DIIS REPORT

ISLAMIC WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN THE ARAB WORLD
POTENTIALS AND CHALLENGES FOR EXTERNAL ACTORS

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Abstract and Summary of Recommendations

Islamic women's activism may appear a contradiction in terms to many Western audiences accustomed to presentations of Islam as counterproductive to the promotion of women's empowerment and the situation of women more generally. Yet in the Arab world (and beyond) many different groups and individuals – as scholars, as charity and welfare providers, and as religious or political activists – work to empower women based on Islamic arguments and references.

Islamic women's activism is an important complement to traditional liberal/secular women's activism, not least because in many cases it enjoys a wider local legitimacy. Accordingly, Islamic women's activists also constitute potentially important future partners for external actors (bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, women's organisations etc.) working to contribute to Arab women's empowerment, participation, agency and authority.

Based mainly on insights from Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, this report provides an easily accessible introduction to Islamic women's activism in the Arab world. It also considers the potentials and challenges of this activism. The report concludes with a number of recommendations to external actors wishing to engage with Islamic women's activists, which are briefly summarised below (and elaborated in section 5):

Main recommendation: Islamic women's activists to be included just like any other potential partner – based on mutual interest, relevance and competence
Islamic women's activists are *not* to be singled out specifically, nor to be the object of specifically designed 'Islamic' projects. Nor should the bar be raised or set in a different manner when it comes to Islamic women's activists. Rather, they are to be included *just like any other potential partner*. That is, *when they wish to engage* in partnership and collaboration with external partners – and when they have *specific competences or other comparative advantages* with regard to a given issue or challenge.

All collaboration to be based on prior in-depth empirical analysis
As for any sound international collaboration, partnership with local Islamic women's activists must be based on solid empirical analysis of the local context, dynamics and actors.

Collaboration to be based on broad consultation and genuine partnership
The strong association between foreign interference and women's issues in the Arab world means that many potential local partners among Islamic women's activists are reluctant to engage and collaborate with foreign partners, especially with regard to women's issues. Overcoming this local reticence requires that external partners manage to communicate and demonstrate *in practice* that they genuinely strive towards partnership and mutual respect.

Avoid controversial discourse
Many Islamic women's activists are wary of concepts such as 'equality' (as opposed to 'equity' or 'complementarity'), 'feminism' and 'gender', as these concepts are loaded with negative associations (of cultural imperialism and neo-colonial interference, threats to Islam and indigenous ways and traditions etc.) Accordingly, local relevance and trust may be enhanced if external actors strive to avoid terms that may evoke (perceived) differences.

Apply an open and dynamic approach to Islam
Islam is a living religion; it has millions of different adherents who interpret and practice their faith in multiple and changing ways. Accordingly, external actors should apply an open and dynamic approach. What matters is not an essentialised construct of 'Islam' – but rather the ongoing interpretations and *practice* of local partners.

Approaching women's issues gradually and as an integral part of other challenges
It may in many instances prove fruitful to apply a long-term and incremental approach. This can both take the form of collaboration with local partners that do not only work to promote women's situation and it can also take the form of initially collaborating mainly with local faith-based partners on projects and issues that do not explicitly or primarily target women's situation.

Collaborate on issues of common interest and mutual benefit
Collaboration on issues related to women's work–life balance constitutes a potentially fruitful field for initial cooperation. It is not too controversial, it concerns issues of common interest and may provide important *mutual* learning experiences.

Preface

Questions of women's rights and gender equality in the Arab world are not only deeply politicised but are also infused with strong postcolonial significance. They therefore constitute one of the main arenas for discussion not only about issues related to women and gender, but also about the role of religion (Islam) in family and society, about relations between East and West and between liberal/secular and faith-based paths and perspectives for each of the different Arab societies in which these issues are debated.

This report is based on a challenging but also deeply rewarding personal journey. Over the past two years I have read about and had the privilege to interview devout Muslim men and (mostly) women in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco who in various ways work to promote women's lives in their society based on a religious approach. Coming myself from a non-Muslim and secular background, these encounters have been profoundly eye-opening and have spurred three central realisations.

The first realisation: Many of these activists simply *do not want* the 'universal' women's rights as they are formulated in the UN conventions (notably the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the CEDAW). They oppose their inherent secularism, individualism and aspiration towards equality (as opposed to equity) – and they strongly oppose attempts to have it imposed on them.

These activists are not uneducated, ignorant or deprived of information. Rather – they are highly educated, travel, have international networks and access to high-speed information from around the world. Yet, they still do not buy into the liberal secular worldview with its ensuing corpus of universal rights and demands.

The second realisation: While these Islamic women's activists indeed reject a liberal secular order and with it the CEDAW and the rights and protection it gives to women – this does not mean that they do not see women (and men) as entitled to a wide range of rights and freedoms. Quite the contrary – these Islamic activists are completely assured that women (as men) are entitled to a vast range of rights and freedoms – and they are deeply committed to work for their implementation and to promote justice and fairness in their societies.

In their view Islam gives men and women equal, but complementary rights – and obligations. The first right (and pride) of a woman is to be a family caretaker. She has a decisive responsibility for bringing up children and taking care of her family – the most cherished and central unit of Islamic society. This does not confine her to the household, however. If she can manage to engage herself in her society as well as taking care of her family, she is indeed obliged to do so, and this will earn her merit in the afterlife. Also, men are not simply the dominant and privileged gender. For instance, whilst a man is entitled to two shares in one of the most important of the many and complex inheritance rules, he is in return obliged to provide for and take care of the female members of his family.

I shall not continue the long list of complementary differences between men and women. Rather, the important point here is that while rejecting 'our' rights and freedoms – these Islamic activists are deeply committed to promoting women's situation from within Islam. They wish to secure women the rights, prominence and respect inherent in the Islamic message and as practiced in the life and time of their Prophet Mohammed – but which have since been obscured and ignored due to a combination of patriarchal, tribal and authoritarian practices.

However, my encounters have also led to a *third realisation*: While this Islamic women's activism is an important complement to secular approaches, it also represents a number of risks and challenges for the promotion of Arab women's empowerment and participation, agency and authority. Islamic women's activism may also (re-)legitimise repressive patriarchal traditions and practices, threaten individual freedoms and essentialise, monopolise and politicise interpretations of Islam and ways of being a Muslim and a women's activist.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This report has been commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is part of a broader project,[1] which according to the terms of reference has as its overall purpose "to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the values, actors and contributions of the Islamic women's movement; and to analyse whether, and if so how, Danish development cooperation in general and specifically the Danish Arab Partnership for Dialogue and Reform can collaborate with Islamic women's activists with a view to promote gender equality and the enhancement of women's rights."

The terms of reference state that the present report is "to present an easily accessible presentation of the Islamic women's movement and to discuss the overall challenges and potentials of Islamic women's organisations/feminism with regard to the work to promote equality and women's rights." It has been further specified by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the main audience of the report are Danish and other international partners (bilateral or multilateral aid agencies, women's organisations etc.) who work to promote equality and women's rights.

The terms of reference also state that the report is to focus mainly on three case countries, namely Egypt (where Danish development assistance has for many years supported activities promoting women's rights), as well as Jordan and Morocco (where activities promoting gender equality and women's rights form one of the main focus areas of the PDR activities).

Finally, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also requested that the report focus mainly (but not exclusively) on actors belonging to the main, moderate Islamist organisations within Egypt, Jordan and Morocco. Considering members of the main Islamist organisations as potential women's activists may come as a surprise to some readers, given that these organisations are often perceived by Western audiences as inherently conservative and patriarchal.

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[1] The report is the final outcome of a project co-funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). The project has previously generated the 2010 DIIS report *The Islamist movement in Morocco: Main actors and regime responses* as well as three short reports focusing on *Islamic Women's Activism in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco* respectively. A DIIS Policy Brief on Islamic women's activism is published in parallel to the present report.

Yet the Islamist movement is a broad, dynamic and heterogeneous one, and the main organisations in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco (as in the wider Arab world) in fact include many women (and some men) who work to empower women and advance their situation in society from *within* these organisations.

Purpose

The present report is of a popular, disseminating (rather than theoretical) nature. It has a double purpose. Firstly, it provides an easily accessible introduction to Islamic women's activism: What is Islamic women's activism? Who are the Islamic women's activists? What do they aspire to? And what does their activism consist of? Secondly, the purpose of the report is also to reflect on the potentials and challenges of this activism with regard to the promotion of Arab women's situation. Specifically, what are the potentials and challenges of this activism for external actors (bilateral or multilateral aid agencies, women's organisations etc.) who work to promote equality and women's rights in the Arab world?

Why focus on Islamic women's activism?

Gaining a better understanding of Islamic women's activism is important for various reasons. Firstly, this activism is analytically interesting. While Muslim women have obviously always been 'active', a new, multi-sited and informal women's movement demanding rights and a voice within an Islamic framework has emerged since the early 1990s (Badran, 2009). To date, this emerging phenomenon remains largely uncharted (Abdel Latif et al., 2007: 12). Yet, it is highly analytically important because it fundamentally challenges dominant liberal and secular ideas concerning the challenges and possibilities of promoting women's rights and gender equality. Moreover, it also serves to nuance essentialising Western stereotypes of Muslim women as the suffering victims of an inherently misogynistic and patriarchal Islam (Abu-Bakr, 2001; Badran, 2009; Ezzat, 2007 & 2001; Mahmood, 2005; Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

Secondly, and most importantly for the present report, a better understanding of this activism also has important practical and policy implications, not least for external actors who work to contribute to the promotion of women's rights and gender equality in the Arab world. Traditionally, they have based their activities mainly on a secular, rights-based approach inspired by the UN instruments (notably the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the CEDAW) and have predominantly collaborated with local actors who base their activism on liberal/secular frames of reference.

However, these liberal/secular local organisations often represent small, urban and bourgeois minorities with limited popular following in an Arab world which has undergone an important Islamic revival in recent decades. Furthermore, postcolonial and anti-imperial sentiment remains vivid among large parts of the population – and they often focus on the question of gender and women's rights given that 'the repressed Muslim woman' served for many years as one of the key legitimising arguments for colonial interference in the region. In turn, the status of women has also become one of the main arguments against postcolonial interference and in defence of local identity and authenticity.

Accordingly, 'civilising' and 'liberating' Western attempts to empower women or alter their situation in society have been widely perceived as part of a postcolonial agenda and an attack on cultural and religious identity and authenticity (Said, 1978 Ahmed, 1992; Kandiyoti, 2011; Bahi, 2011). This view has been further strengthened in recent years, where present-day Western military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were both partially legitimated by calls to free Muslim women (Mir-Hosseini, 2006: 630).

It should be highlighted that this '(post-) colonial civilising' vs. 'authentic Muslim' conflict is also played out from within; i.e. the 'battlefield' is not only one between foreign/Western and local/Muslim actors, but also plays out between 'local' actors. In the Arab world, local actors arguing for a liberal/secular approach to women's rights are often accused of representing a 'foreign' and sometimes also a 'neo-imperialist' approach in their discourse and approaches (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2011).[2]

Accordingly, in such contexts, arguments based in a religious discourse may pass as more socially acceptable, culturally legitimate and politically viable than arguments drawing purely on a secular frame of reference.

Thirdly and finally, external engagement with Islamic women's activists may also provide new potentials and sources of inspiration for Danish and other external actors who wish to contribute to enhancing the situation of women not only in Egypt, Jordan or Morocco and in the Arab world more generally – but also in other parts of the world, including Denmark, where it may create new ways of ad-

[2] Whilst popular portrayals of liberal/secular women's activists as neo-imperialist are commonplace, notably in Islamist circles, it is important to stress that liberal/secular women's organisations have historically played a key role in processes of national liberation and on many occasions have given priority to the cause of gaining independence over that of promoting women's rights (Badran, 2009).

dressing women's situation, not least among parts of the population with Muslim backgrounds.

Partnership and collaboration between Danish/external actors and Islamic women's activists in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and in the Arab world more generally runs into many challenges. For instance, how are Danish or other external partners to gain local trust and willingness to collaborate, given the few existing relations to Islamic actors (particularly to actors belonging to the Islamist movement), given the controversial nature of the question of women's situation – and given that collaboration with foreign and especially Western partners is often perceived as illegitimate?

One challenge intimately related with the above concerns the common identification of problems and approaches, given the big differences between the prevailing discourses and approaches of Western development agencies and those of Islamic activists. The approach of the former is (typically) secular, liberal and rights-based (relying on international conventions such as the CEDAW) and relies on key concepts such as feminism, gender and equality. In contrast, the approach of the latter (again typically) is religious, communitarian and rights-based (referring to religious texts and arguments) and relies on different key concepts such as equity and complementarity. For instance, local Islamic women's activists may not consider it to be problematic *as such* if girls are married at a young age, if daughters inherit less than sons or if men marry more than one wife – all practices that would be judged as unacceptable by most western development agencies. In contrast, the insistence of the latter on women's rights to, for instance, abortion or to live openly as homosexuals is likely to be judged as unacceptable by many Islamic women's activists.

I return in more detail to the above and other challenges in the last section of the report, which also provides a number of recommendations to external actors on how to engage in collaboration with Islamic women's activists.

Definitions
By '*Islamic*' women's activism, I refer to activities by local actors (male and female) who explicitly base their activities on a religious (Islamic)[3] frame of reference. I refer to this activism as 'Islamic' (and not 'Muslim') to stress that focus is on actors who

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[3] The Christian minorities in Egypt, Jordan and in other Arab countries have their own faith-based organisations and activities. They however fall outside the aegis of the present project, which specifically focuses on actors and activists who rely on an Islamic frame of reference.

explicitly rely on, use and refer to Islam in their activities.[4] Meanwhile, referring to this activism as 'Islamic' does not necessarily entail that the actors concerned are '*Islamist*', by which the project understands organisations and actors distinguished from the wider Islamic community or *umma* by their wish to see a formal political order defined in terms of Islam (Mandaville, 2007: 20). As stated above, the present report looks at various 'Islamic' actors, albeit with an emphasis on actors belonging to the moderate Islamist organisations.

When referring to these Islamist organisations as '*moderate*', it must be highlighted that 'moderation' can refer to many different things, among them the character of the political goals, the political tools or the interpretative approach of the organisation in question (Clark & Schwedler, 2003: 295; Pruzan-Jørgensen, forthcoming). When I here refer to Islamist organisations as 'moderate', I specifically refer to organisations that espouse democratic procedures and refrain from the use of violence. I do not here address the interpretive approach of the organisations, which may hence vary on a continuum from organisations applying a literalist approach to those applying a contextualised interpretive one.

Finally, with regard to 'Islam', it must already at this point be stressed that I do not conceive of Islam as a given entity, nor do I bracket all 'Muslims' as a homogenous group. As will be explored in the coming pages, various Muslims apply (as they always have done) different interpretations of the holy texts and the laws that derive from them as well as being themselves guided and influenced by their own contexts: their era and their geographical, social, gendered or other position. My aim is to present a tiny and far from exhaustive sample of these manifold and dynamic interpretations.

By '*women's activism*' I apply a broad and open understanding of activities which, in various ways, aim at empowering women and advancing their situation – by increasing their participation, their agency and/or their authority in various situations and sectors of society. I deliberately do not rely on one of the more narrow definitions often applied among donors such as 'women's rights' or 'gender quality'. While operating with such well-defined concepts allows for a more targeted

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[4] I accordingly also refer to these actors as 'Islamic women's activists' rather than 'Muslim women's activists'. While the latter may be more linguistically self-evident, I retain the former in order to stress that I do not here refer to all women's activists of Muslim background (which would concern the large majority of women's activists in the Arab world), but specifically to those among them who explicitly draw on Islam in their efforts to promote women's situation.

analysis, these terms are controversial and contested by many local religious actors who accuse them of representing a Western, individualised and hence locally ir-relevant approach.

Another alternative could be to refer to this activism as 'Islamic feminism' (Mir-Hosseini, 2004; Badran, 2002; Abu-Bakr, 2001). Feminism as such is not a 'Western' and hence 'anti-Islamic' term (Ezzat, 2007) and it is always important to distinguish between actor and analytical category. However, I have come to believe that it may not be fruitful to employ the term given the negative reactions, which the concept of 'feminism' triggers among many of my interviewees. I shall return to this discussion in more detail in section 2.

By *liberal/secular* women's activism, I refer to women's activism which takes its main point of departure in the rights of the individual as codified in the United Nations conventions on human and women's rights. It should be noted that this denomination does not imply that liberal/secular women's activists are a-religious or non-Muslim, but only that they predominantly rely on non-religious arguments in their efforts to promote women's situation.

Finally, by *Islamic women's activism*, I therefore refer to women's activism which, in various ways, aims at empowering women and advancing their situation – and which is explicitly based on an Islamic frame of reference. As shall be illustrated in more detail throughout the report, this includes a very wide range of different actors.

Methods and sources

In addition to the extensive field experience of the author, notably in Morocco, the present report is mainly based on a literature review as well as findings from four two-week visits to Egypt, Jordan and Morocco. During these visits formal interviews were conducted with 53 Islamic women's activists and local experts working on Islamic women's activism. In addition, I also conducted a number of visits to Islamic women's associations as well as a number of informal group interviews.

The interviewees were selected according to their institutional affiliation. Due to the specific requirements of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasis was given to women's activists belonging to the main moderate (that is, non-violent and professedly democratic) Islamist organisations in the three countries, namely

the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth MB), the Jordanian MB and, in Morocco, Justice and Spirituality[5] and the Movement for Unity and Reform (henceforth MUR).[6]

The interviews were qualitative and conducted as semi-structured and open-ended. I introduced the interviews with a brief presentation, where I strove to overcome intercultural opposition based on the controversial subject matter as well as my Danish nationality (given that Denmark is broadly associated with lack of respect for Islam after 'the cartoon affair'). In these introductions I explicitly stated that Westerners often see Islam as not being supportive of women, but that this was not the approach taken by this project. Rather, the project wished to understand the ways in which Islam is used as a resource to promote women's situation. After this presentation interviewees were asked to describe their activities, the ideas guiding them as well as the obstacles which they were confronting.

Limitations

A number of important limitations follow from the terms of reference of this report. First of all, the empirical scope of the report is limited. The report mainly relies on examples from three countries (Egypt, Jordan and Morocco) and is based on limited fieldwork, concentrated in the main urban areas and on interviews with elite members affiliated to the leadership of the main, moderate Islamist organisations. Furthermore, these interviews mainly gained insights into the formal discourse of mainly urban and leading activists, whereas they only give limited insight into practice; that is the concrete activities in their field, not to say their impact on the ground. Accordingly, the report far from covers the entire 'Arab World' and its multiple expressions of Islamic women's activism. For instance, no attention is paid here to the many exciting recent expressions of Islamic women's activism in the Gulf countries. Even within the three case countries, the report far from provides an exhaustive picture of the impressive geographical, social, political, cultural and religious differences among the many and complex expressions of Islamic women's activism.

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[5] The most obvious translation of the Arab word *Ihsan* is 'charity' and the organisation is broadly known to a western audience as *Justice and Charity*. However, I here translate it with 'spirituality' as this is the interpretation preferred by adherents of the organisation.

[6] I will not get into details about each of these Islamist organisations here with regard to their respective local importance, ideological positions or relations with regimes etc. as this falls somewhat outside the main focus of the present report. I provide more of this information in the DIIS report on the Islamist movement in Morocco as well as in the three short preceding country reports prepared for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Islamic women's activism in Egypt, Morocco and Jordan respectively.

Secondly, the report also has a number of methodological limitations given that case countries have not been selected for comparative reasons but due to their specific interest to the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, the short and limited fieldwork material does not rely on a basis that is sufficiently narrow or selective to provide an exhaustive analysis. Thirdly, the report also has theoretical limitations, as its purpose is to provide an easily accessible introductory overview, rather than a theoretically sophisticated and reflexive analysis of Islamic women's activism.

For these reasons, the present report does not claim to provide exhaustive or conclusive insights into the multiple and complex current expressions of Islamic women's activism in the three case countries, let alone the entire Arab world. Rather, it more modestly aims at providing some preliminary and generalised introductory insights into some of the overall characteristics of this broad and complex phenomenon – as well as a number of initial reflections on the potential for and obstacles to partnership with Danish actors working to empower and promote the situation of Arab women in their societies.

Additionally, between the field visits and the writing of the report, the region has seen and is still undergoing tremendous political changes, in what is commonly referred to as 'the Arab Spring'. While these events have, so far, been most significant in Egypt (among the three case countries) Jordan and Morocco have also seen popular demands for profound sociopolitical change, and Morocco has recently experienced a parliamentary victory of the moderate Islamist PJD party.

While not all of these dynamics are directly related to Islamic women's activism, they nevertheless contribute considerably to changing the overall contexts in which this activism takes place. Unfortunately, at the time of writing it is still too early to assess the significance of these dramatic and ongoing dynamics for women's overall situation – as well as for the effort of those (Islamic or liberal/secular) who work to address and improve it. On one hand it seems very positive that women (and among them women affiliated to the Islamist movement) have been very prominent during the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and also that the Tunisian *Ennahda* party has accepted gender parity on the electoral lists for the constituent assembly in Tunisia. Yet, on the other hand women are, at the time of writing, significantly underrepresented in transitional institutions in both Egypt and Tunisia.

Nevertheless, it seems safe to assert that the importance of understanding Islamic women's activism will certainly not be lesser in a context where the main and moderate

Islamist organisations are likely to gain an increasing and potentially very significant sociopolitical role across the region.

Structure

The report is structured into two parts. After a brief description of Arab women's situation and the challenges, the first part introduces the phenomenon of 'Islamic women's activism': Section 2 provides a brief outline of the key ideas and aspirations that guide this activism; whereas section 3 presents examples of the different arenas and types of activity undertaken.

The second part reflects on the potentials and challenges for external actors contemplating collaboration and partnerships with Islamic women's activists. Section 4 engages in a discussion of the various potentials – and challenges – of Islamic women's activism and, finally, section 5 asks whether, and if so how, external actors can collaborate with Islamic women's activists. The report concludes with a number of policy recommendations.

1. Contextualising: Arab Women's Situation

In order to set the scene for the analysis of Islamic women's activism, this section briefly highlights some of the wide range of cultural, social, legal and political challenges and barriers which prevent Arab women from sharing the same rights and opportunities as men. Many of these are interrelated. For instance, common views about the inappropriateness of women being visible and active in the public sphere lead to strong societal resistance to female participation in the workforce and in the public sphere more generally. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, in the following I distinguish between the respective cultural, social, legal and political challenges which Arab women confront.

It may seem simple to an outside spectator to read through the mass proliferation of studies dealing with the rights of 'Arab women' and to point the finger at issues such as violence against women, female genital mutilation and discriminatory practices when it comes to divorce, child custody, inheritance etc. Yet, in practice, the situation of women across the Arab world is characterised by tremendous social, geographical and cultural differences. Even limiting the focus to Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, this diversity still exists as lifestyles and opportunities vary considerably between urban and rural women, educated and non-educated women, rich and poor women etc. Furthermore, these differences obviously impact tremendously on local perceptions of what constitutes Arab women's situation and problems – as well as the appropriate means and tools of addressing them.

Accordingly, Arab women (and men) are far from agreeing on the justification or relevance of singling out or focusing on specific issues such as these – let alone on the way to interpret them. One of the central dividing lines concerns whether to use a liberal/secular, gender and rights-based approach when one identifies the challenges which 'Arab women' face. As shall be spelled out in much more detail in the following pages, while many local Islamic women's activists may well focus on and find faults in some of the above discriminatory practices, they may not interpret them in the same manner nor end up with the same conclusions as to the ways and means of addressing these practices.

In the following pages, I nevertheless do refer to liberal/secular notions of women's rights and gender equality in order to briefly introduce and 'set the scene' for Western readers, used to relying on these references. Yet, I do so with the very important

caveat that this approach does not represent the only way to identify or grasp Arab women's situation. The general description is mainly based on the 2005 Arab Human Development Report *Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*, which has the advantage of having been written by a heterogeneous group of all-Arab authors.[7] The description is illustrated with examples from Egypt, Jordan and Morocco.

Cultural barriers and challenges

Many Arab women are confronted with cultural norms and practices according to which women constitute a potential threat to family honour and mainly belong in the family and private sphere. These norms, which often have their base in tribal customs and traditions, impede women's access to education and to participation in the workforce and the wider public sphere. In some cases such norms contribute to various forms of violence against women – be it domestic violence, female genital mutilation or so-called honour killings.

As an example, traditional patriarchal norms often deter women from seeking legal protection and justice in Jordan. They also impact on the legislation. The Jordanian penal code is lenient towards perpetrators of 'honour crimes', with sentences of only three months to two years proscribed for murders committed in a fit of rage that stems from an unlawful or dangerous act by the victim. An estimated twenty such 'honour killings' happen every year, although many of these are allegedly not moti-vated by 'honour' but by inheritance or other disputes. As a means of protection from such killings, an average of 25 women are incarcerated at any given time as a means of protecting them (Hussein, 2010: 5). While sponsoring a number of influential women's NGOs, the Jordanian state has historically accepted alliances and policies that retain overwhelmingly patriarchal social structures, not least due to its reliance on the tribes and hence its acceptance of the role of the Sheikh and tribal customary law (*'urf*) (Brand, 1998: 101–104, 120).

Social barriers and challenges

Arab women suffer from higher levels of poverty than Arab men. They are also confronted with unequal access to health, education and professional opportunities. Morbidity and mortality due to disease is higher than for Arab men and, specifi-cally, they suffer from very high levels of morbidity and complications related to

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[7] In line with the UNDP, when I refer to 'the Arab world' I include the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates plus the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

reproductive health. The average maternal mortality rate in Arab countries averaged 270 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2005 (UNDP, 2006: 7). Despite an important increase in the education of Arab girls in recent years, women still suffer more than men from lack of access to education and the region still has one of the world's highest rates of female illiteracy. In 2005 half of females as opposed to a third of males were illiterate in these countries (UNDP, 2006: 7). Recent years have also seen an important increase in women's enrolment in university education. However, female students concentrate in fields with fewer job opportunities, such as the humanities and social sciences. Arab women also face unequal opportunities for jobs, wages and working conditions. Most women remain employed domestically or in the informal sector. Despite increases in recent years, Arab women's formal economic participation remains the lowest in the world. In 2005, it only included one third of Arab women aged 15 and older as opposed to a world average of 56% (UNDP, 2006: 8).

In Morocco widespread female illiteracy remains a huge challenge. By 2007 only 43.2% of adult women (aged 15 and above) were literate, in contrast to 68.7% of men (UNDP, 2009). While existing in both rural and urban settings, illiteracy is especially pronounced in the countryside. According to a 2002 census 84.2% of rural women remained illiterate. A related problem concerns school enrolment. While the school enrolment rate for girls reached 86.6% in 2002, the completion rate at primary level is still very low, notably in rural areas where it amounts to 41.1% (Desrues & Nieto, 2009). The combined effect of low levels of literacy and of school completion, especially among rural women, also entails substantial ignorance when it comes to more general knowledge of political, legal and religious rights. Moroccan women also retain an inferior situation in the workplace. While they are increasingly entering the workforce (in 2004, they constituted 28.5% of the working population, Desrues & Nieto, 2009), they are rarely incorporated on similar terms and with comparable salaries to men. Women overwhelmingly work in low prestige sectors of the informal economy (e.g. textiles and domestic and agricultural work). By contrast, the female presence in top-level positions and decision-making structures within both public and private sectors remain very limited (Sadiqi, 2010).

Legal barriers and challenges
Almost all Arab countries have constitutional provisions protecting women's rights, but these are rarely enforced and are often contradicted by other legislation, such as *Shari'a* based personal status codes or penal laws (which for instance often judge adultery differently). While most Arab states have ratified the CEDAW, the major-

ity have reservations, including in many instances reservations on Article 2 which establishes the principle of equality between women and men.

Egyptian society is permeated with legally sanctioned patriarchal practices and gender discrimination. For instance, the Egyptian penal code substantially differentiates between men and women in the crime of adultery. Furthermore, Egypt does not have a unified personal status code. Where no clear legal text exists, personal status matters are left to the judiciary, which tends to be influenced by conservative interpretations of the classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Egypt also has exemptions vis-à-vis CEDAW on articles that are in contradiction with the Shari'a (UNDP, 2006).

Recent years have however seen a number of positive developments seen from a CEDAW perspective. Egyptian women have won the right to travel without their husbands' permission and to obtain nationality for their children with a foreign husband. They have also gained the right to initiate *khul'* divorce proceedings (after financial compensation). The main changes in women's situation have come about via so-called state feminism; that is under the sponsorship of the highest level of authority. For instance, the controversial endorsement in 2000 of women's right to initiate *khul'* divorce proceedings came about as a top-down decision generated by the first lady, Suzanne Mubarak (UNDP, 2006).

Political barriers and challenges
Most Arab constitutions provide clauses that ensure women's political rights. Yet, in practice, Arab women are confronted with substantial barriers both with regard to their political participation and their political representation. Despite introductions of quotas for female parliamentarians in a number of Arab countries, the proportion of women representatives in Arab parliaments remained under 10% in 2005, making it the lowest in the world (UNDP, 2006: 8).

Jordan was the first Arab country to appoint a female deputy prime minister in 1999. Quotas have encouraged reticent tribal groupings to nominate women candidates and have enabled women to enter parliament. The recently reformed electoral law ensures a minimum of 12 parliamentary seats or 9% to women. At the elections on 9 November 2010 only one woman managed to win a seat beyond the quota (Reem Badran, daughter of former Prime Minister Mudar Badran in Amman). Yet, beyond voting, women's political participation remains limited. Women who run for elections risk social stigmatisation due to their public exposure, participation in long, mixed and often late-night meetings, frequent travel etc.

2. Guiding Ideas and Aspirations

In the following, I start out by summarising the common guiding ideas and aspirations that characterise most Islamic women's activism and activists. Then, as Islamic women's activism is a highly heterogeneous phenomenon involving a broad range of different activists, I subsequently set out some of the key issues on which they vary in their interpretations and positions. I finally illustrate how this variation is also played out in practice with regard to differing foci and priorities.

2.1 Common guiding ideas and aspirations

Islamic women's activists have a number of key guiding ideas and aspirations in common. Fundamentally, Islamic women's activists agree on the central idea that Islam does not constitute a problem for women.

Islam gives women complementary rights and obligations
Islam provides women with rights and privileges. Accordingly, the overall objective for them (as women's activists) is to disseminate knowledge of the rights women are entitled to in Islam – and to ensure that they are respected and implemented in practice:

> Since childhood, there has been a great link between my faith and my actions. It is my faith which frames the vision and the action. Both on an intellectual and social level… It is my belief in God – to be a practicing Muslim, who does/who sees things as they are… It is the faith which makes me a woman, a free human being – with complete dignity – who is not inferior – and who is responsible for her choices. It is neither a husband, nor a father, nor a party, nor a group – but a woman herself who takes decisions – according to her convictions, her choice… This conviction is intimately linked to a direct reading of the Quran – without any male intermediaries… (Personal interview with Khadija Moufid, President of *Al Hidn,* Casablanca, 25 May 2010)

Among the rights bestowed on women a very important one is a *woman's right to protection* by her father or husband. A woman is also free to use what she inherits and gains as she likes and is not obliged to spend it on her family. Furthermore, most Islamic activists also agree that a woman has the right to participate in society – and this includes both receiving an education and working outside her home:

> We pray to God by working – whether within or outside home... 'Build the earth' – In all you do. If you stay home: Okay. If you work: okay. It is all 'building the earth' (Personal interview with Azza el-Ashmawy, Director of Cultural Centre Egypt for Culture and Dialogue, Cairo, 27 February 2009)

In fact, many interviewees directly highlight that Islam is what motivates them to partake actively in society. But this participation must take place within a religiously appropriate framework. Here, the Islamic headscarf (*hijab*) is what protects and allows women to participate:

> As long as I wear my hijab nothing prevents me from participating. (Personal interview with Eideh al-Mutlaq, member of the IAF *Shura* council, Amman, 27 October 2010)

In other words, rather than seeing the *hijab* as preventing women from work and participation, they see this quite the other way around – Islam obliges women to partake and contribute in public life – and the *hijab* is what protects them and makes it possible for them to do so in a safe and respectful way.

Another characteristic of the rights that Islam bestows on women is that they are viewed as equal to but not similar to the rights given to men. Rather than seeing men and women as equal and similar, Islam sees men and women as *complementary*, as having different roles, possibilities and obligations. For instance, the husband supports his family – and the wife has the main responsibility for bringing up their children. This complementarity is, for instance, reflected in the complex inheritance laws. Accordingly, rather than 'equality', most (but not all) activists strive towards *equity*.

> With regard to women's rights, we cannot take our point of departure in the cases of individual (women). Our point of view needs to include the family. Women's rights must not infringe the rights of others. (Personal interview with anonymous member of ORWA, Casablanca, 27 May 2010)

Another characteristic of the rights that Islam bestows on women is that they do not stand alone but are *complemented by obligations*: religious obligations, obligations to take care of their families and (if they have the necessary energy) also obligations to participate in and contribute to society.

There is a lack of knowledge about and many wrong interpretations of Islam
A second key idea which most Islamic women's activists share is that while Islam thus bestows very clear rights (and obligations) on women (and men), it remains a great problem that these rights are not implemented in practice:

> There is ignorance even among Muslims themselves. Muslims have traditions and customs which go far back. They think they are Islamic, but they are not. (Personal interview with Dr. Rohile Gharaibeh, leader of political department of the MB and member of executive committee of the IAF, Amman, 20 October 2010)

According to the majority of activists interviewed for this report, it is a big problem that most people (including many leading '*ulama*) lack knowledge about the Islamic sources. As a consequence people believe in 'wrong' interpretations that do not ensure women the rights, privileges and protection that Islam entitles them to. Accordingly, this demands long-term efforts to educate society about 'the true Islam' and the rights it bestows on women – and to separate these from traditional practices that are not Islamic, although they are commonly believed to be so.

As an example, several interviewees point to the controversial issue of inheritance. According to the *Qur'an*, women descendants only inherit half that of male descendants. This is often taken as a token of Islam being patriarchal and repressive of women. However, according to these interviewees this interpretation is wrong, as the Qur'anic prescriptions do in fact *privilege* the woman:

> Women take the half. But when you calculate… a young man who wishes to marry needs to provide the dowry, the housing, the rent, the clothing, the doctor… all that concerns the family. Also, if he has an aunt (who needs help) he is obliged to help her… The woman gets half plus she gets the dowry. And it's her money to keep. To spend as she likes it! (Kabira Naji, 28 February 2010)

Whereas the male descendant is obliged to take care of his spouse and children (as well as female relatives in need, for instance elderly widows) – the female descendant is free to do with her share what she wants, as she is not obliged to contribute to the expenses of the household and she is not obliged to work outside the house if she does not want to. In practice, however, men do not always respect these Qur'anic prescriptions. Thus, sometimes women are forced to contribute from their own wealth to the household and sometimes men do not respect their financial obligations

towards their brides and descendants. But, according to the interpretation of these interviewees, these problems do not stem from Islam, which protects women – but rather stem from *lack of knowledge* and/or from *'wrong'* (patriarchal) *interpretations and practices*.

So the root cause of women's suffering is not Islam – but ignorance and wrong interpretations. Thus, for Islamic women's activists the challenge is not to free women from Islam – but to give them the rights and privileges which it confers on them. In other words, for most Islamic activists, the challenge is not one of circumventing or evading religion – but rather one of ensuring a correct and respectful (re-)interpretation of the religious texts and religious, legal, historical or political practices as this will give women (and men) the rights and privileges conferred upon them by Islam:

> When I studied – I realised that there are many imams who say things that are not true. For instance, the hadith according to which "a man, when he goes travelling, he asks his wife to stay at home. Then her father gets sick – but the prophet has said that you may not go out, so she stays. The father dies, same thing, she must not go to condole…This is completely made up – this hadith is weak, because it is not in accordance with the spirit (and it also has a weak chain) – someone has lied. A liar who has said that this is what the rasul [the prophet] said… Completely made up. Islam does not work that way. (Kabira Naji, 28 February 2011)

Importance of finding locally acceptable solutions

Most Islamic women's activists also insist on the necessity of addressing issues related to women's situation based on locally acceptable solutions. For some, this can be done while still also referring to, for instance, the CEDAW, whereas others (mainly those adhering to the Islamist movement) strongly disagree with the 'imposition' of the universality of 'Western' concepts such as 'gender', 'equality' and 'feminism', which all have a foreign ring to them and are controversial for wide parts of society. Or, as formulated by an Egyptian blogger met in Cairo in February 2010: "*If I say I'm a feminist, they* [society in general] *will think I want to kill men*!"

Also the 'gender' concept is very controversial for many (but not all) activists. Those who find it controversial mainly criticise it for disregarding the differences and the complementarity between men and women:

Feminism is many things, but 'gender feminism' is rubbish. Gender feminism refers to the call for breaking down all barriers. It is a devastating philosophy (gender feminism, not feminism at large, which can be okay). Never infinite freedoms – does not make sense, neither for women nor for men. All freedoms should be restricted – both for men and for women. Freedoms – but also commitments. Even the existentialists, even Sartre said so. But gender feminism goes beyond this.

Promotes freedom without commitment. Leads to polluting society, homosexual ideas. Crazy philosophy going about abortion, extra-marital sex – as human rights – that should be dictated and practiced by all. Pulling down all philosophical and psychological barriers between women and men. Is insane, madness! (Personal interview with Amany Abul Fadl, prominent member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Cairo, 24 February 2010)

Many Islamic women's activists also contrast the rights bestowed on women by Islam with Western views and ways, which are portrayed as detrimental to women, to their families and to religion. This criticism is linked to a clear opposition to an uncritical import of Western 'templates'. Some (but again not all), specifically level this criticism against the CEDAW:

The CEDAW does not balance rights. [It] only sees women as individuals – despite the family. I am against the CEDAW because it is 'international' – and does not recognise our religious background and resource. It generalises. But the same laws are not to be implemented in all societies. They are not good for us. They want an Islamic society to implement laws that are different from our society. (Personal interview with Umayma al-Akhras, leader of the women's section of IAF, Amman, 19 October 2010)

In fact, the CEDAW seems to have become a main 'arena' of controversy. Many interviewees refer to it as an example of something problematic or controversial. Similar to other controversial concepts such as 'gender' and 'feminism' – the CEDAW seems to have gained a discursive life of its own as the symbol of a Western, individualistic approach, which sees relations between men and women as completely equal – and which engages in conflict/struggle to obtain this equality. This is contrasted with the Islamic view within which the family and not the individual is identified as the primary entity to be protected and where complementarity rather than complete equality is seen as the aim.

Interviewees also argue against preponderant negative stereotypes of Islam 'in the West':

> The stereotype: 'Jordan – the country of honour crimes'. Even if you take the statistics – during the <u>worst</u> year, there were [only] about 20 honour crimes...We have more serious problems!! [This issue] should not tarnish the image of the whole society. And not all of these crimes really have to do with honour. They also concern inheritance. They are <u>not</u> condoned, of course. Not Islamic – not a father or a brother who should punish – but an Islamic governor. [But, it is a] small, limited problem. We have many problems with women's organisations. [They represent] a certain agenda imposed by the CEDAW/Westerners. [The issue of honour crimes] has been misrepresented and has not been treated fairly or in an objective way. (Personal interview with Dr. Dima Tahboub, member of the *Shura* Council of the IAF, Amman, 18 October 2010)

Many Islamic women's activists thus also refute the 'universality' of women's secular rights. They see these as representations of a particular (not universal) and aggressive, Western point of view – which contradicts and challenges Islam. While some concede that 'the West' may not always be wrong in pointing to Arab women as having special problems – it is wrong to assume that these problems are related to or based in Islam. Accordingly, most interviewees also express a deep resentment towards any 'Western' agendas being imposed in general – and specifically so when it comes to women's role and status in society.

Furthermore, many Islamic women's activists also react against liberal/secular women's activists, be they international or local. They criticise them for applying a monopolising, neo-imperialist and condescending discourse and approach to actors who have a different set of references:

> We are against nobody, really. But – that all accept us as we are! The other [from Europe, from the US], when he wishes to establish a relation with me... he wants me to wear shorter clothes, no hijab. Otherwise, I won't be like they want me to be. But with an approach like that, we will never get anywhere. They see us as inferior, as *stupid,* naïve... Once, an Egyptian secularist told me that I saddened him: 'your veil – that your husband has forced you to wear it'. He underestimated me!! It was given by God – not by my husband! That is the problem. If my husband heard that! He has never forced me to put on anything. (Kabira Naji, 28 February 2011)

2.2 Key dividing issues

Islamic women's activists work to promote women's situation based on an Islamic frame of reference. Beyond this commonality, they differ considerably. They engage with a multiplicity of challenges and obstacles to women which they address very differently, not least because many of them pose obvious dilemmas of prioritisation and strategy. Furthermore, they differ considerably in their approaches to a number of key divisive issues.

Disagreement on relevance of focusing specifically on women's problems

Whereas some Islamic women's activists do recognise the relevance and need to specifically address women's problems, others (especially activists related to the MB or MB inspired/related organisations) refute that women in their societies suffer from specific problems which must be addressed apart and which require special priority. Rather, they insist that the main problems they face are general and experienced by men and women alike.

For instance, when asked what constitutes the main challenge for women in their country, several interviewees in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco point to *poverty* – which has dire ramifications for large parts of the population, be they male or female. Some of these ramifications may be gendered (that is, they may lead for instance to males beating females or to husbands divorcing wives and/or abandoning their children) – but the root causes of these reactions are not understood as gendered.

In other words, whereas certain problems may well be gendered, these problems are not seen as the most important or pressing phenomena, as they are symptoms of more profound and pressing root causes (such as poverty and political repression), which are not gendered:

> There is total misery...It is not 'the poor woman' – but 'poor everyone' – the men, who have no work – and the state which crushes everyone. (Personal interview with Kabira Naji, Director of the MB-affiliated Egyptian Centre for Monitoring Women's Priorities (MARAM), Cairo, 28 February 2010)

Disagreement on how to approach the authoritarian regimes[8]

Another divisive issue and dilemma concerns whether or not to collaborate with the authoritarian states. Obviously, working in tandem with or at least with the accept-

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[8] When the fieldwork for this report was conducted, Egypt, Morocco and Jordan as well as the wider Arab world were characterised by their authoritarian states.

ance of the authoritarian states entails many advantages. Besides financial support, it allows greater freedom to work and organise; it may increase dissemination and the chances of gaining impact. Yet, this choice also entails an indirect recognition of the legitimacy of the state.

Furthermore, if they choose this strategy, should they do so by simply recalling constitutional and other legal provisions ensuring women's rights – or should they also press for compliance with the CEDAW, despite their possible disagreement with some of its foundations? Or – should they rather choose a position in opposition to the state, due to its unjust policies, be they economic (poverty, unequal distribution of wealth and possibilities, lack of transparency etc.) or political (repression of pluralism and political dissent) – but thus also working from a much more difficult and less protected position?

This question of how to address the authoritarian regimes demarcates one of the main dividing lines between Islamic women's activists in all three countries studied here. Some, including the majority of NGOs working to change personal status laws as well as key ulama and scholars, choose to work with the state, pushing it to respect and comply with national and international obligations, pushing legislative processes from within etc. In contrast a minority, notably activists related to the regime-critical Islamist organisations, choose to stay more or less independent of the state, seeing it as one of the main obstacles to the improvement of women's situation and empowerment and to political and economic development in general. For some of them, collaborating with the authoritarian regimes is simply unthinkable, as they see the continuation of repressive and authoritarian regimes as constituting the most fundamental and pressing problem for all citizens, be they male or female. Accordingly, Islamic women's activists can be placed on a wide continuum regarding how they address the authoritarian regimes ranging from clear acceptance and collaboration to outright opposition.

Literalist or contextualised interpretive approach

The possibly most important line of division between various Islamic women's activists concerns their interpretive approach. To put what is in reality a multifaceted variation into somewhat simplistic terms, it can be stated that Islamic women's activists differ with regard to whether their interpretive approach is literalist or contextualised.

For instance, this regards their approach to controversial concepts such as gender. Islamic women's activists can again be perceived on a continuum ranging from those

who see gender relations as socially constructed and who promote gender equality – to those seeing gender as completely biologically given and who only promote complementarity between men and women. Many so-called 'Islamic feminists' would be at the former end of the continuum, whereas adherents of conservative Salafi and Islamist ideas would be at the latter end.[9]

Frame of reference: only Islam or also secular conventions?
Finally, and related to the above point, Islamic women's activists also differ with regard to their frames of reference. While they all have in common that their main reference is Islam, they differ with regard to whether it should stand alone, or whether it can be complemented by other sources and references. Also in this regard, activists can be perceived on a continuum, with those who accept complementary secular references such as the *CEDAW* at one end, and those opposing any 'non-Islamic sources' on the other. Again, many so-called 'Islamic feminists' would be in the former group, whereas adherents of more literalist or conservative Salafi and Islamist ideas would be in the latter.

2.3 Variations in focus and priorities

Islamic women's activism not only differs with regard to ideological differences between activists, it also differs with regard to the multiplicity of obstacles and challenges for women, which it addresses. They range from the intimate, personal and private sphere to global challenges and obstacles for women.

At one end of the spectrum Islamic women's activism addresses *intimate, personal issues.* Women experience increasing empowerment and personal transformation via changes in their individual spirituality, religious practice and appearance. This in turn may provide them with a clearer voice and place within their family and society.

At the level of the family Islamic women's activism addresses women's difficulties in realising and insisting on their rights within the family as well as in partaking in activities outside the household. This can include gaining a (higher) education, being active in the workforce, choosing whether or not and with whom to marry etc. One of the key concerns and focus points in this regard is the reform (and implementation) of Islamic personal status codes.

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[9] I express my gratitude to Dr. Liv Tønnesen for sharing this idea with me.

Islamic women's activism also addresses a wide range of *societal barriers* to women. Among these, education constitutes a wide problem: women are not able to navigate in and influence their society because they lack education and knowledge – and that again on a wide range of issues, from the most rudimentary reading and writing skills to more sophisticated levels of knowledge. In parallel, activists also address *pervasive social and economic problems* – poverty, unequal distribution of wealth and privileges (be that between rich and poor, different regions and/or urban/rural areas). While these social and economic problems are general and are shared by both men and women, they often develop into or strengthen pre-existing traditional, gendered practices, such as violence against women, unilateral divorce, weddings of minors etc.

Islamic women's activism also addresses *political barriers and obstacles*, be these gendered barriers and obstacles such as resistance to seeing women in positions of authority or more generalised barriers and obstacles stemming from the authoritarian states and their repressive practices which block women (and men) from living in ways in which they would like to.

Finally, Islamic women's activism also addresses what activists perceive as *unfair politics and power distribution on a global level.* Notably, many interviewees point critically to the detrimental role of Western powers (mainly the US) – seen as partially responsible for the continuation of authoritarianism and unjust rule in their own societies.

3. Islamic Women's Activism: Actors and Activities

The following presentation does not claim to provide a comprehensive presentation of the many different and important faces of the multifaceted phenomenon of Islamic women's activism. More modestly, it aims at providing an easily accessible overview of some of the main categories of Islamic women's activists: scholar activists, social welfare and charity activists, religious activists, political activists, state activists and global activists.

3.1 Scholar activists

Given the strong focus on religious (re-)interpretation, scholar activists play a central role among Islamic women's activists.[10] Yet, they far from constitute a homogenous group as they diverge considerably along ideological lines, educational backgrounds, gender, historical and geographical contexts etc.

Historically, a number of scholar activists have played prominent roles among their contemporaries – and several among them remain influential for present-day Islamic women's activists. Among these is the Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi. In her pioneering work on *fiqh* she refuted the validity of a number of misogynistic *hadith* previously attributed to the prophet (Mernissi, 1975, 1991). Although writing from a secular position, Mernissi has been highly influential on later work written by Islamic scholar activists, among these the new wave of scholar activists who, since the late 1980s, have been writing from an explicitly faith-based perspective and who are often referred to as Islamic feminists.

Islamic feminists

Islamic feminism has been defined as "a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Qur'anic notion of equality of all insan (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life." (Badran, 2002).

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[10] By scholar activists, I refer to scholars who not only contribute to societal debates in a purely academic manner but who also explicitly take on a role as societal activists through public advocacy, membership of women's organisations etc.

Islamic feminism emerged as a new scholarly current in the early 1990s. Several elements catalysed this emergence, among them a growing unease among a number of Muslim women, who were increasingly provoked by the conservative interpretations of Islam propagated by the increasingly influential Islamist movement – and by an increasing awareness of the need to respond to these conservative interpretations with a progressive Islamic voice. Some even consider Islamic feminism to be the 'unwanted child' of Islamism. Not only did the Islamists with their call for 'return to the Sharia' provoke women to increase their criticism – they also bypassed the authority of the *ulama* and brought the classical jurisprudential texts 'out of the closet'. This, in turn both spurred a number of women to question whether there was an inherent link between Islamic ideals and patriarchy – and to increasingly engage in study of the classical texts (Mir-Hosseini, 2011: 71).

Islamic feminist scholars put efforts into reinterpreting the Qur'an, the *hadith* and the *fiqh*. They do so using the classic Islamic interpretative methodologies, *ijtihad* and *tafsir,* as well as various other interpretative tools. Notably, they argue for the necessity of distinguishing between man-made efforts (the Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh,* which is influenced by the historical and cultural context of the interpreters) – and the divine path revealed to the Prophet Mohammed by God (the *Shari'a*), which is universal and timeless (Badran, 2002). They also plead for their right to apply an interpretation (*ijtihad*) which promotes gender justice and equality, new roles for women in religious practices and rituals, changes in family law, penal codes and in legal and political practices (Latte Abdallah, 2010b: 13–15).

Additionally, Islamic feminist scholars also insist on reinterpreting verses, putting emphasis on the overarching verses of egalitarianism and equal public participation of believers (both men and women) – rather than on the specific verses stressing complementarity of different social roles, which have traditionally been used to justify an imbalanced relationship (Abou-Bakr, 2001). Islamic feminist hermeneutics also revisit Qur'anic verses to correct false stories in circulation and to deconstruct verses that refer to male and female differences which have traditionally been used to legitimate male dominance (Badran, 2002). Islamic feminists have also pleaded for women's right to receive advanced religious education and to have more central roles and authority within the religious sphere, for example to pray in non-segregated rooms in mosques, to stay close to the Kaba'a, to lead the prayer etc.

'Islamic feminism' has today become a headline for multiple publications, seminars and policies and is widely perceived by scholarly audiences as a refreshing means of bridging

faith, cultural sensitivity, modernity and women's rights. Although Islamic feminism has mainly been influential in non-Arab areas (such as Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia and the United States), it also includes a number of prominent Arab scholars.

An example of an influential Arab Islamic feminist scholar activist is the Moroccan Asma Lmrabet. A medical doctor by profession, she has in the past few years published a number of books, where she argues for the role and rights of women in Islam (Lmrabet, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2011). Her main argument is that it is possible to reconcile Islam and women's rights, as the latter are a fundamental and inherent part of the Islamic message – which has however been occulted by misogynous domination and interpretation over the centuries. The challenge therefore is to reinterpret the sacred texts in order to promote women's position within Islam, as it originally was meant to be.

In addition to her writings, Lmrabet has initiated new types of institutional collaboration which aim at promotion of women's situation based on an Islamic frame of reference. She is president of the Barcelona-based International Group of Studies and Reflection on Women and Islam (GIERFI), which, among other things, is actively engaged in debating and collaborating with the official league of *ulama* in Morocco (*Rabitat Mohammedia des ouléma du Maroc*).

The above testifies to the increasing importance of Islamic feminist scholar activism. Yet, Islamic feminism remains an extremely controversial term – not least among some of the actors it is designated to encompass, either because it is not part of a process of self-definition by Muslim women, but rather constitutes a 'hegemonic naming of the other' (Abou-Bakr, 2001) or because they do not consider Islam and feminism as reconcilable, given that the latter is seen as representing a westernising and secular imposition (Latte Abdallah, 2010b: 14–15).

On the other hand, the term has also been refuted by *secular* scholars and women's activists, who
consider Islamic feminism to be an oxymoron and who fear that relying on religious references and arguments will only strengthen the legitimacy of Islamist and patriarchal actors (Moghadam, 2002).

And even among those who do accept the term, there are considerable differences with regard to the limits of orthodoxy in their interpretations. Some authors (among them most prominently non-Arab writers such as the African-American convert

Amina Wadud) go beyond what most scholars consider the borders of orthodoxy. Whereas previous interpreters have overcome the challenge that the *Qur'an* includes 'difficult' explicit passages (such as the verses on polygamy) by reading them in light of the overarching principle of equality, Wadud argues for the "possibility of refuting the text, to talk back, to even say no" to these verses due to their contradiction with the egalitarian essence of the Qur'an (Wadud, 2006: 191; see also Latte Abdallah, 2010b:15–16). Meanwhile, other prominent scholars fear this development. For instance, Egyptian Omaima Abou-Bakr tellingly asks whether "the constant privileging of the 'spirit' of the text over its 'letter' eventually risks marginalizing and transcending the very primary source (the Qur'an) relied upon by Islamic feminist arguments?" (Abou-Bakr, 2011).

Islamist scholar activists

Some of the scholar activists who are generally most opposed to this term are those scholar activists who are part of or sympathetic to the Islamist movement.

One of the most prominent among them is the Egyptian Heba Raouf Ezzat, who has been ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood and has been a pioneering voice from within the Islamist movement in her writings:

> Many educated women in the Islamic world are rediscovering the liberating potential of their religious traditions. They demand respect, they already participate in economic and political processes, but they are also proud of motherhood as a value, believe in the family as a social institution and regard themselves as the guardians of culture. Increasing numbers of them have chosen, sometimes against the wish of their own 'patriarchal' families to join the wider Islamic resurgence. They suffer from restrictions and discrimination and from the violation of their human rights by the authorities. Their lives are worth looking at and drawing lessons from, and to show, moreover, how simplistic approaches regarding their identity and consciousness need to be revised. (Ezzat, 2000:136–7)

In her writings, Ezzat criticises the Egyptian liberal/secular feminists and notably their role in Egyptian politics. She considers that they have allied with the authoritarian state and its top-down feminist agenda against 'the fundamentalists' – which happen to include actors who also wish to see and work to promote promotion of women's rights and conditions, albeit from an Islamic (and oppositional) perspective (Ezzat, 2001: 247–254).

Ezzat is also very critical of Western feminism in general, which "…is simply accepted as egalitarian and liberating, with the assumption that it bears a cross-cultural validity that needs no proof." (Ezzat, 2000: 137). She criticises the role of secular liberal feminists within international politics. She provides a challenging 'upside-down' narrative of the history of women's rights promotion within the main UN Conferences in Cairo and Beijing. According to her, the 'bad guys' are the secular feminists (be they Western or Egyptian) who impose their own agenda with no regard for minority voices and for cultural and religious specificity. In contrast, the 'good guys' are the Islamists – whose voice is never heard or respected, who are always portrayed as fundamentalist – yet who have always promoted 'good causes' (such as that female genital mutilation is not Islamic) (Ezzat, 2001: 243–247).[11]

Also the sisters of the forbidden Islamist organisation in Morocco, *Jama'a al-Adl wal-Ihsan* (Justice and Spirituality Organisation) engage in some of the most advanced and (some would say) controversial scholar activism in the Arab world, both in terms of supporting women scholars – and in terms of their re-interpretative work.

The women's section of Justice and Spirituality supports the education of *alimat* (female Islamic scholars) who, with the correct academic credentials, have a legitimate right to engage in *ijtihad*. A number of such scholars have already been educated and several of them play central roles within the movement today, notably in the committee of religious scholars. Furthermore, the section also works to share its re-interpretative efforts with women who are not religious scholars. They notably do so via monthly meetings among the so-called 'Sisters of Eternity'.

They take their point of departure in the notion that the Qur'anic message brought rights to women (and to other repressed parts of the population, notably the slaves). However, in their view, these rights were forgotten during what they refer to as 'the Umayyad *coup d'Etat'* after the period of the four rightly guided caliphs. With the Umayyad, the both politically and socially liberating message of Islam was subjected to political despotism – and to misogynistic interpretation. In their view, much of the following Islamic jurisprudence has been made by men who were coloured by their own times and contexts as well as their gender – and therefore made interpretations that do not respect the rights given to women by Islam.

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[11] More specifically, Ezzat explicitly criticises the Danish (and Dutch) embassies for having funded the 'wrong' (secular) Egyptian participants to travel to the Beijing conference (Ezzat, 2001: 243–247).

Accordingly, Muslims (be they men or women) are faced with an enormous reinter-pretive task. They need to go back to the sources (essentially the Quran, the sound *hadith* and the *Sunna* of the prophet) in order to bring to light the rights given to women (and men) by Islam – as well as better insights into what it means to be a Muslim and how one should practice one's everyday life to be a good Muslim.

The scholar activism of the women's section of Justice and Spirituality is interesting not only because of the controversiality of their re-interpretive efforts, but also due to the extensive outreach of their efforts. While lacking state recognition puts serious limitations on their means of meeting physically, the section has engaged in advanced virtual collaboration, a means by which adherents and sympathisers not only from Morocco but also externally, in France, Spain, the US and elsewhere have a chance to meet and exchange views and scholarly interpretations online.

Does scholarly Islamic women's activism empower women?
Finally, what is the importance and impact of Islamic scholar activism for Arab women? Does it empower them and enhance their situation in society?

Obviously, not all scholarly work or activism focusing on 'women and Islam' con-tributes to the empowerment of women and the enhancement of their situation in society. Substantial scholarship has for many years provided religiously legitimated arguments for very conservative and patriarchal views on women's role in society.

Yet, notably, the more recent Islamic feminist scholarship in many ways contributes to both an indirect and a direct enhancement of women's situation in society, as it provides women with new religious interpretations and arguments – which in turn have many practical implications as they open doors for new roles and authority for women in many spheres. Within the family, for instance, women use new interpretations of the roles of the women accompanying the Muslim prophet Mohammed as empowering female role models – while new interpretations of *fiqh* provide arguments for family law reforms. As another example, this new scholar activism also opens for new roles, avenues of participation and increasing authority of women within the religious sphere – both as common, practicing Muslims and as religious scholars and figures of authority.

3.2 Social welfare and charity activists
Islamic social welfare and charity activism constitutes the historically and numerically most important avenue for Islamic women's activism throughout the Arab world.

Millions of women work as volunteers in Islamic welfare and charity organisations. These organisations manage to attract a high degree of women's participation, because volunteering there is considered more respectable for women who for religious reasons or out of family considerations wish to contribute – but fear mixing with the other sex and running the risk of disgracing their families (Sparre & Petersen, 2007: 82–85).

This social welfare and charity activism involves a broad range of activities by and for women, such as helping fellow believers to celebrate the main religious holidays or organise their weddings. It also includes running orphanages, providing medical help and teaching – be that literacy classes, religious education or various sorts of training in basic skills to help women sustain the livelihood of themselves and their families. The size and outreach of the organisations varies considerably from small local associations organised around a local mosque or neighbourhood to grand-scale organisations with a wide national or regional outreach (Clark, 2004).

An example of the latter is the Egyptian *Resala,* which is the largest voluntary organisation in the Arab world. In 2007, it was estimated to have 25 branches throughout Egypt and to involve 50,000 volunteers (Sparre & Petersen, 2007: 64–66). Another example of an organisation with a wide outreach that attracts many women activists is the Jordanian 'Society for the Preservation of the Holy Quran', which is present locally throughout the entire country (it is estimated to have almost 400 branches throughout the country, 60 of which are in the Amman area alone). The high number of local branches ensures local proximity and hence facilitates women's participation by making it reconcilable with their family duties and general wish not to travel far/late (Abu Hanieh, 2008: 114).

Islamist social welfare and charity activists
Some of the most important charity and social welfare activists are affiliated to the main and moderate Islamist organisations. As an example, women have historically been responsible for much of the social and charity work within the multiple social and religious organisations affiliated to the Jordanian MB (Abu Hanieh, 2008: 113). The largest of these by far is 'the Islamic Charity Center Society' (ICCS)[12] which involves

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[12] The ICCS has held a privileged position among Jordanian NGOs due to the close relations between the regime and the MB. With the exception of the royal NGOs, ICCS is the largest and most financially solvent of all Jordanian NGOs. However, with the increasingly conflicting relationship between the regime and the MB, the former in 2007 took control of the board of the ICCS based on accusations of corruption, widely seen as politically motivated.

many women (and girls) as beneficiaries – or as either paid or volunteer workers. The ICCS provides mosque facilities, education and health services, income generating and training projects plus assistance to orphans and families in need.[13]

The Moroccan *Munadamat Tajdîd al-Wa'i al-Nisa'i* (Organisation for the Renewal of Women's Awareness, ORWA) was established in 1992 by members of the MUR. The ORWA is a national organisation and has its headquarters in Casablanca. It remains a formally independent women's organisation, although its long-time president (Bassima Hakkaoui) is also a member of the consultative council of the MUR as well as a member of parliament for the PJD (where she leads its newly created women's section). ORWA runs various campaigns, lobbies and runs an 'advisory centre' offering counselling in legal and family matters. They also run national campaigns on various social issues such as preventing premarital sex among adolescents. The MUR also runs the so-called Az-Zahra network of local women's organisations spread across the country. The range of membership and types of activity vary considerably between each of the local organisations, but they are generally focused on social work (literacy, professional training etc). Furthermore, they organise annual campaigns on ethical issues, such as veiling, fighting drugs etc.

New welfare and charity activism spurred by lay preachers

In recent years, popular lay preachers such as Egyptian Amr Khaled have managed to attract large numbers of volunteers, especially from among young women from the middle and upper classes. These lay preachers speak colloquial Arabic, wear Western clothing and apply a softer and more compassionate style than traditional sheikhs. Their televised shows broadcast widely on satellite channels appeal especially to young Muslim women from the upper middle class, eager to reconcile Islam with their modern lifestyles. Their shows have spurred a number of new volunteer organisations, which combine conventional charity and welfare activism with advocacy and awareness raising aimed at mobilising young people to become engaged and contribute to their society (Bayat, 2007: 151–55; Sparre & Petersen, 2007: 64–65).

Does charity activism empower women?

Finally, what is the importance and impact of Islamic charity activism by and for women? One thing is that it widely involves women, both as service and charity

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[13] In 2004, the ICCS was running 19 kindergartens, 22 elementary and secondary schools and one college. It furthermore ran two full hospitals plus 15 medical centres (housing 32 clinics and 11 laboratories); six centres for income generation and training and 33 centres servicing needs of orphans and poor families (Clarke, 2004: 89–92).

providers and recipients – but does it also empower women and enhance their situation in society?

First of all, it is obviously not possible to give one straight and conclusive answer to this question, given the huge and varied types of and ideological outlooks of Islamic charity activism and actors. Secondly, the answer is further complicated by any answer to such a question hinging, once again, on definitions.

If by empowerment and enhancement of women's situation one implies a development towards increasing gender equality, a general answer would be mainly negative. Most of the Islamic charity activism does not aim at changing role models for women in family and society but mainly reproduces existing family and gender models.

Yet, this type of activism nevertheless has important potentials for women's empowerment and for the enhancement of their situation – both for activists themselves and for those at the receiving end. With regard to the former, participating in Islamic welfare and charity work provides new 'legitimate' avenues and roles for women in the public sphere. It allows women (among them women from conservative environments) a 'legitimate' reason to get out of the house and meet with other women. Furthermore, it provides these activists with new professional experiences and networks.

Islamic welfare and charity activism also empowers women at the receiving end (including the more vulnerable among them such as women from poor families, widows and divorcees). They gain new skills (such as literacy or a professional training). They gain new chances of providing for and securing a livelihood for themselves and their families. And it gives them legitimate means to get out of the house, meet other women and expand their personal networks.

3.3 Religious activists

Prominent Islamic scholars play a central role as opinion shapers throughout the Arab world, where they are followed by huge audiences on the internet and the satellite channels. While many of these scholars are elderly males who propagate conservative and traditional views on women's roles and obligations, a minority among them (both male and female) work proactively to promote women's empowerment, participation, agency and authority.

An example of the latter is the Egyptian sheikh Abdel Moty Bayoumy, who is based at the prominent Al-Azhar University. His recent scholarship deconstructs classical legal doctrines on wifely obedience and male guardianship. In parallel, Bayoumy has collaborated with various Egyptian women's organisations. He has also been an active participant in public debates on Islamic family law in Egypt (Sharmany, 2011).

Sometimes prominent sheikhs are also pushed by other actors to pronounce interpretations or fatwas that contribute to the promotion of women's situation and empowerment. The experience of Jihan al-Halafawi from Alexandria provides a good illustration. In 2000 Jihan al-Halafawi was the first ever woman belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood to run as a candidate for the parliamentary elections in Egypt. Besides dealing with strong regime harassment, she also had to overcome culturally and religiously based resistance to her candidacy. This resistance came from her neighbouring environment, from some of the local members of the MB in Alexandria – and not least, also sprang from her own self interrogation, and she was hampered by questions of the appropriateness of her candidacy. In order to overcome this resistance, she found great help in soliciting and receiving a fatwa from the prominent Egyptian sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi:

> There were small things that worried me. How could a Muslim woman walk/campaign in the streets? And have her picture on posters all over? This was something new. It worried me a bit. So I asked to meet sheikh Qaradawi – and told him what worried me. He told me to go ahead, that there was nothing wrong. He wrote down what he said – I distributed (and still do) his words in the street... According to sheikh Qaradawi's latest fatwa, a woman can be President. In the Quran there are precedents. For instance Balkis, the Queen of Sheba. (Personal interview with Jihan al-Halafawi, Cairo, 2 March 2010)

Another important category of Islamic women's activists are the female religious guides and lay preachers (most commonly referred to as *dai'at,* but also as *murshidat* or *wa'isat*) who, usually on an informal and voluntary basis,[14] meet with other women in mosques or in private homes and share religious knowledge and advice on how to live and practice their religion. While not a new phenomenon, recent years have seen an upsurge in the number of female lay preachers. Some of them belong to the pietist

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[14] Some of these also work as formal employees; this is notably the case in Morocco, where the state in recent years has engaged in public education and employment of *murchidat* (see more below in discussion of state actors).

and literalist *Salafi* movement, some are affiliated to the Islamist movement, others are state sponsored, while others again are without ideological affiliations.

Saba Mahmood gives a beautiful description of women preachers in her book about the pietist Egyptian mosque movement (Mahmood, 2005). Many of her informants are close to the pietist Salafi movement. Besides sharing their interpretation of the holy sources of Islam, much of the advice they share with their audience concerns private if not intimate matters (how to dress, how to interact with men, how/whether to act in the public sphere etc.)

Other women preachers are affiliated to the Islamist movement. For instance, Moroccan Justice and Spirituality has a wide network of female religious preachers. The main contrast between the focus of their interactions and those of the Salafi preachers described by Mahmood is that they have a broader societal and political outlook. These preachers not only advise women on how to practice their faith but also disseminate a sociopolitical analysis according to which Islam has become misguided due to political interests and misogynistic readings.

Finally, recent years have also witnessed an upsurge in state-sponsored female preachers. As an example, the Jordanian Ministry of *awqaf* (Islamic charitable endowments) has in recent years educated and employed 700 *waisat* (female religious guides or advisors) and *dai'at* (female religious lecturers). According to an anonymous interviewee at the ministry, the background for this is both that they wish to promote *wasatiyya* (moderate, 'middle') Islam and also, that they want to prevent politization and radicalisation and "extremist *dai'at*". Furthermore, they have recognised that "people like and appreciate the *dai'at*… for instance, to prevent drugs – people accept that from a religious perspective". The formal Jordanian *waidat* and *dai'at* are followed and supervised and trained on an ongoing basis by local departments of the ministry. They also participate in charitable activities (sewing, baking, bazaars etc.) to help poor people. They receive a modest monthly indemnity for their efforts.[15] (Personal interview with anonymous officer at the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf, Amman, 26 October 2010).

Does religious Islamic women's activism empower women?
Is it correct to consider these female lay teachers and advisors as Islamic women's activists? In other words, do their activities empower women and advance their

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[15] In 2010, the monthly indemnity amounted to about 150 JOD or approximately 1,165 DKK.

situation in society? Answering this question once again necessitates revisiting the introductory discussion of what constitutes 'Islamic women's activism'. If one takes this to involve an activism which explicitly contributes to 'gender equality' in a liberal/secular sense, most of the *dai'at* and their Islamic study circles should not be considered as expressions of Islamic women's activism. Most of them are pious, private efforts by women to enhance their virtuous conduct in their homes and in society. Furthermore, many of these efforts do not challenge prevailing patriarchal gender constructs and practices, quite the contrary. Notably many *Salafi* preachers clearly propagate views according to which woman's appropriate place and role is in her home as caretaker of her family.

Yet, if one takes 'Islamic women's activism' to include a broader spectrum of activities, which in various ways empower women and enhance their situation in society, the answer becomes more muddled. For one thing, women gain authority and new spaces for themselves, both as preachers and as participants in religious study groups. Furthermore, notably some of the Islamist study groups, as for instance those organised by the women's section of Moroccan *Justice and Spirituality*, clearly aim at empowering women and giving them voice to claim and live their rights, as they see these as given by Islam.

Finally, as has been pointed out succinctly by Saba Mahmood, even women who attend the most pious *Salafi* religious lectures (*durus*) experience individual empowerment through personal transformations, a more profound spirituality and the development of a clearer voice and place within their family and society. Mahmood thus refutes accusations from liberal/secular feminists that members of the mosque movement are repressed and are simply reproducing patriarchy. Rather, in her view, these women freely choose their participation – and in so doing fundamentally challenge liberal assumptions about a true inner core which yearns for autonomy (Mahmood, 2005).

3.4 Political activists
Islamic women's activism also takes place within the formal political sphere. Most of the political Islamic women's activists belong to or are more loosely affiliated with the Islamist movement, be it in recognised political parties or in forbidden/non-tolerated organisations with a formal political agenda.

This kind of Islamic women's activism in the political sphere is far from a new phenomenon. The Egyptian Zeinab al-Ghazali is widely recognised as a pioneering

female leading voice within the Islamist movement in the early 20th century. After a brief membership of the Egyptian Women's Union, she founded the Islamist Muslim Women's Association (*Jam'iyyat al-Sayyidaat al-Muslimaat*), an advocacy and charity organisation. She also edited a magazine and gave religious lessons (*durus*). Zeinab al-Ghazali remained close to and supported the Muslim Brotherhood, but rejected an invitation by Hassan al Banna to merge the two organisations. She was imprisoned from 1965 to 1971 for her activism.

Political Islamic women's activism has seen an important upsurge in recent years, where women have become increasingly active and (in some places) influential within the Islamist movement. Yet, this upsurge has by and large constituted a 'hidden' phenomenon to the outside world. The Egyptian scholar activist Heba Raouf Ezzat explains this by pointing to, notably, Western policy makers having been far too preoccupied by the 'fundamentalist danger' of the Islamist movement to register these important internal dynamics (Ezzat, 2001: 240–243). The importance of this 'hidden' development has increased after recent dramatic changes in the Arab world, as Islamist actors are likely to gain a more prominent position in official politics, for instance in post-Mubarak Egypt. Accordingly, I shall in the description below provide slightly more extensive examples from each of the three case countries than in the sections describing other types of Islamic women's activism.

Political activists in Jordan
During the past two decades women have mainly been allowed to play an increased role within the Islamist organisations for strategic reasons, as male leaders realised their utility in spreading the message (*da'wa*) among other women, children and family members (Latte Abdallah, 2010a: 18). In countries, where Islamists were allowed to join the formal political sphere, women were also drawn in by male leaders who realised that women could attract new voters. This was, for instance, the case in Jordan, where the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) affiliated Islamic Action Front (IAF) initially welcomed a quota of female parliamentarians as a strategic means to enhance their own numbers (Taraki, 1996: 140–158).

Yet, women within the Islamist organisations have since grasped and redefined these opportunities to further defend their influence in the political sphere (Clark & Schwedler, 2003: 308). Nawal al-Fa'ouri is a prominent example of a woman who made use of these opportunities and gained an increasingly important voice within both the Brotherhood and the IAF. She, however, ultimately left the MB and the IAF

due to restrictions put upon her by the male leadership (personal interview with Dr. Nawal Faouri. Amman, 28 October 2010).

At the turn of the century Dr. Faouri became one of the co-founders of the more moderate, less confrontational and more participatory Islamist *Hizb al-Wasat* (centre party). Their 'Forum for Moderate Islamic Thought and Culture' has attracted many women members. They see women as "but the full sisters of men" and emphasise the need for genuine *ijtihad* and innovation, which take into consideration the economic, social and cultural transformation of Jordanian society. In their view, women have suffered from historical injustice and deprival of the rights given to them by Islam. However, they are also wary of Western ideas and traditions which conflict with the *Sharia,* the centrality of the family institution or with Jordanian cultural and social specificities (Abu Hanieh, 2008: 122–3).

As Dr. Faouri's story illustrates, it is quite striking how little women's social, charitable and *da'wa* activism translates into formal authority within the Jordanian MB. Women have no formal leadership role within the MB itself; no women are members of its executive committee or Shura council. Instead, women members of the MB are organised in the independent, parallel and largely insignificant women's section. However, the MB leadership remains internally divided on women's participation in general and about their formal/leadership roles in particular. In fact, this issue constitutes one of the key dividing issues within the MB. Conservative views (according to which women are not to assume posts of public authority) clash with more reformist views which, based on modernist interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence, argue for the permissibility of women's participation and leadership. In this, they refer to the internal 2005 document "the vision of the Islamic movement for reform in Jordan" which for the first time reaffirmed the equality of men and women (Abu Hanieh, 2008: 100–101).

With regard to the IAF, women officially have easier access to formal leading roles. The political platform of the IAF acknowledges women's rights to participate in public life, including their right to join committees and departments within the party. It also sees women as entitled to hold any political post except for that of 'head of state' (Clark & Schwedler, 2003: 301). Since the establishment of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in 1993, women have also been participating actively in the formally political activities of the brotherhood – both as voters (women make up the majority of IAF voters; they accounted for 70% of the party's votes in the 2003 elections), as members

of the party's general assembly (constituting about 10% in 2008) and as candidates (Clark & Schwedler, op cit).[16]

The reasons for this development are manifold. It has partly been spurred by the discourse and actions of the 'women friendly' wing of the MB (and especially of the IAF) – consisting of a number of prominent members such as Dr. Gharaibeh and Isahak Farhan who, based on modernist interpretations of Islam, have consistently pushed for women's political participation. Furthermore, it is also very much the outcome of strategic considerations, as women play a key role in spreading the message (*da'wa*) and in ensuring political mobilisation among women (Taraki, 1996: 156). Yet this development has, first and foremost, come through thanks to IAF women's activists themselves. A small group of highly competent and motivated women have managed to insist on and gain recognition of their competence. Among these, notably Hayat Musimi is referred to by many interviewees as an important and respected role model.

Yet, as Nawal al-Fa'ouri's experience illustrates, this progress is mainly of a formal character. In 2010 no women had yet become members of the executive committee of the IAF and only a few had managed to be elected to the Shura council of the party – and this already low number was more than halved (from 9 to 4 out of the 120 members) in the 2010 internal elections. Accordingly, women still mainly participate in the women's section, which largely deals with issues related to women and which makes significant efforts to secure women's votes. Some analysts see this separate sector as problematic and reflective of "efforts of party leaders to ghettoize women's activities (rather than to enhance gender equality)" (Clark & Schwedler, 2003: 302). In contrast, women members of the section themselves point out that while the section (or separate quotas for women MPs) should maybe not exist in an ideal world – it may still be a useful/necessary intermediary institution, which contributes to strengthening the thinking and participation of women members, including those who are still reticent to engage in the formal political sphere due to the social stigma this often still entails in Jordanian society:

> The section is there to narrow the gap between women and men in political work: women are very far from political work. They have no expertise. It necessitates

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[16] The IAF had women candidates running in the 2003 elections, with Hayat al-Musimi from Zarqa winning a seat. Two women also ran in the 2007 elections, but did not make it to parliament. Two women also ran for the 2007 municipal elections but neither won, as the IAF withdrew from the elections just hours after ballots closed to protest electoral fraud.

time to train and feed her with information, training etc. so the women's sector tries to narrow this gap. Plus, many of our sisters do not believe in work with men. They see this as haram – to talk, meet, and work with men. To go to council meetings etc. But this is Wahhabi [inspiration]! So these sisters, we work with them there [in the women's section]. [There are also] special issues regarding women/family affairs. Our brothers are good, well informed – but they do not focus as much on this area. So – we are also specialised on women within family affairs. The women's section is there for the above three reasons. But personally I hope that the women's section will dissolve completely. (Personal interview with Dr. Hayat Musimi, member of IAF *Shura* Council, former MP and leader of the IAF women's section, Amman, 21 October 2010)

Political activists in Egypt

Turning to Egypt (prior to the revolution of spring 2011) women related to the MB did not play a very significant role on the formal political scene. In contrast to popular views according to which the lack of female participation simply reflected a patriarchal and conservative leadership, prominent women's activists of the Brotherhood rather explain their absence as the result of a tacit 'pact' with the regime and security services:

Our jama'a is very positive; it would like to put us on top. But there is a deal with the very highest security authorities – if women are involved in the top hierarchy, they will not be protected anymore. In this case, women may experience the raping etc. which they did to sisters in Islamic Jihad. But they will still protect women [from harassment], as long as they only stay involved in the bottom and middle levels of the organisation. To the sisters, honour is very important... So women do not have high positions – not because they are looked down upon – but because of pressures beyond our means [from the state]... My work amounts to the double or three times that of brothers – but I do it from a protected corner... Here, ladies from the left-wing/seculars tell us that we are abused... But [progressing] is not interesting, if we are not protected. They criticise us – but they will not be there, once we are taken into prison... (Personal interview with Amany Abul Fadl, member of the Egyptian MB, Cairo, 24 February 2010)

Furthermore, leading women activists of the Egyptian MB also claim that the main reason the state (again, prior to spring 2011) wishes to prevent MB women from figuring prominently in the public sphere is that this would undermine their main argument and critique of the MB as a misogynist threat to Egyptian women. At any

rate, prior to the popular uprising of spring 2011 (in which women and notably many younger female MB activists participated actively), women were not very present in the top echelons of the Egyptian MB. How this situation evolves with the revolution remains an extremely important issue to follow.

Political activists in Morocco

Finally, in Morocco women have gained a quite prominent role as political activists within the Islamist movement. For instance, the ORWA (affiliated to the MUR) became publicly known and played an important role during the recent *Moudawana* reform process (1999–2004), where its women activists staunchly fought a socialist family law proposal which they judged to be too secular and in contradiction with Islam. Women also play a very visible role in the PJD, which has one of the highest percentages of female parliamentarians among the Moroccan parties.[17] Some of them, such as the ORWA president Bassima Hakkaoui, staunchly fight to promote women's situation based on an Islamic approach. However, only two women are members of the party's general secretariat and all six female MPs were voted in via the special 'national list' (which was established by the Moroccan state to ensure a minimum of 10% female parliamentarians).[18]

Within Justice and Spirituality, finally, women enjoy one of the most advanced positions among Islamist organisations in the Arab world – both organisationally and in terms of their activism. This can at least partially be explained by the strong Sufi inspiration of the organisation, whose guide and founder (Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine) is a former adherent of the *Boutchichiyya* order and has encouraged women's participation. Furthermore, one of his daughters, Nadia Yassine, plays a very visible and influential role both within the organisation and as one of its most well known public faces. Women are very present throughout the organisation, also within its decision making bodies, as on average one third of all leading figures are women, including members of its key executive institutions and its committee of Islamic experts. Women also have influential roles in the political circle (the *de facto* party) of the organisation (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2010b).

Does political Islamic women's activism empower women?

Finally, in which ways does the political Islamic women's activism empower women and contribute to advancing their situation in society? At least two different dimen-

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[17] In June 2010, six of the party's 46 MPs were women.

[18] The figures date from the Moroccan parliamentary assembly prior to the elections of 25 November 2011.

sions need to be considered when answering this question – one regards the symbolic importance of their presence and participation in the formal political sphere, whereas the other regards their substantial impact on the politics of the party/organisation.

Considering the symbolic aspect first, women candidates and MPs would seem to play an important symbolic role as new role models and as living illustrations of the possibility for Muslim women to reconcile piety, maternity (as most of the Jordanian and Moroccan Islamist MPs are mothers and spouses) and active participation in parliamentary politics and societal debates. Furthermore, it would seem likely that their presence can attract more women voters, volunteers and candidates. Finally, the fact that ongoing pressure by leading women activists, for instance within the Jordanian IAF, to push for women's membership of the Shura Council and (previously) the parliament also has an important symbolic importance, as it illustrates the possibility of pushing women's presence in prestigious and previously male-dominated spheres of society.

In contrast, interviews made for this report would seem to confirm earlier analyses (Clark & Schwedler, 2003) pointing to women members not impacting considerably on the general politics of their party/organisations. Whereas explanations differ (difficulties for women of managing family obligations, 'honour' and propriety, patriarchal traditions, resistance from senior male leadership or other), the fact is that only a few female members of Islamist parties and organisations in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco have made it into key decision making committees.[19] It should be noted, that the same could be said with regard to many liberal/secular political parties in the three countries, pointing to a widespread problem of Arab political parties and formal political spheres more generally being male-dominated (UNDP, 2006: 201–5).

3.5 State activists

Islamic women's activism is mainly a civil society phenomenon, as Arab state feminism has predominantly been of a secular nature (Hatem, 1994). This has clearly been the case in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, where regime elites have supported top-down secular women's rights agendas, either through direct state-sponsored reforms and initiatives or via support to NGOs. In both Egypt and Jordan this activism has to a large degree been directed by 'first ladies' such as Egypt's previous presidential first lady, Suzanne Mubarak, or the Jordanian queens Nour and Rania and Princess Basma.

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[19] While it goes beyond the time focus of the present report, recent events in Egypt seem to further consolidate this finding. Whereas notably many young Egyptian MB sisters were active in the popular uprising of early 2011, MB women have played a remarkably limited formal role in the transitional institutions.

Yet recent years have also seen an increasing Islamic women's activism directed by state actors. For instance, the Jordanian Ministry of *awqaf* has increasingly engaged in education (and supervision) of female preachers as previously noted. In recent years state-sponsored Islamic women's activism has been far more elaborate in Morocco, going as far as making some observers consider it as involved in 'Islamic State Feminism' (Eddouada & Pepicelli, 2010). Accordingly, this discussion will focus on the Moroccan case.

The new Islamic women's activism of the Moroccan state is an integral element of the new 'moderate Moroccan Islam' promoted by Mohammed VI (who claims direct descendance from the Muslim prophet Mohammed and is constitutionally recognised as *emir al muminin* or Commander of the Faithful). This new religious strategy saw light in the aftermath of the terrorist acts in New York on 9/11 2001 and even more so since the Casablanca bombings of 5/13 2003. The promotion of the new 'moderate Moroccan Islam' is used both to combat radicalisation and to underline the religious legitimacy and importance of the Moroccan regime (Maghraoui, 2009). It draws considerably on the Sufi heritage in Morocco. For this the current minister of Islamic Affairs is well equipped given his membership of the influential *Boutchichiyya* brotherhood.

A number of recent reforms and initiatives clearly aim at reconciling gender equality and a religious frame of reference. To date, the clearest expression of the Islamic women's activism of the Moroccan state was the speech given by Mohammed VI on 10 October 2003, where he announced the main outlines of the new *Moudawana.* In this speech he carefully argued for the necessity of reforming the personal status law based on a uniquely religious frame of reference and managed to find compromises on a number of controversial issues (such as divorce, polygamy and male tutorship, *wilayat*) based on a religious framework – yet drawing on a very pronounced *ijtihad* and going beyond the *Maliki* school [20] (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2010a).

The Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs and *Habous* has also promoted women's presence and authority in the religious sphere through the establishment of new religious roles for women. Education of female religious scholars (*'alimat*) has been encouraged and those educated have been allowed into previously male-only institutions. Since 2003 women have been allowed to participate in the religious lectures during *Ramadan* (*Durus Hassaniyya*); they are now accepted as members of the local scientific councils (*Majalis al 'ilmiyya*), the *Rabitat* (where 20 out of 70 ulama are

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[20] The Maliki school is one of four legal schools (so-called *madhab*) in Sunni Islam. The Maliki school is dominant in the Maghreb.

now women) and they have entered the group of teachers at the prestigious *Dar el Hadith el Hasaniyya.* Furthermore, *'alimat* have also been integrated into the regional delegations of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and *Habous,* where they direct the efforts of the family units. In these units, they have been joined by 250 new, ministry-educated female guides or *murshidat.* These are young female university graduates, who receive one year of training by the ministry in religious science, humanities and practical issues.

The responsibilities of the *murshidat* include guiding women in their religious practice in mosques and in various public institutions (prisons, youth clubs etc.):

> Moroccan society is in demand of religion – everybody looks for religion, but mostly the women – (but) where they go, they only hear mean speaking… (But) women have specific problems, which they cannot share with men. For instance, if a woman has problems in her married life – she needs someone who can listen to her. A woman. This is the work of the murshidat. (Anonymous *murshida*, 31 May 2010)

Does state Islamic women's activism empower women?

Two questions are considered here: firstly, how to estimate the impact of this new state-sponsored Islamic women's activism in Morocco? And, secondly, does this new state-sponsored Islamic women's activism lead to women's empowerment and a strengthening of their situation in society?

With regard to the first question, the state-sponsored Moroccan Islamic women's activism is an integral part of a strategy to impose a certain regime-sponsored interpretation of 'Moroccan Islam' and the religious legitimacy of Mohammed VI as the Commander of the Faithful (Maghraoui, 2009; Direche, 2010). Several informants point (anonymously) to these new efforts as non-genuine and reflections of a "Façade feminisation of political and religious systems – [by] women who play the game of the system". Among the arguments brought forward by informants to underscore this criticism are that the *murshidat* do not really represent something new (as there were always informal female religious guides – so-called *wa'isat* – attached to local mosques via the local *Majalis al 'ilmiyya*); that the various implicated state institutions compete and do not support the same interpretations; and that there are significant limits to the Islamic feminism of the state, as it for instance is still only the male-only Superior Scientific Council *(Majlis al 'ilmi al A'la)* which can make official *fatwa*.

In addition, the above state efforts can also be interpreted as a means of legitimising the Moroccan regime in eyes of western audiences – preoccupied with combating radical religious interpretations and actors and with seeing a more pronounced role for women:

> The goal of all this: that Morocco appears like a country which has succeeded in fighting against terrorism; which has a 'spiritual security' (this has become a very frequently used expression) – and which has succeeded in establishing moderation and to keep moderation (wassatiyya) – in order to appear in front of international audience as being open to the dialogue of civilisations and as having fought against terrorism. *(*Anonymous *murshida*, 29 May 2010)

Or, as stated by Asma Lmrabet, *"*Women are the alibis of modern discourse... the Moudawana, the murshidat... These (reforms) are used to say that one is (a) democrat. But this is mostly façade, 'state feminism'" (Asma Lmrabet, Rabat, June 2010).

The new state Islamic feminism also represents a competition with the Islamists and their long-standing presence and activism among women audiences:

> The state/ministry... wanted to marginalise the Islamists; they wanted to occupy the space of the Islamists. If you say that you are a *murshida*, everything is open to you (youth clubs, prisons etc.) – places, which are not accessible to the Islamists. So they seek proximity/closeness with (the) people via the murshidat – and, at the same time, a distancing from the Islamists. (Anonymous *murshida,* 29 May 2010)[21]

A similar interpretation was held by Nadia Yassine who, in an interview with the author, pointed out that it might not be completely coincidental that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and *Habous* announced its new *murshida* initiative in the very same week in 2005 that Justice and Spirituality announced *their* new initiative to encourage the education of 50 'alimat.

In this competition with the Islamists, the state also presents new challenges to the historical secular and liberal women's movement in Morocco, who are increasingly forced to find religious arguments to legitimate their ideas. This is an important general problematics, which shall be discussed in more detail in section 4.

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[21] I have neither inserted names nor places where I met my *murshidat* informants in accordance with their requests.

So the new state-sponsored Islamic women's activism in Morocco can be seen as an attempt to influence and control the religious sphere, to counter religious radicalisation and the importance of the Islamist movement and to introduce a moderate Islam. The question is whether it also contributes to empowering women and to enhancing their situation in Moroccan society?

Again, the findings do not allow for an exhaustive answer. Yet, it does seem quite significant that the Moroccan state has chosen to appropriate and 'officialise' an Islamic discourse as a part of its many recent efforts to promote women's situation in society.[22] By using an Islamic discourse, the regime has been successful in countering patriarchal traditions and introducing legislation and reforms, not least within the deeply controversial area of Islamic family law reform (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2010a). In this sense, it does indeed seem as if the regime activism has contributed to empowering Moroccan women and to enhancing their situation. Furthermore, while the new Islamic women's activism of the state can be considered as a means of competing with the Islamist movement, it can also be viewed as reflecting a certain responsiveness of the state to increasing demands from religiously-based women's activists in recent years (Eddouada & Pepicelli, 2010).

Yet, it is also clear that the new, state-sponsored Islamic women's activism may at the same time represent drawbacks, not least for liberal/secular groups working to promote women's situation from a non-religious perspective. I shall return to this in section 4.

3.6 Global activists

Finally, past decades have also witnessed the emergence of a number of new global Islamic women's actors and activities. An increasing number of international organisations work in various ways to empower women and to promote their situation based on an Islamic perspective. Examples of such activism include (but far from exhaustively)

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[22] During the past two decades the Moroccan monarchy has made a number of legal reforms aimed at promoting women's situation. Besides the family law reform, the labour and penal codes have also been revised. The regime has also decided to grant citizenship to children of Moroccan mothers with foreign fathers and has announced the withdrawal of Morocco's CEDAW reservations. The regime has also engaged in a number of political reforms, which aim at increasing women's political participation and presence such as the 10% quota for female parliamentarians introduced at the parliamentary elections in 2002 and repeated in 2007 as well as during the municipal elections in 2009, where the quota was 12%. Also within the social domain, the state has made a number of efforts to promote women's situation. Besides efforts to enhance female school education and literacy, gender mainstreaming was also introduced as an integral part of the comprehensive National Human Development Initiative (INDH) launched in 2005 (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2010e).

Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE), the *International Congresses on Islamic Feminism* organised by the Catalan *Junta Islamica,* the Barcelona-based *International Group of Studies and Reflection on Women and Islam* (GIERFI) and the more secular-oriented Women Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML), which mainly works to revise Islamic family laws in female-friendly ways.

An important characteristic of this global activism is that it extends far beyond and in most cases does not have its centre in the Arab world (as is also the case for the increasing 'Islamic feminist' scholarly activism). For instance, the possibly most significant of these many new global initiatives to date originated in Malaysia. Based on the Malaysian *Sisters in Islam* a new global initiative for equality and justice in the Muslim Family, *Musawah* ('equality' in Arabic) was established in Kuala Lumpur in 2009. Members of the Musawah network include individual activists, scholars, policy makers, NGOs and grassroots organisations. The network mainly focuses on reform of Muslim family laws, which are to be based on contextualised interpretations of Islamic law that are open to universal principles of human dignity, of justice and of equality (Basarudin, 2009). One of the advantages of international networks like Musawah is that they provide participants with strong networks and experiences, which strengthen activists in their efforts to address their local situations:

> The women's movement here [in Egypt] is decontextualised, elitist. And religion is here, the language people talk. So Musawah… is dealing with what's there. It is necessary to enter this space – the alternative is leaving it to the fundamentalists. So [members of Musawah are] reclaiming religion as Muslim citizens… [They] focus on enabling Muslim women to live their lives as full citizens… Empowering them…. Muslim feminists are applying a rights-based approach – this is empowering… We represent a different stand. We are fed up with 'this is not Islam'. (Hadil el Khouly, member of Musawah, Cairo, 4 March 2010)

Besides the more formalised organisations and actors, various individuals also work in a more informal manner to promote women's situation based on an Islamic frame of reference. Maybe most significant in this regard are the platforms provided by the new media, not least in the blogosphere, which allow for unprecedented exchanges among individuals who have traditionally not been able to express themselves and connect in the public sphere. Furthermore, what is important about these fora is that they to a great extent address and appeal to young audiences in the Arab world and beyond.

The activism among especially young urban women spurred by lay preachers like Amr Khaled or the virtual meetings and exchanges of the 'Sisters of Eternity' of Justice and Spirituality have already been mentioned. Another example is the '*Kolena Leila*' *(We are all Leila)* campaign which can be cited here. Initiated by a devout young female Egyptian engineer, Eman Abderrahman, the campaign has succeeded during the last five years in getting young Egyptian women (and men) to blog on the problems that women meet in Egyptian society today. What is interesting for this report is that this campaign has nurtured the public participation and expression of numerous young female believers, who have used the blogging experience to figure out how to reconcile their religion and participation in Egyptian society.

Does global Islamic women's activism empower women?

So does this new global Islamic women's activism empower women and promote their situation in society? While still a very recent phenomenon, the potentials of this new global activism seem to be very important as it may strengthen local women's activists, who may gain from learning from other contexts, not least with regard to reforms of Islamic family law (both with regard to the multiplicity of interpretations and to the ways and means of pushing for reform). It may strengthen Muslim women's leadership and authority, provide new means of challenging traditional Islamic experts and their production of Islamic knowledge as it may also represent an important new way of addressing women's traditional exclusion from interpretive and faith communities.

This activism represents important partnership potentials for Danish or other external actors working to promote women's empowerment, participation, agency and authority in the Arab world, given that many of these global organisations also have adherents in, for instance, Denmark.

4. Islamic Women's Activism: Potentials and Challenges

Based on the above presentation of various aspects of Islamic women's activism, the first part of this section summarises some of the potentials that such activism holds with regard to empowerment and increasing participation, agency or authority of Arab women. The second part considers some of the risks and challenges that this kind of activism also represents with regard to the empowerment and increasing participation, agency or authority of Arab women.

4.1 Potentials of Islamic women's activism

Strengthening women's position both in the private and public spheres
First and foremost, Islamic women's activism holds potential with regard to strengthening women's role in the Arab world – in both the private and public spheres. For instance, participation in Islamic social and charity work provides a legitimate way for many women to partake in activities beyond the private sphere, to get out of the house in a legitimate manner and to gain experiences, skills, networks and possibly also revenues and livelihoods, which may in turn enhance their voice and authority.

Furthermore, Islamic women's activism also provides women with new avenues to legitimate positions of authority – as women preachers, scholars, politicians or other such. In turn, these new female figures of authority may become new role models and sources of inspiration for yet other women, who would otherwise be disengaged in public affairs.

Finally, new interpretations of Islam by scholar activists and lay preachers hold wide potentials in terms of providing women both with new arguments and with new means of changing their personal status and situation in both the private and public spheres. For instance, participation in religious study groups may empower women and provide them with agency and new means of personal transformation. It may also provide them with arguments for changes in their roles and situations based on their meetings with fellow participants or on new interpretations of, for instance, the roles of the women accompanying the Muslim prophet Mohammed.

In parallel, new interpretations may also provide arguments for local, state and international activists for more general changes, for instance of Islamic family laws. Indeed,

despite its deeply divisive and controversial nature, Islamic family law reform may well constitute one of the main areas where Islamic women's activism may achieve important formal changes in women's situation in society – given the religious foundations of family laws and legislative practices to do with family matters (marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody) throughout much of the Arab world.

Locally accepted approach overcoming postcolonial sensitivity

As noted in the introduction, the question of 'the Muslim woman' has gained an immensely symbolic and controversial status. On one hand it has served for years as a key legitimising argument for colonial interference. On the other hand, it has also become one of the main local arguments in the Arab world against cultural imperialism and for the protection of local identity and authenticity. The controversial and strong symbolic importance of the issue has led to a situation where women's situation in society has often been left largely unchanged, as attempts to empower women or alter their situation in society (by both foreign and local actors) have been perceived as part of a neo-imperialist agenda and an attack on cultural and religious identity and authenticity (Said, 1979; Ahmed, 1992; Kandiyoti, 2011).

Yet, Islamic women's activism has the potential to overcome this 'stalemate' by providing an indigenous and culturally rooted, and hence more broadly accepted approach to women's empowerment and discussions of women's status in society more generally. Furthermore, Islamic women's activism may, in socially conservative segments of the population, be perceived as more socially acceptable than public participation in general and non-religious women's activism in particular. Accordingly, it may attract new/other audiences than secular women's activism.

Feminising Islam

Islamic women's activism also holds the potential to 'feminise Islam'. It may provide new religious scholarship and interpretations – be these of the *Qur'an*, the *hadith*, the *fiqh* or the *Sunna* – or a general feminist rewriting of Islamic history (or *her*story) which puts emphasis on or reinterprets the roles of female figures such as the female companions of the Muslim prophet Mohammad. In turn, these scholarly efforts may provide arguments and leverage for changes in both family and penal laws as well as in legal and political practices.

Furthermore, such efforts may also lead to an enhancement of women's possibilities and authority within the religious sphere in terms of rights to pray in non-segregated rooms in mosques, to stay close to the Kaba'a, to lead the prayer etc. It may also enhance

women's positions of authority as religious scholars, guides, preachers and potentially also leaders of the prayer (although the latter remains very controversial).

Finally, Islamic women's activism also holds potentials with regard to building new relations between women's activists and the predominantly male religious scholars. It may conceivably push some of the latter towards new interpretations and perspectives on issues related to women's situations and gender relations.

Pushing the Islamist movement towards new positions
More specifically, women's activists belonging to and working within the Islamist movement hold important potential in terms of pushing their mainly male and often very conservative and patriarchal leadership towards new interpretations and positions vis-à-vis women's position and possibilities within the movement – as well as in society more generally.

Islamist women's activists also hold important potential vis-à-vis the formal political sphere, a traditionally male dominated (if not men only) public domain in many Arab countries. Given their legitimacy as veiled and respectable Muslim women, female Islamist political activists may constitute important door-openers to the formal political sphere for female voters, volunteers and candidates as well as for those holding office.

Bridging divides and strengthening of women's movement
Big divides continue to exist between secular and faith-based women's activists, notably those related to the Islamist movement. In some cases this divide is mainly a question of limited knowledge, whereas it in others is based in very strong ideological and referential disagreements. These disagreements concern the fundamental question of whether it is appropriate to include a religious reference or not. They also concern the end goals of their activism. For instance: does one strive towards equity and complementarity – or towards equality? Their disagreements also concern a number of specific issues such as whether men and women should enjoy equal shares in inheritance or whether polygamy and unilateral divorce (*talaq*) ought to be forbidden.

Yet, to some extent, the two approaches are complementary. Not least in terms of outreach, as they have the potential to reach out to different audiences and segments of society. And while they obviously do not work in the same way or agree on references or end goals, these two different currents nevertheless also contribute in some ways to a general strengthening of awareness about women's situation in their society.

Furthermore, a certain process of mutual learning between these different approaches can be witnessed. Even where relations between Islamic and secular women's activists may immediately appear to be strained if not outright hostile – important but less visible and recognised processes of mutual learning nevertheless may exist in parallel. This could for instance be witnessed during the Moroccan family law reform process, where liberal/secular and Islamic women's activists to a high degree mirrored and learned from each other's experiences. Liberal/secular women's activists learned about the value of proximity and field presence – and of including religious arguments in their discourse. In contrast, their mainly Islamist counterparts learned about the utility of employing rights-based and gender discourses and of organising in independent women's organisations (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2009).[23]

4.2 Challenges of Islamic women's activism

So far, the present report has concentrated on describing some of the overall characteristics of Islamic women's activism as well as its various potentials in terms of promoting women's situation and contributing to their empowerment. Yet, such activism (and external support to it) also faces limitations, risks and challenges.

Essentialising Islam and Muslims

Islamic women's activism risks glossing over various local differences and variations in identity – be these along religious, political, ethnic, social or other lines. In other words, identifying and focusing on partners as 'Muslims' risks "condensing women's multiple identities into that of being Muslim" (Tadros, 2011a: 5) and thus also risks overlooking differences in the identity, preferences and interpretations of the community in question – as well as among individuals, partners and collaborators: "Taking religion seriously is one matter, but it becomes seriously problematic when it is promoted as the only identity that counts, disregarding the many other components of identity that should be salient in different situations, thereby truncating a broader sense of self" (de Kadt 2009: 784).

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[23] In fact, whereas Islamic and liberal/secular women's activism represent different historical currents (Ahmed, 1992) it may not be appropriate to only perceive of them as distinct and mutually opposed. Margot Badran has demonstrated in her work on Egypt, how previous presentations of 'feminism' as inherently 'alien' (given an alleged Western and a-religious springboard) is too simplistic, as several feminisms in fact occurred at the same time in Egypt as in England and furthermore were created by Muslim women. Rather, 'secular' and 'religious' feminisms have co-existed, have both undergone dynamic changes – and have been and continue to communicate with and reinforce each other (Badran, 2009).

This essentialisation of identity poses specific challenges for external actors. While they may strive, in the noblest of efforts, to apply a culturally sensitive approach which respects and relies on the faith of local partners, they risk unintentionally ending up contributing to a construction of local partners as (only) Muslim (or as Muslim in a special way) – and hence overlooking local differences and variations in identity.

Religious interpretations and their limits
Islam (as any religion) is open to ongoing and extensive interpretations and most Islamic women's activists rely on varying interpretations of the religious texts. Nevertheless, for most activists, their religious framework does also put limits on their activism. These limits may concern the issues at stake – for instance, many activists will refrain from pushing much on inheritance laws, on which the *Qur'an* provides extensive and detailed prescriptions. Moghadam explains this by pointing to the God-given nature of the *Qur'an*, which makes suggestions of its fallibility highly contentious (Moghadam, 2002: 1160). On many occasions the religious framework also limits the audiences of Islamic women's activism, as it mainly addresses Muslim women (and men) and their rights and relations.

Excluding religious minorities and secular approaches
Islamic women's activism, through charity, in scholarship, in study groups or elsewhere, risks confirming or cementing the legitimacy and authenticity (if not the monopoly) of an Islamic approach to gender and family roles. Islamic women's activism hence risks excluding the voices and wishes of non-Muslim minorities[24] and of those local actors who prefer a secular approach. This exclusion may take on different aspects ranging from ignorance of problems and challenges specifically faced by women belonging to non-Muslim minorities – to the downright imposition of Islamic norms and obligations on non-Muslims or Muslims preferring a secular approach.

Furthermore, supporting Islamic women's activism also risks exacerbating local dynamics and internal competition by strengthening the legitimacy of an Islamic approach and discourse to the detriment of secular approaches and discourses (Moghadam, 2002: 1158).

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[24] Non-Muslims are here considered as minorities given the focus on the Arab world, which holds a Muslim majority population.

This has particular implications for external actors. In their support to local Islamic women's activism they risk pushing local dynamics in unintended ways, by increasing not only the financial means but also the voice and legitimacy of Islamic women's activists relative to other local groups and approaches. It thus also risks pushing secular actors and non-Muslim minorities towards increasing reliance on faith-based or Islamic approaches. And, paradoxically, they will in some cases not only be pushed towards an increasingly faith–based or Islamic approach in order to ensure local legitimacy and voice – but also in order to gain credit as 'authentic' and representative from external actors. Tadros gives the telling example of an experienced Egyptian women's activist, who was recently told at a foreign meeting *not* to give a presentation of women's issues because she was not veiled and thus was not 'representative' of Egyptian women (Tadros, 2011a: 8). Yet, it must be highlighted that the opposite risk also exists, as some Arab liberal/secular women's organisations have also in some instances excluded very devout women from their activities and assistance. So external support for liberal/secular actors may unintentionally exacerbate local dynamics just as well.

Finally, as support for Islamic women's activism risks exacerbating local divergences between religious and secular approaches and actors, it may also weaken the chances for broad alliances between them. Yet, once again, this risk also pertains to support for liberal/secular groups. In other words, in cases where approaches are very polarised, efforts (including external aid) which mainly focus on one (or the other) of such opposing religious/secular groups may undermine local efforts to overcome this polarisation (Balchin, 2011: 18).

Strengthening patriarchy and conservative approaches of religion

By providing legitimacy to a religious approach, Islamic women's activism also risks strengthening the power basis of existing local authorities who also rely on Islam to legitimise their power, be these Islamic scholars, organisations, parties or regimes. In section 3, the example of Jihan al-Halafawi soliciting the Egyptian sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi was mentioned. While his fatwa was very helpful for al-Halafawi, who used it to overcome local reticence about her candidacy for parliament, her action also contributed to strengthening the legitimacy of his views and opinions and those of religious scholars more generally.

Given that many religious scholars remain guided by conservative and patriarchal interpretations of women's role and obligations, soliciting their advice hence potentially represents a double-edged sword. While it may indeed be helpful in a given

specific case, it also risks confirming the legitimacy and authority of actors that are not always guided by a wish to promote women's empowerment, participation, agency and authority.

This dimension is also directly relevant for external actors. Their support to local Islamic women's activists may also result in such unintended strengthening of patriarchal and conservative local discourses and authorities. As an example of such an unintended consequence, Balchin describes how a DFID funded research report looking into the ways in which the *Shari'a* might advance women's rights in Nigeria ended up with highly conservative recommendations –while ignoring the analysis of local women's rights activists, including those working within a religious framework (Balchin, 2011: 17).

Strengthening authoritarian political actors

Islamic women's activism also runs the risk of exacerbating local political power games and of being instrumentalised politically in unintended ways. For instance, it may bolster rather than challenge local patriarchal institutions and discourses (Kirmani, 2011: 57–63). Returning again to the examples given in section 3, we saw the important advantages of religious scholars working within the confines of state controlled institutions, which provide them with important means of influencing state policies and legislation. Yet, these religious activists also represent institutions that have historically been instrumentalised by authoritarian Arab regimes to legitimise their existence and policies.

Accordingly, Islamic women's activists working within the confines of institutions controlled by the authoritarian states may well have unique chances of influencing state policies and legislation – but they (and their collaborators) also run the risk of legitimising the authority of the incumbent authoritarian regimes. This recalls the dilemma mentioned earlier that many Islamic women's activists in the Arab world are facing: whether to work with the authoritarian state (and hence risk contributing to its legitimacy) – or against the state (and hence risk persecution and marginalisation)?

This inherent risk of unintended political support is also pertinent for external actors. Balchin again provides a great example, this time from the Philippines, where a foreign bilateral agency gathered local *'ulema* to produce a statement supporting women's reproductive rights from an Islamic perspective. However, the gathering facilitated networking among the *ulema*, which resulted in the

formation of a political group that promoted a fundamentalist vision of Islam. In other words, what was intended as a means to enhance pluralism and gender equality ended up strengthening the power of a deeply patriarchal group (Balchin, 2011: 17).

Yet, it must again be highlighted that external support for, or collaboration with, liberal/secular women's activists *also* involves a risk of contributing in unintended ways to local political dynamics. For instance, external actors have for many years contributed with political and financial support to the secular state feminism of the Egyptian first lady Suzanne Mubarak or the many women's NGOs (also known as RONGOs or Royal NGOs) of the Jordanian queens and princesses. Besides supporting women's situation, this support has also in many instances contributed to the legitimation of incumbent authoritarian elites and regimes. In other words, external collaboration with or financial support to local women's activists is rarely apolitical – irrespective of whether local partners work from a religious or a liberal/secular perspective.

5. Islamic Women's Activism: Recommendations to External Actors

Islamic women's activism holds clear potentials and is complementary to secular/liberal approaches to the promotion of Arab women's empowerment, participation, agency and authority. Yet, this activism also has its limitations and faces a number of risks and challenges, many of which are specifically important for external actors.

How are external partners to go about establishing mutually beneficial partnership and collaboration with Islamic women's activists from Egypt, Jordan and Morocco and from the wider Arab world – while also addressing the many above-mentioned risks and challenges? For instance, how are external actors to find relevant partners among local Islamic women's activists? And, when that happens, how can the external and local partners manage to build mutual trust and willingness to collaborate? And how are they to identify common focuses and approaches?

Without providing exhaustive answers, this final section provides a number of preliminary recommendations, which hopefully contribute to addressing the above questions as well as the previously mentioned potentials and challenges that Islamic women's activism represents for external actors who wish to contribute to the empowerment and enhancement of women's situation in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and in the Arab world more generally.

All collaboration to be based on prior in-depth empirical analysis
Partnership and collaboration with Islamic women's activists should be based on prior analysis both of a given problem as well as of the different local actors and stakeholders, challenges and approaches to the issue in question.

Specifically, collaboration and partnership should be based on solid knowledge about and recognition of the sensitivity of the issue of women's rights in the given context, granted that the issue has (also recently) been used to legitimise foreign military interventions – just as it has been (and still is) used by local actors both as a source of self-legitimisation and of delegitimising 'foreign' approaches and concepts such as 'gender' and 'feminism'.

Besides analysing the local context, dynamics and actors, such an analysis must also include reflections by the external actors on their own means and ends. Collaboration

aiming at contributing to the promotion of women's empowerment, participation, agency or authority is to be justified by solid and specific empirical analysis – not used as an argument or pretext for obtaining other goals.

It should be highlighted that this recommendation (as many of those that follow) is not specific to collaboration with Islamic women's activists but pertains to all sound international collaboration between external and local partners.

Main recommendation: Islamic women's activists to be included just like any other potential partner – based on mutual interest, relevance and competence
Collaboration and partnership with Islamic women's activists will be a novelty, especially for many Western women's organisations who have traditionally collaborated mainly with local women's organisations with liberal/secular frames of reference. Accordingly, it may be tempting to establish such collaboration in new, specifically designed 'Islamic' projects. It may also be tempting to create new standards and procedures for such collaboration.

However, Islamic women's activists are *not* to be singled out specifically or to be the object of specifically designed 'Islamic' projects. Nor should the bar be raised or set in a different manner when it comes to Islamic women's activists. Rather, they are to be included *just like any other potential partner*. That is, when they *wish to engage* in partnership and collaboration with external partners – and when they *have specific competences or other comparative advantages* vis-à-vis a given issue or challenge.

Thus, when external actors look for collaborators, they should start out by identifying the specific challenges and obstacles to women's situation in a given context – and then engage in partnership with local Islamic women's activists (either on their own or as part of a network of different local partners) when this is mutually wished for and when the latter have relevant competences with regard to addressing the specific challenges or obstacles identified.

This principle of collaboration based on mutual interest, relevance and competence will also, to a large extent, help external actors both to avoid marginalising local non-Muslim minorities and secular actors – and to avoid pushing local actors towards only or increasingly acting based on religious arguments and approaches. Whereas starting out by designing 'a project on Islamic women's activism' would easily run these risks – starting out by defining locally relevant problems that concern women

– and then inviting the most relevant local actors (be they faith-based or not) makes the chances of this marginalisation smaller.

Rather than exacerbating differences between religious and secular (or non-Muslim minority) actors, collaboration with local Islamic women's activists based on mutual interest, relevance and competence can also serve to increase the chances of broad inclusion and, potentially, of mutual cross-fertilisation and inspiration between groups with different frames of reference. It may thus also contribute to bringing together ideologically opposed local actors who may complement and learn from each other by collaborating on a given and defined issue. This is notably the case in contexts like Morocco, where relations between Islamic and liberal/secular women's activists are limited and often characterised by mutual suspicion. In such contexts an approach to collaboration based on mutual interest, relevance and competence may contribute to increasing dialogue across sometimes very isolated secular vs. religious segments among women's activists – and may hence also contribute to strengthening a broad and heterogeneous women's movement.

Collaboration to be based on broad consultation and genuine partnership
The strong association between foreign interference and women's issues in the Arab world means that many potential local partners among Islamic women's activists are reluctant to engage and collaborate with foreign partners. This reluctance is especially pronounced with regard to women's issues, as these are widely perceived as both forming the core of local values and traditions – and as constituting one of the main targets of disrespectful neo-imperialist attacks by Westerners.

Overcoming this local reticence requires that external partners manage to communicate and demonstrate *in practice* that they genuinely strive towards partnership and mutual respect. This demands broad and ongoing consultation and efforts not to impose solutions but rather to identify areas of common interest and experience and, ideally, where results may also be mutually beneficial.

Avoid controversial discourse
Gaining trust, respect and interest among local partners also demands a critical awareness of the discourse and concepts used. Many Islamic women's activists are wary of concepts such as 'equality' (as opposed to 'equity' or 'complementarity'), 'feminism' and 'gender', as these terms are loaded with negative associations (of cultural imperialism and neo-colonial interference, threats to Islam and indigenous ways and traditions etc.) Accordingly, local relevance and trust may be enhanced if

external actors strive to avoid terms that may call to mind (perceived) differences. More generally, many Islamic women's activists do not like being put in boxes such as 'secular' or 'religious'. Again, approaching local partners based on mutual interest, relevance and competence rather than on potentially offensive 'boxes' is conducive to building mutual trust and respect.

A genuine partnership approach combined with a non-offensive discourse may also help to respect the 'do no harm principle' and to avoid stigmatising and giving an unintentional 'death kiss' to local Islamic women's activists who do choose to engage in collaboration with external partners despite the controversiality of such collaboration. Rather, it may then result in respectful mutual learning experiences as well as successful new approaches and efforts to empower Arab women and enhance their participation, agency and authority in society.

Apply an open and dynamic approach to Islam

Islam is a living religion. It has millions of different adherents who interpret and practice their faith in multiple and changing ways. Accordingly, external actors should avoid applying a fixed and essentialising approach to Islam. Rather, the challenge is to apply an open and dynamic approach to Islam – while Islam certainly can be and often is used to legitimise patriarchal and discriminatory practices, it can also be and is used as a tool for promoting gender equality. What matters is not an essentialised construct of 'Islam' – but rather the ongoing interpretations and *practice* of local partners.

Furthermore, it is essential that external actors on one hand do not neglect the importance of Islamic actors and approaches – but neither should they end up perceiving local partners as (only) Muslim and hence overlook local differences and varieties in identity – be they along religious, political, ethnic, social or other lines.

Approaching women's issues gradually and as an integral part of other challenges

Many interviewees express reservations vis-à-vis the singling out of 'women' and 'women's problems'. Whereas women may well experience specific problems, these are only symptoms caused by more fundamental issues such as poverty and political injustice, from which both men and women suffer. In addition, issues pertaining to women's situation are particularly controversial for many interviewees, who see 'the woman issue' as a symbol of cultural authenticity.

For these reasons and in good accordance with the general donor principle of 'gender mainstreaming' it may in many instances prove fruitful to apply a long-term

and incremental approach. This can both take the form of collaboration with local partners that do not only work to promote women's situation but are also active in other less controversial fields of mutual interest and it can also take the form of initially collaborating mainly with local faith-based partners on projects and issues that do not explicitly or primarily target women's situation, but rather do so indirectly or as an added value to partnerships and collaborations which mainly focus on less controversial issues.

Collaborate on issues of common interest and mutual benefit

Women's work–life balance constitutes a potentially fruitful field for initial collaboration. It is not too controversial and it concerns issues of common interest and mutual benefit, especially for Danish and other Nordic development or women's organisations.

Many female interviewees emphasise the difficulties and importance of reconciling their family and public/professional obligations – while clearly stressing the priority of the former. Only if they feel assured that their children or elderly relatives are doing well can they engage in and contribute to the wider society. But when this is the case, they also both wish to and feel obliged to do so. Yet in practice, gaining this assurance that their family members are well taken care of is often hard. Traditionally, most women have relied on their female relatives to help them out – but with increasing numbers of women being educated and entering the work sphere, finding available hands among family members is become more and more difficult. Moreover, qualified and reliable day care facilities (for children or for the elderly) are limited and hard to find.

Many interviewees specifically express knowledge about and interest in the extensive Danish (and Nordic) experience of reconciling motherhood, family life and women's professional participation and contribution to society. Whereas they clearly do not wish to replicate a Scandinavian family model, many interviewees express interest in exchanging experiences in this domain. For instance, several interviewees mentioned the existence of the kindergarten for parents working in the Danish parliament and ministries and saw it as a great way to enhance women's employment in these institutions.

Accordingly, a wide range of issues related to the management of the work–life balance seem to constitute a promising area for potential collaboration. Such collaboration could for instance focus on day care pedagogy and the establishment and quality as-

surance of day care facilities both in the public sphere and in workplaces. It could also address questions related to the introduction or implementation of family friendly legislation (opening for parental leave, flexible working hours and conditions etc). As well as constituting a potentially fruitful and not too controversial area for collaboration, this field seems particularly promising as it might also provide important new learning experiences for Danish and other external actors, not least with regard to addressing requirements for day care facilities or family-related legislation for nationals of Muslim background in their own communities.

Glossary

alim (a)	One who has (religious) knowledge, religious scholar (singular of *ulama*)
awqaf	Islamic charitable endowments (plural of *waqf*)
da'wa	A (religious) call, invitation, appeal or summons; spreading the Islamic message
da'iya	One who practices *da'wa*, female preacher
durus	Religious lectures
faqih	An expert in fiqh, or, Islamic jurisprudence
fiqh	Islamic legal science
habous	Islamic charitable endowment (mainly used in Morocco, similar to *awqaf*)
hadith	Term used to denote a saying or an act or tacit approval or criticism ascribed to the Prophet Mohammad
haram	That which is forbidden
hijab	Islamic headscarf
hizb	Political party
ibadat	Religious obligations
ijtihad	Independent reasoning
imam	One who leads the Islamic prayer
insan	Human beings
khul'	The right of a wife to seek a release from the marriage bond through the courts; subject to financial compensation
maslaha	Public interest
muamalat	Social conditions
murshida	Female preacher/religious guide
Qur'an	Literally 'recitation', the central text of Islam considered by Muslims to be the word of God revealed to the Prophet Mohammad
rasul	Prophet (the Muslim prophet Mohammad)
salafi	Someone who applies a literalist approach to Islam and takes the period of early Islam as a model
shari'ah	Literally 'the divine path'; the totality of God's will as revealed to the Prophet Mohammad; religious law

shura	Consultation
sunna	'Orthodox' traditions of the Prophet Mohammad, as contained in *hadith*
tafsir	*Qur'anic* exegesis
talaq	Repudiation, a man's right to unilaterally repudiate his wife
ulama	Religious scholars
'urf	Customary law
wa'isa	Female preacher/religious guide
wasatiyya	Moderate, 'centre' (often used to refer to moderate interpretations of Islam)

Abbreviations

CEDAW	UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
IAF	Islamic Action Front (political party affiliated to the Jordanian MB)
ICCS	Islamic Charity Centre Society (affiliated to the Jordanian MB)
GIERFI	International Group of Studies and Reflection on Women and Islam (Barcelona-based)
MARAM	The Egyptian Centre for Monitoring Women's Priorities (affiliated to the Egyptian MB)
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MUR	Movement for Unity and Reform (Moroccan Islamist organisation)
ORWA	Organisation for the Renewal of Women's Awareness (related to the MUR)
PDR	Danish Arab Partnership for Dialogue and Reform
PJD	Party for Justice and Development (Moroccan political party related to the MUR)
WISE	Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (global)
WLUML	Women Living Under Muslim Law (global)

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