon as I can, in which I add that information using a pseudonym. The file is then moved to the secured Lund University server, using a VPN, and deleted from my computer. All other field notes are also re-written on computer, although not always on the same day.

Field notes are also used to document the digital fieldwork, mainly in relation to video material. In these notes, I document both the video itself—its content, message, and anything else I find noteworthy—and metainformation, such as creator, context, how widely shared it is, etc. I also use field notes to document general observations about the social media activities of the organizations.

The social media accounts followed as part of the digital fieldwork mainly belong to the feminist organizations themselves, but also includes individual accounts of their leadership, members of the feminist movement in the respective countries, and other feminists with a large following who regularly posts about Egypt or Tunisia. However, the focus lies on the organizations and their social media presence, and as such, it is their content and activities that act as the primary material. The individual accounts instead allow for contextualization, a better understanding of the "field," and to ensure that I do not miss trending topics or potential viral clips and posts. A complete list of all organizational social media accounts can be found in Appendix C.

Interviews

Ellinas (2021) argues that interviews are particularly useful in studies on "hidden" or hard-to-reach populations. Such populations "tend to be sceptical, wary and busy" (Ellinas 2021, 2), and thus reluctant to participate in other forms of data collection, such as survey studies. Due to the current political climate, both Egyptian and Tunisian activists are indeed wary and reluctant to speak openly about their work. As such, while I would not necessarily classify

members of the Egyptian or Tunisian feminist movements as "hard-to-reach," they are generally careful about who they talk to and what they talk about, and their point of view would be difficult to access through other means of inquiry.

In total, I have conducted 20 interviews; ten with Tunisian interlocutors and ten Egyptian (see appendix D for details). Of these, 15 identify as female, 3 as non-binary, and 2 as male. Since there are far fewer men in leadership positions in the organizations studied, pseudonyms used do not necessarily correspond to traditional gendering of Arabic names, nor are pronouns always reflective of the actual identity of the interviewee. This is to protect the identity of the interlocutors.

My approach during the interviews is rather straight-forward. I strive to be transparent and make clear to the interlocutors what this project is about and what the research aim is. The questions are not precisely predetermined but follows a semi-structured guide and adjusted based on who I am interviewing. Questions cover their own personal activism and involvement in feminism, their understanding and view of the Tunisian or Egyptian feminist movement at large, its goals and position in society, the practices of feminist activism, feminist history/histories in their context, intergenerational dynamics within feminism, questions about location and reach, regional and transnational relations of activists and organizations, and feminist histories in other contexts (see interview guide in Appendix D). This takes inspiration from Sarah Anne Rennick's dissertation on youth activism in Egypt, using semi-structured interviews, which she argues "are a useful form of co-constructing empirical understanding of social movements that have a low degree of formalization, shifting membership, or little by way of documentation (i.e., movements where desk research alone is difficult to conduct)" (Rennick 2015, 87). Since this is to some extent the case for the Egyptian and Tunisian feminist movements, such an approach has similar benefits to the study at hand. As previously mentioned, the interview guide was developed and tested through pilot interviews, which revealed that the semi-structured format worked best for this study.

Other Sources of Empirical Understanding

Beyond the primary sources, making up the material that forms the basis for analysis in this study, fieldwork both online and offline also provides many opportunities for deeper understanding of the organizations, the broader feminist movements in the Arab region, and the political context. During digital fieldwork, I am mainly interested in the social media activity of the

feminist organizations included in this study and therefore focus on their accounts as primary sources. However, as these do not exist in a vacuum, I also follow other accounts; individual members, organization leadership, independent activists and academics, other NGOs and organizations, and accounts tied to specific movements without organizational affiliation (such as EnaZeda). Furthermore, I am of course not restricted to only monitoring the accounts that I follow, but also explore other accounts, hashtags, and follow interactions into other areas of the digital space—just as one normally does on social media. This helps me understand the broader social media landscape that the organizations engage in and ensures that I stay alert to trending topics and viral campaigns. This broad and open-ended approach to the digital field is also necessary in order to spot gaps and lack of engagement, for example if there are viral campaigns shared by independent feminist activists that the organizational accounts seemingly ignore.

Traditional fieldwork also provides opportunities for deeper understanding, without necessarily being a source for primary empirical materials. This includes casual conversations and meetings at cafés, hanging out at the homes of activists, car trips to different parts of the country, walk-and-talks in the city, and similar activities. These help me refine my assumptions and understanding of the Egyptian and Tunisian feminist movements, and the current political situation in the respective countries.

Finally, I have also reached out to other academics and researchers, and had e-mail correspondence, Zoom calls, and physical meetings, to talk about both their and my own research about feminist activism in the Middle East. This includes academics in the countries themselves, in other countries in the region, and academics based in Europe and the US who work on feminist activism or gender politics in Egypt and Tunisia. These conversations have helped me mainly in practical terms—such as being introduced to potential interlocutors or given advice on carrying out the fieldwork—but have also provided me with insights from their own research.

Sampling

The kind of analysis we can make and what results can be achieved with interview research will at least in part depend on our sampling strategy. If the goal is to study, for example, general population characteristics or political behaviour, a non-random sampling will in all likelihood be insufficient and exposes the study to criticism on the lack of external validity. However, purposive sampling still has its place within social research, for example in

precursor interviews aimed at developing better tools for further study, but also in studies where the "population" is very specific and narrow, or hard-to-reach. As Lynch (2019, 32) writes: "Insights drawn from in-depth research with non-randomly selected respondents may also generate relational, meta-level information about the society or organization in which they are embedded—information that is simply unobtainable any other way."

Whether or not the participants are selected randomly or, as in this study, purposefully, and regardless of the interviewer's previous relation with the researcher, there will be power dynamics that needs to be considered. MacLean details two conventional approaches to interviewing, where the first encourages the researcher to take a godlike perspective, "to look down from on high as objective and neutral observers of whatever political phenomenon is being investigated" (MacLean 2019, 67). The second approach rejects such detachment, encourages the researcher to become embedded with the participants—socially, politically, culturally, etc.—and "suggests that power can and should be eliminated through an erasure of all distance" (MacLean 2019, 67). MacLean challenges both of these approaches, saying that researchers are not gods, but nor are they truly embedded with the participants (she does not consider autoethnographical work in this account). Instead, she suggests a "rigorous subjectivity," which entails taking a reflexive and consultative approach to interview research methods. This means giving up the notion that pure objectivity is achievable, but also to not pretend as if the researcher can fully become one with their interlocutors:

> Indeed, by *illuminating* the power dynamics and biases involved in the process of conducting interview research, rather than assuming they do not exist, or trying to somehow eliminate them, political science scholarship can become more rigorous, not less. (MacLean 2019, 68 [emphasis in original]).

Narrative Analysis

> Narratives are the stories people construct to make sense of their reality. Narratives help us understand who we are, where we come from, and the implications of that for our current lives. At a collective level, narratives provide cohesion to and transmit shared beliefs of common origins and identity… Proceeding from available discourses and narratives, we routinely reproduce, critique, justify, or negate social relations through our utterances and writings. (Andrews, Kinnvall & Monroe 2015, 141).

Patterson and Monroe (1998, 315) define narrative as "the ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality." Following this, narrative analysis becomes a useful tool to understand the construction of feminist histories, as well as feminists' practical and temporal relationship to other feminists in different times and places, and how these come to inform contemporary feminist activism in a given context. As such, the narrative approach employed in this study does not seek to uncover a singular, objective truth, but rather a deeper understanding of how people interpret their lived realities and experiences. On a collective level, narrative analysis helps us see how people negotiate, contest, and (re)construct hegemonic narratives and their alternatives. Patterson and Monroe emphasize the importance of narrative in the construction of identity, both in the individual and in the collective sense, constructing a past and drawing lines between that past and one's own present:

> The story explains and justifies why the life went a particular way, not just causally but, at some level, morally. The narrator uses the past self to point to and explain the present and the future. This is as true on the individual level as it is on the macrolevel, when groups of people describe a common past suggesting why they have a collective identity that should be recognized as legitimate by others. (Patterson and Monroe, 1998, 316)

A similar argument is put forth by Somers (1994), who posits that the common, essentialist fallacy of viewing identities as stable categories can be overcome by introducing "the categorically destabilizing dimensions of time, space, and relationality" (Somers, 1994, 606). In other words, by historicizing identity, understanding it as temporally, spatially, and relationally situated, we can move past the stable identity categorization and instead see identification as a process—and this includes identifying as a feminist. This is emphasized in much of the literature on narratives, such as Elliott (2005), who writes that narrative "provides the practical means by which a person can understand themselves as living through time, a human subject with a past, present, and future, made whole by the coherence of the narrative plot with a beginning, middle, and end" (Elliott 2005, 125), and I argue that the same is true for collective identity.

There is an inherent temporality embedded in narratives: the events narrated are generally in sequential order, which also reveals how the narrator (whether an individual or a collective) organize, periodize, and understand the events recounted, making narrative analysis well-suited in combination with the focus on temporality. Following this, I define narrative as a representation of a

succession of events (see Shenhav 2015). This minimalist definition is open enough to reveal inconsistencies yet retains the temporal element of narrative and differentiates it from other forms of representation, such as laws, regulations, and policies (although policy texts can themselves contain narratives [see Scuzzarello 2010]). Developing this definition and narrowing it down, drawing from Andrews, Kinnvall and Monroe (2015, 141) who write that narratives are "the stories people construct to make sense of their reality," I would say that narratives are structured accounts that configures events into a temporally organized, causally meaningful whole from a particular point of view, aimed at answering both "what happened" and "what it means."

Building on Somers' view that identities and claims are narratively constituted within relational fields and embedded in ontological, public, and meta-narratives (Somers 1994), and Shenhav's proposal of a story grammar for analysing social and political narratives (Shenhav 2015), I utilize narrative analysis in practice first by gathering material (through interviews, fieldwork, and digital fieldwork, as detailed above). I then categorize this in NVivo by making case classifications for each organization and file classifications for metadata about the material, before segmenting each "text" into units in order to identify stories (such as stories about feminist histories, feminist icons, or transnational campaigns), trace how these are ordered temporally, and what "type" of narrative the stories are geared towards—for example, organizational narratives, historical narratives, problem narratives, future-oriented narratives, aspirational narratives, and so on. Each text is coded using three top-level codes: difference; temporality; transnationalism. Lastly, I also note overlap and divergences, looking at whether the narratives are shared between several organizations, how they differ, and whether they include or exclude other actors and organizations.

Story-Text-Narration-Multiplicity

The narrative analysis employed here builds on a model by Shenhav (2015), who adapts the classical tripartite story-text-narration model with an additional fourth part: multiplicity. The first three parts come from Rimmon-Kenan (1983, reproduced in Shenhav 2015), and defines *story* as the sequence of events and the characters involved in them. *Text* is defined as the spoken or written discourse that tells the story, i.e., "the mode in which the story is conveyed" (Shenhav 2015, 16). *Narration* is defined as "the process of communicating the story, as there cannot be a narrative unless the story is told" (Shenhav 2015, 16). Emphasizing social narratives, which are shared by a

group of people, Shenhav refines this model by adding the fourth part. *Multiplicity*, therefore, deals with "the process of repetition and variation through which narratives are being reproduced at the societal sphere" (Shenhav 2015, 17). Multiplicity underscores that no single narrative is ever isolated; rather, it exists in relation to broader cultural, political, and historical story networks that lend it resonance or contestation. These four parts function as a methodological device to structure my analysis of the narratives, and seek to uncover both how feminist organizations construct, organize, and narrate their own history, and the histories of the feminist movement(s) at large (including outside the national context), as well as how individual members of these same organizations narrate these histories, their own place within them, and to some extent how narratives diverge and converge.

It is important to reiterate that as I do not seek to speak over, speak for, or even give voice to the feminists that I meet with—following instead Tillman's call to "*get to know* others in meaningful and sustained ways" (Tillman 2015, 291)—my use of narrative analysis is not simply a recounting of stories as they are told. On the contrary, narrative analysis is used to uncover both the explicit and the implicit, and thus function as a tool for me to interpret these stories through the concepts of transnationalism and temporality.

Operationalization

Identifying the themes of difference, temporality, and transnationalism in the empirical material is not always straight-forward. For example, interview answers and online textual material about the naissance and development of a Tunisian or Egyptian feminist movement might be interesting in themselves, revealing how organizations view this history or how members motivate their association with the feminist movement. However, it is perhaps even more interesting what they leave out, what they prioritize and de-prioritize in the retelling of history, and whether absences indicate an element of presentism. Finding these gaps requires a very close reading and familiarity with the material, which I strive for by re-listening to recordings several times, re-reading transcripts and interview notes several times, and by repeatedly going back to the material throughout the research process, in an adaptive and abductive manner.

My conceptualization of feminist solidarity in Egypt and Tunisia stresses the role of temporality, transnationalism, and difference, which are quite large and abstract concepts. As such, I develop a framework that breaks down temporal and transnational elements into practical and/or ideological sub-concepts that

are more concrete and workable (see Appendix A), which also forms the basis of coding in NVivo. These are further concretized and associated with specific expressions that I look for both in interview answers and in the textual and online material, to be analysed in terms of function in relation to the practice of feminist activism in the specific context. Some of these expressions overlap, and in terms of coding I then attribute the expression to all relevant variations, aiding in the analysis of the interplay between different concepts related to transnationalism, temporality, and difference. The rationale for this operationalization builds on the conceptual framework developed, specifically emphasizing relationism, underscoring relational dynamics on multiple levels: between feminists and feminist organizations within the same context, between feminists in different contexts, and between feminists cross-generationally.

In concrete terms, I take temporal perspectives and chronopolitical practices to be identifiable through narratives of the organizations' origins or the naissance of feminist movements within the specific local/national context, narratives of developments, ruptures, trajectories, and changes within these movements, and narratives about important historical "events," historical figures, or feminist icons. Conversely, an absence or rejection of history may indicate another form of temporality, revealing an element of presentism "whereby feminists take a parthenogenetic approach, in which the past of women's movements is denied" (Smith 2015, 978).[25] This could also be viewed as a form of chronocentrism: "the belief that one's times are paramount, that other periods pale in comparison, [or] a faith in the historical importance of the present" (Fowles 1974, 65). The difference between presentism and chronocentrism can be quite blurry, as they both refer to a prioritization of the present time and rejection of the relevance of the past and/or future in the present. However, for the sake of clarity, I will only apply presentism on instances relating to *rejection of the past*, and chronocentrism only on instances relating to *rejection of the future*.

[25] *Presentism* in this context, and as used by Smith (2015), differs somewhat from how it is used in historical analysis and sociological analysis. In its strictest philosophical definition, it is an ontological position claiming that only present things exist. However, a presentist may also argue that everything exists at the present time (including past and future things). For this study, it is sufficient to define it as a temporal perspective which rejects the relevance of past and future things in the present.

Chapter 4: Difference

> I want there to be a place in the world where people can engage in one another's differences in a way that is redemptive, full of hope and possibility.
>
> – bell hooks, *Reel to Real* (1996)

In this chapter, I explore the challenge of difference for feminist organizations. I begin by outlining contextual and spatial dimensions of feminist activism in Egypt and Tunisia; the local "situatedness" of feminist activism, local and national specificity, and spatial divisions both on the national level and beyond the nation, drawing partly from interviews but also digital material and secondary sources. Beyond grappling with the perception of being "foreign" or "Western," feminist organizations in both Egypt and Tunisia also struggle with the perception of being mainly focused on urban centres, marginalizing rural women and disregarding their experiences. Becoming more inclusive of women in rural areas and shedding this perceived bias is therefore a key concern these organizations are working actively on. At the same time, with the increasing repression of civil society in both countries in recent years, feminist activists have expressed uncertainty about what is and is not allowed. I theorize that feminists who are appealing mainly to educated, urban, middle- and upper-class women are generally seen as less challenging to the political status quo, and closer aligned with the legacy of state feminism, meaning that feminist groups that seek broader appeal—particularly those appealing to working-class women—face harsher repression. However, what is considered "allowable activism" relates not only to the *what* but also the *where*, meaning that this difference in response from state authorities takes a spatial dimension.

Furthermore, spatial inequalities and issues of urban bias connect in important ways with language politics, racial politics, and class politics, as well as contention around religion and secularism, all of which relate to long-standing feminist debates and theorization on "difference" and how to build a strong feminist movement—based on solidarity—across differences. The sense of marginalization and erasure of difference expressed by, for example, Muslim feminists and Nubian feminists, pinned to mainstream feminist organizations,

have in recent years also led to the beginnings of new movements or segments within a larger feminist movement. While there are important differences between Egypt and Tunisia in terms of racial politics, closely tied to unique historical events, differences in terms of colonial history (French versus British colonization), and geopolitical differences, the shared sense of marginalization—not just in society at large but within mainstream feminist organizations as well—means that the activism and political agenda of black and/or Nubian feminists look remarkably similar, mainly related to their critique of race-blind feminism and the marginalization of racialized women.

Places of Protest and Allowable Activism

On the 25th of November 2023, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the first day of the 16 days of activism, I was at the midway point of my second fieldtrip to Tunisia. I was in a taxi on my way from Ain Zaghouan Nord to the Human Rights Square near the centre of Tunis. Around a thousand Tunisian feminists and their supporters were to gather at the square before going on a silent march in protest of violence against women, but also more specifically against the violence enacted on Gaza's women. Although the Swedish embassy and other diplomatic missions in Tunisia did recommend avoiding large crowds generally, there were no specific warnings about this demonstration, nor any indications that it could be dangerous. Despite a crack-down and police intervention against protests in early 2023, these mainly targeted protests related to migrant rights and against statements made by President Saied in February and March of 2023. At the time, feminist activists had largely avoided the increased repression of civil society, although many still worried about this development. Feminists expressed uncertainty about the boundaries of what type of activism was allowable in the eyes of the state, especially after Ahlem Bousserwel, secretary general of ATFD, had been arrested in August 2023, accused of insulting a public official and resisting police (Business News Tunisia, August 26, 2023). Nevertheless, as anticipated, the demonstration went on without any disruption or violence, and without being dispersed by the police.[26]

As the silent march was planned on this specific commemorative day, most of the information that had circulated and was printed on flyers and posters described it as a protest against gender-based violence, and this was also what

[26] Field notes, Tunis Centre (Tunis), November 25, 2023.

I had been told when I was invited to join the march by one of my interlocutors. However, the attention to Palestine was also communicated, and the organizers say they chose to make it a silent march as a way to both give voice to the women of Gaza and as a commentary on the silence of Western feminists (see Forlani 2023). Observing and attending the march, it was also clear that what motivated people's anger the most at this time was the assault on Gaza. Practically every participant was carrying a Palestinian flag or wearing a keffiyeh, and most of the signs and placards declared solidarity particularly with the women of Gaza. As the march passed by large murals and walls of graffiti covered with slogans connected to #EnaZeda, the #MeToo-movement of Tunisia, and many placards also tied into the commemorative day, the broader issue of violence against women was still very much apparent even if Palestine was in focus.[27]

Although there is no way of confirming it, I speculated at the time whether the Palestinian cause offered a level of protection for the protest. There are indeed organizations and activists who deliberately frame their work within a discourse which may be perceived as less controversial or divisive, such as LGBTQ+ organizations avoiding that acronym and instead frame their work within a human rights discourse. With massive popular support in Tunisia, there would not be much gained for state authorities or the police if they were to shut down a protest focusing on Palestine. Instead, this would likely generate more protests. Furthermore, demonstrations focusing on Palestine may be seen as unrelated to domestic politics in Tunisia and therefore not a challenge to the sitting president. Compared to other demonstrations—such as those criticizing President Saied's statements on migrants and refugees or protesting the violent dispersal of migrant camps—one focusing on Palestine would appear fairly "harmless" to state authorities. This is not to say that solidarity with Palestine exhibited by feminists is nothing but a vehicle to forward other causes. On the contrary, Palestinian liberation is sincerely and deeply important for feminist organizations in Egypt and Tunisia, and for the feminists I have met with. Nevertheless, demonstrations and campaigns framed around Palestinian liberation still provide an outlet where feminist activists may operate with less resistance, which the organizations are aware of.

In early March 2024, a few days before International Women's Day, I had just returned to Cairo for fieldwork when a colleague texted me to say she was visiting Tunis and wondered about any events happening there. I realized that I was aware of several demonstrations, seminars, film screenings, and other

[27] Field notes, Tunis Centre (Tunis), November 25, 2023.

events happening in Tunis, but had not heard about anything planned in Cairo. As such, I reached out to a few Egyptian friends on WhatsApp, asking if there were any demonstrations or other activities planned. Sabah, the feminist activist affiliated with the Bread and Freedom Party, immediately answered with a very straight-forward message: "Better not to ask or participate unless it is a Maadi thing, as it is not safe."[28] Maadi is an affluent district in the south-eastern outskirts of Cairo, particularly popular among well-off expatriates, diplomats, and consular personnel. Several embassies and ambassadorial residences, offices of international development agencies such as USAID, and the national or regional headquarters for multinational corporations are located in Maadi. More importantly, it is also considered somewhat secluded from the rest of Cairo and as indicated by Sabah's response, it is known as an area that is less affected by policing, state surveillance, and political repression, precisely *because* it is affluent and disconnected from the rest of Cairo. In fact, several interlocutors requested to meet in Maadi as they believed we could speak more freely at a café or restaurant there. Any demonstration or political event taking place in Maadi is assumed to not relate to the vast majority of Egyptians, and therefore it is perceived as unlikely to spread elsewhere. Simply put, an International Women's Day march or similar event in Maadi would not constitute a threat to the political status quo in Egypt. However, it is not the place itself that determines this threat but rather the assumed reach. In other words, while it manifests as a spatial difference, it is more accurate to view the non-policing of Maadi activism in terms of class difference.[29]

One demonstration did however take place in downtown Cairo, responding to a call for a global women's strike in solidarity with Gaza, but it was small and quickly dispersed by security forces. The demonstration began outside the Palestinian Women's Union in Cairo and was planned to go Tahrir Square, which they named "the site of the martyrdom of Shaimaa Al-Sabbagh" (see CairoGaza 2024). Shaimaa was an activist and leading member of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party who was shot and killed by a police officer during a protest in January 2015, becoming a martyr and symbol against the Egyptian military regime. Planning the demonstration in this manner, the protestors deliberately linked these two symbolic sites for the struggle of Palestinian women and Egyptian women, highlighting transnational solidarity with the

[28] Sabah, WhatsApp direct message to author, March 6, 2024.

[29] This conclusion is based on observations throughout fieldwork in Cairo, and therefore lack a specific, dated field note.

women of Gaza and the centrality of Palestine to feminist activism in Egypt, as confirmed by a statement released ahead of the demonstration:

> We call upon every Egyptian woman who shares our shame and helplessness to persist in finding every possible means to express solidarity with the women of Gaza and to exhibit pride in their courage and resistance. A future without Gaza is inconceivable. A feminist struggle without Gaza is untenable. We reject the war waged against women's bodies. Our solidarity with Gaza is our form of resistance. (CairoGaza 2024)

Although police arrested demonstrators and demanded that bystanders delete footage of the protest, several video clips soon began circulating on social media showing the protestors declaring solidarity with Palestinian women and chanting that "the land is Palestinian."[30] Other video clips show plain-clothes police asking the protestors who they are with, who had brought them there, and who had organized the demonstration, to which they respond that they are "simply women."[31] The protestors also called on President Sisi to open the Rafah crossing, denounced Egypt's complicity in the suffering of Gaza, and accused Arab governments of cowardice and inaction. The potential protection of the Palestinian cause that I had speculated in Tunis was clearly not present in Egypt, at least not when the protestors petition the president directly, placing their protest on a domestic level rather than calling for a ceasefire or levelling critique against foreign, non-Arab governments.[32]

After International Women's Day had passed, I noticed that there had also been an event organized by the diplomatic missions of Canada, Czechia, France, Germany, Mexico, and Sweden. These embassies are mostly located in another affluent district, Zamalek, located in central Cairo but separated from the rest of the city as it is an island in the Nile. The event was an award ceremony that the embassies take turns hosting for International Women's Day each year, under the title "Champions of Change." The theme of 2024 was "inspire inclusion," aiming to recognize Egyptian women who have made a noteworthy contribution to society. Among the 12 women awarded in 2024, there were several CEOs, a few entrepreneurs, a film director, a rally contestant, and an

[30] Digital field notes, Garden City (Cairo), March 2024. The specific video clip showing this chant can be found posted on X by @nihalist___, March 8, 2024: https://x.com/nihalist___/status/1766076363218342232

[31] This video clip, showing the dispersal of the demonstration, was posted on X by @MazidNews, March 8, 2024: https://x.com/MazidNews/status/1766077664501121063

[32] Field notes, Garden City (Cairo), March 15, 2024.

astronaut (see German Embassy in Cairo 2024). The event is a recent tradition of embassies in Cairo using International Women's Day to celebrate mainly women entrepreneurs and innovators. However, in 2024, there were at least two activists among the honourees, including Fatma Ibrahim, founder of The Sex Talk Arabic, and Soraya Bahgat, founder of Tahrir Bodyguard. The Sex Talk is an "intersectional feminist platform tackling issues of sexual violence in Arabic-speaking societies, and promoting sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice" (Sex Talk Arabic 2025). Tahrir Bodyguard is a volunteer movement focusing on protecting female protestors and combating sexual harassment (see Cairo Urban Initiatives Platform, n.d.). In other words, these are not entirely uncontroversial activists for the Egyptian government, although there does not seem to have been any issues with honouring and celebrating them.[33]

Contrasting the relative ease with which events can take place in Maadi or Zamalek (although of course the organizers being embassies plays a part too) with the palpable fear from leftist and working-class feminists to organize any type of event for International Women's Day, even one focusing on solidarity with women in Gaza, indicates that the schism described here is not only one of spatialized difference but also deeply classed. Organizing demonstrations for International Women's Day may be allowable in Maadi, but not in Downtown. Celebrating women CEOs, entrepreneurs, and innovators, is generally not seen as controversial, and celebrating activists requires foreign embassies backing you up, but advocating for women working in the factories at Mahalla El-Kubra or calling for solidarity with the women of Gaza is next to impossible without repression or resistance from state authorities in the Egyptian context. In other words, some protests are seen as relatively harmless, particularly if they appeal to middle- and upper-class women or if the focus of their critique does not implicate the Egyptian state and its current leadership, whereas other protests are heavily securitized and met with swift repression.

The spaces where feminist activism can be tolerated by state authorities are dwindling in both countries, although the field is noticeably narrower in Egypt compared to Tunisia.[34] Certainly, the specific issue at hand, and the framing, also matters in relation to what can be tolerated. In Tunisia, feminists engaged in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights have always been met with some resistance,

[33] Field notes, Garden City (Cairo), March 15, 2024.

[34] This claim is based on observations throughout fieldwork in Tunis and Cairo but also appears in the interview material; Zoha, in-person interview, March 14, 2024; Naila, in-person interview, March 14, 2024; Noor, in-person interview, November 28, 2023.

while the topic of racial discrimination and anti-racism activism was not as contentious not that long ago.[35] In fact, in 2018, Tunisia became the only MENA country to introduce a law against racial discrimination, largely due to efforts of black Tunisian civil society activists (Mzioudet 2024). Yet, activists who have been advocating for the rights of both queer and black Tunisians say that suddenly both have become contentious and controversial issues, coupled with repression from state authorities.[36]

Transformations happening in the region since the uprisings of 2010-2011, in terms of political mobilization and contentious politics, have prompted social movement researchers, media scholars, and political anthropologists to investigate the role of digital spaces for activists in authoritarian settings, hypothesizing that such spaces provide opportunities for activism even under repression. Some scholars have argued—to various degrees—that the internet in general and social media in particular has had a democratizing effect, enabled broader citizen agency, and empowered activists by providing new (digital) spaces to mobilize while escaping state surveillance and repression (see for example Wheeler 2017; Breuer and Groshek 2014). More recently, other scholars have taken a more cautious approach, instead saying that while digital technologies have provided new tools and generated new spaces for political activists in authoritarian settings, they are far from exempt from surveillance nor are these spaces out of reach from the state (see for example Mehta 2024; Abdelmoez 2024; Batmanghelichi and Mouri 2017). Of course, the very same technologies may equally be new tools for surveillance, as well as tools for anti-feminist mobilization (see Anstis 2024; Anstis and LaFlèche 2024; Abdelmoez 2022). Now, it is not groundbreaking to note that repression of activism takes place both online and offline—as pointed out by digital anthropologists like Heather A. Horst, Daniel Miller, and Larissa Hjorth, the digital is not disconnected from our offline worlds (see Horst and Miller 2013; Hjorth et al. 2017). However, it is still important to emphasize caution when determining the potential benefits of digital activism. While I, in my research, see an increasing utilization of digital spaces for feminist activism in both Egypt and Tunisia, and it is indeed discussed by my interlocutors as an alternative in times when traditional methods of (offline) protesting is not viable, the increased usage has also been followed by increased repression.[37]

[35] Shams, Zoom interview, October 5, 2023; Aisha, Zoom interview, August 6, 2025.

[36] Aisha, Zoom interview, August 6, 2025.

[37] Sarah, Zoom interview, May 12, 2023; Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023; Aisha, Zoom interview, August 6, 2025.

Language Politics and Spatial Difference

The vast majority of feminist organizations (as with other non-governmental and civil society organizations) in Tunisia and Egypt are based in Tunis and Cairo respectively. Exceptions include Association Femme et Citoyenneté (AFC) and Association Joussour de Citoyenneté (AJC), both based in Kef governorate, which compared to coastal Tunisia is significantly more rural.[38] In Egypt, we find Ganoubia Hora based in Aswan, which is a governorate in southern Egypt with a comparatively low urbanization rate.[39] Independent activists and interlocutors I have met with come from both rural and urban backgrounds, although most of them now live in urban centres, in part related to the fact that there are simply more opportunities for activists to work there.

These organizations, as well as independent feminist activists, do have an acute awareness of the perception that feminism and feminist politics mainly serve an educated, urban elite, and therefore work actively to overcome this problem. In Tunisia, perceptions of an urban bias within the feminist movement largely manifests in relation to language politics, whereby French is associated with educated Tunisians in the cities, leading some groups to implement policies for their own working language.[40] Aisha, a leading voice of the burgeoning black feminist movement in Tunisia and former member of ATFD, highlights the importance of accessible language and that the goal is to be understood: "When we are angry, we speak in the language of the street."[41] Typically, this implies Tunisian Arabic, but Aisha emphasizes that it is not just the language itself that matters but also the vernacular and the message, formulating a political message that actually speaks to people and can be easily understood by those it concerns, rather than relying on overly theoretical or academic discourse. Through this lens, language politics intersect not only with spatialized difference and the spatial dimension of feminist activism but also with class.

Amira, a Tunisian university professor and Islamic feminist scholar affiliated with Musawah, sees a schism in the feminist movement related to language. In

[38] According to the 2014 census, the rural population of Kef governorate was 105,866 out of 243,156, or 43.54% (Office de Développement du Nord-Ouest 2023).

[39] According to the 2017 census, the rural population of Aswan governorate was 868,820 out of 1.47 million, or 58.94% (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics 2017).

[40] Amira, phone interview, April 17, 2023; Reem, in-person interview, November 30, 2023; Aisha, Zoom interview, August 6, 2025.

[41] Aisha, Zoom interview, August 6, 2025.

her view, there are some organizations that are mainly francophone, largely influenced by French feminist political thought, conducting most of their work in Tunis, and privileging the concerns of an urban elite.[42] This is contrasted by mainly arabophone organizations, which reach broader groups of women, including rural and working-class women. While there is merit to the argument that the primary working-language or the language of external communication may limit their reach, there is little in the textual material to suggest that certain organizations are more or less francophone or arabophone depending on their "brand" of feminism (such as universalist, secular, Islamic, Marxist, queer, etc.) or depending on where they are based. For example, the Islamic feminist organization Musawah provides comparatively few resources in Arabic—although this is likely related to the absence of country-specific websites and social media accounts—while the universalist, secular ATFD has resources in both French and Arabic, and make most of their social media posts in Arabic. Meanwhile, AFC, one of the organizations based in El Kef, has only ever run a website in French, while the Tunis based, queer feminist organization Mawjoudin has made their website available in Arabic, French, and English, provides nearly all their resources in all three languages, often within the same publication, and their social media posts are typically trilingual as well.[43]

There is, however, an interesting discursive function of this argument that links language to place, as it places francophonism as a marker of urban elitism and foreign influence, standing against a Tunisian authenticity associated with the Arabic language. Here, language is imbued with meaning and value, which ties into the country's colonial history and colonialism's ongoing legacy. I further observe added layers of complexity specifically in Tunisia, as race, class, and language politics operate simultaneously, sometimes contradictory ways. As mentioned, the French language is on the one hand associated with an urban upper-class, positioned in a dichotomous relationship to the Arabic of rural and working-class Tunisians. On the other hand, black Tunisians recount speaking to strangers in perfect Tunisian Arabic, only to receive a response in French, based on an assumption that they are migrants who are not—or in their view *should* not be—fluent in Arabic.[44] In other words, while it might be true, as argued by Tayeb (2021), that racial whiteness is posited as "indigenous" and

[42] Amira, phone interview, April 17, 2023.

[43] For details on each organization's use of language in online material, such as on their main website and social media accounts, and in published reports, studies, press releases, and so on, see appendix F.

[44] Aisha, Zoom interview, August 6, 2025.

separate from colonial/European/French whiteness, the French language becomes racialized in paradoxical ways as simultaneously valorised through association with urban elites and de-valorised through association with the country's black migrant population.

Although an Arabic-French schism would not translate to the Egyptian context, there are similar challenges related to the politics of language, particularly affecting LGBTQ+ groups and queer feminists. There is undoubtedly a hegemony of anglophone discourse on sexuality, often making English terminology (such as "gay" or "queer") more accessible or recognizable than Arabic alternatives, even for native speakers (see Abdelmoez 2021). For example, gay men and lesbians are commonly labeled in Arabic with terms many would consider derogatory, such as *shādh* and *shādha* (meaning "deviant" or "pervert"). Although some have attempted to reclaim these words—notably, queer feminism is sometimes translated into Arabic as *nasawiyya shādhiyya*, "deviant feminism"—it is more common today to hear the words *mithlī* and *mithliyya*, meaning "same," at least in queer-friendly contexts. However, many still simply use the English words "gay" or "queer," even when speaking Arabic, which further reinforces the anglophone hegemony within sexual discourse. It also risks exacerbating the impression of queerness as, by definition, something foreign or non-Arab, leading to a denial of "the possibility of indigenous nonnormative or 'queer' Arab sexual subjectivities and identities" (Hasso 2011, 653). As such, linguistic hegemonies within queer and feminist movements do indeed represent a potent political problem, tying into perceptions of place, belonging, and authenticity, even if there are no indications that feminist organizations (including LGBTQ+ focused ones) privilege French or English over Arabic.

These critiques of mainstream feminist organizing—as urban, elitist, or foreign—also ties into ideological rifts within the movement, wherein ATFD and their regional partner organizations are portrayed as forwarding a liberal feminist agenda and adopting a French model of *laïcité* that contravenes the inclusion of religion and the experiences of religious women within the organizations' work.[45] This, in turn, has influenced the general perception of feminism in the Middle Eastern context, but more importantly it has had an impact on the formulation of state feminism in Tunisia—and by extension, as I argue below, in Egypt—by lending credibility to narratives that places religious norms and practices, such as veiling, as *the* main obstacle to women's rights, rather than any material or political inequalities. This critique is, in my

[45] Selma, in-person interview, April 13, 2023; Reem, in-person interview, November 30, 2023.

reading, clearly valid, although the extent to which Islamic feminists have been more effective in repairing this perception or moving beyond the dichotomization of feminism and Islam is less clear. To the claim that Islamic feminists are better than secular feminists at reaching rural and working-class women, it should be noted that these organizations are also typically headquartered in the urban centres. Similarly to other organizations, their high-ranking members are also mainly well-educated academics, and they do not escape the preconceived notions many people have about feminists and feminist politics in general. Nevertheless, Amira, speaking as a member of Musawah, is particularly critical of ATFD and "their hegemony" within Tunisian feminism, calling their work an "appropriation of feminism."[46]

Queer feminist organizations, like Mawjoudin, are also clearly aware of this perceived urban bias, and work actively to provide services outside of Tunis, such as supporting travelling medical staff to do STI testing in rural areas, offering home testing kits, and providing online counselling for LGBTQ+ youth who cannot get such counselling in person at their Tunis office.[47] However, since this type of work is not (and should not be) very visible, it does little to dispel ideas of Mawjoudin working mainly for queer youth in the urban centres.[48] The added layer of advocating for the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, a type of advocacy considered even more "inauthentic" in the MENA region than mainstream feminist activism, makes this perception even more pressing. Considering that neither queer feminists nor Islamic feminists seem to escape accusations of attempting to introduce foreign ideals, norms, and values related to gender, family, and society, and that both groups are perceived as mainly serving the interests of urban, middle- and upper-class elites, suggests that the perceived authenticity of their sources—i.e., whether they base their claims on Islamic jurisprudence or on Judith Butler—is not really the core issue. On the one hand, this could come back to the failure of feminists to effectively communicate differences and diversity within the movement.[49] On the other hand, we would do well to remember that the main filter through which people in Egypt and Tunisia have experienced and been exposed to (supposedly) feminist discourse is when it has been co-opted by the state. As such, the untethering from former and current autocratic regimes remains a challenge for all feminists, regardless of internal differences, while continuing to build

[46] Amira, phone interview, April 17, 2023.

[47] Field notes, Lafayette (Tunis), April 13, 2023.

[48] Selma, in-person interview, April 13, 2023.

[49] Warda, in-person interview, March 7, 2024.

and strengthening an autonomous movement and mobilizing support at the grassroots level. Reforms such as the "Suzanne Mubarak laws" may have consisted of policies that feminists generally supported (see Mohammed 2013) such as giving women the right to no-fault divorce (*khul'*) and allowing Egyptian citizenship to be passed from a woman to her children even if the father is not an Egyptian citizen (see Hatem 2016). However, the top-down implementation inevitably garnered backlash, tied feminists to policies lacking popular support, and undermined grassroot efforts to build such support.

Decentralizing Feminism, Centring Race

The perceived inability of established, mainstream feminist organizations to reach rural and working-class women and advocate for women's rights across all social strata and all geographical location has led to newly emerging feminist movements (or segments within the feminist movements, depending on one's perspective) in both Egypt and Tunisia. Since 2011, there has been a trend of decentralization of feminist groups in Egypt, and many initiatives have been launched in places like Ismailia, Qena, Al-Beheira, and Aswan.[50] These initiatives are generally better positioned to anchor their activism at the local level, as they avoid the perception of coming in as "outsiders" attempting to impose changes and can better communicate their message without ostracizing local communities (see Allam 2019). Here, Nubian feminism in general, and Ganoubia Hora in particular, stands as a prime example. Ganoubia Hora belongs to the growing number of feminist groups and organizations in Egypt that are not based in Cairo and, in their own account, the first to be based in Upper Egypt.[51] It started as a youth initiative in 2012, motivated explicitly by what they viewed as a problematic centralization of the feminist movement, urban bias, and lack of representation for Nubian feminists. As Warda says, "the [Egyptian] feminist movement can't see a woman like me,"[52] meaning there was a need for an organization that could advocate for Warda and other Nubian and black women like her. Notable, however, is that they still view themselves as an integral part of the Egyptian feminist movement, not a

[50] This trend has also been noted in previous studies, such as Zaki (2022) and Raway (2024), as well as by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (2018).

[51] "نحن من [who are we?]," Ganoubia Hora, accessed December 10, 2024: https://ganoubia-hora.com/نحن-من/; The English version of the same webpage is available here: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/about/

[52] Warda, in-person interview, March 7, 2024.

breakaway or a countermovement. In other words, while they motivate their existence in relation to deficiencies of the feminist movement, they still place themselves squarely within the same movement. They acknowledge and share the goals of other feminist groups but identify a gap; a need to grow and evolve the movement and realign their advocacy so as to not further marginalize large groups of women. While still situated in the margin of the Egyptian feminist movement—and some Nubian feminists I have spoken to, such as Nabra, say that it is too early to speak of a "Nubian feminist movement"—they have carved out a space and managed to raise attention to issues of race, class, and spatial inequalities within the broader movement and within Egyptian society at large.[53]

Recent years have brought similar debates to the fore in Tunisia, as black feminists demand recognition and, more importantly, demand an end to racial discrimination (see for example Bajec 2020; Lungumbu 2023). These debates have particularly proliferated since early 2023, when President Kais Saied began making comments on the demographic make-up of Tunisia, mirroring European far-right populists' and white nationalists' rhetoric of a "Great Replacement," specifically portraying "irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa" (quoted in Brown 2023) as part of a conspiracy to make Tunisia into a "purely African country that has no affiliation to the Arab and Islamic nations" (quoted in Al Jazeera News 2023a).[54] Preceding these comments, in January 2023, Tunisia saw thousands of trade unionists protest after a crackdown on unions which included the arrests of senior officials of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), as well as arrests of other political opponents and critics of the president. The protests also targeted proposed subsidy cuts as part of a bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), increased unemployment, and increased cost of living—for example, loaves of bread were used as a sign of protest (see Kvinna till Kvinna 2023; Al Jazeera News 2023b). President Saeid's remarks, then, tied into these concerns by placing blame for the country's economic situation on migrants, claiming that the high inflation was due to migrants buying bread, driving up prices. These remarks have been widely viewed as an attempt to shift focus from subsidy cuts, austerity measures due to IMF bailout plans, and worsened unemployment

[53] Nabra, in-person interview, March 23, 2024.

[54] Parikh (2023) points out how Tunisia's migration laws and lack of transparent procedures for obtaining and renewing visas themselves produce migrants' "illegality," highlighting that the "category of an 'illegal' or 'irregular' migrant is a social and political construct built largely along racial lines."

rates, instead scapegoating Sub-Saharan migrants for the government's economic failures.[55]

While the president's comments—as well as the subsequent surge of anti-black violence throughout the country, perpetrated both by state security forces and vigilante groups—brought greater attention to the racial discrimination, marginalization, and hostilities experienced by black Tunisians, these issues are not new and they permeate all of society, including feminist organizations. Similarly to Nubian feminists in Egypt, racialized women and feminists in Tunisia (including black and Amazigh feminists) have also expressed similar challenges of recognition within national politics and society at large.[56] This relates to long-term political projects to construct a unitary, Tunisian national identity, which is closely tied to Bourguiba's modernist vision for Tunisia and clearly separated from "African identity." This vision is described by Loes Debuysere as such: "The notion of 'Tunisianité' concerns an ambiguous and multifocal patriotic narrative that refers to the specificity of Tunisia, its history and identity […] of which the emancipated 'Femme' is a crucial pillar" (Debuysere 2016, 203). Yasmine Akrimi further details the narrow frame of the *Femme Tunisienne*: "She is university educated, she works, she is urban, she is secular, she comes from the upper-middle class and, as we argue, she is often light-skinned" (Akrimi 2022, 3). This also means that within the feminist movement in general, and within the groups that remained aligned or even allied with Tunisia's state feminism specifically, there has been little room for those who do not fit the mould. Indeed, several feminist organizations have been slow to respond to racist attacks in Tunisia and slow to mobilize in support of black women (see Ksiksi 2020). The nascent movement of black feminists, therefore, face challenges on multiple fronts, closely tied to the unique history and location of Tunisia.[57]

[55] In July 2023, the EU rewarded Tunisia with a one-billion-euro strategic partnership, aimed at reducing migration to Europe, further cementing the narrative that migration was the cause of Tunisia's financial woes and that cracking down on migrants and black Tunisians will be the solution—at the cost of becoming gatekeepers of the EU (see Amara 2023).

[56] Applying a global racial discourse on "whiteness" and "blackness" in the North African context is not entirely unproblematic, and some would claim an inherent contradiction in identifying as both black and Amazigh, yet people still do (see Silverstein 2020; King 2020; Tayeb 2021). Furthermore, the central aspect here is not so much what blackness *is* but rather what it *does* in the Tunisian context.

[57] I noted this during my first stint of field work in Tunis (field notes, Lafayette [Tunis], April 14, 2023), as the dispersal of migrant camps dominated both the news and conversations

A number of black activists in Tunisia have been active since before the revolution in documenting their experiences of racism and racial injustice, for example through online blogs or social media. However, in terms of more organized, collective political activism, it is not until recent years that groups have started filling this gap and begun addressing the lack of representation. *Collectif Voix des Femmes Tunisiennes Noires* (VFTN), the Voice of Tunisian Black Women Collective, is one such group, started in 2020 as a reaction to negative and abusive comments against black women on the Facebook page of #EnaZeda (started by Aswat Nissa). Today they have their own social media accounts and arrange webinars, although these too have been targeted by hackers.[58] Although the organization has grown substantially since 2020, it is still young, and it may not yet be possible to speak of a "movement" of black feminism in Tunisia. As such, this is one of their primary goals:

> One of our immediate objectives is to 'get it off our chests,' which will allow us to move to the next step, namely the creation of a movement for black women that promotes solidarity and sisterhood for black women on all levels, particularly socio-culturally and economically. (Voix des Femmes Tunisiennes Noires 2024 [translation from French by author])

Racial discrimination does not exist in a vacuum, of course, and both Tunisian and Egyptian black feminists recognize the inseparability of racism from other forms of violence and oppression, such as sexism and classism. As previously discussed, racial politics also converges and intersects with issues of language, place, and history. Situating these debates in context of colonial histories and the legacy of slavery sheds light on racialized difference and dynamics. These histories are significant for understanding the work of feminist organizations, particularly in order to contextualize the critique of black and Nubian feminists. French colonial rule in Tunisia entrenched French as a language of administration, aspiration, and modernity, while marking Arabic as vernacular, the "common tongue," and associated with tradition rather than modernity. Combined with colonial scholars constructing racial boundaries, demarcating Tunisia as separate from the rest of Africa, at least in part defining Tunisian national identity in terms of anti-blackness (see Tayeb 2021), leads to a contemporary paradox wherein French is both valorised while simultaneously

with people I met. This issue was also later raised in interviews, particularly by Aisha (Zoom interview, August 6, 2025).

[58] This was noted during digital fieldwork (December 16, 2024), particularly a post on Facebook detailing the online harassment and hacking-attempts. VFTN has since deleted their public Facebook page and now only has a private group.

looked down upon. In Egypt, British and earlier Ottoman regimes instituted their own racialized hierarchies in relation to class, region, and religion. Colonial administration and censuses treated Sudanese, Nubian, and Upper Egyptian (*Sa'idi*) populations as distinct, naturalizing difference and determining who "counts" as Egyptian (see Walz 2010).

As shown by Scaglioni (2020), nineteenth-century abolition and twentieth-century independence did not dissolve racial orders and hierarchies, but endures in everyday address, marginalization, and access to space. A clear example of this is the continuing impact of the displacement of Nubians during the 1950s and 1960s, and earlier displacement as well; separation of Nubia between Egypt and Sudan in 1898, and the destruction of Nubian land and displacement due to the construction of dams and reservoirs beginning with the Aswan Low Dam, opened in 1902, culminating with the Aswan High Dam, opened in 1970. These dams, and subsequent creation of Lake Nasser, led not only to complete submersion of many Nubian villages, but also loss of heritage and culture, and mass-displacement (Amer 2018). This influences Nubian political activism, including Nubian feminists, to this day as it is dispersed throughout the country and have to organize between Cairo, Aswan, Alexandria, the displaced villages (particularly Kom Ombo), and so on.

It is mainly in relation to these unique histories that we find key differences between Egypt and Tunisia. However, despite important differences, there are still similarities between black and/or indigenous feminists in Egypt and Tunisia, for example the attention to intersectionality, an insistence on the inseparability of gender from race and class within their activism, and a sense of marginalization within the broader feminist movement in their respective countries. Black Tunisian and Nubian Egyptian feminists are therefore faced not only with gendered exclusion and marginalization but also racialized ideas of who is included within the national imaginary, as well as who is considered inside of the feminist movement itself.

Elite Feminism and Class Difference

There is, of course, a history to feminism's perception as being a movement for elite, urban women. Feminism in Tunisia has long been seen as bourgeois—not excluding Marxist feminists, much to their chagrin—and many within the movement would say they have failed in communicating its diversity and the difference between autonomous feminist movements and

those aligned with the state or the political elite. There is still a sense that feminism and women's rights are associated with the regime of Bourguiba (and to a lesser extent the secular policies of Ben Ali), which exacerbates the problem of it being viewed as bourgeois. Feminists in Egypt report a similar challenge, in that the women's rights advocacy by former First Lady Suzanne Mubarak only cemented this perception of elitism, further associated with Mrs. Mubarak's image as a "Western-style" and "modern" first lady—sometimes rhetorically tied to her part-British family, something she shared with her predecessor, Jehan Sadat.

While many feminist groups in both Egypt and Tunisia portray the regimes of Mubarak and Ben Ali as engaging in "gender-washing," by which a women's rights discourse was used strategically to seek legitimacy in relation to the international community and to undermine religious conservative groups internally (see Tripp 2019), some Egyptian feminists present an alternative narrative. They instead view Suzanne Mubarak's advocacy as inspired by the work of her Tunisian counterpart, Leïla Ben Ali, and that Tunisia in many ways acted as a model for personal status law reforms.[59] These reforms became nicknamed "the Suzanne Mubarak laws" or *qawānīn al-hānim,* "Laws of the Lady," and were widely unpopular.[60] As previously detailed, Tunisia's personal status code is typically perceived as pioneering within the region, and Tunisia under Ben Ali "was often held up as a beacon for Western-style women's empowerment" (Lynch et el. 2016, 3). As such, it would make sense for Suzanne Mubarak to model her advocacy after Leïla Ben Ali, but this would not preclude its perception as, indeed, "Western style."

While it would be difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the true motivations and sources of inspiration for either Suzanne Mubarak or Leïla Ben Ali, this would also be outside the scope of this study. Instead, my focus here is on how their advocacy and legacy is perceived and narrated by feminists today, and what appears then are mainly three things: Co-optation, competition, and counteractive rhetoric. Co-optation is likely the most common point of feminist critique against both first ladies and aligns in broad terms with the general argument against authoritarian state feminism; that Mubarak and Ben Ali undermined feminist organizations by instrumentalizing a discourse of women's rights in order to project an image of progressivity while retaining

[59] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

[60] For examples of criticism against the reforms, see articles by Al-Zayat (2011a; 2011b), published in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, a semi-independent, privately owned, liberal-leaning daily newspaper which is one of the most widely circulated in Egypt.

credit for reforms, thereby removing agency and credibility from the feminist groups and limiting their influence.[61] The "competition-argument," by contrast follows the alternative narrative presented above, portraying the first ladies as involved in competition with each other over a public image as the foremost champion for women's rights in the region.[62] This argument retains the effect of denying the influence of feminist groups but differs in terms of explanatory logic. Lastly, some groups, mainly those who were close to Suzanne Mubarak and Leïla Ben Ali, mainly direct their criticism towards the rhetoric used to dismiss reforms introduced during the respective governments.[63] Rather than criticize the first ladies for pushing through reforms without supporting grass-roots work to mobilize and generate political support for them, they critique oppositional, often Islamist, groups for employing labels tying the reforms to the first ladies. They argue that this nicknaming was a rhetorical/political strategy used by opponents of feminism, in an attempt to generate resistance. Those who forward this argument claim that the reforms indeed happened in large part due to the work of feminist organizations, and by labelling them the "Suzanne Mubarak laws" or similar nicknames, the work done by those organizations is dismissed. As such, it would not necessarily be the fault of the first lady, even though the narrative still acknowledges the lack of good-will towards Suzanne Mubarak, believing that the reforms themselves would not be so unpopular if they were not associated with her.

Regardless of the perception and narration of the first ladies and the reforms introduced during their time, it remains that the women's rights advocacy of Leïla Ben Ali and Suzanne Mubarak contributes to the perception of feminism as elitist and against the interests of the working-class, including working-class women. This compounds with the iconization of historical feminist figures, such as Doria Shafik and Bchira Ben Mrad, who are also often described as elitist or bourgeois women (see for example Cole 1981; Al-Ali 2002) contributing to this negative perception of feminism and of the movement.

[61] Sabah, in-person interview, March 4, 2024; Naila, in-person interview, March 14, 2024.

[62] Asma, zoom interview, March 8, 2024.

[63] Aziza, phone interview, December 18, 2024. See also Mohammed (2013) for an example of this argument.

Authenticity and Religious Difference

The Islamic feminist critique against mainstream organizations is particularly connected to policies against veiling, such as banning the veil in public schools and universities—policies which were supported by feminist groups such as ATFD in Tunisia and, earlier, the EFU in Egypt. However, there are also non-Muslim feminists—even some I have met during fieldwork who said they are personally critical of the practice of veiling—who argue that ATFD made a big mistake prior to the 2011 uprisings in taking a strong stance against veiling. Particularly criticized is a 2003 statement from ATFD, lamenting the fact that women were increasingly veiling, calling the veil "a symbol of the confinement of women and of regression."[64] This alienated many Muslim women and cemented the view of ATFD as a secular, anti-Muslim, and elitist organization. Furthermore, young feminists may view the policies against veiling as counterproductive as they made it into a symbol of resistance against political elitism and politics' encroachment on personal life choices, which in turn encouraged more people to veil. This aligns with Yacoubi (2016, 260) arguing that the veil had, since the 1990s, shifted to become "a manifestation of hostility toward the state and the Western liberalism it stood for."

Dorah Mongalgi, co-founder of the feminist festival Chouftohonna, similarly indicates critical views of ATFD, though also says they "were blamed for many things, such as being too elite-oriented and not being inclusive towards some women, nevertheless, we owe them our current rights" (quoted in Blaise 2016). Since 2011, ATFD has shifted their stance on the "problem" of veiling, largely driven by generational turnover.[65] They adopted a more intersectional approach, de-emphasized their critique of religious practices, and have become more inclusive of Muslim women—potentially related to their wish of being a "universalist feminist organization"[66]—but such past mistakes are still

[64] Statement by ATFD reproduced in Tunis News, published August 13, 2003. Accessed December 9, 2024: https://tunisnews.net/13-aout-2003/. Translation by author.

[65] Noor, in-person interview, November 28, 2023; Reem, in-person interview November 30, 2023; Field notes, Tunis Centre (Tunis), December 1, 2023.

[66] One interlocutor who is a current member of the board for ATFD, Aziza, used the term "universalist feminist" to describe the organization. This may imply a form of feminism that attempts to erase differences and promote a universalizing vision for feminist politics. However, taken together with other answers, such as an emphasis on intersectionality, I understand this to mean that they wish to be a "broad tent" organization that gathers feminists of all kinds. By contrast, a former member of the board who also identified ATFD as "universalist feminist" argued that this is a clear distinction between historical, registered organizations (such as ATFD) and unregistered grassroots organizations or

negatively influencing how people view them. However, while one member of the board of directors for ATFD told me that their work today has "nothing to do with religion,"[67] their own online material still describes their mission as "feminist, secular, and progressive," or in French: "féministe, laïque, et progressiste."[68] As such, *laïcité* is not simply a label applied unto ATFD by others, but a self-declared mission of ATFD themselves. This, combined with past statements, encourages interpretation of them as taking a hardline position against religious expression in public life, despite a shift towards intersectional analysis and activism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored challenges faced by feminist organizations in Egypt and Tunisia which—to various extent and along lines of place, race, class, language, religion, and sexuality—relates to difference. Based on this, I draw a number of conclusions. First, difference is cast onto feminism itself, by which I mean that social differences (such as foreignness, elitism, secularism) are projected onto feminism as if it were inherent or intrinsic features. This allows state authorities and opponents of feminism differentiate between activism perceived as threatening and activism considered allowable, wherein, ironically, "foreign" or elitist feminist organizing is more tolerable as it is considered unrelated to the concerns of ordinary Egyptians and Tunisians. As such, this perception of feminist activism is not just discursive or rhetorical but informs state regulation and response. Work that remains perceived as elite—either in terms of the specific cause, the targets of feminist critique, the location of activism, or the form of organizing—can be tolerated, while feminists focusing particularly on the concerns of working-class women are met with harsher repression. Therefore, the difference detailed here is as much spatial as it is classed and forms an ideology of permission: allowable activism is defined by the "what" and the "where" (and potentially even the "when").

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informal groups, in that the latter are more comfortable to identify as intersectional rather than universalist, thus placing the two in opposition. The contrast in these answers from one current and one former member of the board of directors may further indicate a shift within ATFD in recent years.

[67] Aziza, phone interview, December 18, 2023.

[68] "Qui sommes nous," ATFD. Accessed January 15, 2024: https://atfd-tunisie.org/qui-sommes-nous/

I further argue that difference is to a large extent both performed and policed through language and linguistic gatekeeping. This is particularly evident in Tunisia, where Arabic is framed as more authentic, and associated both with rural communities and with pious, Muslim women, while French is associated with elite schooling, liberal–secular projects, and colonial legacy. Yet, language politics also reveal some contradictions in terms of racial difference, as I note how black Tunisians will speak Tunisian Arabic to strangers only to be answered in French. This is perceived as a way of excluding them from "Tunisian-ness," assigning them to the category of "outsider," and associating both blackness and the French language with Tunisia's migrant and refugee communities. Language therefore becomes a gatekeeping device that upholds difference along both racial and class lines even as it claims to mark authenticity in contradictory ways. The choice of working language in feminist organizations, how they communicate in public campaigns, and perform their digital outreach may then impact not only their audience but also how they are perceived. Their awareness of this influences their external communication as well as the networks they form and how they relate to other organizations.

Feminist organizations in both Egypt and Tunisia are acutely aware of these dynamics and actively try to dispel elitist perceptions. This mainly take the form of widening their work by shifting outreach beyond the capital or urban areas and changing their external communication. Islamic feminists, as well as younger generations of intersectional feminists (further detailed in the next chapter), have pushed mainstream organizations to abandon a secularist discourse which treats religion as the main obstacle for feminist politics. In both countries, critiques against a hard anti-veiling stance previously held by mainstream feminist organizations have led to a more intersectional analysis, recognizing that such positions inadvertently reproduce marginalization of rural, working-class, and Muslim women. However, these changes in approach and analysis are uneven and I note that tension and contestation is still present. Nevertheless, in attempting to shed the "elitist" label, the fault-lines of class, race, religions, and language move inside the organizations themselves, forcing them to rethink who has been excluded by previous positions, and what kinds of arguments, practices, and references (including religious ones) they consider legitimate ground to build their feminism from. As such, changes within the movements toward increased inclusion is not simply about widening their base, but a question of developing different analyses. Viewed in this manner, difference is not an obstacle to overcome, it is a resource to draw from (see also Mohanty 2003). More importantly, it is the infrastructure which feminist politics is built upon.

Racial politics and racialized dynamics are increasingly visible facets of the feminist movements in both Egypt and Tunisia. Although still in its early stages, and with some conflicting perspectives on whether it is possible to speak of such a "movement," I note at least the possibility of a black feminist movement in Tunisia and parallel projects among Nubian feminists in Egypt. Their critiques converge in stating that mainstream organizations have been race-blind or have disregarded racialized women's concerns as unrelated to the feminist movement, thereby flattening out difference and erasing how race, place, language, and class intersect with gender. Crucially, the work of black and Nubian feminists does not simply "add race" to an existing agenda but has the potential to reframe what counts as feminist work. Given recent ideological shifts within mainstream organizations, time may favour those feminists who are pushing for an intersectional analysis which is attentive to issues of racial discrimination and spatial differences within the movement itself.

Finally, I want to emphasize that exploring difference does not entail narrating fragmentation. Although the feminist movements in Tunisia and even more so in Egypt do appear increasingly fragmented, it is not in relation to emerging movements but rather increased state repression and a deteriorated civil society in general. Race, class, religion, language, and space are equally the means by which feminist claims gain voice, audiences, and legitimacy, but also the means by which they get filtered, policed, or excluded. Egyptian and Tunisian feminists are not just navigating these divisions but theorizing them—through strategies about where and how to organize, which languages to privilege, and what archives to build (which is explored further in the next chapter). When they contest elitism, centre racialized women, or prioritize colloquial Arabic, they are doing more than widening the movement or working for inclusion; they are altering the infrastructures of feminist legitimacy, in fact strengthening the foundation on which solidarity can be built. This is the analytic payoff: difference is not a problem to be flattened or smoothed out, but a resource and more importantly an infrastructure—one that the following chapters explore further by tracing how coalitions are built across both temporal and spatial boundaries.

Chapter 5: Time

> Tomorrow belongs to those of us who conceive of it as belonging to everyone, who lend the best of ourselves to it, and with joy.
>
> – Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (1988)

This chapter focuses on the temporal border-setting within feminist activism in Egypt and Tunisia, presenting and analysing findings related to how "time" and temporality influence feminist political activism and feminists' solidarity work. The main argument can be formulated in two parts: First, that the timing practices and temporal perspectives of feminist organizations and movement participants delimit the possibilities and impact of their activism. Secondly, that intergenerational relations constitute a major challenge for the formation and sustaining of feminist solidarity, and, in the long-run, movement cohesion and longevity.

Drawing mainly from textual material produced by the studied organizations—such as policy documents, organizational charters/mission statements, annual reports, solidarity statements, calls for action, and other campaign material—and using interview material for contextualizing, providing details otherwise missing in the material, the chapter begins by detailing the timing practices of the activists and organizations, the narration and (re)construction of feminist histories, periodization(s), as well as how and to what extent they draw from the past to shape their activism. I then explore deliberate attempts at "restorative history," by which feminist activists showcase an understanding of historical narratives as resources in the present.

Lastly, the chapter explores "generations" and generational turnover within feminist activism, cross-generational replication of practices and repertoires, processes of knowledge transmission across different cohorts of activists, and tensions arising from differences in priorities and strategies. Generational interaction shapes feminist tactics and narratives, but there is also a risk for disruptions caused by generational gaps or lack of intergenerational engagement, delimiting the potential for intergenerational solidarity and broad

cross-generational feminist alliances. In this regard, special attention is given to the notion of a "lost" generation, considering the impact of political instability and migration on the continuity and trajectory of feminist activism in the region.

Zooming out from the specific practices and challenges detailed, I conclude by arguing that the temporal strategies employed are not only reflective of the organizations' priorities but are active processes that shape and are shaped by contemporary feminist activism in a co-constitutive manner. The past—and constructions of the past—is inevitably linked to the present, informing current actions and future aspirations, at the same time as the work to envision and encourage alternative feminist futures is constrained by the activists' timing practices as well as their political practices. One way of conceptualizing this, I argue, is by viewing time as a field of struggle and, crucially, paying attention to how the field is shaped by the struggle as much as the struggle is shaped by the field.

Feminist Activism across Temporal Borders

Beginning in December 2010, eyes around the world turned towards Tunisia, as the popular uprising against President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali grew larger. Soon, the uprising spread to Egypt and several other countries in the region. Among the many things that can be said about how the mass protests were talked about—in global news outlets, by pundits, policy makers, and on social media—a notable and prevalent narrative was that this was the first time that these countries experienced protests in which women were taking active part. However, as Pratt (2020) argues, "such attitudes reflected an Orientalist epistemology, denying the possibility of women's agency within 'Arab-Muslim culture,' and viewing it, instead, as an expression of 'Western' values of freedom and autonomy" (Pratt 2020, 3). Of course, neither women's political activism nor feminist activism are new phenomena in the Middle East and North Africa. As have been detailed earlier in this dissertation, Egyptian and Tunisian feminist histories stretch back at least to the early 20th century. Yet, existing narratives of feminism's naissance in the MENA region, as told by feminist activists and organizations themselves, vary and often commence from different points.

The first part of the narrative analysis applied in this dissertation focuses on stories about the origins and development of feminism in Egypt and Tunisia.

In both countries there are three main stories cited as the source of their respective movements; (1) social and cultural transformation in the mid- to late 1800s, (2) women's participation in the respective independence movements, early- to mid 1900s, and (3) iconized, feminist pioneers who paved the way, such as the founders of the first women's rights organizations. These three "stories" are not themselves narratives but make up one corner of the narrative triad (story-text-narration) to which multiplicity is added to capture variation and repetition.

Within these broader stories of feminism's naissance there are, of course, also differences and nuances, mainly visible by taking a closer look at the second corner of the triad, the text. However, the organizations' founding documents, outreach material, campaign material and other texts they produce typically do not provide detailed accounts of the movement's history, only sharing enough to explain their own role within the movement and provide rationale for their existence, why they are needed, or why they were founded in the first place. Furthermore, these organizations also differ in their temporal perspective. Archival work and knowledge-production/dissemination on feminist histories are central concerns for some organizations (Women and Memory Forum, Ganoubia Hora), some produce a few texts concerning the past, although it cannot be said to be central to their work (ATFD, New Woman Foundation, Musawah, Mawjoudin), while others purely focus their work on the present and/or future (Aswat Nissa, Egyptian Feminist Union, Nazra for Feminist Studies). This difference in temporal perspective is also reflected in the extent to which the organization provides detailed historical narratives or simply brief descriptions of their own organizational history—or indeed no organizational history at all. As such, we have to turn to interviews for richer, more detailed origin stories, which exemplifies and further reveals diverging narratives as well as differences in temporality.

Feminist Beginnings

Academic Narratives

Feminist scholarship on Egypt and Tunisia reflects a long history and tradition of women's political organizing in both countries, but also represent its own narrative on where, when, and how feminist mobilization began. A common "starting point" in the Egyptian case is the 1880s, when Aisha Taymur and other women began publishing "allegorical fiction, and essays on gender and social practice" (Booth 2013, 44). Taymur was an Egyptian woman of Turco-

Kurdish origins, whose writings on women's status in Egypt and the Muslim world at large is often described as pioneering in challenging gender norms at the time (Booth 2017). Finding women largely absent from mainstream history texts, Taymur saw a need of filling this intellectual gap in women's history, though her writing was mainly fictional, unlike that of her contemporary, Zaynab Fawwaz. Born in southern Lebanon but living and working most of her life in Cairo, Fawwaz is known for her biographies about other women, including one she wrote about Taymur. This biography appeared in a compilation text, entitled *Scattered Pearls on the Generations of the Mistresses of Seclusion*, which draws specifically from a genre on "generations" (*tabaqāt* in Arabic). This is a genre which dates back centuries, with the earliest example being *The Great Book of Generations* by Muhammad Ibn Sa'd (d. 845 C.E.). According to the feminist literary scholar and Arabic translator Marilyn Booth, *tabaqāt* literature is a culturally specific practice of narrating completed lives, and she argues that by writing within this genre "Fawwaz appropriated a long-lived, male-authored genre for an emerging discourse of gendered experience and aspirations that would lay the groundwork for Arab women's ascendant feminisms" (Booth 2001, 2).

There are, of course, alternative narratives and histories on the development of Egypt's feminist movement in the academic literature. Homa Hoodfar, for example, traces the origins of the Egyptian feminist movement to the social restructuring that the country went through during the reign of Mohammed Ali, 1805-1848, and 19th century reformers such as Qasim Amin (Hoodfar 1992). Amin was an Egyptian lawyer and writer who, quite problematically, is sometimes called the "first Arab feminist" or the "father of Egyptian feminism." Nevertheless, he too wrote about women's status and role in Egyptian society, and on the role of history. In his most famous book, *The Liberation of Women* (*al-Tahrīr al-marʾah*), he writes that history can teach us about the status of women, and further argues that this status is linked to the status of the nation:

> This evidence of history confirms and demonstrates that the status of women is inseparably tied to the status of a nation. When the status of a nation is low, reflecting an uncivilized condition for that nation, the status of women is also low, and when the status of a nation is elevated, reflecting the progress and civilization of that nation, the status of women in that country is also elevated. (Amin 2000 [1899], 6)

While definitely relying on a modernist, teleological logic, Amin indicates a discontinuity in the status of women, thus opening the possibility for change.

Amin goes on to make the argument that, considering the fact that women "comprise at least half the total population of the world" (Amin 2000, 12), their exclusion and marginalization in society—such as the denial of access to education or participation in the work force—also denies society the benefits of the abilities of half the population. In making this argument, he is building on the belief that change is not only possible but necessary, which is a common theme in early feminist writing on history (see Hannam 2008). The above quote is also an example of a common theme in feminist writing at the time, namely that "[n]ationalism was the leading idiom through which issues pertaining to women's position in society were articulated" (Kandiyoti 1995, 9).

In Tunisia, we find similar themes, including a man often labelled as an early, feminist pioneer (not only in academic writing but also by my interlocutors). The man in question is Tahar Haddad who, like Amin in Egypt, was involved in the Tunisian movement for national independence, although mainly made a name for himself through the publication of the book *Our Women in Shari'a and Society* in 1930 (see Charrad 2001; Weideman 2016). Arfaoui (2007) also describes the early feminist movement in Tunisia as similar to that of Egypt, such as that the nationalist movement of the time provided an opportunity for women to enter the public sphere—though, importantly, noting that this opportunity was mainly available to upper-class, educated women. One of the pioneers in this movement was Bchira Ben Mrad (also frequently named by interlocutors), who in 1936 founded the Muslim Union of Tunisian Women, drawing inspiration from Huda Shaarawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union founded in 1923. Arfaoui (2007) further divides the history of Tunisian feminism into three distinct eras: the early movement (c. 1920s-1956) which was marked by the nationalist struggle against colonial occupation; the early independent era (c. 1956-1970s), marked by institutionalization and state feminism; and the beginning of an autonomous movement (c. 1970s-2000s).[69]

Kallander (2021) delves deeper into the state feminism of Tunisia in the 1960s, and details how the Tunisian state, under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba, strategically employed women's rights as part of its nation-building project.

[69] The concept of *state feminism* is used somewhat differently by Arfaoui compared to its original conceptualization by Helga Hernes (1987). In this context, it is used to describe a sort of gender washing by political elites, instrumentalizing a *discourse* of women's rights, embedded in a larger modernization project, in order to project an image of progressivity, while retaining the authority to grant or deny civil and political rights—i.e., women's rights were granted by the president as a supposed sign of his good and progressive leadership, rather than as a response to demands from women's rights activists. This conceptualization is shared by most who use the term in the Middle Eastern context, including interlocutors in this study as well as Kallander (2021).

Kallander argues that the state's engagement with feminism was not merely a response to women's demands but a deliberate strategy to shape and project a modern, progressive image of Tunisia on the global stage. However, in her account, we can again find many similarities with Egyptian feminist repertoires of the 20th century, such as the strategy of nationalist women's unions to publish magazines:

> The women's press shaped popular narratives about women's place in society by situating Tunisian feminism in relation to the experiences of women elsewhere. In fact, women in Tunisia had participated in anticolonial women's networks for decades following calls from Egyptian feminist Saiza Nabarawi to unite Asian and "Eastern" women, and Lebanese feminist Nour Hamada's First Eastern Women's Congress in Damascus in 1930. (Kallander 2021, 39)

Kallander further questions the claim of Tunisian exceptionalism in the area of women's rights; a claim often made in relation to early postcolonial legislation such as the personal status code being described as "the most extensive" in the Middle East:

> The singular focus on family law as determining women's rights often marginalizes broader social and political contexts, while the claim to exceptionalism obscures commonalities with Egypt, Turkey, Algeria, or Morocco. Legal frameworks of emancipation extended state power over the home through the regulation of marriage and divorce, while granting the state the patriarchal privilege of protecting those rights. (Kallander 2021, 14).

Similarly, Nadia Marzouki argues that this state monopoly on women's issues—i.e., that "women's rights are granted by the ruling elite or the ruler himself" (Marzouki 2010, 199)—is something that Tunisia shares with Algeria and Morocco. In order words, rather than exceptionalism, Marzouki and Kallander emphasize commonality in terms of legal framework, but Kallander also highlights commonality in terms of feminist practices of resistance (such as anticolonial women's networks).

Organizational Narratives, Tunisia

In Tunisia, the independence from France in 1956, and the subsequent political reforms that followed, is often utilized as a starting point of an organized feminist movement in Tunisia although this origin story have become more contested in recent years.[70] The personal status code enacted in 1957 is

[70] Noor, in-person interview, November 28, 2023.

particularly highlighted as a milestone, making it a common reference point for feminist origin stories in Tunisia. Within the region, this personal status code is often perceived as pioneering or progressive (Chekir 2016), meaning that even feminists in Egypt are typically aware of its status.[71] As pointed out by Kallander (2021) this emphasis on family law as the main determinant of women's rights may be problematic, marginalizing other areas of political and social transformation, but it is nevertheless such a prevalent story that even those who want to tell other stories often begin by mentioning that the importance of the 1957 personal status code is overstated.[72]

While some Tunisian feminists highlight the independence from France as the beginning of an organized feminist movement, others would specifically emphasize the establishment of the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) in the same year. Alternatively, those emphasizing the independence movement itself assert that the participation of female independence fighters fundamentally transformed societal perceptions of women's roles in politics and public life.[73] Additional significant milestones cited in interviews include the work of Bchira Ben Mrad, the establishment of the Muslim Union of Tunisian Women (UMFT) in 1936, and the publication of Tahar Haddad's book *Our Women in the Sharia and Society* in 1930. Such specific origin stories—citing particular events, years, and people—are rare in the available texts from the Tunisian organizations themselves. In fact, there is only one single example of this, from ATFD, which makes an implicit distinction between the women's organizations and unions supported by the state and the "autonomous feminist movement" in the narration of their history:

> ATFD was founded by the autonomous women's movement, which, since the 1970s, had materialised various forms and structures: the 1978 "Tahar Haddad" Club for the Study of the Condition of Women, 1982 UGTT Commission for the Study of the Condition of Women Workers, the 1983 "Nissa" magazine, and the 1984 LTDH Women's Commission. This was then followed by the birth of the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) in 1988 and finally ATFD in 1989.[74]

[71] Asma, zoom interview, March 8, 2024.

[72] Reem, in-person interview, November 30, 2023.

[73] Selma, in-person interview, November 16, 2023; Reem, in-person interview, November 30, 2023.

[74] "Who Are We," ATFD. Accessed January 18, 2024: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/who-are-we/

Here, ATFD paints a picture of a movement which started in the 1970s, laying a foundation of feminist clubs, magazines, and commissions, which eventually led to the formation of their association. Although still not particularly detailed, ATFD provides not just a story of their own origins, but the origins of the movement they consider themselves part of. What is described here obviously does not fit in with any of the four main stories (in the case of Tunisia) that I have identified, and the reason for that is that they immediately continue by establishing a different origin story:

> This movement strived for: the rehabilitation of the women's struggle since the 1930's, the recognition of the pioneering work of the Muslim Union of Tunisian Women (UMFT) and the Union of Tunisian Women (UFT), and the revival of the celebration of the 8th of March (International Women's Day), which had not been celebrated since the 1940's.[75]

In other words, the story presented by ATFD here is not that Tunisian feminism originated in the 1970s, but rather that the *autonomous* feminist movement (as opposed to state feminism), which led to the formation of ATFD, began then. Feminist struggle—or "women's struggle" in their words—began in the 1930s, which they largely credit to the work of the Muslim Union of Tunisian Women (UMFT) and the Union of Tunisian Women (UFT), presenting the autonomous movement of the 1970s as a revival of this struggle. This further strengthens the implicit distancing from Bourguiba's state-sanctioned feminism, portraying a breakage of the nascent movement due to nationalization and co-optation when these two organizations were supplanted by the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) after Bourguiba came to power:

> B'chira Ben M'rad, who had remained at the head of UMFT until then, was quickly replaced without Bourguiba ever recognizing her activism during those years of national struggle for independence. (Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2017, 50)

ATFD thus presents themselves as born out of the autonomous feminist movement, itself a continuation or revival of women's political participation and struggle during the 1930s and 1940s. This would indicate that they acted, to some degree, in opposition to the state-aligned women's groups which raises the question of why Ben Ali, who was president at the time, would allow their registration as an official NGO. According to Aziza, who is on the board of directors for ATFD, this stemmed from Ben Ali's wish to create his own legacy

[75] "Who Are We," ATFD. Accessed January 18, 2024: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/who-are-we/

and be seen as even more progressive on women's rights than Bourguiba, which in turn may be seen as a second attempt at co-optation of the revived feminist movement.[76]

Although early post-independence legislation is commonly portrayed as pioneering in terms of women's rights relative to other countries in the region, the narration of which is often delivered with a distinct sense of national pride, alternative views and narratives also tend to emphasize deep threads of feminism in Tunisia and highlight an entanglement with other narratives such as that of colonialism and national independence. For example, some feminists caution against declaring a particular historical figure as feminist or not and may argue that for example the establishment of women's hospitals initiated by daughters of the Tunisian Bey improved the living conditions for many Tunisian women and hence belongs in the history of Tunisian feminism, regardless of whether they would consider so themselves—implying that they would not.[77] This exemplifies a departure from the otherwise prevalent story in Tunisia of connecting the feminist movement to the movement for national independence, and may be understood as an attempt to de-privilege the state-sanctioned feminism that is associated with Bourguiba, instead emphasizing a deeper and older Tunisian history of women's rights advocacy. Both these stories, however, share in their emphasis on the local, Tunisian level. Rather than constructing feminist ideas and practices as something that was brought in from the outside world, particularly by the French colonial regime, women's rights are positioned as deeply Tunisian, and indeed anti-colonial.

There is some blurring here, between women's rights and feminist politics, which should be noted. As stated in chapter 2, I define feminism, following bell hooks, as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. While women's rights activism is not precisely the same as feminist activism there is, of course, an overlap as well as shared histories. Furthermore, there is little to be gained for this dissertation in demarcating what the boundaries of feminist history are, rather than centring the feminists' own perspective in narrating the movement's birth. In the material analysed here, there is an emphasis on advocacy for (and advancement of) women's rights as being either the origin or a precursor of the feminist movement. In other words, highlighting initiatives of the daughters of the Bey functions as a centring of practices that improve the lives of women, indicating that as a central concern

[76] Aziza, phone interview, December 18, 2023.

[77] Reem, in-person interview, November 30, 2023.

for contemporary feminists, while also downplaying the importance of labelling or ideological stake-claiming in narrating feminist histories. Any potential differences between women's rights advocacy and feminist activism, therefore, becomes less important. The priority is instead to exemplify the kind of practices and the kind of politics that improves the lives of women. This is a common theme for feminist origin stories in both Tunisia and Egypt.

Organizational Narratives, Egypt

Turning to Egypt, the stories I find there share many similarities with Tunisia, particularly in this emphasis on deep, national threads. Highlighting the work and activism of nationalists and independence leaders Safiya Zaghloul and Huda Shaarawi is a common starting point, although some begin in the 1800s with the social and cultural reforms of the *Nahda* ("Awakening," sometimes called the "Arab Enlightenment") during the rule of Muhammad Ali. Others emphasize the role of 19th century feminist writers, such as Aisha Taymur, in reimagining women's role and status in Arab and Muslim contexts at large. The material collected from Egyptian organizations and through interviews with Egyptian feminists do however reveal a much stronger presence of stories focusing on iconized figures. Similar to how the 1957 personal status code occupies such a privileged position within Tunisian feminist history narratives, Zaghloul, Shaarawi, and Shafik are so commonly referenced as progenitors of the Egyptian feminist movement that those who disagree with this narrative often begin their own origin stories by rejecting it. This may take different forms, such as by carefully stating that Zaghloul, Shaarawi, and Shafik were pioneers but that they were not alone and that we must not forget "the power of the ordinary woman,"[78] or by outright rejecting them as elitist figures whose iconicized status overshadows working-class women and their struggle for equal rights, for example through participation in trade unions, the Egyptian labour movement, and national strikes.[79]

Nevertheless, particularly Huda Shaarawi figures prominently in the existing origin stories as told by feminist organizations in Egypt. A contributing factor to this may be that Shaarawi is a broadly well-known figure, not just within the feminist movement but within the general population too. Many would learn about her in school, although not as a women's rights advocate or feminist but

[78] Sarah, Zoom interview, May 12, 2023.

[79] Sabah, in-person interview, March 4, 2024; Mona, in-person interview, March 22, 2024.

as an anti-occupation leader.[80] This indicates that an entanglement of feminist histories and national independence movements in the context of Egypt runs the risk of erasing feminism from the re-telling of history. Aware of the problem of such erasure, several feminist organizations—perhaps most notably the Women and Memory Forum (WMF), founded in Egypt in 1997—focus their work on documenting and disseminating stories about historical figures and important milestones from a feminist point of view, emphasizing the significance of, for example, Huda Shaarawi not just as an advocate for national independence, but also as an advocate for women's rights. In terms of historiography and archiving, the WMF emphasizes two areas of interest for them:

1. Excavating women's roles and contributions in cultural and intellectual history.

2. Restoring women's lives and history in collective memory.[81]

These focus areas stem from their belief 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."[82] As such, the historiographical and archival work becomes an important tool in their goal to "support and empower women through the production and dissemination of knowledge."[83] Embedded in this mission statement is also an explicit acknowledgement of history—or more accurately, dominant historical narratives—as playing an active role in shaping contemporary social, cultural, and political lives of women and therefore, as Bonnie G. Smith writes about temporality, "a ground for women's political movements" (Smith 2015, 977).

Similarly to Tunisia, the Egyptian organizations rarely provide detailed origin stories beyond their own beginnings, although speaking to former and current representatives of their leadership reveals the wide diversity of narratives existing in parallel. This ranges from those who consider the movement to have begun after 2011, to those who weave historical threads from ancient Egypt:

[80] Sarah, Zoom interview, May 12, 2023.

[81] "About Us: Historiography & Archives," Women and Memory Forum. Accessed October 31, 2025: https://wmf.org.eg/en/about/

[82] "About WMF: Our History," Women and Memory Forum.

[83] "About WMF: Goals," Women and Memory Forum.

> It's embedded in our culture and embedded in our history as well. Even before the known history, we've known it since the pharaohs . . . Egypt is one of the first civilizations in the world. And during the civilization of the ancient Egyptians, they knew the female goddesses. Until the Greek conquered Egypt, by Alexander, there were many hundreds of female goddesses, and the Egyptians used to worship, respect, and seek the blessing of those women. And the Egyptian society was a marental, not a parental society. Women used to have equal rights, if not more rights than men.[84]

Beginning the narration of Egyptian feminist history by referring to ancient Egypt is simultaneously quite unexpected and, in my view, quite expectedly Egyptian. Amer, a former board member of the Egyptian Feminist Union, does precisely this, thereby emphasizing a deep history, which in turn is contrasted with the abrogation of women's rights that he attributes to the Greek conquest of Egypt. While this is not a particularly common view—and raises questions about whether goddess worship qualifies as "feminist practice"—it shares with other narratives this emphasis on a deep history and placing the influence of foreign powers as an obstacle, rather than a source, for women's rights. As such, this origin story positions anti-feminist sentiment, rather than feminism, as imposed from the outside. Such a positioning occurs at multiple layers, even within Egypt and in ways that potentially could contradict Amer's perspective. Warda, a Nubian feminist from Aswan, tells me that Nubia was historically a "feminist culture," exemplifying this with reference to the many female monarchs and a now lost veneration of women in Nubian society.[85] In this story then, Egypt is positioned by Warda similarly to how Amer positions Greece, as the outside entity responsible for the loss of a feminist culture.

It is important to note here that neither Warda nor Amer really treats ancient Egyptian or Nubian society as a starting point of feminist history, but rather as a preface of their narration to argue for a "local" connection and authenticity that is contrasted with the otherwise prevalent narrative of foreign influence. This is also relevant in relation to the previously mentioned questions, whether a presence of female goddesses or monarchs is evidential of a feminist society, as this is not really the point they were trying to make. Yet, there might still be an intriguing, albeit complex, temporality at play here. In terms of feminism as a political movement and ideology for women's rights and gender equality,

[84] Amer, Zoom interview, May 15, 2023. Note: At the time, I followed the logic of Amer's statement and therefore did not ask for clarification, but understood this to mean "matrilineal, not patrilineal society," if not "matriarchal, not patriarchal society."

[85] Warda, in-person interview, March 7, 2024.

Amer relays a more conventional history, referencing demonstrations led by women during the 1919 revolution against British colonial rule in Egypt. Warda, on the other hand, focuses on the Nubian feminist movement, which she refers to as a recent phenomenon, only emerging in the last decade as a reaction to an inability of the larger movement to perceive women from her background: "The [Egyptian] feminist movement can't see a woman like me."[86] This highlights specifically how Nubian experiences are marginalized within the feminist movement, but also reflects more broadly a sort of race-blindness.

Having prefaced these narratives with an emphasis on much deeper histories, framed in some ways as a better ideal of a feminist society, they are weaved together and creates links between past and present. For Warda, especially, this becomes important as it means that in her vision of feminist futures, Nubian identity and culture is centred rather than erased. She places contemporary Nubian feminism within a larger Egyptian movement yet draws from Nubian history to "encourage certain outcomes rather than others, reflective of specific priorities" (Hom 2020, 11)—the priority for Warda being to promote a vision of feminist activism that is more attentive to local context and issues of class, race, social status, and so on. Therefore, centring Nubian identity, history, and culture does not entail a separatist approach, but rather a way to decentre and democratize the Egyptian feminist movement, making it more inclusive. This is not by any means a unique mission for Nubian feminists which is made explicit in the self-narrated story of Ganoubia Hora: "We see ourselves as an integral part of the Egyptian feminist context, as well as the regional, African, and global context."[87]

Restorative History

The work and activism of feminist organizations with a temporal perspective emphasizing the past as a resource—mainly the Women and Memory Forum (WMF) and Ganoubia Hora—can be understood, at least in part, as restorative history. The production of history inevitably builds on both exclusion and inclusion, selectively authorizing certain narratives over others, which may

[86] Warda, in-person interview, March 7, 2024.

[87] "About: Who We Are," Ganoubia Hora, accessed January 18, 2024: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/about/

also require erasure of stories that bear witness of alternative pasts. The problem of women's absence from mainstream history texts has long been recognized by feminist writers, in the Arab world and elsewhere. Restorative history, then, seeks to shed light on people and stories that have traditionally been excluded. This happens on multiple levels, such as national historical narratives excluding women—leading to the WMF's interest in "restoring women's lives and history in collective memory"[88]—at the same time as what we may call "mainstream feminist histories" exclude Nubian women, as argued by Warda and other Nubian feminists. The work of WMF and Ganoubia Hora, therefore, also aligns with the argument of Smith (2015), who says that the writing of women's histories often does not treat the past in a teleological mode of progress but, at least to some extent, "considers the events of centuries ago to have been a golden age" (Smith 2015, 975).

Like WMF, Ganoubia Hora considers knowledge production to be at the heart of feminist activism. In their own words, "knowledge production has been the cornerstone of historical narratives, the transfer of information, and the definition of individual identities."[89] They particularly stress the importance of documentation for future generations: "We aim to document the experiences of women in southern Egypt and to extensively research the history of women in southern Egypt."[90] Apart from Ganoubia Hora's focus on women in and from Upper Egypt, their work also departs from that of WMF in its temporal relations. While Ganoubia Hora highlights the importance of knowledge about history for contemporary feminists, and stresses that such knowledge informs and shapes their activism, their mission is also decidedly more forward-looking:

> From a feminist perspective, it captures women's emotions across eras, amplifies their voices, shapes their priorities, and serves as a legacy for future generations while enriching the understanding of current ones. Knowledge production also involves analysis that fosters comprehension, shapes laws, and crystallizes awareness. Consequently, we focus on knowledge production as a

[88] "About Us: Historiography & Archives," Women and Memory Forum, accessed October 31, 2025: https://wmf.org.eg/en/about/

[89] "نحن من [who are we?]," Ganoubia Hora, accessed January 18, 2024: https://ganoubia-hora.com/نحن-من/ [translation by author and Rafah Barhoum]; Note, the English version of the same webpage does not precisely match the wording here. The English webpage is clearly meant to say what is reproduced here, but the translation required correction for clarity, which is why I opted to quote the Arabic version instead. Compare "About: Our Goals," accessed November 2, 2025: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/about/

[90] "نحن من [who are we?]," Ganoubia Hora.

> tool for the feminist movement to articulate our vision on issues affecting women in southern Egypt.[91]

As such, where WMF focuses mainly on history as a resource in the present, effecting change by supporting and disseminating feminist historical research, Ganoubia Hora has a stronger emphasis on documenting the present as a resource for the future. This approach follows Loewen Walker's (2014) argument about the "living present;" an enfolding of past, present, and future, or more concretely, that the past and the future are always dimensions of the present, and that the work we conduct in the present therefore entails engagement with both past and future. This is done consciously and strategically by Ganoubia Hora, as evidenced both in their external communication and in their knowledge-production practices. As such, WMF can be described as mainly engaging in knowledge production on history as a way of shaping the present, whereas Ganoubia Hora instead emphasize knowledge production on the past *and* the present as a way to shape the future.

Producing and disseminating knowledge about history, particularly historical knowledge related to feminist movements, also has the effect of alleviating the sense of hopelessness which may come from increased repression. Hanan, who used to work for HarassMap and the Arab Foundation for Equality (AFE), sees this as a deliberate strategy employed by feminists today, saying that "because things are difficult right now, people really look back and try and find models and ways of working and operating under difficult circumstances."[92] Historical inspiration goes even further, however, as it is not only about the effect it has on activists' practices and activities, functioning as a source for replicating strategies across time or finding ways of navigating difficult times. Perhaps more importantly, it may simply act to illustrate the possibility of alternative futures and counteracting the potential risk of activist fatigue or political apathy in the face of challenging times:

> I think to see myself in the historical context gives me... it gives perspective, just like, you know how they say, the meta perspective. It just gives me that meta perspective of, like, "okay, it's a shitty moment, but people overcome, and they have good lives, and they do accomplish things" and so on and so forth. And it's not... You're not defined by this particular period in time.[93]

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[91] "نحن من [who are we?]," Ganoubia Hora.

[92] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

[93] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

Commemorative Memory Practices

Commemoration and commemorative memory practices may also function as restorative history, bringing to light past events, putting them to work in the present, and weaving historical moments together with current priorities. Activities of feminist activists often centre around commemorative dates, such as the International Day of Eliminating Violence against Women (25th of November), Revolution and Youth Day in Tunisia (now 17th of December, previously 14th of January), and the Day of Revolt in Egypt (25th of January). Another interesting example is Egyptian Women's Day which is celebrated on the 16th of March, alongside International Women's Day on the 8th of March, in commemoration of the women who participated in the 1919 revolution; in a statement about this day, New Woman Foundation describe it as "the day the first martyr of the revolution in 1919 fell, which is also the day Huda Shaarawi and her friends founded the Declaration Egyptian Feminist Union."[94] The women-led protests on this day were initially prompted by the arrest and exile of independence leader Sa'ad Zaghloul. The protestors were met with violence by the British troops, and six women lost their lives, leading to an even larger number of women joining the protests in the following days (Ramdani 2013).

These dates are often used by feminist organizations and groups for launching new campaigns, issuing statements or reports, and to bring attention to issues—such as sexual harassment, violence against women, feminicide, and so on—that relate both to the historical event that is commemorated and to the contemporary work and priorities of the feminist movement. Noticeable is also that many of these commemorated events are dislocated from their place of origin, instead shifting towards "transnational memory spaces" (Björkdahl and Kappler 2019). This transnational aspect of commemorative memory practices is explored further in chapter six, but here we may note particularly the International Day of Eliminating Violence Against Women as an example. This day commemorates the "Mirabal Sisters," three sisters from the Dominican Republic who, on this date in 1960, were assassinated by the regime because of their involvement in an underground movement working towards ending the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Today, the event serves as a memory used by feminist organizations to campaign for eliminating gender-based violence. The day marks the beginning of 16 days of campaigning by feminist organizations in Egypt and Tunisia, during which many activities take

[94] "Statement: New Woman Foundation celebrates "The Voices Of Freedom'," New Woman Foundation, accessed March 21, 2025: https://nwrcegypt.org/en/statement-new-woman-foundation-celebrates-the-voices-of-freedom/

place, lasting until International Human Rights Day on the 10th of December. It is also used as an opportunity to join together across borders in joint statements.

Beyond the affective element of commemoration—calling attention to past struggles, victories, and tragedies, and thereby inspiring action through solidarity with past generations of activists—it also discourages presentism by creating temporal links between actors, instilling a sense of responsibility towards past generations, and encouraging historical awareness. As such, commemoration may inspire the sort of feelings expressed by Hanan, that times may be tough now, but times have been tough before, and the feminists that came before us have nevertheless persevered and made progress. At the same time, there is also a risk that commemoration also feeds into feelings of permanent crisis and political inertia. In emphasizing commonalities between past and present struggles, activists may inadvertently portray a never-ending struggle which risk instilling apathy and hopelessness rather than inspiring action. In this regard, it is possible that transnational commemorations, untethered from the local political history, are actually *more* impactful than those that risk reinforcing the view of history as a series of recurring failures to achieve the activists' intended goals. Indeed, it appears as though most commemorative activities that are highlighted by the feminist organizations—both in Tunisia and Egypt—and that act as springboards for campaigns and calls for action, are related to foreign events. This includes commemoration of the Mirabal sisters, but also commemorative acts in solidarity with Palestinians, such as Nakba Day on the 15th of May. Commemoration of this kind may also forge temporal links on multiple transnational axes, such as using the 25th of November and the Mirabal sisters' struggle against an authoritarian regime as a way to highlight the ongoing resistance of the Palestinian people in general and particularly expressing solidarity with the women of Gaza.[95]

Intergenerational Relations

Different organizations and groups attract different types of members, not only in terms of ideological or political differences but also demographically. ATFD and the EFU are often viewed as led mainly by an older generation of feminists,

[95] Field notes, Tunis Centre (Tunis), November 25, 2023.

whereas organizations that have popped up since 2011 attract more youth.[96] However, whether generational differences can be found within the feminist movements in either country is not entirely clear-cut and determining whether existing differences (in terms of strategies, protest tactics, political practices, and so on) are indeed generational or simply age-related is even more difficult. Oftentimes, feminists who do claim that there are "generational" differences do not differentiate between "generation" and "age." For example, some would argue that younger feminists are more provocative, outspoken, or public in their activism and may even refer to this as a hallmark of "Gen Z activism,"[97] without necessarily reflecting on whether this constitutes an age-effect or generational effect (or a combination of both). Nevertheless, the perception of generational differences, regardless of underlying cause, may still impact the feminist movement by materializing as rifts between different organizations or different groups of activists and adds to the fragmentation which is apparent.

It is important to note that the concept of "generations" is contested, both in the empirical material analysed here but also in the political science literature. Stoker (2014) argues that political generations are defined by the experience of formative events during "impressionable years." Following this definition, we may consider a generation of activists in both the Egyptian and Tunisian context, consisting of those who experienced the 2010-2011 revolutions during their impressionable years. Indeed, many younger feminist organizations were founded shortly after 2011 and many feminists—particularly those who today are in their late 20s to early or mid 30s—would mark 2011 as the beginning of their political awareness and feminist consciousness. Sarah, who grew up in Alexandria and became politically active during the revolution, is one of them:

> My activism… I would say it ignited with the revolution in Egypt in 2011 and it was like the beginning of a new me, the beginning of a new era. We were all living that dream that we are going to make a change and the change… it's us who are going to make this change, the youth![98]

[96] The Egyptian Feminist Union may technically count towards post-2011 organizations, as it was originally founded in 1923 and then became inactive in the 1950s before being relaunched in 2011. Whether it can be considered the same organization may be debated, but it is nonetheless generally seen as an "older" feminist organization in Egypt, particularly as they build on the legacy of (and weave temporal threads linking themselves to) the original Egyptian Feminist Union of Huda Shaarawi.

[97] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

[98] Sarah, Zoom interview, May 12, 2023.

Similarly, Amer, who grew up in Cairo and was in his early 20s when the revolution started details how the protests and encampment at Tahrir was the first time his eyes were opened to gender inequality, gender-based violence, and the problem of street harassment experienced by many Egyptian women, adding that the revolution provided an opportunity for political freedom:

> From 2011 until 2013 or 2014, probably, there was a huge margin of political freedom that my generation did not experience before and did not experience after. I joined a march in Tahrir Square on the 8th of March [2011] during the International Women's Day. And it was my first time to join a women's group.[99]

Interestingly, feminists who state an earlier entry into the movement, pre-2011, often credit their parents and/or grandparents for this, indicating a potential relevance of lineage generations in the absence of a political generation:

> I've always called myself a feminist, definitely. The women in my family have always been doing public service of some kind and it started with great grandma. My grandmother is a very strong woman and very stubborn and my great-grandmother also. Like my grandmother was the first woman in her family to go to university because she was just too smart [laughs]. And she did a doctorate even and I mean that was very rare for a woman at the time, and I grew up with this role model in a way, and my mother is also very… again, very contradictory. So, I think in an implicit way I did [get it from them], but nobody was ever like "we're a feminist family," or that there were like feminist texts around the house or anything like that, but it was somehow in the air.[100]

Some feminist activists, particularly in Tunisia, reject the concept of "political generations" and instead argues that the difference between certain organizations or individual feminists is more ideological than generational.[101] This argument may be supported by the example of Amina's nude protest (see Grove 2015b). Despite providing legal support, ATFD leadership was critical of Amina and her use of nude, digital protests in the style of FEMEN. A former president of ATFD confirms this critique, saying that Amina "did not want to do the work but skip ahead."[102] However, many other feminist organizations were also critical, regardless of generation. In contrast, Malak, who used to be

[99] Amer, Zoom interview, May 15, 2023.

[100] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

[101] Manal, in-person interview, April 18, 2023.

[102] Noor, in-person interview, November 18, 2023.

affiliated with Mawjoudin, instead believes that Amina did ATFD a favour by giving them an opportunity to appear less radical in comparison.[103] Reem, who has mainly been active in the Tunisian youth movement and belongs to the same generation as Malak, disagrees, saying that Amina's protest painted all feminists in a bad light, because the average Tunisian will not make a distinction between Amina and ATFD regardless of condemnation from the latter.[104] It is clear that there are many competing narratives (multiplicity) and perspectives on Amina's protest, and no distinct generational groups can be determined based on similar views on the efficacy of nude blogging. Further, the material collected here does not reveal any clear differences between "new" and "old" feminist organizations. As such, there may be truth to the argument that existing differences between feminists in Tunisia are more ideological than generational, at least in relation to the example of Amina. This perspective also aligns with previous research on youth politics in the MENA region:

> Especially in a region where more than 65 percent of the population is below the age of thirty, it is not very useful let alone accurate to use age as the sole axis of differentiation. The younger generation has equally strong yet varied affiliations by class, geography, and sometimes ideological preferences. (El-Mahdi 2024, 5)

In her dissertation on Egypt's revolutionary youth movement (*shabāb al-thawra*), Rennick discusses the concept of "generations" in relation to political practice and argues that this notion is "neither intrinsic nor an outcome of structural situation in the age pyramid; rather, it is a negotiated process that results from both multigenerational interaction as well as private exchange within the generational unit itself" (Rennick 2017, 106). This way of viewing generations aligns well with my findings here; while some interlocutors would downplay the significance of generations or generational difference, those same activists would still refer to different periods of time in ways that indicate not only distinct political practices, but also distinct cohorts of activists employing those practices. While Amina might have employed particularly polarizing tactics, almost everyone I have met and spoken to during fieldwork would confirm that feminist protest tactics differ between generational groups, even if it is not the sole line of difference—clearly, ideological differences, or socioeconomic and demographic differences (to name a few), still play a big role in shaping the practices, priorities, and strategies of feminist activists, both

[103] Malak, in-person interview, April 8, 2023.

[104] Reem, in-person interview, November 30, 2023.

on an individual and organizational level, and these lines of difference cannot be neatly separated. In other words, ideological differences obviously exist also within the generational unit, but in terms of practices, the preferred repertoires of activists are at least *perceived* to differ along generational lines.

In both Egypt and Tunisia, there is a perceived difference between older and younger cohorts of feminists in terms of preferred strategies. Primarily, older generations of feminists (generally speaking) are understood to favour subtler advocacy work. In comparison, younger generations of feminists are seen to a larger extent as seeking "virality," as more vocal, and utilizing a more fearless, "in-your-face" type of activism:

> Like all these younger people, they are definitely doing very interesting things in my opinion, and they're more vocal. I'm sure you know about the kind of like #MeToo that happened in Egypt. I mean, it was these Gen Z feminists that were really pushing it like, rather than... the old guard let's say. I think it's not just the feminists, it's also queer activists who are a little bit more public. You know they've pushed the agenda... again, in a discreet and subversive way. Like, it's not like I'm going out to protest in the street. It's a very different kind of... I mean, you can say this social media thing started with the revolution, but they've taken it to a whole new level that I think is very interesting.[105]

While Hanan, in the above quote, explicitly says that these younger feminists and queer activists are "more vocal" and "a little bit more public," she also says that they've pushed the agenda in discreet and subversive ways. She then clarifies that this is not to say that street protests are "subtle" or less public; however, street protesting is a tactic that has become less common among all feminist activists and organizations, regardless of generation, meaning that the comparison is rather between contemporary political practices. It is with this in mind that Hanan argues that "Gen Z feminists" are more vocal and public, particularly with reference to social media. While this difference in usage of social media for activism is generally acknowledged by the other interlocutors, it is not always viewed in a positive light:

> Activism in the generation when I was growing up, in my generation… it was much more about word of mouth and talking. (…) It's very disappointing that there is a whole new generation that all their ideas and views about things are being shaped via Instagram and TikTok influencers. (…) I think also that online activism is now being looked at as a significant form of activism, and in my

[105] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

> opinion, I find it much more effective the way my generation used to do it; via workshops and campaigns in the street and talking to people.[106]

Whether or not it is viewed in a positive light, and even though the term "generation" itself may be avoided by some, there seems to be consensus that generational differences do exist, at least in terms of tactics and practices, particularly the use of social media (which is explored further in chapter six).

ATFD has in recent years worked actively to change their perception, to de-emphasize their religious critique and become more intersectional (which is not necessarily directly related to any generational divide), and to collaborate more with other, newer organizations such as Aswat Nissa and Mawjoudin. Nidhal, who works at Mawjoudin, tells me that ATFD had reached out to them for a collaboration, which they accepted with the condition that ATFD agreed on including trans women in their definition of "women." It may surprise European or North American readers that ATFD accepted this condition, as trans-exclusionary feminism has become a controversial, hotly debated topic across Europe and North America. However, within feminist and activist circles in Tunisia this is not a controversial stance, but it is also not something that is communicated in campaigning or outreach directed at the public. Instead, this agreement only relates to their internal work. The counselling and STI testing of Mawjoudin is also provided for trans women (as a part of the LGBTQ+ community they work with), but it is not clear if the same is true for ATFD. Interviewing a current member of the ATFD board of directors, Aziza, I asked whether they accept trans women at their counselling centres. Rather than giving a direct answer, Aziza told me that ATFD was the first association to openly advocate for LGBTQ+ rights in Tunisia, but since there are now many other organizations, such as Mawjoudin and Damj, they leave that work to them.[107] This seems to indicate that while theoretically they support the rights of trans people, they consider it better if other organizations deal with the advocacy and that ATFD remains silent in their external communication. She then clarified: "I cannot tell you exactly who is coming to the centre. But nowadays, the queer and LGBTQ+ community have their own organizations, and we have very good collaboration. They have their own counselling and guidance."[108]

[106] Asma, Zoom interview, March 8, 2024.

[107] Aziza, phone interview, December 18, 2023.

[108] Aziza, phone interview, December 18, 2023.

In terms of the understanding, perception, or construction of feminist histories, there are some differences found on the individual level which may relate to an age-effect (if not a generational-effect). For example, Hanan, who refers to herself as belonging to "the old guard" and traces her activism to before 2011, gives many examples of historical and regional sources of inspiration and talks about developments of the feminist movement throughout the 20th century. In contrast, Asma, who belongs to the generation of feminists who became active in 2011, marks the revolution as the origin of the feminist movement in Egypt:

> I'd say, maybe it's an unpopular opinion, but that it is started by the revolution in Egypt and when we saw a space where young women, and old women, and young men, and old men, and the whole society could gather together with their different beliefs, and social status, and economic status, in the square defending the values that they want to be reinforced in the society.[109]

As this surprised me, I asked about her views on the organizations and activists who had been active for decades prior to 2011. She tells me that she does not really know much about them but agrees that there might have been initiatives and activism that support women, without necessarily constituting *feminism*—in other words, distinguishing women's rights activism from feminist activism. Without drawing too strong conclusions from this observation, it is likely that differences like this would influence the temporal perspective of the activists (an argument I develop further later in this chapter), as well as their practices.

A Lost Generation?

Faced with political uncertainty, growing percentage of university graduates, and high unemployment rates particularly affecting young people, many young Tunisians migrated to Europe and elsewhere in the decade since the uprisings. In fact, David and Marouani (2017) note that the 2014 Tunisian Labour Market Panel Survey indicates that of the Tunisian migrants where the year of departure is known (dating back to 1953) around 42% had left between 2011 and 2013. This trend was also confirmed to me during fieldwork, as it was perceived to have affected the composition of the feminist movement today. Many activists have left Tunisia since 2011, and it has been mainly educated, middle- and upper-class millennials who have had the opportunity to do so. Younger activists largely missed the train, so to speak, either because they lacked the necessary finances to leave, or because the EU tightened border

[109] Asma, zoom interview, March 8, 2024.

controls and many European countries closed their borders in response to the so-called "migrant crisis" in 2015. Meanwhile, older activists were too settled or had other attachments that hindered them from leaving.

Beyond the problem of brain drain, this left a generational gap, which may have exacerbated the divide between older and younger feminists. As detailed in the previous section, some feminists note tensions arising from differences in priorities or preferred strategies, and even ideological differences between generational cohorts of feminists. However, perhaps a bigger challenge than generational tension is the damage done to intergenerational connectivity more broadly, stemming from this exodus of activists. Feminists in both Egypt and Tunisia note that there is a lack of mentoring for new generations, which both risks widening generational divides but also impact the ability of the movement to bring in more people and limiting its potential for growth. Speaking about concerns for the future of the feminist movement in Egypt, Nabra, who is a co-founder of Nazra for Feminist Studies, particularly highlights this problem:

> I think also the generational problem [is a concern]. The generational gap is very bad. It's very, very bad. Now I'm called old generation [laughs]. I'm called old generation. So, we have to find a way… especially, I think, our generation, how we can fill the gap. Because we are not… first of all, we write a lot, and this is very important, and we can transmit the knowledge to the new generation … We have to transmit knowledge, we have to transmit skills, we have to build our narratives. This is very important. And I think it's very important for us to be able to do that.[110]

Nabra repeatedly returns to the importance of writing and links the issue of generational gap with the lack of writing as a feminist strategy. She argues that by writing about both personal and societal issues from a feminist point of view, we may help young people who are facing similar issues or share similar concerns to find vocabularies and a framework for their experiences. Writing, thereby, may inspire a feminist political consciousness and function as a sort of "manual" for new, fledgling feminists. This, in turn, may alleviate some of the problems associated with the generational gap. While feminist writing has a long history in Egypt (as detailed in the first part of this chapter), this tradition has been somewhat lost in recent years, according to Nabra:

> We have to expand the movement; we have to include the younger generation. We have to write. We don't write any… we don't write much. (…) A lot of

[110] Nabra, in-person interview, March 23, 2024.

> things we don't transmit to the younger generation because we do not write. (…) All this knowledge will be missed.[111]

Documentation is seen as a means to expand the feminist movement but also ensure movement longevity. This is also emphasized by Tunisian feminists, though not always in the form of writing. It could also be as oral history, podcasts, or documentaries. The key is to preserve and pass on lessons learned, which aligns with the "restorative history" practices of Ganoubia Hora and the Women and Memory Forum. Sonia Hedhili, a Tunisian feminist activist, journalist, and former program manager for Damj, exemplifies this argument in a report for the Heinrich Böll Foundation:

> Now, more than ever, we must prioritize the documentation of these stories of feminist resistance—whether through oral histories, written records, or digital supports such as podcasts, and documentaries. Sharing these voices will help us maintain the momentum for progress and ensure that the lessons learned are passed on to future generations. This is our collective responsibility: to document, preserve, and propel forward the struggle for women's rights, no matter the obstacles. (Hedhili 2025)

In a context of movement fragmentation and the decline of intergenerational mentoring, feminist writing as a method for transmitting knowledge and giving support or guidance to younger generations becomes even more important. Here we may return to the concept of lineage generation, although understood in broader terms than defined simply by kinship and closer in line with the concept of "academic genealogy" or an intellectual lineage. If we consider feminists a *concrete social group*—defined as "the union of a number of individuals through naturally developed or consciously willed ties" (Mannheim 1952, 289)—within which there are multiple generational groups, we then also need to consider the (political and sociological) relationship between those groups, giving rise to lineages. The generational gap identified, therefore, represents a break in the genealogy, and by extension a diminished transitional effect which may lead to even further fragmentation. However, this way of viewing the generational gap also opens possibilities, as the lack of mentoring and training of new generations of feminists may equally lead to the development of new practices and methods that would enrich the movement rather than fragment it, although it would still inevitably exacerbate problems of movement cohesion. As such, if the goal is to both expand the movement and make it more solid –an explicitly stated priority by most feminist

[111] Nabra, in-person interview, March 23, 2024.

organizations in this study—ensuring intergenerational connectivity, facilitating mentorship, and increased transmission of knowledge between generations of feminists ought to be prioritized, especially in light of the identified problem of generational gaps.

Knowledge-Sharing over Generations

> Throughout history, knowledge production has been the cornerstone of historical narratives, the transfer of information, and the definition of individual identities. From a feminist point of view, it captures women's emotions across eras, amplifies their voices, shapes their priorities, and serves as a legacy for future generations while enriching the understanding of current ones. Knowledge production also involves analysis that fosters comprehension, shapes laws, and crystallizes awareness. Therefore, we are interested in knowledge production as a tool for the feminist movement through which we articulate our vision of women's issue in southern Egypt. We aim to document women's experiences in southern Egypt and to extensively research the history of women in southern Egypt.[112]

While the problem of a generational gap is easily recognized in the interviews, it is significantly harder to detect in the textual material—understandably so, as the organizations' external communication rarely tend to reveal problems within the movement, but rather focuses on their work, activities, and mission. However, because of this focus on organizational activities, the material instead reveals the strategies that are employed to overcome this gap, to ensure the movement's vitality and longevity, and the importance placed in doing so. As detailed earlier in this chapter (and exemplified in the above quote from Ganoubia Hora), these organizations often highlight the use of knowledge-production as a tool for the feminist movement, especially in relation to ensuring movement longevity and providing future generations of feminists with better opportunities to realize their vision. In a statement for International Women's Day, 8th of March 2022, Nazra for Feminist Studies refers to young feminists as "the main generator of any political or social mobilization."[113] The

[112] "نحن من [who are we?]," Ganoubia Hora, accessed January 18, 2024: https://ganoubia-hora.com/نحن-من/; Note, as with other quotes from Ganoubia Hora, this is translated from Arabic (with much help from Rafah Barhoum) as their own English translation required correction for clarity. Compare "About: Our Goals," accessed November 2, 2025: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/about/

[113] "Statement: Empowerment is Learning," Nazra for Feminist Studies, March 7, 2022. Accessed January 20, 2024: https://nazra.org/en/2022/03/statement-8-march-2022

statement then goes on to describe Nazra's work to ensure youth-led, political mobilization:

> Young feminists and women human rights defenders […] are the main generator of any political or social mobilization and the new blood for the new waves of feminist movement. From this point on and believing in the role of female and male youth within the movement, as well as the necessity of empowering and integrating them in different mobilizations and movements, Nazra has adopted, since 2013, local and regional feminist schools and a specialized mentorship program on the MENA Region level, which is based on the organizational and structural learning that includes transmitting knowledge, exchanging experiences and ideas, reviewing and analysing them, learning the lessons from previous generations, adjusting trajectory by turning mistakes into success and weakness into strengthens, then using the above to create a roadmap in order to continue their journeys with feminism, decision-making and leadership.[114]

Here, too, emphasis is placed on empowering young members of the movement, and doing so by means of knowledge. One of the strategies mentioned in this statement, that of adopting specialized mentorship programs aimed at transmitting knowledge and facilitating inter-generational exchanges is particularly noteworthy as it is explicitly practiced on a transnational, regional level as opposed to other existing programs, aimed at bridging urban-rural divides. Nabra, who was one of the founders of Nazra, highlights the impact that feminist mentors from different national contexts have had on her:

> Especially Ziba [Mir-Hosseini], she educated me. I met Ziba when I was 25. She gave me knowledge. She gave me care. Up to now, we're sending emails to each other. She's 70 now. She's… up until now, she's active. I learned from her a lot, not only on Iran. Pakistan, as well, had somebody like Farida Shaheed. I was associated with Women Living Under Muslim Laws [WLUML].[115]

WLUML, referenced by Nabra here, is an international solidarity network that Shaheed and Mir-Hosseini both have been members of, and which led to the foundation of the global Islamic feminist organization Musawah in 2009. At the same time, Nabra acknowledges that having access to "big names" like this is a privilege that not everyone has:

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[114] "Statement: Empowerment is Learning," Nazra for Feminist Studies.

[115] Nabra, Zoom interview, March 23, 2024.

> First of all, you have to be very lucky to work in a feminist NGO. You might be a feminist but you're not working in a feminist NGO… but when you have the connection, you can manage, but if you don't have the connection, that is very bad. For example, the people… people like Ganoubia Hora, if they don't have the access to some of the big names in the feminist movement, I think they will be doomed. Because those in Aswan are far from the centre… if they don't have connections, they will be doomed. But, alhamdulillah, they have connections. But are they helping the others in Upper Egypt? Are they helping others in Upper Egypt? I don't know. Are they transmitting the knowledge they get? I don't know.[116]

Here, Nabra pinpoints both the challenge of access and inclusivity, making sure that connections and resources are available even outside of urban centres, and the risks of exclusivity—i.e., feminist NGOs gatekeeping the fruits of those connections and keeping the knowledge gained exclusive to the inner circle. This risk might be mitigated by the second strategy mentioned in the statement from Nazra, which is feminist schools. This serves a similar purpose to the mentorship, albeit in a broader scope and more organized form. Nazra began organizing annual feminist schools in 2013, providing opportunities for young feminists to learn more about gender issues, deal with challenging and taboo topics regarding for example sexual violence, and develop tools for activism. Even before 2013, Nazra regularly provided training on topics related to their work, such as in 2010 when they collaborated with the initiative Rising Voices to deliver training under the title "Exploring Taboos" (*Tankeeb fil Tabohaat*), aimed specifically at train young activists in discussing and dealing with taboo topics online: "This training will focus on equipping the trainees with the needs knowledge and skills to discuss taboos issues in our society, using the social media tools."[117]

Similarly, the New Woman Research Centre (NWRC), which is run by the New Woman Foundation, also launched a feminist school in 2014, focusing on the issue of violence against women and girls (VAWG):

> A Feminist School is a flexible, safe space for young people to discuss issues related to women's rights violations and challenge their perceptions around VAWG. NWRC's vision was to utilize the Feminist School as an organizing mechanism for young women and men. (Participedia, n.d.)

[116] Nabra, Zoom interview, March 23, 2024.

[117] "Expolring Tabboos [sic]… An Attempt to Discover the Hidden," Nazra for Feminist Studies, June 13, 2010. Accessed October 27, 2024: http://nazra.org/en/node/33

While open to anyone interested, the school initially had requirements that all the participants are between 18 and 35 years old, that at least 70% are female, and included criteria to ensure diversity of background, ensuring participation from all "eight governorates where NWRC had existing initiatives for youth and women" (Participedia, n.d.). The school ran until 2017, during which time new members were allowed to join. The format was based on the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, cycling between reflection-action-reflection. As such, it combined theoretical discussions, reflections on feminist issues, and feminist leadership training, with practical work in local communities, such as having the members work on "implementing awareness raising campaigns in three local communities in 2015" (Participedia, n.d.). Following this, in 2016-2017, the participants were tasked with forming their own local schools in their communities, thus making sure that the school does not only benefit those who had the possibility to participate in the national school; the knowledge is indeed shared on a local level as well, counteracting the risk highlighted by Nabra.

Feminist schools have also been implemented in Tunisia since at least 2009, when ATFD launched the Ilhem Marzouki Feminist University (UFIM), announced on International Women's Day:

> The Ilhem Marzouki Feminist University (UFIM) is a permanent project that provides training for future generations on human rights in general and women's rights in particular. It is part of its objective to promote self-reflection and self-improvement among young people through a participatory and interactive approach.[118]

This project takes two forms, a summer university and a training cycle, building on the experiences and knowledge accumulated by ATFD throughout their years as an active feminist organization, as well as making use of their connections by bringing in "feminist activists at the regional, national and international levels."[119] It explicitly aims to train future generations of activists, and "seeks to revive intergenerational cultural links by reaching out to young people."[120] As such, ATFD reveals a conscious concern for (and practices directed towards) maintaining intergenerational connectivity and establishing institutions that can facilitate long-term knowledge-sharing practices.

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[118] "Feminist University," ATFD, accessed October 28, 2024: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/feminist-university/

[119] "Feminist University," ATFD.

[120] "Feminist University," ATFD.

> Feminism is a political project about what *could be*. It's always looking forward, invested in futures we can't quite grasp yet. (Olufemi 2020, 1)

The 2010-2011 revolutions are a common reference points used by feminist activists when talking about change and continuity within their movement, both in Egypt and in Tunisia, as detailed throughout this chapter. As previously stated, many feminists pinpoint 2011 as the beginning of their activism and political consciousness, and those who have been engaged in activism before 2011 still use it as a reference point for talking about "current" or "contemporary" feminist activism in both countries. This functions as a periodization, delimiting the present "era" of activism—post-Arab Spring—which shapes the movement and impacts the strategies, activities, and priorities of the activists. To exemplify and clarify how this works, we may compare contemporary Tunisian and Egyptian political activism with Sophie Chamas' observations on Lebanese activism and the concept of "dead time," characterized by stuckedness, political failure, and "widespread hopelessness and a sense of the endlessness of the status quo" (Chamas 2023, 3). Chamas is critical of many activists' and academics' response to such stuckedness, consisting of a seemingly pragmatic but technocratic turn in which any action is considered good action, however small and short-term the successes may be:

> If looked at superficially, the pragmatic strategies and tactics adopted by my urban activist interlocutors to log short-term successes appeared robust; these activists seemed mobile and busy. I watched these tactics repeatedly hinder long-term goals and visions. I began to view them as the product of an anxiety to act in order to counter widespread hopelessness and power the engine of change that, while noble in its intentions, hollowed the potential of activism. (Chamas 2023, 8)

While there are definitely some worrying indications that similarly reactive activism may become increasingly common in Egypt and Tunisia, it has not yet reached the point of what Chamas observes in Lebanon.[121] I would argue that this is partly due to timing practices, particularly periodization. It is clear by now that the progress made in the revolutions of 2010-2011 has largely been reversed, yet this "period" of post-Arab Spring remains—a period within which potential and hope for change lives on even if dampened. While it would

[121] This claim is based on cumulative observations throughout fieldwork in Egypt and Tunisia, compared to Chamas' (2023) research on the state of political activism in Lebanon.

be entirely possible for Egyptian activists to speak of, and conceptualize, the present time as delineated by the Sisi presidency and thereby understand it as a time of increased political repression and erosion of civil society, they instead narrate the current period as having started in 2011 with the revolution. Similarly, Tunisian activists could, for example, speak of the present time in relation to the beginning of Saied's presidency in 2019, or the 2021 "self-coup" in which he dismissed the parliament and prime minister, yet they do not.

By narrating and conceptualizing the current era of activism in a broader frame, which includes both successes and failures, activists are also countering the sense of an endless status quo. To what extent the 2010-2011 revolutions really were transformative is then irrelevant, and there is of course a known problem with viewing past events through a subjective lens. What matters, instead, is precisely that the revolutions are indeed *remembered* through a somewhat rosy lens. This, in turn, facilitates a periodization which contains the possibility of change, enables hope, and thereby contravenes "dead time." Chamas calls for a "reorientation towards futurity" and "refusal of a politics that is beholden merely to the possibilities of the present rather than the potentialities of the future" (Chamas 2023, 9). The timing practices of feminist organizations and activists in Egypt and Tunisia does precisely this, and the emphasis towards future-potentialities is particularly evident in the work of Ganoubia Hora in Egypt and Mawjoudin in Tunisia.[122] Instead of paralysis or inefficient and reactive activism in the face of what may seem like a permanent state of crisis, this attention towards futurity can "shape our politics in the present to be more egalitarian and inclusive" (Chamas 2023, 8). As such, these temporal strategies are not only reflective of different political priorities but are active processes that both shape and are shaped by contemporary feminist activism. Temporality and political activism are, to an extent, co-constitutive: Timing practices, as detailed above, enable or foreclose political action by way of delimiting the imagined possibilities for change. Political practices, conversely, may enable or foreclose temporal regimes, such as by blocking or contradicting long-term goals and setting temporal boundaries of the activism.

However, it is important to note that future-oriented political activism does not preclude action that focuses on presently urgent concerns. Practices such as providing counselling for queer youth (Mawjoudin) or operating counselling centres for victims of violence (ATFD), having travelling doctors provide STI testing in rural areas (Mawjoudin), and providing legal support and guidance

[122] "نحن من [who are we?]," Ganoubia Hora; Malak, in-person interview, April 8, 2023; field notes, Lafayette (Tunis), April 13, 2023.

to women (CEWLA, Aswat Nissa) are all practices that address urgent needs of vulnerable groups. At the same time, they are also practices aimed at supporting and strengthening the communities of people these organizations work towards, whose political interests they want to represent, and whose rights they advocate for. This aligns with what, according to Chamas, activists should be concerned with; that is, practices aimed towards "sustaining a social movement as community, as family, keeping each other and their cause alive" (Chamas 2023, 14). In this sense, providing urgently needed services do not necessarily come at the expense of an imaginative, radical, and future-oriented politics. Supporting and strengthening local communities of women and queer youth may indeed be an integral part of such long-term political work.

During fieldwork in Egypt, I met with Mona, a queer feminist activist who was formerly a member of Nazra and has many years of experience working with several other feminist organizations both in Egypt and other countries in the region. Building a more solid feminist movement is a key concern for Mona, and she explicitly emphasizes the importance of collective care and work that is geared towards community rather than towards the public or political elites. Beyond the practices mentioned above, she talks about creating spaces for collaboration, empowerment, radical discussions, and feminist knowledge-production, giving several examples of initiatives since 2011. She is also aware of the risks of activist paralysis, connecting this problem with the awareness of collective care. During our four-hour long interview, she recommends that I listen to a podcast called "How to survive the end of the world," by the sisters Autumn Brown and adrienne maree brown. Mona believes in a movement and an activism that embraces contradictions, makes peace with it, and is loving, kind, caring, and authentic. In this regard, she tells me about her strategy for combating activist paralysis, again drawing inspiration from adrienne maree brown and the concept of "pleasure activism." For Mona, this is about finding ways to exist and resist, while also finding joy in the activism, both personally and collectively, which comes back to community-building and collective care. While she did not explicitly say so, I got the sense that Mona takes great care to instil both joy and hope in those she meets, and those within her community, or at least she definitely did with me.[123]

What Mona tells me also reveals a certain temporal perspective. She repeatedly returns to the importance of collective care and the responsibility we have for each other, as well as that she is happy to see younger generations of feminists embracing collective care. This emphasis on collectivism may also imply a

[123] Mona, in-person interview, March 22, 2024.

rejection of chronocentrism—believing the present time to be more significant and more worthy of our attention than any other time—as that would preclude responsibility towards either past or future generations (see Gosseries 2013). More importantly, the focus on finding joy in feminist activism and building hope on a community level clearly counteracts the problem of "dead time," instead inspiring political action with an attention on feminist futures, however utopian they may be:

> Hope depends on a radical political imaginary, a commitment to a horizon and a not-yet-here. Political action driven by hope refuses any action that is not geared towards a particular utopian horizon, regardless of how delayed or impossible such a horizon might be. (Chamas 2023, 10)

Chamas (2023) expands on the politics of hope, drawing from Gabriel Marcel, by distinguishing it from desire. Whereas hope, as it is used in the above quote, necessarily involves waiting, desire is insatiable and does not endure delay. Desire-based activism focuses on immediate action and the illusion of success, often to the abandonment of long-term strategic goals and visions. As such, it is inevitably linked to a presentist and chronocentric temporality.

It may be intuitive to label "pleasure activism" as desire-based, but I do not believe that it is, at least not in how it is conceptualized and practiced by Mona. Activism driven by desire "depends on the belief that transformative change is an impossibility" (Chamas 2023, 10). This is not the case for pleasure activism, which largely builds on black and feminist speculative fiction (such as that of Octavia Butler). It is indeed rooted in hope and in a belief that a different world is not only conceivable but achievable. In contrast to desire-based activism, Mona's intervention exemplifies a perspective on feminist activism centred on radical transformation, collective well-being, accountability, and movement longevity, in turn revealing a forward-looking, non-chronocentric temporality. In other words, we see here that time and timing, even if implicitly, may have profound impact on shaping political action, both on the individual level and on the organizational level.

Another potential impact of the kind of community work Mona describes—creating spaces for collaboration, discussions, and knowledge-production—is also evident in the material. Several interlocutors note a change within public discourse, wherein previously taboo topics are now discussed and portrayed on TV, on talk-shows as well as in Ramadan serials.[124] Topics addressed in

[124] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023; Asma, Zoom interview, March 8, 2024.

media and television today reflects the kind of discussions that were held within feminist groups in the years after the revolution, not only in established organizations, but more importantly within informal meeting spaces for young creatives and cultural workers, feminist theatre groups, and artist collectives.[125] Many of these later began working in the entertainment and cultural industry, carrying these experiences and conversations with them, thus bringing them to a more general public. Mona says that there are now more open discussions about topics such as violence against women and bodily rights; female genital mutilation (FGM), harassment, and honour crimes are all less socially accepted today, largely because of mainstream media, TV shows, and Ramadan serials. This point of view is far from unique, nor limited to feminist circles, but reflects the potential impact of popular culture which cultural studies scholars (particularly those of the Birmingham School, such as Stuart Hall and Richard Dyer) and media anthropologists (such as Walter Armbrust) have argued for quite some time now. Following this, Mona argues that the boundaries were pushed within feminist groups and then later brough to mainstream attention through cultural products such as Ramadan serials. This does not mean that similar issues were not prioritized by feminists prior to 2011, but rather that the spaces created to facilitate discussions around them, particularly collaborative creative spaces, lead to a broader societal impact through the participants' later engagement and employment in the entertainment industry. This would mean that activism focused on creating and facilitating spaces for radical discussions, feminist knowledge-production, and collaborative creative work—while not directed towards impacting the public sphere—may yet have long-term effects, given time.

There is Only Now

> There is nothing else than now. There is neither yesterday, certainly, nor is there any tomorrow. How old must you be before you know that?
>
> – Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940)

Throughout chapter five, I have presented a few indications of chronocentrism. What has been covered so far is mainly been in the form of reactive activism, whereby feminists faced with political failures, a seemingly endless status quo, and looming activist paralysis, attempt to overcome this by abandoning long-

[125] Asma, Zoom interview, March 8, 2024; Mona, in-person interview, March 22, 2024.

term goals in favour of securing short-term victories. This variety therefore reveals something about the temporal dimensions of feminist activism with regards to the future but says nothing about their relationship to the past. However, tendencies of both presentism and chronocentrism appear to some extent in the interview material, such as Asma's statement that the feminist movement in Egypt began with the revolution in 2011, meaning that she considers earlier histories to be irrelevant for her work.[126] This view almost precisely mirrors the case that Smith (2015) uses to exemplify presentism:

> "Women's history," one women's liberation participant claimed, "we invented it," indicating a rupture or break with the many feminist histories written in the past. (Smith 2015, 978)

Another, more explicit, example is the former board member of the Egyptian Feminist Union who, upon being asked about the role history plays within contemporary feminist activism in Egypt, says:

> [Is it] important for the current generation, to think about the past? No. No. (…) If you are a scholar, you will find, like… figures like Huda Shaarawi, Doria Shafik, Nawal el-Saadawi… But if you are an activist, you won't bother much about the figures.[127]

Beyond providing another example of how the re-telling of feminist histories tends to bias iconized figures—the question was not whether these figures play an important role today, but rather more generally about the role of history—this quote clearly presents a presentist point of view; stating that the past is entirely irrelevant for feminists in the present. There is reason to be concerned with such perspectives. Firstly, denouncing the relevance of the past risks exacerbating existing tension and disagreement between different generations within the movement, which in turn contradicts the goal of building a more solid, cohesive movement. Secondly, by putting into practice a precedent of clean breaks with past generations of feminists, the activists are also limiting their own potential for future influence.

Apart from these few examples, most interlocutors and indeed the vast majority of feminists I have met during fieldwork do acknowledge both the past and the future as relevant for their activism in the present. The textual material—and even more so the social media content studied through digital

[126] Asma, Zoom interview, March 8, 2024.

[127] Amer, Zoom interview, May 15, 2023.

fieldwork—is somewhat trickier. A lot of campaign material, social media posts, and other forms of outreach, mainly focuses on present concerns, rarely making explicit references or claims towards either the past or future. This, of course, is neither surprising nor does it tell us much about the organizations' temporal perspective, since it is to be expected that outreach materials relate mainly to the present. Instead, where we do find evidence to either confirm or deny any chronocentric or presentist leanings is in the organizations' mission statements, intended goals and visions, and in statements of commemoration.

Some statements of these varieties have already been presented throughout this chapter, for example in relation to how the Women and Memory Forum and Ganoubia Hora not only acknowledge the past but place great significance on documenting and disseminating knowledge about feminist histories. Considering such knowledge to be a resource both for the present feminist movement, and for future generations of feminists, clearly stands in contradiction of either chronocentrism or presentism. The same can also be said about the New Woman Foundation (NWF), who released a statement on Egyptian Women's Day, commemorating the women's rights activists who died during the 1919 revolution.[128] Furthermore, the NWF has put into practice to organize feminist schools with the explicit, goal of training future generations of feminists.[129] Feminist schools and mentorship programs are also run by Nazra for Feminist Studies, and the founders of Nazra highlights the importance of writing and providing resources to ensure movement longevity which equally indicates a future-oriented outlook.[130] Likewise, in the Tunisian context, the Ilhem Marzouki Feminist University founded by ATFD also contradicts a chronocentric temporality, and much of Mawjoudin's work is geared towards strengthening the Tunisian queer community through disseminating knowledge and providing counselling to those in need.[131] Furthermore, the narrative ATFD presents about their own origin reveals deep

[128] "Celebration of Egyptian Women's Day and Closing Even of 'Against Early Marriage' Project through Art in the Egyptian Villages," New Woman Foundation. Accessed March 21, 2025: https://nwrcegypt.org/en/celebration-of-egyptian-womens-day-and-closing-event-of-the-against-early-marriage-project-through-art-in-the-egyptian-villages/

[129] See Participedia, n.d. for details on the NWF feminist schools.

[130] "Expolring Tabboos [sic]… An Attempt to Discover the Hidden," Nazra for Feminist Studies, June 13, 2010. Accessed October 27, 2024: http://nazra.org/en/node/33

[131] "Feminist University," ATFD. Accessed October 28, 2024: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/feminist-university/; Selma, in-person interview, April 13, 2023.

attachment to feminist histories, in a way that signals a sense of responsibility to carry their legacy and continue their work.[132]

As such, while a few individual feminists express presentist or chronocentrist sentiments—in the form of a disinterest in past histories of their movement and that the looming threat of "dead time" may cause activists to abandon their visions for the future—there are no such indications on an organizational level. As detailed throughout this chapter, there are still temporal differences, evident in how different organizations relate to both the past and future. For example, whether organizations engage in archiving or documenting feminist histories reveals differing emphasis on past, present, and future, while we can further differentiate between those who see such practices mainly as a resource for the present generation (WMF) or as a way to ensure future access to knowledge and ensure movement longevity (Ganoubia Hora).

Conclusion

With this chapter, I aim to show how time is not just a backdrop for feminist activism in Egypt and Tunisia, but a field of struggle navigated in different ways by the studied organizations. Timing practices and temporal perspectives may delimit the work and potential outcomes of feminist political activism and exploring the chronopolitical practices of feminist organizations and activists in Egypt and Tunisia reveals a number of things. The most basic such practice is periodization; organizations and activists make claims about when and how feminism began, which moments matter, and how histories should be ordered. Yet, the key takeaway here is not that feminists periodize—a complete absence of periodization would be surprising and an extreme form of presentism. Some form of periodization is most likely inevitable, but there is nothing inherent in feminism that structures it into sequential "waves," and the diverging *ways* feminist beginnings are narrated indicates uneven temporality within the movement. Furthermore, historical narratives matter in relation to the construction, maintenance, and practice of solidarity, especially across generations, where coordination and intergenerational movement cohesion to some extent depend on a shared understanding of what has been inherited, but more importantly a shared view of linkages to the past in orienting towards future goals.

[132] "Who Are We," ATFD. Accessed January 18, 2024: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/who-are-we/

Secondly, another prominent chronopolitical practice explored in this chapter stems from the understanding that dominant historical narratives erase women, leading some organizations to pursue restorative history and documentation. This, too, is done with different focus and emphasis, as some organizations produce or support historical research in order to help contemporary feminists in their work, others prioritize documenting the present so that future feminists will inherit records and documentation, geared towards movement longevity. Both these strategies treat time as a resource—one by drawing from the past to create an impact in the present, the other by documenting the present to ensure future generations can build on the work. However, both also entails politics of inclusion, as choices about what to recover or record can reinscribe silences. Even feminist's restorative historical work and archival practices may, of course, centre urban, secular, or elite narratives. Although those organizations who are involved in uncovering untold stories are generally attentive to such dynamics, I note a layering wherein the same critique that is forwarded by mainstream feminist organizations against historical exclusion of women is in turn levied against the same organizations in relation to racialized, working-class, or rural women.

Temporal politics can also be observed in regard to intergenerational relations. There is generally an awareness of how repertoires, strategies, practices, and priorities are passed on through writing, documentation, mentoring, and feminist schools, but the practical application of these tactics is uneven. Knowledge-sharing depends on access, contact, continuity, and the availability of mentors and resources to host schools or support historical research. Furthermore, political instability and migration have produced what could be described as a "lost" generation, interrupting intergenerational interaction and limiting institutional memory. The gap is therefore not just demographic but also temporal, and to some extent ideological, as differences in priorities and practices—whether to focus long-term community-building, organizational infrastructure, or short-term services needed by marginalized communities—are essentially about time. Building intergenerational solidarity therefore requires more than increased contact between different generational cohorts of feminists, as the more pressing issue is aligning temporal priorities.

Finally, temporal perspectives and practices function as affective and strategic resources that help sustain activism. Archival and historical activism—such as restoring suppressed histories, highlighting feminist struggles of the past, and commemorating particular events—counters hopelessness by situating present setbacks and "failures" within a longer narrative of feminist struggle. Therefore, explicit engagement with temporality and deliberate periodization

is central to sustained feminist activism. Furthermore, work geared towards the future—such as documentation of present activism with future generations of feminists in mind or prioritizing long-term community-building—prevents feelings of "stuckedness" (see Chamas 2024). In both countries, recent years of increased repression and movement setbacks could easily have led to a break in feminist organizing. While it has definitely left a trace, not least in terms of fragmentation, I note something different than a "dead time," as activists found temporal strategies to retain hope and continue their work even if in a different form.

In highlighting these practices and strategies, I want to particularly emphasize the necessity to understand temporality both as an instrument and as a field of struggle, rather than an objective, pre-existing context or backdrop of activism. Chronopolitical practices do not only reflect the organizations' priorities but actively contribute to and configure the possibilities of feminist organizing. Because hegemonic timelines foreclose as well as enable particular forms of activism, the most consequential work is, in my view, the temporal work. Particularly, it is absolutely central for feminists to engage with—and actively reframe—temporal perspectives in order to allow for future-oriented activism.

Chapter 6: The Transnational

> The practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together.
>
> – Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (2003)

In October 2011, a Facebook page named "The Uprising of Women in the Arab World" was created by a group of Arab women with backgrounds in Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt. They had realized the potential for political mobilization through social media, demonstrated during the uprisings earlier in 2011, but also shared a belief in the importance of transnational feminist solidarity in the region. The purpose, as such, was precisely to create a platform for mobilizing, supporting, and uniting women across the region. About a year later, the page was used to launch a campaign in which people (regardless of gender, even though most were women) posted pictures of themselves holding placards, only written in Arabic, calling attention to issues facing them in their lives or statements explaining why they are feminists. Within a month, the Facebook page had grown from 20,000 followers to 80,000 (see Abbas 2012). This campaign exemplifies the intersection of transnational activism and digitally mediated activism, which remains an effective avenue of feminist activism. However, authoritarian regimes do still crack down on all political organizing, including activism in digital spaces. Nevertheless, cross-border engagement and activism—such as collaboration, replication of campaigns, and expressing solidarity for activists in other national contexts—takes place both online and offline, and transnational engagement within feminist activism in the Middle East and North Africa predates the internet.

While the previous chapter focused on feminist activism and solidarities in Egypt and Tunisia across time (the temporal dimension), this chapter looks closer at feminist activism and solidarities across borders (the transnational dimension). The aim here is to explore the construction, operationalization, and practice of transnational solidarity within Egyptian and Tunisian feminist activism. The primary argument is that there is a discrepancy between the

narration of transnational engagement and the concrete examples of exchange; the stories told by these organizations tend to exaggerate commonalities and erase differences, diversity (of opinion and of identity), and disagreements. However, I also argue that solidarity should not be understood as a theoretical concept but as an important foundation for transnational organizing. While I categorize instances of transnationalism as either ideational or practical—meaning they are either based on the idea/ideal of transnationalism or they reflect a reality of practical interaction—I claim here that ideational statements of solidarity also *do* something.[133] Solidarity statements are narratives, aiding in the construction of a collective identity, which may or may not reflect the existence of a "material" transnational community or movement, but act as a foundation on which practical transnational solidarity networks may be built. In other words, statements of solidarity should not be seen as irrelevant or without impact, precisely because they form the basis of collective identity. This argument is presented and unpacked in the first part of the chapter, where I also introduce existing narratives on the history of transnational engagement within the Egyptian and Tunisian feminist movements, as well as how feminist histories in other national context function inspirationally for the organizations and activists. Using these narratives as a stepping stone, I explore different ways solidarity is expressed and practiced in the present.

The second part of the chapter explores the regional dimension of Middle East and North African feminism(s), and how transnational feminist solidarity aids in the construction of shared histories, collective memories, and a collective identity—all the while activists and organizations must navigate the issue of difference and avoid presenting themselves in ways that bolster accusations of cultural inauthenticity. What emerges is that feminists in Egypt and Tunisia, through their regional engagement, participate in a continuous process of narrating and reproducing feminist histories, identifying common struggles and experiences, and weaving these into a broader narrative of both regional

[133] I define *ideational statements* as those which present the ideas, ideals, and motivations of the organization, which primarily means their charter, mission goals, and "about us"-pages. *Performative statements* are those which produces that of which it speaks, for example statements of solidarity. These overlap to some extent, such as how a declaration of the goals of an organization are central to the establishment of those same goals, and to the establishment of the organization itself, committing them to a cause (see also Zivi 2016). Both ideational and performative statements should mainly be seen as indications of things the organization would like to be true as opposed to more descriptive texts, which are not necessarily truer, but generally describe things that "are" or "has been"—e.g. describing a recently concluded campaign, or current services offered—rather than things they wish will be—e.g. close-nit alliances of feminist groups and extensive regional feminist cooperation.

and global feminist resistance. Importantly, however, this process of co-creating shared histories is not without its challenges, as it often requires smoothing over differences in terms of context, political landscape, and historical trajectories.

The third and last part of the chapter looks at digital platforms as spaces for facilitating transnational feminist activism and regional engagement. While it is important not to dismiss the impact of "traditional" forms of activism, nor the centrality of the body in protest movements, social media and other digital tools have nevertheless fundamentally changed the way feminist activism is conducted, allowing for instantaneous communication and coordination across borders. These digital spaces enable the amplification of feminist voices, dissemination of critical information, and mobilization of resources and support. As street-protests, sit-ins, feminist workshops, and many other tactics, are marked by their ephemerality, digital tools may extend both the lifetime and the reach of these campaigns, for example by documenting, archiving, and disseminating the protest digitally long after the moment of performance. While public street walls nowadays are rapidly rinsed of unwanted graffiti, the internet never forgets. As such, digital activism has become an important part of feminist organizing, especially under authoritarian regimes. Particularly political virals—videos, hashtags, and memes that spread rapidly across digital networks—have been important for the visibility and effectiveness of feminist campaigns, not least the ability of these campaigns to cross borders.

Foundations of Transnational Feminist Solidarity

The sense of belonging to a global movement is often clear in conversations with feminist activists in Egypt and Tunisia, even though its conceptualization, how this movement is perceived, and how the individual activists and specific organizations see themselves within it differs.[134] Belonging to a global movement is, however, a narrative which is even more prevalent in the charters, mission goals, and self-descriptive texts from the organizations, possibly reflecting a wish to "de-peripheralize" Middle Eastern and North African organizations within feminist discourse. In other words, instead of forwarding a narrative of regional specificity or MENA exceptionalism—the idea that women and feminists in this region face unique or uniquely severe

[134] While "global" is not synonymous to "transnational" (as discussed in chapter two), I use the term "global movement" here as it is the frame used by activists and their organizations.

challenges which separate them from other contexts—these organizations generally emphasize commonalities and see themselves as (or prefer to be seen as) connected with other feminists around the world in a non-peripheral way.[135] This may exacerbate the perception of feminists as westernized or of feminism as part of Western cultural imperialism and therefore inauthentic in the region. However, both in terms of ideational or performative statements, such as charters, statements of solidarity, and mission goals, and in terms of concrete collaborations—to the limited extent they occur beyond the regional level—focus lies mainly on South-South relations. Within this narrative of feminists' global connectivity, it is rather the Global North which is peripheralized.

The existence of transnational feminist solidarity networks in the region could potentially be identified through shared historical narratives, knowledge about feminist histories in other contexts, and from the construction of linkages by drawing inspiration from these histories. While this is not readily apparent in texts from the organizations, it appears in the interview material and digital field notes that the extent to which feminists in Egypt and Tunisia draw inspiration from other contexts than local or national histories varies greatly. Former board members of ATFD say they know nothing about Egyptian feminist histories, and likewise some Egyptian interlocutors only mention Tunisia to say that they think the purported trailblazing of Tunisia in terms of women's rights legislation has been exaggerated.[136] As discussed in chapter four, there are also Egyptian feminists arguing that the (much lamented) women's rights advocacy of First Lady Suzanne Mubarak emulated Tunisian state feminism, meaning the transnational inspiration is meant in negative terms.[137] Contrasting this non-existent or negative view on transnational feminist histories, other interlocutors speak at length about the inspiration drawn from "transnational feminist icons." Hanan, who is an Egyptian feminist formerly affiliated with HarassMap and the Arab Foundation for Equality (AFE), is one of them and mentions the Algerian resistance fighter Djamila Bouhired as a source of inspiration. Bouhired was a prominent member of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) who was convicted of bombing a café, sentenced to death by guillotine, and later spared. In discussing important

[135] See for example "About Us," Nazra for Feminist Studies. Accessed March 20, 2025: https://nazra.org/en/about-us; "Who are we?" ATFD, accessed January 17, 2025: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/who-are-we/; "About: Our Goals," Ganoubia Hora, accessed November 2, 2025: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/about/

[136] Noor, in-person interview, November 28, 2023; Zoha, in-person interview, March 14, 2024.

[137] Asma, Zoom interview, March 8, 2024.

feminist figures in history, Hanan mentions Bouhired as an important icon for Egyptian feminists of her generation.[138] Some interlocutors, particularly Islamic feminists, also speak about drawing inspiration from Iranian feminists who have been fighting against rigid religious interpretation despite incredibly high stakes.[139]

Inspirational histories appear layered between national, regional, and global sources of inspiration, wherein national sources are clearly given priority. References to non-Arab or non-Muslim contexts are few, though they do occur, and particularly noteworthy is the absence of Europe and North America in these narratives. References to Europe or the US in the textual material and digital field notes mostly occur in a negative context, such as condemning support for Israel.[140] In the interview material, only one person mentions drawing inspiration from the United States, specifically naming Black Lives Matter and the American black queer movement as sources of inspiration.[141] Interestingly, one interlocutor makes a separation based on different facets of her identity, saying that as a Muslim feminist, she draws inspiration from Iran, but as a black feminist, she draws inspiration from Senegal. She then says that for the movement at large, it is Latin America that inspires, referring mainly to viral campaigns such as the #NiUnaMenos protests.[142]

What appears here is a narrative multiplicity, in that there are many different versions of the "story" about transnational feminism in the region; organizations and individual interlocutors typically present the existence of a global feminist movement to which they belong, and describe this movement in terms of shared experiences, common struggles, and exchanges of practices and knowledge, while actual engagement and knowledge about regional and other feminist histories and contemporary feminist movements varies greatly. This indicates a discrepancy between how feminist organizations and activists narrate transnational engagement and the reality of interactions between them.

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[138] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

[139] Nabra, Zoom interview, March 23, 2024.

[140] See for example "Statement from the feminist organizations and groups," Ganoubia Hora, November 25, 2023. Accessed January 20, 2024: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/article/statement-from-the-feminist-organisations-and-groups/

[141] Zoha, in-person interview, March 14, 2024. Another interlocutor, Aisha, also spoke about Black Lives Matter, although mainly as a critique against the short attention-span of journalists and academics who would interview her about black activist organizing in Tunisia, and write about it once before moving on to other things.

[142] Nabra, Zoom interview, March 23, 2024.

However, understanding the external communication of these organizations and their representatives through a narrative perspective may help clarify this discrepancy. Taken as narratives, it is important to understand the purpose of the narration: contributing to *building* a transnational feminist movement. Rather than descriptive of a reality of close-nit networks of activists engaging with each other, providing support, exchanging knowledge, and sharing their experiences, the statements by feminist organizations on regional and global engagement are mainly ideational; it's an *ideal* rather than a *reality*. With limited resources and organizations who are struggling with a deteriorated civil society under increasingly hostile state authorities, the feminist movement in Egypt is fragmented, and Tunisia appears to be heading in the same direction. As such, more and more initiatives and activism are happening outside of these organizations, making large-scale collaborations across borders more difficult. Yet, because of the ideal of a global movement, and the work that is done on constructing and fostering a collective identity, as well as existing contacts and the possibility of forging new contacts through social media, there is still a foundation upon which transnational activist engagement can and does happen, only that it mainly happens at the individual level (such as the four women who started "The Uprising of Women in the Arab World") and therefore bound by resources available to individual activists. Such engagement will inevitably look different from what we may expect by looking at historical collaboration between feminist organizations in the region. In other words, transnational networks of feminist activists do exist, but speaking of a transnational feminist movement in the Middle East and North Africa should be qualified with these caveats.

Feminist Solidarity as Transnational Practice

As discussed in chapter five, days of commemoration are commonly used by feminist organizations to express solidarity across borders, while also calling attention to issues of concern in the local context. Here, especially, is where we find Egyptian and Tunisian feminists' expressions of solidarity directed to feminists *beyond* the Middle East and North Africa. The 25th of November is a particularly important date, and the sixteen days that follow are often the most eventful in the year for activists, as many organizations plan activities and campaigns during this period. Online campaigns are then shared under hashtags such as #16Days, #16يوم, and #16DaysOfActivism, and there are often events like candlelight vigils for victims of violence, marches against gender-based violence, communal empowerment workshops, art therapy sessions, theatre performances, and film screenings. As previously mentioned,

the day commemorates the Mirabal sisters and acts as a call for action against gender-based violence—and more generally state-sanctioned violence against women—but also as a call for solidarity with women around the world.

While conducting online fieldwork in November 2023—in conjunction to my second round of physical fieldwork in Tunisia—a statement began appearing on the feminist social media accounts and under the "16 days"-hashtags, signed by 27 feminist organizations from around the region, including New Woman Foundation (NWF), Women and Memory Forum (WMF), and Ganoubia Hora. The statement was made in conjunction with the International Day of Eliminating Violence against Women and begins by asserting that "the global feminist movement is active during the sixteen-day campaign against Gender-Based Violence," before briefly describing the history of the Mirabal sisters.[143] As it was written just about a month after Israel had begun its most recent assault on Gaza, the rest of the statement goes on to call out the violence enacted on Palestinians, and the complicity of "Western governments" who they say are "providing undivided support for practices, violations, and crimes against humanity, just like their fellow dictatorial governments."[144] Making such a connection, highlighting the support of Western governments for Israeli occupation and control of occupied Palestine (whether this support is passive or active) establishes a common struggle for feminists and human rights defenders in different contexts, detached from the politics and policies of their respective governments. As such, this expression of solidarity follows Dean's (1996) "reflective solidarity," meaning that we are bonded in our shared relationship to a third entity. In this statement, rather than the Israeli state it is primarily "Western governments" who are positioned as the third entity against which the relation of solidarity is built.

This narrative shows two things that are important to note: (1) the degree of practical, concrete collaboration is not necessarily relevant in determining the existence of a transnational community standing in solidarity with each other; and (2) it is an example of one strategy employed by feminist organizations to avoid accusations of Westernization when highlighting global or transnational feminist connections, namely, to couple such statements with a critique of "Western governments." The statement disentangles implicit connections

[143] "Statement from the Feminist Organizations and Groups," Ganoubia Hora, New Woman Foundation, Women and Memory Forum, et al. Published on the Ganoubia Hora website, November 25, 2023. Accessed January 20, 2024: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/article/statement-from-the-feminist-organisations-and-groups/

[144] "Statement from the feminist organizations and groups," Ganoubia Hora et al.

made between "the West" and "human rights," and challenges the suggestion that these countries are somehow principled defenders of human rights and international humanitarian law. Thus, distancing themselves from "Western governments" promotes a decolonial narrative of a global feminist movement in which the West is not at the centre. This is further strengthened narratively by the statement starting off with commemorating women in the Global South who lost their lives fighting against an oppressive regime, then continuing by condemning the actions of governments in the Global North perpetuating such oppression and ending by describing the horrific situation in Gaza as a result of these actions.[145]

All 27 organizations and groups are dislocated from the material place of the original event that is commemorated—the assassination of the Mirabal sisters. However, as highlighted by Björkdahl and Kappler (2019), commemorative practices act as means of "memory travel" or "diffusion of memories," which in turn contribute to the formation of transnational memory discourses. Through its use by feminist organizations in this manner, the memory is placed within—and becomes part of—a global narrative of marginalized groups fighting against oppressive regimes, making it possible to apply in other contexts, such as advocating for the liberation of Palestine. Following the suggestion that feminist solidarity is a form of organizing (Wickström et al. 2021), the translated and translocated memory can then function as an opening for such organizing to occur, using it as a call for action—even if that may come with a risk of smoothing over nuances and differences, something which is not readily acknowledged in the statement.

These signatories and the collection of countries they are based in—including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen, but not Tunisia—may indicate a dividing line between direct interaction and concrete collaboration on the one hand and simply expressing solidarity on the other, and that this divide aligns with geographical, regional boundaries as understood by the organizations themselves. While these signatories have channels for regular communication, some level of regular interaction, and a history of collaboration on campaigns, similar engagement in terms of concrete collaboration beyond the region is scarce.[146] This is true even in relation to organizations based in locations

[145] "Statement from the feminist organizations and groups," Ganoubia Hora et al.

[146] Digital field work reveals such interaction—e.g., shared statements, some examples of cross-sharing and replication of campaigns—and also shows some evidence of practical collaboration or cooperative work at the regional level, but little interaction other than solidarity statements and non-specific references to supported initiatives beyond the Middle East and North Africa. This is despite interview material and physical field work

relatively near Egypt and/or Tunisia, such as sub-Saharan countries, despite expressing similar goals and claiming to stand in solidarity. In other words, it is reasonable to question the extent to which solidarity correlates with practice, unless solidarity itself constitutes practice (which I argue and elaborate further below). Nevertheless, one should be clear when discussing transnational feminist solidarity, particularly beyond the MENA region, that the practice of writing, signing, and sharing statements of solidarity, or organizing events *on behalf* of the other—such as holding candlelight vigils or marches in honour of victims of feminicide—is far more common than organizational ties and concrete collaborations with feminists around the world.

Understanding statements of solidarity as a form of practice can be argued by taking a performative perspective, focusing on what the statement "does." Following Mohanty (2003) and Dean (1996) solidarity may be viewed as a communicative, in-process expression of commitment towards a shared "we." Similarly, following Zivi (2016) we can consider how a statement referencing "the global feminist movement" does not rely on such a movement as a pre-existing entity but instead functions to produce it through the statement itself. "The signature invents the signer" (Derrida 1986, 19). Declaring solidarity, committing to support and to stand by the ones addressed by the statement—while also expressing a shared belonging to a transnational, regional, or global movement—these statements function to construct a relational community which includes both sender and receiver of the statement. Crucially, since solidarity ultimately implies a level of distance, this relationship acknowledges and respects difference, while simultaneously constructing a "we." This provides a basis for further engagement, and a basis for a larger movement which can put its weight behind any calls for action made in the name of the movement or, better yet, to mobilize further support for a particular cause should the opportunity arise.

Regional Solidarities and Cooperation

> I think that's always been the case. I think the Arab feminist movement in general has always been very communicative with each other, even when I was working in HarassMap or working in AFE [Arab Foundation for Freedoms and

revealing connections and exchanges with, for example, countries in sub-Saharan Africa (digital field notes, Ain Saghouan Nord, December 2023; Naila, in-person interview, March 14, 2024; Aisha, Zoom interview, August 6, 2025).

> Equality], or just you know, just doing stuff with other collaborations, it's always been... you know, exchange of thoughts, exchange of... you know, meeting in forums (...) It's always been part of the movement, I think.[147]

As previously discussed, the extent to which feminists in Egypt and Tunisia relate to and draw inspiration from histories outside the national context varies, and there appears to be a discrepancy between ideal and practice. However, at least at the narrative level, the organizations included in this study regularly refer to regional and global engagement, transnational support networks, and practices of cooperation across borders. Whether idealized or not, this narrative necessitates a closer look at the co-constitutive relationship between regionalization and transnational activism, as feminist activists take on the role of transnational actors (TNAs) and through their engagement and/or narration, reinforce regional boundaries and shared identities—with potential risks of exclusion. As we have seen, the narratives that Egyptian and Tunisian feminist organizations share of their origin, history, and trajectory tend to privilege local and national contexts, emphasizing their activities in relation to particular national milestones and broader societal or political transformations (such as the respective countries' independence movements or the 2010-2011 uprisings) but references to regional collaboration that do appear also indicate some differences in the conceptualization of regional cooperation, and even disagreement on the merits of transnationalism itself.[148] Indeed, there is disagreement both in terms of theory—such as to what extent transnationalism is a relevant concept to understand feminist activism in the Middle East and North Africa—and on a practical or normative level, i.e., whether transnationalism *should* be pursued by feminists and what the potential risks might be.[149]

Regional transnational activism, in particular, is contested in relation to the way it relies upon a geopolitical "region," the basis of which is itself contested; is MENA a region defined by shared religion, language, ethnicity, identity, history, etc.? All these entail various levels of exclusion. Furthermore, MENA may be seen as a colonial construct, intended to create a stable, uniform, and cohesive object which may be studied (and conquered). Lastly, a key point of

[147] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

[148] As an example of different conceptualizations of regional cooperation, we may look at the online presentations, charters, and mission statements of the organizations, such as: "Who are we?" ATFD, accessed January 17, 2025: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/who-are-we/; "About Us," NWF, accessed January 17, 2025: https://nwrcegypt.org/en/about-us/.

[149] Field notes, Lafayette (Tunis), April 14; field notes, Garden City (Cairo), March 19, 2024.

critique is that feminist regional activism may rely on a conceptualization of shared gender politics, smoothing out difference, and an assumption of similar challenges—for example, portraying gender-based violence as a particular MENA issue, necessitating explanation which easily ends up in culturalist, essentialist, or Orientalist arguments about Islam or "Middle Eastern culture" (itself a concept heavily criticized by postcolonial feminists) as uniquely misogynistic. As such, many feminists are cautious of over-emphasising regional similarity, while at the same time maintaining broad-based criticism and cross-border mobilizing on issues that *are* of shared concern, such as Palestinian liberation.[150]

As such, there is a clear tension between on the one hand wanting to portray dynamic transnational interaction and strong alliances of feminists on a regional and global scale, and on the other hand wanting to avoid accusations of being agents of cultural imperialism or imposing foreign gender norms in the local context. At the same time, there is also a tension between wanting to emphasize local and national specificity while also forging support networks and not portraying the region as exceptional in relation to feminism, women's rights, and gender politics. This requires quite some feats of balancing for these organizations and activists when narrating their history, goals, and positioning within the larger region and the global feminist movement as they see it. The self-positioning of feminist organizations therefore carefully balances between highlighting global links and emphasizing shared experiences of women and feminist activists on the one hand, while also avoiding to portray close connections with European and North American feminists on the other hand. This balancing act is found in both Tunisian and Egyptian organizations, often taking the form of "scaling," or distinguishing the different geographic areas that the organization engages with, while also pinpointing particular issues of importance in contexts other than the Egyptian/Tunisian national arena (again with Palestinian liberation as the recurring example). The self-describing texts of the organizations show how transnational cooperation may be separated into multiple levels of interaction, such as in this example from the charter of ATFD:

> 3) Establish links of solidarity and cooperation with women's organizations on the scale of the Maghreb, the Arab World and internationally, as well as with NGOs and humanitarian associations, on the basis of autonomy and mutual respect.

[150] Field notes, Tunis Centre (Tunis), November 25, 2023.

> 4) Support all those men and women and organizations who campaign in our country, in all Arab countries and throughout the world in favour of a freer, fairer and more egalitarian society.
>
> 5) Support all peoples in the fight against colonialism, racism and oppression and in particular the legitimate struggles of the brotherly Palestinian people, and the people of South Africa, in their just struggle against Zionism and apartheid.[151]

Here, ATFD declare their aim to "establish links" with women's organizations in "the Maghreb, Arab World and internationally" and to provide support "in our country, in all Arab countries and throughout the world." Lastly, they pledge to support the fight against colonialism, and in that context specifically pinpoint Palestine and South Africa. Similar scaling is found in the Egyptian organizations, although the named levels or geographic areas differ somewhat, reflecting differences in priorities and in regionalization. In terms of priorities, statements from the New Woman Foundation (NWF) in Egypt and Aswat Nissa in Tunisia show a lower degree of emphasis on "international" cooperation and engagement than other organizations, instead focusing on local and regional cooperation. For example, while the "About Us" page from NWF does state that they work to highlight "women's issues locally, regionally and internationally," further references to the international level are virtually non-existent.[152] Instead, the narration of their work, both in ideational statements and in descriptive texts of organizational practices and activities, mainly relates to Egypt and, to a lesser extent, the Arab World.[153]

In relation to scaling, regionalization, and how the organizations perceive or present the different contexts they place themselves in, it is unsurprising that Egyptian organizations never refer to the Maghreb as a context for their work. Beyond inclusion of this "subregion" only being relevant in the Tunisian case, the most noticeable difference among these organizations is Ganoubia Hora:

> We see ourselves as an integral part of the Egyptian feminist context, as well as the regional, African, and global context. We see that feminism has come to

[151] "Who are we?" ATFD, accessed January 17, 2025: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/who-are-we/

[152] "About Us," NWF, accessed January 17, 2025: https://nwrcegypt.org/en/about-us/

[153] See for example this statement released by NWF for Egyptian Women's Day, 2015: "Statement .. New Woman Foundation celebrates 'The Voices Of Freedom'," NWF, accessed January 17, 2025: https://nwrcegypt.org/en/statement-new-woman-foundation-celebrates-the-voices-of-freedom/

> unite the efforts of various women in the world towards a better world for women in their different social environments, so from this standpoint we seek permanent networking with feminist movements and foundations especially in Egypt, and we learn and develop from other regional and global contexts, and in order to develop and sustain the Egyptian feminist movement, we see that it is our role to support / seek the assistance of all emerging feminist initiatives or entities that are consistent with our vision to achieve a supreme goal, which is a better world for Egyptian women.[154]

None of the other organizations place as much emphasis on the African context as Ganoubia Hora. They present themselves as "an integral part" of the global (feminist) context, although elsewhere state that they focus specifically on what they call "the southern reality" and the impact on women's lives stemming from "tribalism, marginalization and centralization."[155] Statements, social media posts, and other texts from Ganoubia Hora repeatedly declare the need to unite across borders, learn from feminists in different contexts, and to forge permanent support networks—not only within the Middle East and North Africa but indeed globally, and especially with Global South feminists. There is also an emphasis on commitment to support feminist initiatives at the local, national, regional, and global levels, and for themselves to draw assistance from others who align with their goals. While Ganoubia Hora to some extent stands out in the way they specifically emphasize collaboration and solidarity with feminists across the African continent and repeatedly place themselves in the African context—reflecting their multilayered organizational identity, tying together Nubia, Egypt, Africa, and more—other organizations do also emphasize their connection with feminists across the Global South.

Musawah also sticks out in their regional and international positioning, although this is less of a difference in regionalization but rather stemming from their own organizational structure and history as a transnational movement. Musawah started in Malaysia in 2009, with the aim of "advancing equality and justice for women and girls in Muslim contexts, locally and globally," and to

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[154] "About: Our Goals," Ganoubia Hora, accessed November 13, 2024: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/about/; See also Arabic version of the same text: "نحن من [who are we?]," Ganoubia Hora, accessed January 18, 2024: https://ganoubia-hora.com/نحن-من/

[155] "About: Our Goals," Ganoubia Hora; "نحن من [who are we?]," Ganoubia Hora. I understand centralization here—contextualized by interviews and other textual material related to Ganoubia Hora—to mean a centralization of services, such as legal support or mental health services, whether by the government or provided by civil society organizations to cover for government failings. Centralization then refers to the fact of such services focusing mainly on urban centres, particularly the capital, and therefore less accessible to women in rural areas and "southern women."

advance equality and justice in Muslim family laws and policies "at national, regional, and international levels."[156] From the very start, it has been an organization and movement that is not based in any singular country from which a scaling of engagement can be identified. As such, when they write about supporting activists and organizations "at the international, regional, and national levels," there are no further indications of how the regional level is structured, and the national level is not singular as opposed to those organizations that are based solely in Egypt or Tunisia. While Tunisian activists affiliated with Musawah centre their national activism in Tunisia, their transnational (whether regional or international) engagement is organized around "women and girls in Muslim contexts" and thematically focuses on Muslim family laws. As such, Musawah expresses a different kind of transnationalism, based on shared experiences and a religiously connoted, collective identity of "Islamic feminist" rather than, for example nationally, ethnically/racially, or politically connoted identities such as Tunisian, Arab, Nubian, black, or Marxist feminists.

Multiple narratives and understandings of regional transnational feminism exist side-by-side, particularly in relation to the constitution of this region, what its borders are, what defines it, and what identities and histories it fits. This multiplicity is evident simply by comparing ATFD's reference to links of solidarity with women's organizations in "the Maghreb, the Arab World and internationally" and Ganoubia Hora's division of "Egyptian feminist context, as well as the regional, African, and global context."[157] This observation may seem banal—it would be obvious that an Egyptian feminist organization based in Aswan is less concerned with Maghrebi feminist cooperation than Tunisian feminists—but it nevertheless shows that the makeup of regional transnational feminism faces challenges already at conceptualizing collective identity. Competing narratives, disagreements, and sentiments of marginalization or exclusion indicate different experiences of regional belonging, revealing fragmentation and in turn betraying the vision of a fixed, agreed-upon region. There is a noticeable tension in narratives (both in the interview answers and the textual material) about the Egyptian and Tunisian feminist movements, particularly from organizations and members outside of the "old guard," the

[156] "About: Growing a Strong & United Movement," Musawah, accessed November 2, 2025: https://www.musawah.org/about/; "About: Driving Change from the National to the Global Stage," Musawah, accessed November 2, 2025: https://www.musawah.org/about/

[157] "Who are we?" ATFD, accessed January 17, 2025: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/who-are-we/; "About: Our Goals," Ganoubia Hora, accessed January 17, 2025: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/about/

established, mainstream organizations, who have been around for a long time and come to occupy a unique position, enjoying somewhat higher levels of tolerance from the state. These "marginal outsiders," challenging the purported inclusivity of mainstream organizations, often claim to represent the interests of groups who they perceive as not properly represented within the movement, for example Nubian/Southern women, LGBTQ+ individuals, or black women. Their (counter)narratives trouble the idealized image of transnational feminist solidarities or a coherent regional feminist movement based on sameness and shared identity.[158]

I have previously argued that narratives that portray a vibrant and interactive regional transnational feminist movement do not reflect the current reality but instead represent an ideal. However, with all of these challenges and pitfalls in mind, what then underpins such an ideal? There are several factors which may drive contemporary feminist activists in Egypt and Tunisia to look beyond their national context when seeking support or collaborations. Hanan—the feminist activist who credited her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother for making her a feminist, and has been active in the Egyptian feminist movements since before 2011—says that the movement has always been transnational, that there is already a precedent in place, and that previous generations have already done the work of establishing a tradition of working across borders.[159] There is also ample evidence showing a history of transnational feminist engagement in the Middle East in previous literature (see for example Salem 2018; Arfaoui 2007; Moghadam 2005; 1998).

However, it is important not to idealize this history or overstate its significance. Several interlocutors, especially in Egypt, speak of a fragmented movement—one, Amer, even said that there is no Egyptian feminist movement anymore.[160] They describe a situation in which organizations mainly keep to themselves and avoid communicating or collaborating with others within the country, despite working towards similar goals. Feminists of the older generations would emphasize that this was not always the case. Nabra, one of the co-founders of Nazra for Feminist Studies, attributes this partly to the effects of NGO-ization—a "process by which social movements adopt a depoliticized, centralized, and neoliberal structure" (Lemay 2023, 16)—and partly to

[158] These tensions are also revealed by Mehta (2024) in her study on the construction of a regional public space through online gender activism in the Middle East and North Africa (which is explored further later in this chapter).

[159] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

[160] Amer, Zoom interview, May 15, 2023.

funding: "They don't use the funds in a good way. They think that if they got funded, they have to stop cooperating with others."[161] In other words, according to Nabra, many of the feminist organizations have a sense that if they secure funding for a project, they need to work alone. This may either be to justify their funding, prove their ability to use it efficiently and work independently, or to avoid having to share funds and pay overhead costs to bring in people from other organizations in the project. Collaborating with partners in other countries removes some of these challenges as there are less expectations on sharing funds or paying for the other organization's staff. There is a sense of resource competition between the local organizations that is not present between those based in different countries. Expressing a similar sentiment about the NGO-structure of feminist activism in Tunisia, Manal tells me that "Feminism is best practiced outside of think-tanks."[162] According to her, there are some established organizations, yes, but most "known" feminists in Tunisia are unaffiliated and a lot of the work is informal and unorganized.[163]

Another factor contributing to fragmentation of the feminist movement is, of course, repression from state authorities, such as in the form of surveillance, arrests of activists, and limitations or bans placed on receiving foreign funding. This civil society crackdown has led to activists leaving their organizations. However, while this impacts the feminist movement at large, it is mainly the organizations themselves that are affected, as the networks of feminists in-between often remain. It is therefore mainly the *form of organizing* that shifts, towards a more autonomous feminist movement and potentially even reversing some of the effects of NGO-ization. This autonomy enables more diverse and dispersed transnational engagement, in turn aided by new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and an increasing importance of digital spaces for the practice of political activism in general and feminist activism in particular (see Mehta 2024; Thiel and Maslanik 2017; Hjorth et al. 2017; Postill 2012). While the increased repression of feminist activists is generally seen as a major challenge, many have also perceived the move towards project-based work and NGO structure as contributing to a de-politicization and neo-liberalization of the movement, diminishing its revolutionary potential. Particularly socialist and Marxist feminists, such as those affiliated with the

[161] Nabra, Zoom interview, March 23, 2024.

[162] Manal, in-person interview, April 18, 2023.

[163] The well-known feminists Manal refers to are mostly former, high-ranking members of the organizations included in this study, meaning they were included in the sampling for the interviews conducted.

Bread and Freedom Party, but also Islamic feminists, therefore express that the current political moment is not purely challenging but an opportunity for feminists to re-organize outside established NGOs, build new alliances, and to re-politicize the movement.

Digital Spaces of Transnationalism

> [Content warning/notice on sensitive content: This chapter contains references to violence, specifically violence against women and feminicide, which some readers may find disturbing or triggering.]

A series of highly mediatized feminicides in June and July of 2022 led to widespread calls for a regional women's strike, mainly organized through an online campaign under the slogan "Solidarity Across Borders." This call echoed other women's strikes in response to feminicide and gender-based violence, such as the #NiUnaMenos protests which started in Argentina in 2015 and later spread across Latin America. As such, this campaign is not simply transnational in form and content, but also through its links with global feminist histories. Therefore, the form and content of the campaign, particularly its call for cross-border solidarity, provides opportunity to further explore the potential effects, risks, and benefits of transnational feminist activism, while the medium enables us to consider how digital spaces may facilitate such activism.

In June of 2022, a 21-year-old student named Nayera Ashraf was attacked outside of Mansoura University in Egypt, after having rejected a colleague's marriage proposal. Nayera's murder was filmed by a bystander, and it quickly began spreading on social media and was also picked up by national and international news outlets. This was followed four days later by another murder in Amman, Jordan, of 21-year-old Iman Irsheed who likewise had rejected the advances of a man. In this case, rather than the attack itself, it was screenshots of threatening messages sent to Iman that were spread through social media. One message specifically references the murder of Nayera: "Tomorrow I am coming to speak to you and if you don't accept, I am going to kill you just like the Egyptian killed that girl today" (Dadouch 2022).

These murders, together with several other cases in Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria, became triggers for the regional women's strike. The "Solidarity Across Borders" campaign started and was organized mainly through social media, and Mehta (2024) notes how it constructed a narrative about the "regionality" of gender-based violence (GBV), as well as a regional collective identity and

a "transnational public founded upon solidarity collectively acting to challenge GBV" (Mehta 2024, 549). As discussed previously in this chapter, such regional collective identity is perhaps shaky at best and may rely on exclusion of already marginalized voices. What is more problematic, however, is the risks associated with constructing a narrative of regionally specific gender-based violence. Placing such violence at the regional level, as something uniquely experienced by women within this region (however defined), simultaneously erases local specificities and context while at the same time separating it from violence perpetrated against women elsewhere. As such, it may exacerbate predominant anti-Muslim or anti-Arab rhetoric connected to narratives about "the violent Arab man," drawing causal links between Middle Eastern and Muslim men and misogynistic violence (see Ghannam 2013).

Returning to the specificity of the digital space, as opposed to the supposed specificity of the physical space, it is necessary to consider the role played by social media in contemporary feminist activism. As detailed in the previous chapter, most feminists whom I have interviewed, met during fieldwork, or spoken to online, speak of a more active use of social media as a hallmark of the younger feminist activists. Furthermore, utilization of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) is often associated with the so-called "fourth wave" of feminism. The online presence and digital campaigning of the organizations in this study differ both in degree and format, and at first glance one might believe that this corresponds with generational differences, meaning that "older" organizations would utilize social media less than those that were founded in the last 10-20 years. For example, HarassMap, launched in 2010, is very much built on the proliferation of social media, the realization that (in their own account) 97% of Egyptians at that time owned a mobile phone, and that they therefore could use digital technology to "support an offline community mobilization effort to break stereotypes, stop making excuses of perpetrators, and to convince people to speak out and act against sexual harassment."[164] Their approach inspired others, and they have helped start similar initiatives in Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and more, showing also how the format has spread.[165] Allowing reports through text message, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and their own website means that their presence online has been very high and also enable them to connect

[164] "About: Our Story," HarassMap, accessed January 20, 2025: https://harassmap.org/who-we-are/our-story

[165] "Our Work: Around The World," HarassMap, accessed November 2, 2025: https://harassmap.org/en/around-world

victims of harassment with support services. In contrast, the website of the Egyptian Feminist Union has been inactive since at least 2023 and now leads to ads for a Thai casino.[166] However, other organizations of the "old guard" (defined here broadly as those started before 2011) are very active online, including Women and Memory Forum, New Woman Foundation, and ATFD. Instead, the difference in utilization of social media, and particularly its utility in forming transnational feminist networks, mainly reflects a difference in priorities and preferred strategies.

In both Egypt and Tunisia, digital tools now function as testimony platforms as much as archival infrastructures, but also as sites of exposure. In Tunisia, the #EnaZeda campaign made use of Facebook groups and Instagram pages to highlight stories of sexual harassment and victimization, translate them into agenda-setting moments, and sync online narratives with street mobilization (see also Doelker 2020). Feminist activists have also made use of Instagram to translate the MeToo-movement to the Egyptian context, building on the work already established mainly by Harassmap. However, as discussed in the beginning of this dissertation, digital activism is not free from the risks associated with other forms of campaigning. For example, Egyptian authorities have applied the 2018 Cybercrime Law against regular TikTokers and activists alike, while Tunisian authorities have used Decree-Law 54 (2022) to prosecute online speech, which stifles the possibilities of digital activism.

Feminist (Political) Virals

In the introduction to this chapter, I described a Facebook page and campaign under the name "The uprising of women in the Arab world."[167] This page was started in 2011 by Yalda Younes, Sally Zohney, Diala Haidar, and Farah Barqawi. At the time, Younes lived in Paris, Zohney in Cairo, and Haidar and Barqawi lived in Beirut. In the first six months or so, the page had around 3,000 followers. Farah credits the initial interest from people partly to events happening mainly in Egypt and Tunisia: "We noticed that even revolutionary guys, who saw women fighting beside them, well, after they reaped the success (or semi-success) of the revolution, they tried to marginalize the women" (Abbas 2012). Another factor, according to Farah, was the trial by Samira

[166] See: http://efuegypt.org/; Previous versions of the website are accessible through the Wayback Machine: https://web.archive.org/web/20220120173229/http://efuegypt.org/

[167] "The uprising of women in the Arab world انتفاضة المرأة في العالم العربي," Facebook page, accessed January 18, 2025: https://www.facebook.com/intifadat.almar2a

Ibrahim against the Egyptian Army after she had been subjected to so-called "virginity tests," conducted during the 2011 revolution to protect soldiers, who were tasked with dispersing protestors, from accusations of rape. While a civilian court could determine that such tests had taken place and ordered that they be stopped, a military tribunal acquitted the army doctor in charge in March 2012: "It was the kind of news that made every Arab woman angry… this made the page grow, because we made it clear that we do not, and cannot forget" (Abbas 2012).

By October 2012, the group had also started a Twitter account (now X) and launched a digital campaign that went viral and quickly increased the group's visibility.[168] Hanan, affiliated with HarassMap, praised the campaign especially for its reach:

> Farah did this amazing campaign where basically women all over the Arab world were holding up like little papers saying, "I believe in women's rights and feminism, because…" and then a statement. And it'll be people telling their stories or just a statement they believe in. And it was men, it was women, it was queer. It was everybody. It was an amazing, amazing campaign.[169]

The campaign led to the number of followers on Facebook growing from 20,000 to 80,000 in just a month. This example highlights the efficiency of viral campaigns in shedding light on an issue and building support for a particular cause or movement, as well as the speed and ease with which digital campaigns can spread across borders. The potential impact of social media for activists has by now been covered in-depth by many social movement researchers and media anthropologists, not least in relation to how social media was used during the Arab Spring (see for example Radsch 2016; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013; Lim 2012; Cottle 2011). However, the concept of "political virals" represents a specific type of digital campaigning and it should be noted that digital activism does not always take the form of political virals, large-scale campaigns against a particular issue, or even outreach work aimed at the public. For example, studying women bloggers during the uprising in Egypt, Sonali Pahwa notes that a lot of their work was about community-building and fine-tuning a political voice:

[168] Uprising of Women in the Arab World (@UprisingOfWomen), Twitter (now X), accessed January 18, 2025: https://x.com/UprisingOfWomen/

[169] Hanan, Zoom interview, May 13, 2023.

> Less visibly and without heroic accolades, the women bloggers of whom I write created spaces for reflecting on revolutionary times, using them to incubate new forms of writing about political sentiments. I argue that these were also sites of performing gendered roles and relations for an audience of anonymous readers. (Pahwa 2016, 26)

This can be compared with the Tunisian non-binary drag performer and activist Khookha McQueer, who does seek to make their online persona publicly known, even to conservative audiences.[170] They do this for example through the "Ask Me a Question" feature on Instagram:

> When I first opened my space for questions, it was spontaneous, and I was determined to answer every question, because I felt I was capable to answer them in a way that provided answers to the next generation. I witnessed a lot of queer youth struggling to get the answers that are very essential. Like, rather than saying "it is not your business to ask about my gender" or making statements when answering those questions, I vehicled the idea of being a queer person not as a victim or different, but being strong and having agency and striving for equal treatment with cis, heterosexual people. (McQueer, in Gomez 2019, 15).

This type of online activism does little in terms of fine-tuning a political voice, but instead puts emphasis on visibility, virality, and making many more people aware of a particular political issue. The goal then is not to create an intimate space for engaging with other likeminded activists and developing or fine-tuning revolutionary feminist political thinking, but rather to reach beyond those circles and gain wider attention for feminist causes.

Pahwa (2016) writes that one of the bloggers in her study, Maha, viewed the blogosphere as insufficient in bringing about social change in Egypt, and that now is the time for feminists to get off the internet and on to the streets:

> The time for rehearsing feminist debates online was over, she believed, and it was now expedient to organize on the ground and gain wider currency for women's questions in civil society: "You know, these activists all know each other and speak to each other online. We have to go offline to reach others, do a grassroots campaign in the countryside and elsewhere." (Pahwa 2016, 40f).

Even though this is directed towards online campaigning, it could be read as a statement against romanticizing digital spaces of activism. There is definitely

[170] Khookha is a regular collaborator of Mawjoudin, have also been affiliated with Damj, Avocats Sans Frontières, and Chouf, and is well-known in Tunisian feminist circles.

an argument here against neglecting traditional street protesting, but also more specifically against the intimate, inward-looking blogging studied by Pahwa, which is not necessarily focused on outreach. This last point has already proven moot, as political blogs do not have the same impact as they did 10 years ago. Contemporary forms of digital campaigning are more outward-looking, seeking to reach as many people as possible (i.e. virality), rather than creating a space for feminist collaborative thinking.

Political virals, as such, refers to the type of content that typically does not require a lot of resources or time to produce, it is easy to share, and often make use of simple and clear messages. They consist of politically themed content that spreads rapidly through social media or some other digital communication, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, mainly with the aim of influencing public opinion, raising awareness about an issue, or promoting a political agenda. These virals can take many forms, such as video clips, tweets, memes, comics, parodies, satirical images, and so on. Political virals often rely on emotional appeals, outrage over injustices, sharing personal testimonies, or using humour to capture attention and engage audiences. Given the relative simplicity in creating such content, the feminist campaigns that go viral are often started by individual activists rather than by organizational efforts, which perhaps also relates to the previously described fragmentation.

The campaign started by "The uprising of women in the Arab world" is one example, utilizing a simple format and clear messages—holding up a sign with a message of support or solidarity—that made it easy for many people to join in, at the same time as it allowed for anonymity by holding the banner or paper with your message in front of your face. Other examples of campaigns that spread across borders include #MeToo and variations of the same concept, such as #MosqueMeToo, #EnaZeda, and #EndTheSilence. A more recent example is the campaign "Guardianship is my right" which was launched by the Women and Memory Forum, in March 2021, to criticize and mobilize against provisions in the personal status law, limiting women's rights to guardianship over their children.[171] Just as the other campaigns here, the format relied on personal testimonies, shared under a hashtag that became so popular that it was picked up by journalists and shared through traditional news media (see Al-Nasr 2021).

[171] See for example Women and Memory Forum (@WMFcairo), Twitter (now X), accessed November 3, 2025: https://x.com/WMFcairo/status/1505227813321953284 The hashtag is still in use, see Women and Memory Forum (@WMFcairo), Twitter (now X), accessed November 3, 2025: https://x.com/WMFcairo/status/1905213863538077883.

There are of course challenges, and risks, associated with digital campaigning in general and political virals specifically. Feminists and their allies face online harassment and cyberbullying, at the same time as anti-feminist counter-campaigns are equally capable of building support and attention online. State surveillance is also a significant risk for those activists who choose to not be anonymous, to the extent that is possible. Furthermore, some activists worry that campaigning online may lower the commitment dedicated by supporters if it replaces other forms of engagement. A political, feminist revolution cannot be *only* digital.

Conclusion

Egyptian and Tunisian feminist organizations narrate themselves as belonging to a "global" feminist movement. However, looking at concrete instances of collaboration—joint campaigns, co-authored statements, shared training programs, and so on—there are fewer indications of interaction than narratives seem to suggest. This discrepancy, I argue, has to do with how transnational feminist solidarity function in relation to constructing shared, collective identity, and that the narratives themselves are part of enabling transnational engagement. In short, narration and practice are not opposing categories, as the stories organizations tell about their position within a larger regional or global movement create expectations and points of recognition that can be built upon.

On this basis, I argue that feminist solidarity should not be understood as a theoretical concept but as an important foundation for transnational organizing. Ideational statements—such as petitions of support, statements of solidarity, and transnational commemoration—also *do* something. They consolidate a collective identity ("we," "our struggle") and rehearse a grammar of obligation that activists can draw on when opportunities for practical cooperation arise. There are, of course, also risks, such as that broad solidarity statements may flatten differences and obscure disagreement, while also reifying boundaries. Nevertheless, dismissing ideational statements of solidarity also misses how it has the potential of establishing networks, building moral and symbolic capital, and (re)affirming feminism as transcending borders.

In terms of boundaries, the regional frame highlights further possibilities and risks. Through regional replication and cross-posted campaigns, as well as transnational commemorations and solidarity statements, Egyptian and Tunisian feminists build a Middle East and North Africa feminist archive,

consisting of shared histories, struggles, and practices. This comes with possibilities in terms of supporting and empowering feminists across borders but can also contribute to regionalization in a problematic sense. Firstly, it risks smoothing over contextual differences, homogenizing feminist organizing. Secondly, and more problematically, it risks reifying "MENA" as a coherent, stable region defined at least partly by gendered dynamics and gender politics. Particularly, this may feed into Orientalist discourse on misogyny or gender-based violence "unique" to the region, often coupled with ideas of Muslim men as "uniquely" and innately misogynist. Misogyny then becomes depoliticized, instead framed as a matter of culture and/or religion.

Furthermore, narratives that reinforce a particular view of "the region," defining it for example on a presupposed Arab identity or shared religious identity, may inadvertently draw hard borders around who may be included within the movement, making it harder to see solidarities that cut diagonally across regions or to acknowledge differences within them. In short, regional narratives can be enabling infrastructures and, simultaneously, boundary-making projects that require continuous critique from within.

Finally, digital spaces of activism contribute both to the possibilities and the ambivalence of transnational engagement. Social media and new information and communication technologies enable easier affiliation with a transnational feminist "we," facilitates the circulating political virals that spread across borders, and to digitally document and archive otherwise ephemeral actions. In authoritarian contexts, digital technologies can enable some forms of activism, particularly when combined with tools to secure some level of digital privacy, while also exposing activists to harassment, surveillance, and legal trouble when digital privacy fails.

In conclusion, I argue that Egyptian and Tunisian feminist organizations build transnational solidarity by telling it (ideationally) and by testing it (practically), and the apparent space between the two does not indicate failure but formation. The challenge—and the opportunity—is to keep the identity work generative, focusing on solidarity without erasure of difference and without flattening disagreement. We should therefore be careful both when constructing regional narratives, and when studying them, as to not reify hard, exclusionary borders. Read this way, the most important question is not whether solidarity is "real," but what relationships it enables and how those relationships remain attentive to difference while making cooperation possible.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Feminist solidarity is challenged on three fronts: difference, the transnational, and the temporal. Although these challenges can indeed be productive, they are nevertheless fundamental in shaping contemporary feminist activism, whether or not feminist organizations explicitly engage with them. As noted in the introductory chapter, they are not neatly separated and, in fact, it is largely the ways in which the challenges of difference, time, and the transnational converge and compound to enable or hinder the formation of feminist solidarities which interest me. In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the main findings and contributions, both in terms of conceptual advancement, discussing the utility of a chronopolitical lens within transnational feminist studies, as well as studying social movement from the "ground up." Furthermore, I also elaborate on how difference should be understood as the infrastructure of feminist organizing, i.e. that the same channels that carry our claims—language, space, religion, class, race—also gatekeep them. Secondly, I discuss how this dissertation advances empirical knowledge about Egyptian and Tunisian feminist movements. Particularly, this dissertation fills a gap by looking at temporal practices and perspectives and how these come to influence contemporary feminist activism in the region. Most importantly, however, in relation to both conceptual and empirical advancement, is the convergence of difference, time, and the transnational. Finally, I provide some potential avenues for future research, based on the current state of the research field, the findings here, and the limitations of this dissertation.

The conceptual framework developed in this dissertation combines feminist theories of difference, chronopolitics, and theories on the transnational (drawn from both social movement theory and transnational feminist studies) in order to investigate feminist organizations' work towards transnational solidarity, in the context of Egypt and Tunisia. Doing so demonstrates the value brought to feminist social movement research by both paying attention to (subjective) time and moving beyond linear or sequential time as well as by interrogating the tensions, contradictions, and competing priorities related to the interplay between "the local" and "the transnational." This framework contributes to a

situated, contextualized, and holistic understanding of transnational feminist solidarity, from the "ground up" which also entails not losing sight on the feminist individuals who make up the movements studied, even while looking at organizational links, networks, and interactions. I believe the same approach can be developed further, built upon, and applied in other settings, which I discuss further in the final part of this chapter.

Chronopolitics of Transnational Feminism

A primary argument forwarded in this dissertation is that that time, within the context of social movements, is not an independently existing background but a field of struggle actively navigated and shaped by organizations and activists. Chronopolitical practices—particularly narration of movement beginnings, development, and trajectories—do political work by forging links, legitimizing strategies and practices, constructing boundaries, and delimiting coalitions. This also means that such periodization is often contested, as organizations, activists, collaborators, and other stakeholders forward alternative narratives, or make strategic choices which require different temporal framings. Treating temporality as a field of struggle clarifies how struggles over narrative are also struggles of power. Importantly, temporal perspectives are also affective and strategic resources. Restorative historical work—particularly the archiving of alternative histories, highlighting past feminist struggles, and commemorating important events or milestones—mitigates tendencies towards "dead-time" and activist fatigue by embedding setbacks within longer narrative arcs, thereby working against dominant, sequential or teleological temporalities. Future-oriented activism, meanwhile, motivates community-building efforts which ensure long-term commitment. Thinking in cycles and actively engage with time as a resource allows feminist organizations to adjust pacing, refocus on long-term goals, while emphasizing the slow work of community-building even under increased repression. In this sense, "time work" provides both morale and method.

A chronopolitical lens allows us to move beyond feminist "waves," which inherently implies a waxing and waning of successes and setbacks, in turn obscuring subtler, long-term work of feminist organizations. Equally, the same lens may be applied to other movements, even those who are not generally discussed in terms of waves, as the linear and/or sequential understanding of activist mobilization still dominates social movement research.

Difference as Infrastructure

A second theoretical claim is that race, class, religion, language, and space are channels through which feminist politics are made and unmade. In other words, they are not external dimensions to feminist mobilization but constitute it, carry it, and shape it. This means that chronopolitical practices and temporal work of feminist organizations also intersect with tensions and contestations related to, for example, racialized difference and marginalization of racialized women. As emphasized by Mohanty (2003) difference is not a hurdle to overcome but a resource to draw from. Based on the findings of this study, I argue that it is better understood as the infrastructure through which feminist politics moves. Class, race, religion, language, and space shape who can speak, where they can gather, which arguments are perceived as legitimate, and how other stakeholders (particularly state authorities) respond. Because these dimensions also exist inside organizations, feminists continuously face the challenge of having to critically examine who are centred or prioritized—as well as who are marginalized and excluded—within their work and within the movement as a whole. Crucially, generational turnover leading to ideological shifts and internal critique against previously held stances forces organizations to rethink who counts as a "feminist subject," and what kinds of arguments, practices, and references (including religious ones) are considered legitimate feminist ground to build from. In the case of Egyptian and Tunisian feminist organizations, internal critique by intersectional and Muslim feminists ties into generally held perceptions against "elite" feminism. Shifting towards a more inclusive frame then requires altering infrastructures (including languages, narratives, and strategies), not just expanding "inclusion criteria" or widening the base which organizations draw their members from.

Ideational Transnational Feminism

Throughout this dissertation—particularly in chapter six—I argue that transnationalism is unevenly narrated and enacted, but that the narration could be understood as constitutive of transnational feminist solidarity. Ideational solidarities contribute toward building a shared collective identity which can be converted into coordination, resources, and protection. At the same time, there are potential pitfalls in terms of erasing difference and presenting a homogenized view of the movement, to the exclusion of voices who are already marginalized. The regional frame increases this risk, for example by

discursively constructing a regional movement founded on a supposed shared ethnic or religious identity. As such, regional narratives can be both enabling infrastructures and, simultaneously, boundary-making projects that risk regionalizing feminism in ways that reify borders and gloss over disagreement. More problematically, there is also the risk that such a frame reifies "MENA" as a coherent, stable region defined at least partly by gendered dynamics and gender politics, thereby legitimizing Orientalist discourse that paints the region as particularly or uniquely misogynist. I also argue that this frame risks exacerbating the perceived "Western-ness" of transnational feminist activism.

Viewing transnational feminist solidarity as both practice and as ideation, with an understanding that it is possible to "do things with words" (Austin 1975), allows for a view of transnational activism from below. Narratives themselves are part of enabling transnational engagement, thereby functioning to construct shared, collective identity, providing a ground-up model for studying feminist movements which may be applied to other social movements or other contexts.

Nexus of Difference, Time, and the Transnational

Bringing these strands together, feminist solidarity emerges not as agreement around a single agenda but as temporal synchronization across difference within a transnational space. Constructing a cohesive, transnational movement built on solidarity requires engagement with temporal differences and diverging perspectives, particularly if understanding timing as forging linkages between past, present, and future. However, temporal synchronization does not mean that difference—of class, race, religion, sexuality, language, location, and so on—disappears, of course, but needs to be recognized, translated, and negotiated through activists' temporal perspectives without demanding sameness. Explicit engagement with temporality provides the mechanisms of this, as the recognition of multiple feminist genealogies and moving beyond linear, teleological temporality provides a usable past that organizations and activists can inhabit without erasure.

Synchronized campaigning, such as around commemorations and declared "days of activism," produce coordinated presence across uneven conditions, while future-oriented activism reveals a sense of responsibility towards future generations. Ideational transnational solidarity then provides opportunities for temporal practices and perspective to travel. Read this way, solidarity is a reflexive and infrastructural practice that converts narrated belonging into

cooperation without erasing disagreement. Its success depends less on erasing difference than on managing pace and temporal perspective, acknowledging diverging genealogies, and building archives that let actors enter at different times and still find themselves inside the same struggle.

Finally, digitality reshapes the temporal and spatial affordances of activism. Digital technologies and platforms can extend the life of otherwise ephemeral performances and boost the spread of feminist campaigns beyond its original location, while also increasing visibility. Conceptually, the digital sphere is best read as a double-edged infrastructure of memory and mobilization—one that stretches time for movements but can also compress and magnify risk.

Advancing Empirical Knowledge

Apart from the formulation of a conceptual, analytical, and methodological approach to studying transnational social movements—from the "ground up," through the lenses of difference, time, and transnationalism—this study also applies the same framework and, in doing so, contributes to the literature on Middle East feminist movements with new empirical insights. First of all, in both Egypt and Tunisia, activists engage in chronopolitical work that orders feminist histories, situates organizations within these histories, and authorizes strategic choices. There is significant diversity and diverging narratives, particularly related to the "beginnings" of feminist movements in the respective contexts. Furthermore, perceived exclusion and marginalization inform the practice restorative history (drawing from the past to equip activists in the present) along with present-tense archiving (documenting current activities for future feminists), revealing different temporal perspectives and priorities.

Furthermore, by paying attention to temporal tensions, the research conducted here shows intergenerational dynamics as an issue of particular importance for feminist organizations. As detailed in chapter five, disrupted mentorship chains and a "lost" generation shaped by instability and migration constitutes a major challenge to feminist mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia, which risks intensifying disagreement over practices, strategies, and priorities. Where generational turnover has been aided by mentorship and feminist schools, as well as established practices of documenting and archiving feminist struggles, gaps in the work towards maintaining institutional memory may exacerbate fragmentation. Increased emphasis on preserving such a memory and finding

new ways of ensuring movement cohesion and longevity—as well as prioritizing slow but impactful community-building work—becomes crucial for building strong solidarity networks across generations as well as across borders. At the present moment, application of such emphasis appears uneven.

On the challenge of difference, I note both ideological and spatial issues at play. In chapter four, I describe how activism which is considered "allowable" is defined both by the *what* and the *where*. Feminist protests and activities in affluent neighbourhoods or advocating for elite- and foreign-coded causes are relatively spared from repression by state authorities, while protests perceived as relevant for working-class women and protests staged in city centres or factory towns face much harsher response.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, racial politics have become a salient but contentious issue, with emergent Black feminist organizing in Tunisia and Nubian feminist initiatives in Egypt highlighting anti-Blackness, dispossession, and cultural devaluation. While I have put effort to bring some of these developments to light, it has not been the core aim of the dissertation, instead mainly looking at how racialized difference intersects with the work towards building feminist solidarity. As such, there is much more research to be done in this area, which I detail further below. What this dissertation may still contribute with is by calling attention to the interventions of black and Nubian feminists in Tunisia and Egypt respectively. Furthermore, intersecting with both class politics and racialized dynamics, we should pay attention to how the politics of language tie authenticity and national belonging to Arabic while associating French with urban, secular elites, which may be either valorised or de-valorised depending on context—wherein race plays a significant role in determining which, as shown in chapter four.

In terms of transnational interaction, I highlight how feminist organizations and activists engage more in narrating regional and global engagement than there are concrete examples of active collaboration and coordination. Nonetheless, throughout this dissertation, I also argue that speech matters, and that solidarity statements, transnational commemorations, and other references to a regional feminist movement form a foundation for constructing a shared collective identity, building and maintaining bonds of feminist solidarity. Digital platforms intensify these patterns while also introducing surveillance and harassment risks, and we have seen increased repression of feminists' online activism, dispelling romanticized views of these platforms.

Together, the findings presented throughout these seven chapters indicate feminist movements in Egypt and Tunisia endure times of increased repression

and a deteriorating civil society not only by assembling bodies and resources, but by engaging explicitly with pasts and futures, renegotiating difference, and (re)calibrating cross-border ties. The most generative projects, in my view, are those that acknowledge multiplicity in terms of feminist histories, expand archives with attention towards restoring marginalized or silenced groups, bridge generational cohorts, and convert narrated solidarities into reciprocal infrastructures—without letting the work of building shared collective identity, based on transnational feminist solidarity, smoothen out difference and reify exclusionary boundaries or let regional frames congeal into hard borders.

While this dissertation focuses on feminist activism in a particular context, I believe the same framework of studying social movements through the nexus of difference-time-transnationalism can be applied in other contexts and to other social movements in order to produce empirical insights on the work, at micro-level, towards enabling sustained transnational mobilization. In the next section, the final part of this dissertation, I outline some potential directions for future research building on what has been presented here.

Avenues for Future Research

Beyond what I have indicated above in terms of the possibility to build on and further developed the framework used in this study, and applying a similar approach in different contexts, there are also other potential directions, based on the findings here and gaps in the literature. Building on this study's account of temporality, difference, and transnationalism in Egyptian and Tunisian feminist activism, future research could consolidate theoretical arguments—such as on time as a field of struggle, or difference as infrastructure—into empirical studies at a larger scale, or a different level of analysis. The directions outlined here are to some extent interconnected and move more towards explanatory and evaluative work than what this dissertation could provide. Each of these directions speaks to different gap but could also be combined; of course, future studies can assess not only whether particular practices hold up in other contexts, but how they converge and come to shape mobilization, movement longevity, and outcomes over time.

First of all, despite a recent increase in research, Middle East political science in general—and feminist studies in the region in particular—still lacks systematic analyses of race and racialization. Future research should theorize race with attention to local/contextual specificity (such as colourism, racialized

national identity projects, linguistic gatekeeping, or the legacy of colonialism and slavery) rather than importing simplified binaries. Comparative work across Egypt and Tunisia, and across urban/rural divides, could specify when racial hierarchies become visible, how these are coded through class, religion, or language, and how they interact with social movement repertoires. Methodologically, mixed designs that combine, for example, discourse analysis, life-history interviews with black and Nubian feminists, and extended fieldwork could delve further into how racialized dynamics shape activism and social movement mobilization. The benefit of such a research agenda would be further conceptual clarity—race as a constitutive dimension of feminist politics in North Africa—and an empirical basis for evaluating organizational reforms that claim to centre racialized women.

Furthermore, considering how digital developments outpace research, there is a pressing need for designs that capture the interplay between online and offline activism. Rather than treating visibility as a proxy for capacity, future work could track the "conversion rate" by which ideational solidarities (hashtags, open letters, commemorations) mature into material exchange (co-training, legal support, pooled resources). Multi-sited, hybrid ethnographies following specific campaigns across platforms and street venues, paying attention to linkages between the digital campaign in questions and offline meetings, workshops, or protests, would help distinguish (non-)performative signalling from organizing infrastructure. Given the repressive, authoritarian context, it is important to consider risks and how to mitigate digital surveillance by state authorities, particularly in order to not cause harm on political activists. There would, however, be potentially important contributions, in terms of a more precise account of how digital temporality (speed, persistence, recirculation) and spatiality (reach, exposure) reconfigure feminist repertoires.

Looking closer at the geographies of "allowable activism," future research should pay attention to sites of struggle, and the unevenness of repression. Spatially attentive political sociology or political ethnography could link the "where" of activism—downtown offices, campuses, cultural centres, factory-adjacent, etc.—to permitting regimes, policing patterns, and surveillance. Coupling administrative data and court records with crowd-sourced incident logs, on-the-ground fieldwork and participant observation could investigate how space intersects with class, racialized exposure, or the intensity and form of state response. Attention to temporal variation (such as upcoming elections, religious holidays, or commemorative dates) would connect space to time,

clarifying how organizations synchronize calendars with safer geographies and how states recalibrate tolerance by location.

Related to the relative lack of research of race in the Middle Eastern context (at least contemporary, non-Orientalist, critical research), another theme to pursue would be the afterlives of slavery and racialization through oral history and archival reconstruction, linking long-term marginalization, dispossession, and cultural devaluation to contemporary feminist agendas and coalition possibilities. Community-governed digital archives that collect and combine court records, missionary/consular materials, and community-held collections with life-history interviews can both preserve fragile memory and constitute reparative practice. Analytically, future research could investigate, for example, whether integrating these histories into organizational narratives shifts priorities, influence commemorative calendars, or expands the set of actors recognized as movement predecessors. Such work should also anchor present-day racial politics within the chronopolitics of the region, countering perceptions that race and racialized dynamics are recent "imports," without necessarily denying the impact of globalized discourses on race.

Lastly, to understand how movements endure, investigating intergenerational dynamics, or understanding "lost cohorts" warrant longitudinal attention. Research focusing on membership and leadership turnover, practices of cross-generational knowledge-sharing, and mentorship programs—supplemented by, for example, interview diaries and social network analysis—could look at whether structured handovers reduce temporal tensions, particularly the risk of short-term goals becoming prioritized over community-building efforts.

These potential avenues of future research are mutually reinforcing. For example, mapping allowable spaces may clarify both online-offline interplay, as well as racialized and class dynamics of movements. Taken together, the agenda moves from cataloguing exclusions to evaluating which infrastructural changes—in language, venue, archive, calendar, and platform use—most effectively widen participation, reduce tensions whether from generational turnover or from ideological disagreement, and increase feminist cooperation across difference and borders. By specifying designs, measures, and ethical protocols attuned to authoritarian contexts, future research can further develop the thesis's central claims, and hopefully, ultimately, translate it into practical guidance for movements seeking not only to survive but to recombine and endure.

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Appendix A

Breakdown of Concepts and Codes

Abstract concept (Top level-code)	**Variation** (Class.)	**Theme** (Sub-codes)	**Concretized expressions** (Description)
Transnationalism	Practical	Transnational collaboration	Specific transnational feminist networks (such as the AFU); regional and international women's conferences and workshops; shared and/or co-coordinated campaigns; knowledge-sharing efforts.
	Practical	Viral, transnational campaigns	Examples of specific campaigns.
	Practical / ideological	Travelling of ideas, practices, and repertoires.	Examples of cross-border knowledge-sharing efforts; mentions of foreign sources of inspiration.
	Ideological	Foreign sources of inspiration	Transnational feminist icons; mentions of important, historical moments from other contexts; re-telling and emphasis on feminist struggles in other national contexts.
	Ideological	International solidarity	Expressions of support for other, foreign causes (such as women in solidarity with Palestine); re-telling and emphasis on feminist struggles in other national contexts; sharing of stories and giving examples of feminist causes in other contexts.

Temporality	Ideological	Feminist histories	Important feminist milestones and historical moments; origin stories of feminist movement(s) and feminist organizations; stories of development, trajectories, and changes within feminist movements; historical figures and feminist icons.
	Ideological	Intergenerational responsibility	Expressions of collective responsibility towards (people of) the past and the future.
	Ideological	Chronocentrism	Expressions of prioritizing and valuing the present time above other time, e.g. abandoning long-term goals in favour of present priorities, declaring the past irrelevant for current practices and activities.
	Practical	Multigenerational interaction	Examples of interaction between different generational cohorts, e.g. knowledge-sharing practices (passing the torch), mentoring and mentorship programs, collaborations and shared campaigns; examples of tension stemming from generational gaps, or differences in practices, priorities, and goals.
	Practical	Timing practices	Periodization of feminism (such as “fourth wave”); periodization of movement and political context (such as “post-Arab Spring,” or “post-independence feminist movement); temporalization
Difference	N/A	Othering	Portrayal of feminism (or some feminists) as foreign, Western/ized, culturally inauthentic or insensitive; portrayal of internal dynamics or sub-movements as marginal, marginalized, or excluded (e.g. Nubian feminists excluded from movement)

	N/A	Racial/ized dynamics	Expressions of racial discrimination, exclusion, or marginalization; racism, colorism, anti-blackness; expressions of racialized national identity and exclusions based on such identity; discourses of indigeneity and belonging.
	N/A	Spatial regimes	Expressions of where feminist activism is permitted or tolerated versus policed; accusation or critque of urban bias within feminist movement; centralization of feminist organizations and critique of rural marginalization.
	N/A	Language politics	Perception of language difference and value of language choices; working language and availability of organization documents in Arabic/French/English; language discrimination and gate-keeping.
	N/A	Class/ed dynamics	Perception of feminism (or some feminists) as elitist; exclusion of working-class women or class analysis; difference in authorities response to activism directed towards working-class women versus middle- and upper-class women.

Appendix B

Table of Organizations

Organization	Founded	Description	Country
Association Femme et Citoyenneté (AFC)	2011	Based in El Kef, in northwestern Tunisia bordering Algeria. Aims to promote equality and work for the development of women's rights in the economic, social, cultural and political fields.	Tunisia
Association Joussour de Citoyenneté (AJC)	2015	Based in El Kef, striving for gender equality, supporting human rights and feminist values, and combatting youth marginalization.	Tunisia
Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD)	1989	Based in Tunis, ATFD grew out of feminist debate clubs in the 1970s, which became more of a formalized group under the title “femmes démocrates” in 1982, in conjunction with a march protesting the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Officially formed in 1989, ATFD strive to eliminate discrimination and violence against women, and to promote women's access to effective citizenship.	Tunisia
Aswat Nissa	2011	Based in Tunis, Aswat Nissa advocates for “integration of the gender approach in all public policy areas,” work towards promoting a culture of gender equality, fighting gender discrimination, and support women to become active members of the political and public spheres.	Tunisia
Mawjoudin for Equality	2014	Based in Tunis, Mawjoudin strives to defend and promote “human rights in general, sexual and bodily rights and gender equality in particular,” focusing on advocacy, documentation, community capacity building, raising awareness,	Tunisia

		creating safe spaces, and encouraging queer artistic production.	
Musawah	2009	Founded and headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, though active in Tunis with several leading members, and built on previous collaborations and meetings between Islamic feminists in the MENA region and elsewhere. Musawah is a global movement working for "the advancement of human rights for women in Muslim contexts, both in their public and private lives."	Tunisia*
Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU)	2011 (1923)	Based in Cairo, the EFU was founded in the home of Huda Shaarawi in 1923 but was dissolved as an independent organization in 1956, and was revived in 2011. Now works on raising awareness of women's issues, encouraging women's participation in politics, and improving educational opportunities for women in order to combat illiteracy.	Egypt
Ganoubia Hora	2012	Based in Aswan, striving to analyse and understand "intersections such as tribalism, marginalization and centralization" and their impact on women's lives from a feminist perspective. Ganoubia Hora seeks to provide "a safer public sphere for southern women and a private sphere that achieves justice and gender equality."	Egypt
HarassMap	2010	Started as an initiative in Cairo around 2005, but was officially founded in 2010. Based on volunteer work, HarassMap works with digital means to "engage all of Egyptian society to create an environment that does not tolerate sexual harassment." The co-founder and executive director is now also a program director for Musawah.	Egypt
Nazra for Feminist Studies	2007	Based in Cairo and aims at "contributing to the continuity and development of the Egyptian and regional feminist movement," by adopting a gender perspective that analyses and critically engages with power relations affecting the political, social and economic situation of women.	Egypt

New Woman Foundation (NWF)	1984	Based in Cairo and began as an informal group in 1984, but was officially registered as an NGO in 2004. NWF strives towards a society free from discrimination "against human beings, women in general and the most marginalized categories in particular" and focuses specifically on economic and social rights.	Egypt
Women and Memory Forum (WMF)	1997	Based in Cairo and founded by academics and activists focusing on "revisiting Arab cultural history from a gender sensitive perspective," analyzing and challenging gendered representations in different historical periods, and "producing alternative knowledge that could be used for advocating women's rights issues in contemporary Arab societies."	Egypt

*While Musawah is not a Tunisian organization at its inception, they organize many Islamic feminists in Tunisia, and in this dissertation, I focus on Musawah solely through the work done in Tunisia and/or by Tunisian members.

Appendix C

Social Media Accounts

Platform	Organization	Handle / username
Instagram	Association Femme et Citoyenneté	@afc_kef
Instagram	Association Joussour Citoyenneté	@joussourcitoyennete
Instagram	Aswat Nissa	@aswatnissa
Instagram	ATFD	@femmes_democrates
Instagram	Egyptian Feminist Union	@egypt_efu
Instagram	Ganoubia Hora	@ganoubia_hora
Instagram	HarassMap	@harassmape
Instagram	Mawjoudin	@mawjoudin_we_exist
Instagram	Women & Memory Forum	@womenandmemory
TikTok	Aswat Nissa	aswatnissa
X	Association Joussour Citoyenneté	@AssociationJous
X	Aswat Nissa	@AswatNissa
X	ATFD	@atfd_tunisie
X	Egyptian Feminist Union	@egypt_efu
X	HarassMap	@harassmap
X	Mawjoudin	@Mawjoudin
X	Nazra for Feminist Studies	@Nazra_Mena
X	New Woman Foundation	@nwf_woman
X	Women & Memory Forum	@WMFcairo

Facebook	Association Femme et Citoyenneté	facebook.com/2011afc
Facebook	Association Joussour Citoyenneté	facebook.com/AJC.EL.KEF
Facebook	Aswat Nissa	facebook.com/aswat.nissa
Facebook	ATFD	facebook.com/femmesdemocrates
Facebook	Egyptian Feminist Union	facebook.com/EgyptianFeministUnion
Facebook	Ganoubia Hora	facebook.com/Ganoubia
Facebook	HarassMap	facebook.com/HarassMapEgypt
Facebook	Mawjoudin	facebook.com/mawjoudin.tn
Facebook	New Woman Foundation	facebook.com/newwomanfoundation
Facebook	Women & Memory Forum	facebook.com/WomenandMemory

Appendix D

Interview Details

Pseudonym	Interviewee	Date(s) of Interview	Mode	Country
Malak	LGBTQ+ rights activist, queer feminist, and co-founder of Mawjoudin.	2023-04-08 2023-11-15	In-person	Tunisia
Selma	Gender equality advocate working with sexual and reproductive health and rights. Formerly affiliated with ATFD.	2023-04-13 2023-11-16	In-person	Tunisia
Nidhal	Coordinator and project manager for Mawjoudin.	2023-04-13	In-person	Tunisia
Amira	Writer, Islamic feminist, and women's rights activist. Affiliated with Musawah and the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation.	2023-04-17	Phone (WhatsApp)	Tunisia
Manal	Tunisian journalist and researcher, focusing on social movements and feminism.	2023-04-18	In-person	Tunisia
Shams	Social movement researcher focusing on queer activism.	2023-10-05	Zoom	Tunisia
Noor	Former president of ATFD.	2023-11-28	In-person	Tunisia
Reem	Feminist, youth activist, and translator.	2023-11-30	In-person	Tunisia
Aziza	Feminist, sociologist, and current member of the board of directors for ATFD.	2023-12-18	Phone (WhatsApp)	Tunisia
Sarah	Egyptian writer, project manager, and coordinator of several feminist initiatives.	2023-05-12	Zoom	Egypt
Hanan	Journalist, producer, and editor, formerly affiliated with the Arab Foundation for Equality (AFE) and HarassMap.	2023-05-13	Zoom	Egypt

Amer	Project manager and community organizer formerly affiliated with the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU).	2023-05-15	Zoom	Egypt
Sabah	Human Rights educator and worker's rights activist, affiliated with the Bread and Freedom Party.	2024-03-04	In-person	Egypt
Warda	Nubian feminist, translator and researcher, affiliated with Ganoubia Hora.	2024-03-07	In-person	Egypt
Asma	Feminist, youth activist and researcher focusing on migration and discrimination.	2024-03-08	Zoom	Egypt
Naila	Translator and gender equality consultant, previously affiliated with Nazra for Feminist Studies.	2024-03-14	In-person	Egypt
Zoha	Project manager and coordinator for transnational women's rights coalition in the MENA.	2024-03-14	In-person	Egypt
Mona	Queer feminist and SRHR advocate, formerly working at Nazra for Feminist Studies.	2024-03-22	In-person	Egypt
Nabra	Nubian, Islamic feminist. Currently affiliated with Ganoubia Hora, formerly affiliated with Nazra for Feminist Studies.	2024-03-23	In-person	Egypt
Aisha	Intersectional feminist and anti-racist activist. Co-founder of *Collectif Voix des Femmes Tunisiennes Noires*, formerly affiliated with ATFD and other feminist and anti-racist groups.	2025-08-06	Zoom	Tunisia

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Thank you very much for agreeing to share your experiences with me about feminist activism, history, and practices in the Middle East. This study is part of my dissertation and doctoral training at the Department of Political Science and the Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, Sweden. I can be reached at joel.abdelmoez@cme.lu.se

The aim of this study is to explore Arab feminist activism, looking at how contemporary activists understand and relate to past generations of feminists, and draw inspiration for their own feminist practices and activism. As such, the proposed study deals with the overarching question of how transnational and transgenerational politics of feminist activism takes shape in the Middle Eastern context.

Your answers will be stored according to Swedish regulations on sensitive personal data. The answers will be put together with those of all other participants in this study, no identifying information will be collected, and the only one with access to the recordings of the interviews will be myself. These recordings will be stored on a secure, password protected server, managed by IT services at Lund University, and in case this interview is conducted via Zoom, the files will be deleted from the computer on which the Zoom interview was conducted. No recordings, interview notes, or transcripts will be stored on any physical device carried during fieldwork.

Please be as open and honest as possible. There are no right or wrong answers. If there is a topic you do not want to discuss, just let me know and we will move on to another topic. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate without causing any problems to me or anyone else, including to yourself, at any point of the study. If you do participate, I will not use your name in any papers or presentations, unless you explicitly want your name to be used. If you have an organizational affiliation,

this may be named in the study, unless you want me to keep that confidential too, in which case it will not be named in any papers or presentations.

If you have any questions about the project or my research, feel free to ask during the interview, or contact me later.

Do you have any questions that you would like to ask?

Topics

1. **Personal life and activism**

a) Early life and education

b) Political activity

c) Definition of "feminism"

2. **Movements and organizations**

a) Tunisian/Egyptian feminist movement

b) Leaders and important figures

c) Other causes and movements

3. **Practices**

a) Sources and inspiration

b) Resources

c) Sharing of practices

4. **History**

a) Important moments

b) Generational differences

c) Future goals

5. **Location and reach**

a) Unique and common features

b) Regional relations

c) Domestic focus and international outreach

Appendix F

Details on Digital Material

Digital, textual material analysed in this study are mainly gathered from the respective organizations' websites, listed below. The organizations who do not have an active website still keep an active social media presence (see Appendix C for all social media accounts) where they post statements, reports, and other forms of textual material beyond ordinary social media posts, which are then collected from there. Statements, reports, and other textual material posted on social media are also gathered from organizations who do have a website.

Organization Websites

Association Femme et Citoyenneté (AFC)

No active website since February 2019. Previously active website archived, accessed January 24, 2025:

https://web.archive.org/web/20190207005344/http://afc.tn/

Association Joussour de Citoyenneté (AJC)

No active website, nor traces of a previously existing website.

Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD)

Main website (French): https://atfd-tunisie.org/

English website: https://atfd-tunisie.org/en/

Arabic website: https://atfd-tunisie.org/ar/

Aswat Nissa

Main website (French): https://www.aswatnissa.org

English website: https://www.aswatnissa.org/en/home/

Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU)

No active website since 2023. Previously active website archived, accessed October 30, 2025:

https://web.archive.org/web/20220120173229/http://efuegypt.org/

Ganoubia Hora

Main website (Arabic): https://ganoubia-hora.com

English website: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/

HarassMap

Arabic website: https://harassmap.org/ar/

English website: https://harassmap.org/en/

Mawjoudin for Equality

Main website (English): https://www.mawjoudin.org

Arabic website: https://www.mawjoudin.org/ar/home-ar/

French website: https://www.mawjoudin.org/fr/home-francais/

Musawah

No website specific for Tunisia, global website: https://www.musawah.org

Publications on Tunisia (English and Arabic), accessed January 24, 2025:

https://www.musawah.org/resources/?_country=tunisia

Nazra for Feminist Studies

Main website (Arabic): https://nazra.org

English website: https://nazra.org/en

New Woman Foundation (NWF)

Main website (Arabic): https://nwrcegypt.org/

English website: https://nwrcegypt.org/en/

Women and Memory Forum (WMF)

Main website (Arabic): https://wmf.org.eg

English website: https://wmf.org.eg/en/

Language Use in Digital Material, Tunisia

Org.	Main website content	Publications and press releases	Social media content
AFC	Website inactive since February 2019. Last version in the Internet Archive shows content only availble in French. AFC also has an organizational profile on Jamaity, an online platform for Tunisian civil society organizations, only available in French.[172]	Due to their website being inactive, there are also no publications, press releases or other online resources available. Their profile on Jamaity only shows information on the organization and contact information.	Facebook posts mainly in Arabic with some in French, none in English. No presence on Twitter/X, although active presence on both Instagram and TikTok, where mainly Arabic is used.
AJC	No active website, nor traces of a previously active website. Refers to their Facebook page and email as points of contact. AJC also has an organizational profile on Jamaity, an online platform for Tunisian civil society organizations, only available in French.[173]	Due to not having an active website, there are also no resources, publications, or press releases available online. Their profile on Jamaity only shows information on the organization and contact information.	Facebook posts are mainly in Arabic and French (simultaneously); a few posts in one or the other, and even fewer in English. Twitter/X posts are mainly in Arabic, with a few posts in French. Instagram captions are mainly bilingual, Arabic and French, while images are variously in Arabic and French (not simultaneously) and only a few in English. Videos are mainly in Arabic.
Aswat Nissa	Main content available in French and English.	Mostly in Arabic, some in French, none in English.[174]	Facebook posts mainly in Arabic, some in French, none in English. Twitter/X posts mainly in French, some in Arabic, few in English. Instagram and TikTok captions, images and videos are almost exclusively in Arabic.

[172] AFC on Jamaity, accessed January 24, 2025: https://jamaity.org/association/association-femme-et-citoyennete/

[173] AJC on Jamaity, accessed January 24, 2025: https://jamaity.org/association/association-joussour-de-citoyennete/

[174] Press releases (Arabic and French mixed), accessed January 23, 2025: https://www.aswatnissa.org/communiques-de-presse/; Studies (Arabic and French mixed), accessed January 23, 2025: https://www.aswatnissa.org/nos-etudes/

ATFD	Main content available in Arabic, French, and English.	Mostly in French, some in Arabic, none in English.[175]	Facebook posts mainly in Arabic, some in French, very few in English. Twitter/X posts both in Arabic and French. Instagram captions and images are mainly in Arabic, with a few posts in French and none in English.
Mawjoudin	All content equally available in Arabic, French, and English.	Most publications are trilingual (Arabic, French, and English within the same document) while some are exclusively in Arabic and a few exclusively in French.[176]	Facebook posts are mainly trilingual (Arabic, French and English within the same post), while a few are only in Arabic. Twitter/X posts are mainly trilingual; each post is made as a thread where the initial post is in Arabic, which is then followed by a reply in English, and another reply in French. Instagram posts use trilingual captions, while images and videos posted typically contain both Arabic and French.
Musawah	No website specific for Tunisia. Global website available in English and Arabic.	Resources on Tunisia consists of 4 out of 5 publications in English and 1 in Arabic.	No social media accounts specific for Tunisia. Facebook posts mainly in English with some in Arabic. Twitter/X posts mainly in English with some in Arabic. Instagram captions and images are about equally as frequent in Arabic as in English (although rarely both for the same post). Videos mainly in Arabic with English subtitles.

[175] Press releases in French, accessed January 23, 2025: https://atfd-tunisie.org/communiques/ Press releases in Arabic, accessed January 23, 2025: https://atfd-tunisie.org/ar/البيانات/; Publications in French, accessed January 23, 2025: https://atfd-tunisie.org/publications/; Publication in Arabic, accessed January 23, 2025: https://atfd-tunisie.org/ar/المنشورات/

[176] All publications and reports (Arabic, French, and English), accessed January 23, 2025: https://www.mawjoudin.org/reports-guides/

Language Use in Digital Material, Egypt

Org.	Main website content	Publications and press releases	Social media content
EFU	Website inactive since 2023. Last version on the Internet Archive shows content availble in Arabic and English.	Due to website being inactive, publications, press releases, reports and other documents are only available through the Internet Archive. Reports are mainly in Arabic, though some are also available in English. Newsletter is only available in Arabic. Research papers available in Arabic, only one available in English.[177]	Facebook posts, Twitter/X, and Instagram are all only in Arabic.
Ganoubia	Main content available in Arabic and English, although the English texts are often lacking clarity due to grammatical or syntactical errors and other translation issues.	Documents available in Arabic and English, although many files are only available in Arabic.[178] Statements and papers available in both Arabic and English.	Facebook posts, Twitter/X, and Instagram are all only in Arabic.
HarassMap	Main content available in Arabic and English.	Documents (reports, studies, law texts) available in both Arabic and English.	Facebook posts mostly in Arabic, a few posts in English. Twitter/X posts mostly in Arabic, a few in

[177] Reports and statements (Arabic), EFU, accessed January 24, 2025: https://web.archive.org/web/20230125220405/http://www.efuegypt.org/Reports.aspx; Newsletters (Arabic), EFU, accessed January 24, 2025: https://web.archive.org/web/20230125220322/http://www.efuegypt.org/NewsLetters.aspx; Research (Arabic), EFU, accessed January 24, 2025: https://web.archive.org/web/20230125220445/http://www.efuegypt.org/Books.aspx; Reports and statements (English), EFU, accessed January 24, 2025: https://web.archive.org/web/20240101092827/http://www.efuegypt.org/EN/Reports.aspx; Research (English), EFU, accessed January 24, 2025: https://web.archive.org/web/20240101092857/http://www.efuegypt.org/EN/Books.aspx

[178] Files (Arabic), Ganoubia Hora, accessed January 24, 2025: https://ganoubia-hora.com/المواد-المعرفية/; Articles (Arabic), Ganoubia Hora, accessed January 24, 2025: https://ganoubia-hora.com/المواد-المعرفية/; Articles (English), Ganoubia Hora, accessed January 24, 2025: https://ganoubia-hora.com/en/knowledge-material/

		Campaign material only available in Arabic.[179]	English. Instagram captions, images and videos only in Arabic.
Nazra	Main content available in Arabic and English.	Statements, reports, studies and other documents posted directly on the main webpage, in both Arabic and English.[180]	Facebook posts mostly bilingual (Arabic and English within the same post), while a few are only in English and a few only in Arabic. Images also mainly bilingual. Twitter/X posts are mainly bilingual; typically, each post is first made in English, which is then followed by a reply in Arabic. Instagram captions and images in both English and Arabic, sometimes within the same post and sometimes as separate posts one after the other.
NWF	Main content available in Arabic and English.	Publications, studies and other documents available in both Arabic and English, though more posts are made in Arabic. [181]	Facebook posts mainly in Arabic, including images. Twitter/X posts mostly in Arabic, with very few posts in English.
WMF	Main content available in Arabic and English.	Documentation, news, reports, publications and other documents available in Arabic and English.[182]	Facebook posts mainly in Arabic, including images although some shared videos in English. Twitter/X posts mostly in

[179] Studies and reports (Arabic), HarassMap, accessed January 24, 2025: https://harassmap.org/ar/studies-and-reports; Studies and reports (English), HarassMap, accessed January 24, 2025: https://harassmap.org/en/studies-and-reports; Campaigns (Arabic), HarassMap, accessed January 24, 2025: https://harassmap.org/ar/campaigns

[180] Main website (Arabic), Nazra for Feminist Studies, accessed November 3, 2025: https://nazra.org; English website, Nazra for Feminist Studies: https://nazra.org/en

[181] Publications (Arabic), New Woman Foundation, accessed January 24, 2025: https://nwrcegypt.org/category/مطبوعاتنا/; Publications (English), New Woman Foundation, accessed January 24, 2025: https://nwrcegypt.org/en/category/digital-library/publications/

[182] Library (Arabic), Women and Memory Forum, accessed January 24, 2025: https://wmf.org.eg/فهرس-المكتبة/; Publications (Arabic), Women and Memory Forum, accessed January 24, 2025: https://wmf.org.eg/كتب-ومؤلفات/; News (Arabic), Women and Memory Forum, accessed January 24, 2025: https://wmf.org.eg/blog/; Library (English),

			Arabic, though a few in English and some shared videos in English. Instagram posts in Arabic, including images and videos.

Women and Memory Forum, accessed January 24, 2025: Library (English), Women and Memory Forum, accessed January 24, 2025: https://wmf.org.eg/en/library/ [Note: all titles in the library, Arabic or English are listed on both versions of the website, meaning Arabic and English titles are mixed]; Publications (English), Women and Memory Forum, accessed January 24, 2025: https://wmf.org.eg/en/books-and-publications/; News (English), Women and Memory Forum, accessed January 24, 2025: https://wmf.org.eg/en/blog/

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3. Petersson, Hans F. Power and International Order. An Analytic Study of Four Schools of Thought and Their Approaches to the War, the Peace and the Postwar System 1914-1919. Lund: Gleerups, 1964.
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5. Wieslander, Hans. I nedrustningens tecken. Intressen och aktiviteter kring försvarsfrågan 1918-1925. Lund: Gleerups, 1966.
6. Söderberg, Olof. Motororganisationerna i Sverige. Bakgrund, grupperingar, aktiviteter. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1966.
7. Sjöblom, Gunnar. Party Strategies in a Multiparty System. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1968.
8. Hydén, Göran. TANU Yajenga Nchi. Political Development in Rural Tanzania. Lund: Uniskol, 1968.
9. Lindeberg, Sven-Ola. Nödhjälp och samhällsneutralitet. Svensk arbetslöshetspolitik 1920-1923. Lund: Uniskol, 1968.
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14. Stenelo, Lars-Göran. Mediation in International Negotiations. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1972.
15. Lindquist, Stellan. Linkages between Domestic and Foreign Policy: The Record of Ghana. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1974.

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17. Hermerén, Henrik. Regeringsbildningen i flerpartisystem, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1975.
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19. Peterson, Carl-Gunnar. Ungdom och politik. En studie av Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Ungdomsförbund. Stockholm: Frihets förlag, 1975.
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23. Liljequist, Gunnar. Distribution av kommunal service. Lund: Liber, 1977.
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26. Hagström, Bo. 1971 års länsförvaltningsreform. En utvärdering. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1978.
27. Skogmar, Gunnar. Atompolitik. Sambandet mellan militärt och civilt utnyttjande av atomenergi i amerikansk utrikespolitik 1945-1973. Malmö: Stenvalls Förlag, 1979.
28. Sannerstedt, Anders. Fri konkurrens eller politisk styrning? 1963 års trafikpolitiska beslut – debatten om innehåll, tillämpning och effekter. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1979.
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36. Adebo, Tarekegn. Ideological Trends in the Political Thinking of the Developing Regions: The Case of Sub Saharan Africa. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1982.
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39. Bergström, Tomas och Lundell, Bengt. Från MBL till MBA. Kommunerna och MBL. Lund: Statsvetenskapliga institutionen, 1982.
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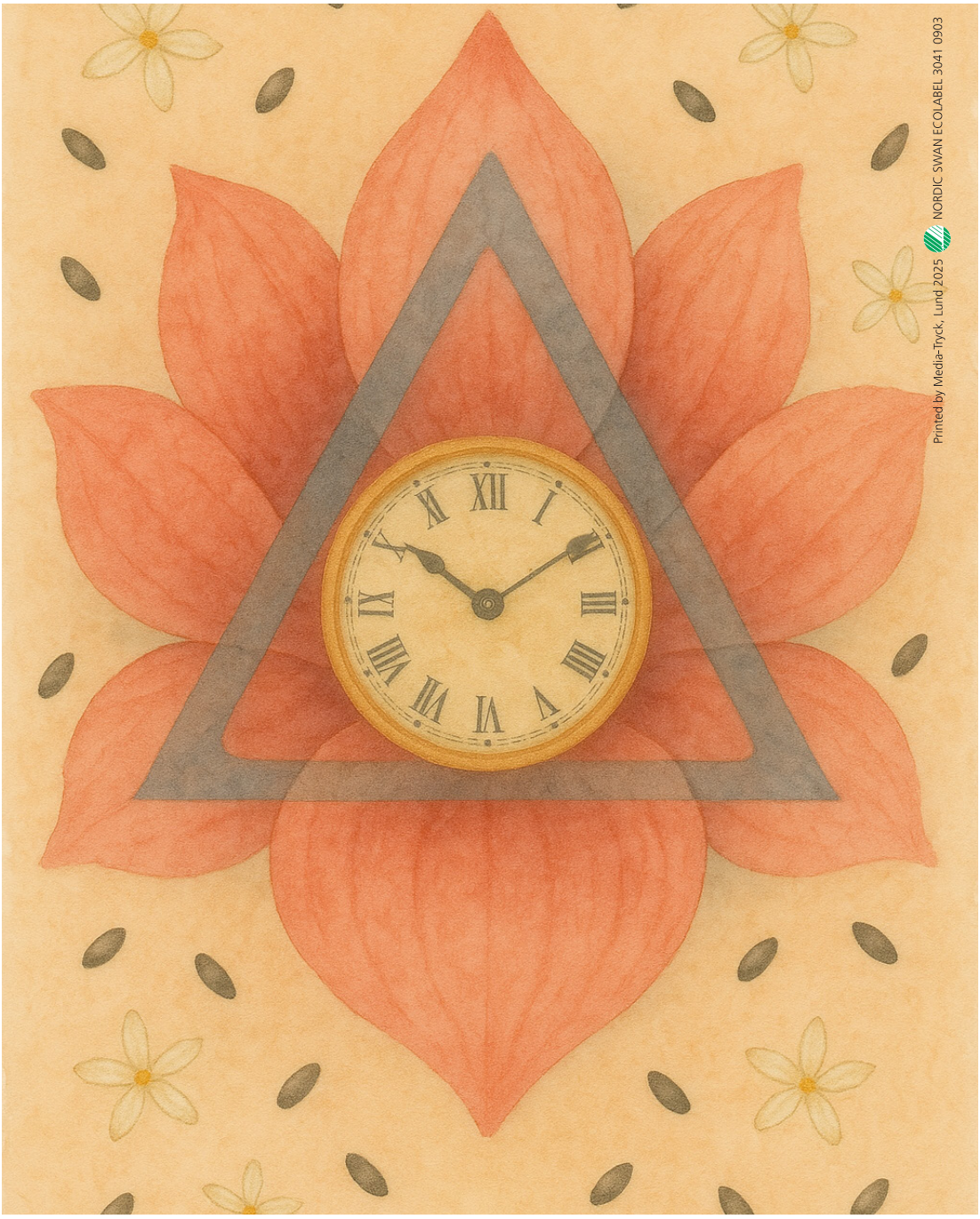

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