

Legitimizing Change among Muslim Women in Malaysia and Egypt

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Some people consider Islam oppressive, particularly to women. Yet, Islam is a structure of many structures and contains the capacity for creativity and change. This article examines some ways in which the structures that constitute Islam serve as the vehicle for legitimization of some Muslim women's actions and the medium for more equal treatment.

Historically, men have interpreted Islamic texts (Qur'an, Sunnah, Hadith) to the detriment of women.¹ Evidence exists in those texts that women should be treated more fairly than they are in some Muslim countries today. Islamic educators are pinpointing where the Qur'an, Sunnah, and Hadith provide room for reinterpretation. The knowledge that some women gain from reinterpretation empowers them as they publish that knowledge or take it home and engage their families. This knowledge—this reinterpretation—is a “human resource,” in the words of William Sewell Jr., that women in Malaysia and Egypt can use in different ways to improve their lives.²

Islamic education has led to making choices about and questioning long-established principles of action. It has led to female empowerment, calling for more equality in public and private realms. The forms of that empowerment range from public outcry to private mission. Empowerment for some Muslim women in Malaysia and Egypt looks like the right to choose how to interpret a passage of the Qur'an that, thus far, has been interpreted for her. It looks like the right to earn new respect from her husband and her community for her devotion to Islam and her new understanding of the choices embedded in interpretations of it. Empowerment for a Muslim woman looks like a scholarly female teacher who offers her

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students thoughtful, objective options and choices to make on their own. It looks like a woman who uses knowledge of Islam to question her designated roles in society.

This article defines Islam as a set of norms, principles, and identity that Muslims hold sacred and important. It defines empowerment as a bottom-up process with which women analyze, develop, and voice their needs and interests.³ Whether intended or not, empowerment should lead to more equal redefinition of social or political space relative to men.

Structures are principles of action that reflect a power dynamic. They articulate to, reflect, and overlap with each other; sometimes compete with each other; and sometimes reinforce each other. The nature of structures is intertwined with action. Structures exist only insofar as they are acted upon—and because they depend so much on action, they remain in states of perpetual reformulation. Actions can create, reinforce, and transform structures. A child who asks a parent for permission to act reinforces a hierarchy of kinship relationships. A Christian who attends church on Sunday reinforces the relationship between a priest and his patron, between society and religion.

Inherent within each social relationship is the capacity for change. Just as structures shape actions, so may people change their actions and transform structure. The church patron may start reading the Bible on her own, interpret it differently from her priest, publish articles about her new interpretation, and influence the way her community engages with its branch of Christianity.

This article focuses on understanding how the interplay between structure and agency enables creativity that can cause change. The degree to which change occurs is not the subject of this study; rather, it examines how agents creatively use structures and resources to reinterpret notions of legitimacy. This reinterpretation lies at the root of their pursuit of change. A pressing analytical challenge in gender studies today involves the attempt to theorize “both change and continuity, invention and repetition, and understanding the forms they take.”⁴

The study considers the cases of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Cairo, Egypt. In Malaysia the members of Sisters in Islam (SIS) are legitimizing more equal treatment for Muslim women by adhering to an Islamic frame-

work but debating interpretations within it. In Egypt some Muslim women are doing the same—but to a lesser degree and by way of a different process.

First, the article places SIS and the Egyptian subjects in the context of the larger debate about the kind of feminism in which such women engage. Second, it explicates Sewell's argument concerning the interrelated natures of structure and agency—the foundation for this analysis—thus preparing the reader to engage the evidence within the context of structure and agency as Sewell sees it.⁵ After explaining the research process and then delving into the evidence, the article concludes, having illustrated how some Muslim women creatively manipulate structures and legitimize their efforts to obtain more equal treatment for themselves and others. It shows that the structures which constitute Islam are inherently malleable and that agency can come from the most seemingly rigid structures.

Feminism as a Frame

It feels natural to see feminism where women seek equal treatment. In the case of members of Malaysia's SIS, they pursue a kind of Muslim feminism in terms of gender equality and do not mind being categorized as feminists. However, in Egypt the very word *feminism* evokes ire and indignation.

Egypt's long history of secular feminist discourse was discredited as elitist and Western during the Islamic revival of the 1970s and 1990s. Ever since, feminism has become a foil for many Egyptian Muslim women activists. "Scholars of the Middle East [e.g., Soroya Duval, Yvonne Haddad, Jane Smith, and Sherifa Zuhur] have agreed that one of the most pronounced characteristics of Islamic women's groups is their reaffirmation of nationalist and anti-Western views."⁶ Instead, Egyptian Muslim women have embraced an Islamic framework to talk about equal rights. Haddad and Smith describe female Islamic scholars as those who "participate actively in promoting the rights and opportunities that they believe Islam truly accords them . . . [from] a position that speaks from within their own culture, consciously avoiding articulation that represents foreign ideologies or perspectives that seem to reflect Western feminism."⁷

Azza Karam famously developed a typology of Islam-oriented feminism, applying it to Muslim women activists. She divides the field into three types: Islamic/Muslim, Islamist, and secular, concluding that Islamic/

Muslim feminists constitute the most meaningful kind of female Muslim activist today in Egypt.⁸ Among Muslim feminist activists who use a Quranic framework to create more space for themselves are those who have reinterpreted the Qur'an in meaningful ways and those who have dared to translate it again in its entirety.⁹ Islamic/Muslim feminists adopt a worldview in which Islam can be contextualized and reinterpreted for the purpose of promoting equal treatment between men and women under the law and of allowing freedom of choice to play an important part in the expression of faith. SIS includes Islamic/Muslim feminists.

Islamist feminists, on the other hand, are guided by a desire to help fashion a "proper Islamic society and state."¹⁰ Muslim feminists generally do not believe in fashioning an Islamic state; they largely support secular government. The key characteristics of Islamist feminists are twofold. First, even though they work openly and avidly for women's rights, they refuse the title "feminist." They deem feminism an enemy of women's rights as they see them through the lens of the Qur'an. Second, they refuse such a title because it emphasizes the rights of women for the purpose of gaining freedom not appropriate to their place within a "proper" Islamic society. They believe in balance, not equality, between men and women. This balance derives from the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet (s.a.w.). The Egyptian Muslim women featured in this article fall under this category. However, referring to such women as feminists is both antithetical to their purpose and inaccurate. They do not believe in equality between men and women as a secular feminist might envision it. Rather, they believe that a balance must be struck between men and women in which everyone assumes his or her rightful and complementary roles. They refer to this balance as "equality." Hence, they frame the struggle for equality differently—such that women do not work in opposition to men but in conjunction with them. They refuse to acknowledge existence of a "women's" problem. Rather, issues that Muslim women face are societal injustices. In an interview for a newspaper, Qazim, an Egyptian, explained that equality between the sexes is the basis of Islam in spite of differences: "Difference does not mean inequality. . . . One should not desire the attributes of the other. For Allah is just. And ultimately there is balance."¹¹ Further, as Qazim explained, "Allah gave certain different blessings to men and women, but these are partial differences that do not mean inequalities—there is a unity of kind."¹² This study refers

to such women—antifeminists who believe in balance between men and women accorded by the Qur'an rather than gender equality—as *hurriyat al-mar'a* (women of freedom). Moreover, instead of simply observing ways in which Muslim-oriented activists pursue gender equality, it explores the process by which agency and structure interact and produce change by looking to Sewell's theoretical work.

Noting the Limitations of “Habitus” and Explaining Change

Sewell reformulates Anthony Giddens's notion of the dual nature of structure and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus in order to create a place for human agency within a theory of structure. Previously, structure and its outcomes were conceived of as fixed and rigid, but Giddens conceives of structure as not only constraining action but also enabling it.¹³ In terms of their duality, “structures shape people's practices, but it is also people's practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures.”¹⁴ That actors are “knowledgeable” about social and cultural limitations, for example, and are “enabled” means that people “are capable of putting their structurally formed capacities to work in creative or innovative ways.”¹⁵ Further, because structures both reinforce themselves and enable actors, one should consider them processes rather than static states of being.¹⁶

Structures are principles that pattern the practices of people's lives and that reflect the importance of power.¹⁷ As these principles are put into practice, they produce and reproduce social life.¹⁸ They are also generalizable in that one can apply them to new contexts and new situations.¹⁹

One can see a certain action, experience, or publication by an actor or group of actors through the lens of two or more axioms at once, depending upon the aspect of the action, experience, or publication on which one wants to focus—because Sewell's axioms are not independent of each other in reality. The people who enact them are parts of competing structures within which they transpose schemas (rules) and may produce unpredictable (as well as predictable) consequences with any action. Some engage in reinterpretation, as actors read the Qur'an through their own experiences and education. Further, those people constantly find themselves subject to an intersection of structures from within and without Islam in which they act, react, produce ideas, and reinterpret ideas.

Structures consist of human and nonhuman resources, both of which enhance or maintain power: “Human resources are physical strength, dexterity, knowledge, and emotional commitments,” [whereas] “nonhuman resources are objects, animate or inanimate, naturally occurring or manufactured.”²⁰ Further, these resources are unequally distributed, but every member of a society controls some measure of human and nonhuman resources: “Part of what it means to conceive of human beings as *agents* is to conceive of them as *empowered* by access to resources of one kind or another” (emphasis in original).²¹

Sewell devises five axioms to explain how a society comprised of many varying structures and resources that reinforce themselves and each other also generates transformations.²² He contends that, first, practices are guided by many distinct structures. For example, the actions of people at any given time may be guided by hierarchies of power within the family, class, race, socioeconomic background, religion, and so on. Sometimes those structures are competing, sometimes not. Second, within this multiplicity of structures, the learned rules, which guide action, are generalizable to a wide range of situations. For example, one can extrapolate the hierarchy of kinship relations to embody state-mass relations. Third, the applicability of any learned rule to a new setting renders the accumulation of resources unpredictable. Some people might interpret any given principle differently than expected as well as apply that principle differently. Consequently, it is difficult to know just how many variations on power accumulation can be derived from resource accumulation and vice versa. For example, or as Sewell explains, “a joke told to a new audience, . . . a cavalry attack made on a new terrain. . . —the effect of these actions on the resources of the actors is never quite certain.”²³

Fourth, one can derive a multiplicity of meanings from any symbol or language or text—and this applies to resources as well. Resources differently interpreted may empower unforeseen actors and teach different rules of action. For example, a human resource like emotional commitment to Islam may be interpreted as a reason to pursue justice for women. As a result, an interpretation of Islam legitimizes the pursuit of such justice while reinforcing that person’s version of the structure of Islam, guided by kinship ties, class, and so on. That legitimization empowers the actor to pursue change, even as she reinforces the structures that guide her action. This

ability to “transpose and extend schemas to new contexts” is inherent in agency.²⁴ Fifth, and finally, Sewell contends that structures overlap and intersect.²⁵ An elaboration of each axiom will assist the reader in understanding the complexity of the relationship between agency and structure.

Axiom One: The Multiplicity of Structures

Though structures can be homologous, “it is never true that all of them are homologous” as Bourdieu proposes.²⁶ First, structures differ between institutional spheres “so that kinship structures will have different logics and dynamics than those possessed by religious structures, productive structures, aesthetic structures, educational structures, and so on.”²⁷ Second, important differences exist within spheres: “For example, the structures that shape and constrain religion in Christian societies include authoritarian, prophetic, ritual, and theoretical modes. These may sometimes operate in harmony, but they can also lead to sharply conflicting claims and empowerments.”²⁸

Axiom Two: The Transposability of Schemas

The key to Sewell’s understanding of the transposability of schemas is that an actor can apply a schema in *new* contexts, not just in “similarly shaped problems.” According to Bourdieu, “To say that schemas are transposable, in other words, is to say that they can be applied to a wide and not fully predictable range of cases outside the context in which they are initially learned.”²⁹ Sewell notes that “the real test of knowing a rule is to be able to apply it successfully in *unfamiliar* cases. Knowledge of a rule or a schema by definition means the ability to transpose or extend it—that is, to apply it creatively” (emphasis in original).³⁰

Axiom Three: The Unpredictability of Resource Accumulation

The unpredictability of resource accumulation refers to the idea that power accumulation due to activities guided by social structures is not entirely predictable.³¹ Further, “if the reproduction of schemas depends on their continuing validation by resources, this implies that schemas will in fact be differentially validated when they are put into action and therefore will potentially be subject to modification.”³² For example, “a brilliantly successful cavalry attack on a new terrain may change the battle plans of subse-

quent campaigns or even theories of military tactics . . . [just as] a succession of crop failures may modify routines of planting or plowing.”³³

Axiom Four: The Polysemy (Multiplicity of Meanings) of Resources

Because one can interpret resources in various ways, they can “[empower] different actors and [teach] different schemas.”³⁴ That is, any resource may convey more meanings than any one person can generally understand.

Axiom Five: The Intersection of Structures

One can interpret resources in various ways because “structures or structural complexes . . . overlap.”³⁵ Different actors embedded in different structural complexes can claim an array of resources, just as a single actor embedded in different structural complexes can claim those same resources.³⁶ Schemas, however, “can be borrowed or appropriated from one structural complex and applied to another.”³⁷ For example, one could borrow the rules particular to Christianity and apply them to government. Sewell’s axioms, especially his third and fourth, offer a window into the interplay between agency and structure observed among the Muslim women who are the focus of this study.

Methodology

Here, an interpretive method identifies cases in which Muslim women utilize Islamic textual knowledge to legitimize efforts to obtain more equal treatment. The study uses biographies, observations, and interviews to identify the strongest incidents of this use of textual knowledge to improve the quality of life for women. Examples occur in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Somalia, Malaysia, and elsewhere. In the 1990s and 2000s, sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers observed and interviewed such women. The present study addresses cases in Malaysia and Egypt.

Methods of empowerment used by SIS in Malaysia offer an illustrative comparison to the kinds of empowerment found in Egypt. Although many women’s organizations exist in Malaysia, SIS remains one of the most well known and respected both inside and outside the country. Additionally, its agenda is decidedly framed within the context of Islamic texts. Further, SIS is prolific, publishing scholarly and newspaper articles, books, and book-

lets—many in English. All the resources available to this study illustrate SIS's method of reinterpreting Islamic texts for the purpose of creating more equality for Muslim women in Malaysia.

Egypt, the second case study, provides interesting contrasts in reinterpretation between some Muslim women activists in Egypt (*hurriyat al-mar'a*) and the members of SIS. Moreover, an abundance of literature is available in English. The Egyptian portion of this research draws from interviews administered by Saba Mahmood, Elizabeth Fernea, Azza Karam, and Beth Baron.³⁸ Mahmood and Sherine Hafez seek to explain some aspect of the "piety movement." Karam establishes a typology of Islam's feminists. Baron and Fernea's approaches largely focus on feminist histories. These sociologists, anthropologists, and historians identify patterns by applying in-depth anthropological techniques that address the daily lives of devout Muslim women, usually in Cairo. Their attention to detail, reflections, and analytic discourse provide an intimate understanding of these women within certain contexts. This study limits itself to interviews or observations by the above authors because they represent the best in-depth field research. Those who conducted interviews did so during the 1990s, among different women in roughly the same class of Cairene women.

The incidences in which some Muslim women pursue more equality by way of an Islamic framework are not isolated and unusual. That is, even though examples of their using Islamic texts to legitimize actions are not usually the object of scholarly research, they are not difficult to locate within the types of resources under scrutiny here. This analysis is certainly not the first to notice how women are embracing the Qur'an. Zahra Kamalkhani notes how an "increasing number of women [are] entering into Islamic orthodoxy and intellectualism."³⁹ Though Kamalkhani refers to Iranian women, her statement reflects a broader movement combining Quranic knowledge and a desire to obtain more equality for Muslim women. Neither is this study the first to comment on how devout Muslim women are embracing the Qur'an, earning social respect and legitimacy, and then using that legitimacy to get what they want. Mahmood provides much insight in this regard.⁴⁰

The subjects interviewed and observed in the research mentioned above share certain characteristics: they are devout, Muslim, and female. They have found opportunities either to learn from or teach about Islamic

texts. This process has legitimized their efforts to seek more equal treatment for themselves and/or others. Social legitimacy empowers their efforts. Yet, few researchers attempt to identify and then explain ways in which some Muslim women learn how to use Islamic education to give their activities legitimacy. Further, no researchers have explored the idea that the many structures which constitute Sunni Islam enable some Muslim women to legitimize their reinterpretations of social space.

Some Muslim women consciously use Islamic textual knowledge to push the limits of acceptable social and political behavior. Others *unconsciously* push those limits. This study does not delineate between the two—to do so would require original field research involving Muslim women, which is lacking here. However, many competent scholars have conducted field work in various locations on devout Muslim women who are gaining access to Islamic education. This study co-opts their works for its purposes.

Cases: Context of Comparison

This analysis uses two case studies—Malaysia and Egypt—to meaningfully compare the ways in which Muslim women use Islamic textual knowledge to empower themselves.⁴¹ Both countries, former British colonies, house a majority Sunni Muslim population. Moreover, both have governments that desire to appear modern so as to appeal to foreign investment and thereby further their economic development, and both governments struggle to give secular court rulings legitimacy over Sharia (Islamic law) rulings.

Malaysia is just over 50 percent Muslim whereas Egypt is over 90 percent.⁴² Malaysia's population is divided amongst three major ethnicities and religions: Malay (Islam), Indian (Hindu), and Chinese (Buddhist). Malays, deemed Muslim upon birth, adhere to a set of Sharia laws that tend to override any secular court rulings. Indians and Chinese may choose which court they wish to utilize. Malays also receive lawful privileges that Indian and Chinese citizens do not. For example, "the constitution states that the Prime Minister and the chief ministers of the individual states [have] to be Malay."⁴³

Malaysia

SIS is one of three organizations that constitute the core of what is now referred to as “the new women’s movement” in contemporary Malaysia.⁴⁴ It consists of a group of 10 highly educated women active in other women’s organizations during the 1980s when the state and women’s organizations in Malaysia debated the Domestic Violence Act, which sought to be multiethnic by covering all women in the country. This caught the attention of a series of Muslim groups that protested the act on two fronts, both related to the Qur’an. First, the Islamic groups argued that “men have a right to beat their wives” and second, that “domestic violence was a family matter” and thus should be treated with Sharia law under state jurisdiction “rather than be treated as a criminal matter under federal jurisdiction.”⁴⁵

SIS’s strategy involves (1) pointing to the many ways in which male interpretation of the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) (Hadiths) and the Sunnah oppress women, (2) deconstructing that interpretation, and (3) countering it with a reinterpretation of certain verses that is more historically grounded and representative of the overall spirit of the Qur’an.⁴⁶ SIS seeks to provide women with equal rights within an Islamic framework.

In order to disseminate the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction of certain Islamic tenets to the public, SIS hosts several workshops, study sessions, conferences, and law clinics each year (many of them free), attended by hundreds of Malay Muslims. Additionally, members of the organization are prolific, publishing thematic, easy-to-read short works in English and Bahasa Malaysia on subjects such as family law, polygamy, women’s reproductive rights, and guardianship law, which they distribute at events. In more concrete terms, SIS makes a difference in people’s lives by fighting for or against certain laws.

In contrast to the exegetical method of isolating verses to interpret in order to suit a certain male-centric agenda, SIS has carefully analyzed and documented its reinterpretation of the Qur’an in order “to extract the spirit of the message” as the group pursues a more female-friendly agenda.⁴⁷ “For the Sisters, the only authentic source is the text of the Qur’an, while the authority of the Hadith is of uncertain, and sometimes contradictory status, due to the historical circumstance in which it was constructed.”⁴⁸

Through training, education, and publications, the members of SIS show how “*ijtihad* [Quranic interpretation] must be exercised in concert and through democratic engagement with the *ummah* [Islamic community]” if Islam is to be relevant to Malayan lives today.⁴⁹ These Muslim women activists have developed a particular type of agency—one in which they “deconstruct discriminatory discourses and practices that are legitimized by certain interpretations of religious texts.”⁵⁰ Essentially, they emphasize the role of human agency in interpretation, which creates room for reinterpretation.

The director of SIS, Zainah Anwar, comments that the problems in Malaysia related to women’s rights are largely due to the dominance of male interpretations of the Qur’an.⁵¹ She explains that people read the Qur’an and as an understanding of that reading forms into language, “the process of human agency, of human understanding and human intervention has come in and interacted with the revealed word.”⁵² That is, when rules are codified and fatwas delivered, much room still exists for reinterpretation because they are based on human understanding of God’s word and reflect human tendencies and norms of a certain time. As time changes, those manifestations of human interpretation must also change.⁵³ Thus, agency and (re)interpretation are inevitable. As norms, tendencies, and times change, so must interpretation.

Egypt

The Egyptian government has banned religiously oriented organizations, silenced secular feminist discourse, and co-opted official Muslim-oriented feminism. By doing so, the secular state has effectively quieted the official line but actually participated in promoting the Islamist agenda. John Esposito describes Muslims today as “a newly emerging alternative elite, modern educated, but more formally Islamically oriented than their mothers and grandmothers.”⁵⁴ Since the 1970s and its global resurgence of Islam, Muslim women in Egypt are likely aware that their embrace of Islam is perhaps more pronounced than that of their mothers and grandparents. Azza Karam notes that “the state has silenced the discourse of secular feminism, whilst furthering its own ‘Muslim’ discourse” by establishing state-supported Islamic feminism and dismantling secular feminist groups.⁵⁵ The government-supported women’s nongovernmental organiza-

tions (NGO) do not dare speak in opposition to regime rhetoric or activities, concentrating entirely on charitable work for Muslim women.⁵⁶ Women activists in Egypt participate in NGO women's associations, female branches of political parties, state-sponsored women's organizations, and groups formed around issues involving women.⁵⁷ However, no unified Muslim women's union exists that is not a branch of the government. The lack of an organization comparable to SIS has called for creativity in order to make a meaningful comparison between Egypt and Malaysia. Consequently, this study sought evidence of Muslim women acting on Islamic education for the purpose of obtaining better treatment, outside an organizational setting in Egypt.

Evoking Change: Malaysia

This section demonstrates how SIS has redefined boundaries within Islam by questioning the authenticity of some Hadiths and by reinterpreting Quranic passages. It also discusses how SIS educates the public about the proper treatment of women, according to SIS's interpretation of Islam, in question-and-answer form. Within the following evidence, Sewell's theory about the relationship between structure and agency helps to explain how change comes from within an Islamic framework.

Hadith Authenticity in Question

SIS questions the authenticity of some Hadiths in order to dispute their interpretation.⁵⁸ A history of questioning the authenticity of Hadiths within Islam creates a structural opening within which to further debate their validity, keeping the rights of women in mind. In so doing, SIS acts on the premise that a reinterpretation of Hadiths will redefine the ways in which women see their roles in society. That is, SIS attempts to redefine those roles by using reason to tackle interpretations of Hadiths. This process reflects the change that Sewell talks about. Reinterpretation entails redefining meanings while reinforcing the many structures that constitute Sunni Islam for SIS members (axioms one and four). Certain Hadiths are interpreted differently by SIS, resulting in a legitimized, woman-centered perspective of Islamic texts and evoking Sewell's fourth axiom of how differently interpreted resources may empower unforeseen actors and teach

different rules of action. SIS's intentions to legitimately raise the status of women from within Islamic texts represents an exercise in such reinterpretation—the teaching of different rules of action in particular. The organization has laid the foundation on which to criticize the degradation of women in some Hadiths, describing the prevalence of forgery and explaining how it occurred, the details of which are not essential to this study. SIS solidifies its right to question Hadiths by pointing to a long tradition of men who have done the same:

All the Islamic authorities agree that an enormous amount of forgery was committed in the Hadith literature. . . . The very existence of a copious literature on *marḍu'at* (forged traditions) remind [*sic*] us of this reality. . . . Moved by the desire to safeguard the Sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.) against falsification and error, the ulama have undertaken painstaking efforts to verify the authenticity of Hadith, and a separate discipline, called *usul al-hadith*, was developed. . . . Had there been an accurate documentation of Hadith, as there was of the Qur'an, there would have been little reason for the development of the discipline of *usul al-hadith*.⁵⁹

SIS explains how, despite the weakness of antiwoman Hadiths, they tend to prevail. The group then provides an example of conflicting Hadiths, the antiwoman version prevailing:

When there are conflicting Hadiths on a certain issue, it is usually the anti-women Hadith that is popularized. For instance, in Sunan Abu Dawud, it is reported that the Prophet (s.a.w.) appointed Umm Waraqah to be the imam to lead the prayers of her household, while the muezzin (the person who announced the call to prayers) was an elderly man. This Hadith is said to have a stronger *isnad* (chain of transmission) than another contradictory Hadith, reported in Sunan Ibn Majah, that a woman cannot be imam when there are men in the congregation. . . . However, it is the Hadith in Sunan Ibn Majah that is well-known to Muslims today.⁶⁰

Here SIS shows that more than one Hadith exists on the issue of whether women should be allowed to lead men in prayer. At least one Hadith, more authentic than the more popular Hadith, does allow a woman to do so in certain circumstances. However, the more well-known Hadith, which most individuals abide by, bans women from leading prayer when men are in the congregation—thus, it is the one that prevails. SIS then quotes a Hadith that conflicts with the Qur'an:

Another popular Hadith is the one reported by Abu Hurayrah and documented in Sahih Bukhari vol. 7, Hadith no. 114 that says: "From Abu Hurayrah: the Prophet (s.a.w.) said, 'Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not hurt (trouble) his neighbor. And I

advise you to take care of women, for they are created from a rib and the most crooked portion of the rib is its upper part.”

This claim is not supported by the Qur’an for God says: “O Mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women. Be careful for your duty toward Allah in Whom you claim (your rights) of one another, and toward the wombs (that bore you). Lo! Allah hath been a Watcher over you” [Surah an-Nisa’, 4:1].⁶¹

SIS suggests that perhaps the Hadith quoted above comes from Christianity because of the description of the way woman was formed from the rib of a man, as expressed in Genesis 2:21–23.⁶²

The following example further elucidates the process by which SIS negotiates reinterpretation of Islamic texts. Again, the organization begins with a question—in this case, one about the extent to which Islam enables the degradation of women:

[Part 2, Question 1:] I heard that if the Prophet (s.a.w.) could have his way, he would have asked wives to prostrate to their husbands and that if there is an ulcer excreting pus from a man’s feet to the top of his head, and his wife were to lick them, she would still not be able to fulfill his rights as a husband. Is it possible that Islam degrades women to this level?⁶³

In response, SIS first quotes the Hadith that evoked the above situation:

It is believed that these claims are derived from Hadiths such as: “No human may prostrate to another, and if it were permissible for a human to prostrate to another I would have ordered a wife to prostrate to her husband because of the enormity of his rights over her. By God, if there is an ulcer excreting pus from his feet to the top of his head and she licked it from him, she would not fulfill his rights.”

Or: “It is not lawful for anyone to prostrate to anyone. But if I would have ordered any person to prostrate to another, I would have commanded wives to prostrate to their husbands because of the enormity of the rights of husbands to their wives.”⁶⁴

SIS then references male scholars of Hadiths who had labeled the authenticity of these Hadiths “very weak” to “fairly good but strange.” No scholars cited by SIS consider the above Hadiths “sound” (i.e., authentic).

A multiplicity of structures is evident in the many principles that people enact regarding what it means to them to be Islamic. Just as “Christian societies include authoritarian, prophetic, ritual, and theoretical modes,” so do Islamic societies contain a multitude of competing structures.⁶⁵ Within Islam itself, SIS has pointed to the four competing schools of thought that influence interpretations of Islamic texts.⁶⁶ Instead of discred-

iting them, the organization identifies the ones that most respect women's rights; it does so by emphasizing the existence of the not-so-popular but more authentic interpretations of Islamic texts that support women's rights (axiom four—empowerment of unforeseen actors).

Therefore, although some men have used the tools of reinterpretation to oppress Muslim women, SIS uses the very same ones to gain ground for them (axiom four). The organization reinforces the sacred nature of Quranic interpretation and in so doing legitimizes its questioning of that interpretation. These efforts render a seemingly conflicting agenda compatible while enabling SIS to teach different rules of action (axiom four). That SIS has created space for female interpretations of Islamic texts educates women who might otherwise not question the version of Islam taught to them at the local mosque (axiom four). That questioning points to creativity and to agency. The process of questioning the authenticity of Hadiths reflects part of Sewell's fourth axiom—that meanings can be interpreted in different ways. Granted, some men hold up antiwoman Hadiths as the most authentic, but SIS refers to Islamic texts to justify the inauthentic nature of those same excerpts. In fact, almost all of the content of Islamic texts is subject to interpretation. This susceptibility to interpretation also serves as Islam's strength, keeping it adaptable.

Quranic Reinterpretation

SIS's ideas about how women should be treated intersect with how male interpretations of Islam reflect the treatment of women (axiom five). The group uses the Qur'an as well as the Sunnah and Hadiths to condemn polygamy when certain Quranic passages in particular have been interpreted as condoning polygamy (axiom four). SIS engages a system of understanding—the prevalent male-centered interpretation of Islamic texts on the subject of polygamy—and questions it, using agreed-upon tools (disputing the authenticity of a Hadith or Sunnah and reinterpreting the Qur'an) to oppose it. All the while, SIS looks to texts within Islam to make legitimate its conclusions about the role of polygamy in Islam.

Since the nineteenth century, several leading Islamic scholars including Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, the Grand Mufti of Egypt until his death in 1905, have pointed out that polygamy was reluctantly tolerated by Islam due to the pre-existing conditions at the time of revelation. . . . The guiding principles in the Qur'an against polygamy can be demonstrated by firstly, limiting the maximum number of wives to four, then by enjoining on the fair and just

treatment of multiple wives, and finally by declaring that fair and just treatment is impossible.⁶⁷

Here SIS takes the reader through the logic of this argument: the Qur'an reluctantly allowed polygamy, then limited the number of wives to four, insisted on equal treatment among them, and finally declared that equal treatment among multiple wives is impossible. Thus, polygamy should not be allowed, according to the Qur'an. This analysis reflects Sewell's fourth axiom, dealing with the varying interpretations of resources such as knowledge, which empower unforeseen actors and/or teach different rules of actions. Despite the implication of empowering unforeseen actors, the examples offered here illustrate the teaching of different rules of actions by means of different interpretations.

SIS further challenges the legitimacy of polygamy by explaining that the notion of its preventing certain social ills is questionable:

An argument that is sometimes put forward in support of polygamy is that it is intended to reduce social ills such as illicit affairs, prostitution and the birth of illegitimate children. However, the legality of polygamy has not actually put an end to these social ills among the Muslim community. In some cases, it might even have contributed to the problem of social ills among young people who have been brought up in unhappy and neglected polygamous households (pp. i-ii).

Without spending much time on this point, the authors refer to surahs within the Quran:⁶⁸

It is disheartening that many of those who advocate polygamy seem to ignore Qur'anic injunctions on polygamy in Surah An Nisa 4:3: "if you fear you cannot deal justly (with your wives), marry only one (wife)." The Qur'an is also the only holy scripture that contains the phrase "marry only one." A further injunction is to be found in Surah An Nisa 4:129 which goes on to add that "You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire." If the rights of Muslim women are upheld and advanced as contained in the spirit of the Qur'an, then the justice that it embodies will never be ignored (p. ii).

SIS immediately cites a second and then a third surah:

"If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three or four; But if you fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one. . . . That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice." Surah Al-Nisa 4:3. . . .

"You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire." Surah An Nisa 4:129 (p. 2).

SIS authors quote from an “authentic” Hadith that relates a story about how the Prophet (s.a.w.) felt about polygamy:

Many forget the authentic hadith (as reported in Sunan Ibn Majah) which reported that the Prophet (s.a.w.), when asked if he would permit Saidina Ali to marry another woman, said that he would not, “unless and until Ali Ibn Abi Talib divorces my daughter, for surely she is part of me and what troubles and agitates her, troubles and agitates me too; and what harm befalls her befalls me too” (p. 5).

SIS reinterprets excerpts from the Qur’an and Hadith in order to justify an antipolygamy stance, taking the tools ordinarily reserved for supporting polygamy within Islam and using them to negate polygamy (axiom four). The organization questions the Quranic basis for polygamy by highlighting passages in Islamic texts not commonly referred to, thus creatively pursuing a new dimension for Islam—one that opposes polygamy. Even more clearly, during this process, SIS attempts to legitimately manipulate long-supported guidelines within Islam about how women are treated in a certain context. Thus, the actions of SIS are guided by Muslim feminism as well as by its devotion to Islam, reflecting Sewell’s first axiom. SIS has interpreted the principles of Islam differently than expected, reflecting axiom three. Meanwhile the group also teaches new rules of action with regard to how people conceive of polygamy because it uses knowledge (a resource) of Islamic texts and interprets those texts differently (axiom four). By these means, SIS is attempting to transform Islam creatively and organically, from within itself.

Public Education: Changing Minds

Every time SIS approaches a question with the intention of reinterpretation and logically answers that question using Islamic sources, the organization cannot know what kind of response it will instigate. This points to axiom three, which contends that it is difficult to know what types of empowerment might come out of applying learned rules to a new setting (or new rules to a familiar setting). SIS’s arguments and actions lead others, such as those who frequent its meetings and workshops, to empowerment by informing them of their rights under the law. Through its many efforts to educate the public about the ways in which Islam can empower women, SIS launches a sort of intellectual cavalry attack on Malaysian Muslims, arming them with new interpretations of Islamic texts.

Zainah Anwar, executive director and a founding member of SIS, remarks that

Sisters in Islam began as a research and advocacy group with a focus on interventions in the law- and policy-making process. We write memoranda to the government on law and policy reform, as well as open letters in the press on current issues. Our aim is to generate informed public debate on these issues and to build a constituency that will support a more enlightened interpretation of Islam on specific matters in contention.⁶⁹

SIS's influence lies largely in its determination to make issues public. It believes that the "Qur'an supports the universal values of equality, justice and a life of dignity for women" and that the people have a right to debate these issues in the public domain.⁷⁰ In this way, interpretation no longer lies in the hands of male Islamic scholars alone but also in the hands of people who are encouraged to engage Islamic texts themselves. SIS helps the public do this by breaking down issues and explaining why and where certain beliefs about the treatment of women in particular come from and where room for reinterpretation resides (see the example above). Quranic exegesis is not the only way in which SIS educates, though. Anwar also explains the role that public education plays in SIS's agenda:

Another important strategy is public education to raise awareness and build an essential core group of activists and opinion-makers. We organize a monthly study session on topical issues in Islam, conduct a monthly training workshop on women's rights in Islam, offer an annual public lecture series by prominent progressive Islamic scholars, and mount a biennial regional workshop on key aspects of Islam and women's rights.⁷¹

The training workshops include classes such as Gender and Sharia (beginning) and Gender, Human Rights, and Sharia (advanced), which have been taught since 2000. Furthermore, by launching Telenisa in 2003, SIS began offering free legal advice on Sharia laws and other issues that Muslim women face. Every year, through Telenisa alone, SIS deals with more than 600 cases ranging from inheritance to violence against women.⁷²

This effort has prompted predictable responses. Some people try to discredit SIS members' qualifications for interpreting Islamic texts because they have not been formally educated in religious schools. Others "equate our questioning and challenging of their obscurantist views and interpretations of the Qur'an with questioning the word of God."⁷³ Questioning the word of God is considered anti-Islamic. SIS members are told to respect ancient interpretations of Islamic texts as reliable and to ignore a long tradition of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning).⁷⁴ Also, some individuals contend

that offering differing interpretations of Islamic texts causes confusion among the Muslim public, which leads to disunity. Only *ulama*, Muslim scholars, have the right to interpret. In spite of this backlash, SIS continues to make issues public as often as possible and to appeal to the government to create more equality for women.

Sometimes the results of SIS's efforts are not so predictable. For example, in January 2006, it successfully repealed amendments to Malaysia's family law that would have made it easier for men to pursue polygamy and divorce.⁷⁵ By making issues public and by simultaneously educating the public, SIS uses its actions and publications to create both predictable and unpredictable consequences, some of which empower Muslim women, thus allowing for unpredictable resource accumulation (axiom three). It is difficult to know just how Malaysians interpret what they learn during workshops and how they implement their interpretations at home, if they choose to implement them at all. SIS's Islamic education may spur unpredictable resource accumulation.

The Deconstruction of Beatings

Women's treatment (such as beatings) within their family hierarchies influences SIS's strategies for reinterpretation of Islamic texts (axiom one). For example, SIS approaches problems such as domestic violence by publishing comments or questions that it receives and following up with answers. Though simply organized, this question-and-answer method deals with complex issues and educates average Muslim women, creating opportunities for them to legitimately challenge the behavior of their husbands with the backing of Islamic texts.

Here, SIS responds to a concern about whether Islam allows wife beating:

6. My husband beats me, and he tells me in Islam I cannot tell anyone what happens between a husband and his wife. Besides, he says a husband can "discipline" his wife if she disobeys his wishes because she has committed *nusyuz*.

Actually, it is very clear from many authentic Traditions that the Prophet (s.a.w.) strongly disapproved of the idea of beating one's wife. For instance, on more than one occasion, it is reported that he said:

"Could anyone of you beat his wife as if she is a slave, and then lie with her in the evening?"
(Bukhari and Muslim).

“Never beat God’s handmaidens.” (Abu Dawud, Ibn Majah Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Hibban and Hakim, on the authority of Iyas ibn ‘Abd Allah; Ibn Hibban, on the authority of ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbas; and Bayhaqi, on the authority of Umm Kalthum).⁷⁶

Having established the premise that the Prophet (s.a.w.) disapproves of wife beating, SIS explains how the misunderstanding arose:

The problem of violence or abuse does not come from the Traditions, but from the term “*idribubunna*” (in Surah an-Nias’ 4:34) which is usually translated as “beat them with a single strike.” The root of this word is “daraba.” If one were to consult an Arabic dictionary, one would find one of the longest lists of meanings in the whole Arabic dictionary ascribed to this word! In the Qur’an, depending on the context, “daraba” can mean “to travel,” “to strike,” “to set up,” “to give (examples),” “to take away,” “to ignore,” “to condemn,” “to cover,” or “to explain.” When encountering a word with multiple meanings, it is important to use common sense to identify the proper meaning according to the context and form within which it is being used.

Upon explaining the philological source of the problem, SIS puts the problem in historical context:

In the pre-Islamic period known as the Age of Ignorance (*Jabiliyah*), there were gross practices of physical and emotional abuse of females. Even if the usual translation of “daraba” as “a single strike” is to be accepted, seen within this context, the single strike would be a restriction on the pre-existing practice and not a recommendation. Later, as Muslim society in Madinah developed towards an ideal state, the final verse in the Qur’an on male-female relationship (Surah at Tawbah 9:71) regards women and men as being each other’s protecting friends and guardians (*awliyya*) which emphasizes the cooperation between the two in living together as partners.

Notice how SIS breaks apart each section of comment six, identifying the root of each issue and addressing it in its present context:

As for *nusyuz*, the Qur’anic discussion of *nusyuz* is used for both women (Surah an-Nisa’ 4:34) and men (4:128). Thus, *nusyuz* cannot actually mean a woman’s disobedience to her husband, as is often assumed.

As for not telling anyone about what happens between a husband and a wife, a distinction has to be made as to the context. It is certainly improper for either a wife or a husband to tell others about their spouse’s personal failings by way of gossip and backbiting. However, when actual harm is involved, it is necessary and proper to file a complaint in order to get legal recourse.

A summation of findings follows. Notice how, whenever possible, SIS refers to Imams (religious scholars) to validate its findings:

Neither the Qur'an nor the Traditions justify a husband beating his wife for merely disobeying his personal wishes. In fact, all the early Muslim authorities stress that the "beating"—if resorted to at all—should be only if the wife is guilty of gross immoral conduct, and should not cause pain but be more or less merely symbolic, such as with a toothbrush or a handkerchief, while some great Muslim scholars, e.g., Imam Shafi'i are of the opinion that it is barely permissible, and should be avoided.

Finally, SIS's use of the word *misogyny* reminds the reader of the authors' Muslim feminist leaning:

The fact that authentic and strong Traditions of the Prophet (s.a.w.) expressing his disapproval of the practice of wife-beating are not being popularized is another instance of the attitude of misogyny—undisputed Traditions in favour of women are frequently neglected, while Traditions of dubious authenticity discriminating against women are frequently highlighted.

For SIS, reinterpretation of Islamic texts is a tool of power used to educate and thus empower other women in Malaysia. Again, this clearly denotes Sewell's fourth axiom. SIS interprets Islamic texts differently, thus potentially empowering unforeseen actors (those who might read the booklet containing such interpretations) and teaching different rules of action. The format makes the information accessible. Regular references to male scholars and the Qur'an legitimize SIS's findings. Members of SIS use knowledge to empower themselves and others. Having found an opening for creative reinterpretation, the organization continues to tap it, hoping that such efforts will change the way women and men see their roles in relation to each other within Islam.

Evoking Change: Egypt

This section examines the efforts of four Egyptian women on behalf of the rights of Muslim females. First, Labiba Ahmad, among the first *hurriyat al-mar'a*, extended the role of mother to that of mother of a nation. Second, Abir took the knowledge she accumulated from Quranic studies and manipulated her husband's behavior. Third, Hajja Faiza, a Quranic teacher, offered her students a choice where there was thought to be none. Finally, Heba Ra'uf, among the most modern of the *hurriyat al-mar'a*, attempted to expand the reach of Muslim women in Egypt by looking within Islam for legitimization. As in the Malaysia cases, all four women evoked change (more equal treatment for women) from within the framework of Islam and in so doing illustrated some of Sewell's axioms.

Labiba Ahmad: Nationalizing Motherhood

Labiba Ahmad (1870s–1950), an early example of *hurriyat al-mar'a*, was among the first of such women to empower females from within Islam. Her agenda fused a call to Islam with a notion of Egyptian nationalism. Beth Baron refers to Ahmad as a bridge between generations, “linking the *Salafis* (Islamic reformers who looked to the first generation of Muslims as a model) and later Islamic radicals” (italics in original).⁷⁷ In founding the Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening (*Jam’iyyat Nahdat al-Sayyidat al-Misriyyat*) and a journal, the *Women’s Awakening* (*al-Nahda al-Nisaa’iyya*) (1921–39), Ahmad sought to create a cultural ideal in a “new Islamic woman” to legitimately counter that of the “new (secular) woman.”⁷⁸

Ahmad’s framework was that of Islam. She made the role of mother central to women’s lives, infusing nationalist calls to action in her agenda, due to the presence of the British at the time. Ahmad commended the “influence of the virtuous mother in shaping the nation,” and asked, “what is the nation if not a collection of families?”⁷⁹ So it begins to become clear how Sewell’s axioms relate to her. She applied the notion of female family member to that of mother of the nation, taking one structure and transferring its principles to another. The latter illustrates Sewell’s second axiom on the multiplicity of structures and on learned rules being generalizable to a new setting.

Ahmad carefully distinguished her society from that of liberal feminist Huda Sha’rawi, the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), whose mission was “to reform Islamic family law rather than spread the word about its merits and strengthen Egyptians’ religious identity.”⁸⁰ Such reform points to a liberal framework rather than a religious one. Thus, Ahmad spoke highly of the EFU’s charity work but distanced herself from the fundamental premise from which the members worked because religious morality was not at the center of the union’s program.⁸¹

Ahmad and the EFU used the journal *Women’s Awakening* as their primary tool to disseminate their moralist agenda in Egyptian society and beyond. In the journal, she demonized anti-Islamic social practices or projects such as alcohol consumption, mixed bathing at beaches, and the building of a sports complex for females: “Isn’t the woman capable of exercising while she is in her home . . . for in prayer and its movements are the greatest exercise.”⁸² She believed in extending Quranic education to all but did not

think that boys and girls should be taught the same curriculum “because she saw them as destined for different roles in life.”⁸³ Ahmad asked, “When will the people understand that the duty of a girl is to be a mother?”⁸⁴ Like the practice of SIS, she used Islamic education to evoke unpredictable and predictable resource accumulation among Egyptian Muslims (axiom three). Labiba Ahmad is likely considered the first of the “modern” *hurriyat al-mar’a*, largely because of her methods of address, regular travel, and influence. Beginning in 1933, Ahmad gave weekly addresses on Royal Egyptian Radio. The readers of her journal, who already loved her, often listened to her talks on social and religious themes consistent with the content of her journal. During this time, Ahmad developed close ties with Hasan al-Banna, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, since they shared a vision of Islamic revival in Egypt.⁸⁵ Throughout the 1920s and 30s, she traveled to Mecca multiple times, building a network of relations—the Saudi king, sheikhs, government officials, and other pilgrims among them: “She mingled with Muslims from other countries and developed a wide circle of correspondents in the Arab world . . . and beyond.”⁸⁶

Ahmad used her access to the public through her public profile and writings to put mothers on pedestals as virtuous centerpieces of a successful nation. By promoting the spread of Quranic education, she encouraged women to learn about their rights within Islam and to know that their most important role resided in motherhood.⁸⁷ Ahmad created space in society for herself by generalizing the role of mother of a household to that of the nation. Whether she succeeded in helping others legitimately create public space for themselves remains uncertain. Clearly, though, she did reinterpret the role of women within the Qur’an, thus legitimizing her own access to a public arena. Like SIS, Ahmad reinforced some of Islam’s structures while reformulating some aspect of them, thereby giving her more freedom of movement and influence, and, through her actions, implying that other women had a right to those freedoms. She taught different rules of action by amplifying the role of motherhood, thus speaking to Sewell’s fourth axiom.

Labiba Ahmad transposed rules about the physical, emotional, and mental boundaries of being a good Muslim woman. When Muslim women were expected to stay home and be good wives and mothers, she made their role that of caretaker and heart of the nation, encouraging them to take on

a public duty that not only remained within the framework of Islam but reinforced it.

Abir: Wife and Mother

Some Egyptian women use their knowledge of Islamic texts to validate their questioning of the parameters of their roles as wives and mothers. These *hurriyat al-mar'a* experience and take advantage of conflicting claims about the role of women in an Islamic society. By attending Quranic classes, they reinforce the religious structures. By learning about flexibility within the Qur'an regarding the proper role of women, they find an opening. By learning that alternative and better treatment for women is in line with Quranic teachings, they simultaneously reinforce and question. By learning about how women were treated in the time of Mohammad and the debate surrounding their treatment, for example, some women return home with renewed energy and attempt to change their space. As some women engage this process, they tap into Sewell's first axiom as their ideas about how a woman should be treated and their religious beliefs overlap and sometimes conflict. They also access his fourth axiom as they reinterpret the information they acquire at Quranic lessons and apply that interpretation at home. Abir is such a woman.

Insisting on attending Quranic classes, Abir organized her days to ensure that she could fulfill all her duties at home, leaving her husband no excuses about why she should not attend.⁸⁸ Based on what she learned in the classes, by using everyday methods of persistence and by serving as a good role model herself, she persuaded her husband, Jamal, to become more pious. As explained below, Abir's methods of resistance created space for herself and empowered her within her home. These methods of empowerment are particular to her role as an Islamic-educated mother and wife.

Abir's methods of empowerment are interesting because she empowered herself within her home by making her husband more pious. By forcing her husband toward a more pious lifestyle, she gained his respect. Her story offers an example of a Muslim woman who enhances her position at home by embracing Quranic education.

Abir enrolled in a two-year program to train to become a "*da'iya*" or teacher of religious lessons, having attended local lessons for some time. Jamal, a Muslim who seldom practiced his faith, was embarrassed by his

wife's embracement of Islam and criticized her at every turn, calling her "backward." He threatened to take another wife and would not engage in practicing Islam at home. Abir remained resolute. She knew that her husband, like many men in Egyptian society, feared accusations of being anti-Islamic.⁸⁹ Still, Abir had to work diligently to bring her husband around. She took special care in her duties concerning the home and her son so that Jamal would not have good reason to stop her from pursuing her teaching license. Eventually, she used several tactics to wear her husband down. She embarrassed him publicly for not performing prayers. On Fridays at home, she played recorded sermons depicting hell, torture, and reckoning with God at full volume. Though Jamal was never happy about Abir's attending school, he slowly began to pray more regularly and gave up drinking alcohol and watching X-rated films in their home.

Abir's successful efforts to use Quranic knowledge to create more space for herself is an example of how a series of overlapping structures can be reinforced and changed as actors reinterpret and gain ground. What is striking about this story is that Abir sought better treatment and a better behaved husband by reminding him of his Islamic duties. Backed by Quranic legitimization, she used her Quranic knowledge of her role of wife and mother to persuade her husband to lead a more religious life and in so doing, created a happier home for herself. She gained renewed respect in her role as mother and wife from her husband, reflected by his conformity to her pressure. This unpredictable outcome resulted from implementation of her interpretation of new knowledge (a resource) she acquired at Quranic school, in keeping with Sewell's fourth axiom. Further, the ways in which people might manipulate structures and reestablish interpretations are not necessarily predictable—and neither are the outcomes or the ways in which power is shared or usurped.

Hajja Faiza: Islamic Teacher

When some Egyptian women engage in Quranic education, they are unsure of the consequences. Will their husbands forbid them to attend meetings or classes? Will their children protest? Then, when a woman returns home with new knowledge to wield at her husband, will her family acknowledge her devotion to Islam, or will her husband beat her or force her to divorce? Will her new devotion to Quranic teachings make her family

closer to or more distant from her? In any situation, such a woman might guess at the consequences, but she will not really know the extent to which she has transformed her arena until she acts upon the information she has obtained. Some *hurriyat al-mar'a* produce naturally unpredictable consequences from educating themselves or others about Islamic texts. This process of engaging in Quranic education and these unpredictable consequences evince Sewell's third axiom.

A popular, educated teacher of the Qur'an, Hajja Faiza holds weekly meetings for women who want to learn about its teachings. She uses her knowledge of scholarly sources to provide women who attend her meetings with informed choices.⁹⁰ Faiza has no equal-rights agenda; rather, she has an Islamic agenda. She is spreading Islam, but in so doing she has made herself known for offering choices to the women in her audience—choices that may empower them at home.

In the majority-Sunni tradition, women are prohibited from calling believers to prayer or delivering Friday sermons. Neither can they lead groups to prayer in which both men and women are present.⁹¹ All four schools of thought—Shafi'i, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Maliki—recommend that men pray together in a mosque rather than at home; the schools differ when it comes to women. Only Hanbali jurists suggest that women collectively pray in a mosque.⁹² If women happen to pray collectively at home, “the Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Hanafi schools recommend that a woman lead the prayers.”⁹³

Faiza has led congregations of prayer and reflection even when a male Imam is present, subjecting herself to public criticism by a famous male *da'iyah*, Shaikh Karam, who also preaches at Umar mosque. He has accused her of *bid'a*, “a term in Islamic doctrine that refers to unwarranted innovations, beliefs, or practices for which there was no precedent at the time of the Prophet (s.a.w.), and which are therefore best avoided.”⁹⁴

At one of her lessons, a member of her audience inquired as to whether Faiza's “practice of leading women in prayer when a male imam was present” is an act of *bid'a*.⁹⁵ She responded that the author of the question must have heard this criticism from Shaikh Karam and refuted it thus: “[That opinion] is based on the Maliki school. The other three schools [Shafi'i, Hanafi, and Hanbali] say that it is permissible for a woman to lead other women in prayers, and is in fact better [*afdal*]. There are three opinions on

this matter [from among the four schools] that are in agreement, and the fourth is different.”⁹⁶ She then explained that she follows the majority opinion while Shaikh Karam follows the minority opinion, but that *both* are within their rights because “it is our right [*min haqqina*] to select from any of the opinions available in the four schools, even if the opinion happens to be noncanonical or anomalous [*shadhdh*].”⁹⁷

Such questions and answers demonstrate one way that Faiza approaches her students. She neither shows disrespect toward the male *da'iyah* nor acquiesces to his opinion. Instead she gives her students a choice that they must make of their own free will. The method is particularly poignant insofar as legitimizing different interpretations of the Qur'an makes the structures that overlap with it porous and, thus, malleable. This porous nature then may result in unforeseen consequences, actors, and the teaching of different rules of action—Sewell's fourth axiom. The validity gained through this process empowers each student who makes choices and acts on them; thus, the student becomes the unforeseen actor who applies different rules of action to daily life.

In another example, when asked about female circumcision (a common practice in Egypt), Hajja Faiza reasoned that the Hadith that supposedly condones circumcision is “(weak), a classificatory term in hadith literature that refers to a Prophetic tradition of dubious authority.”⁹⁸ She concluded that female circumcision is not obligatory, recommended, or reflective of a custom of the Prophet (s.a.w.) or his followers; thus, practicing it is optional. She added that some believe that it is important to follow weak Hadiths for good measure and that some support circumcision because it is said to be good for women's psychological health. The choice is theirs, but she strongly recommended consulting a medical doctor if the decision is affirmative.⁹⁹ Again, Faiza created for her students choices that enable action which can both reinforce and/or undermine overlapping structures within Islam (axioms one and four). The choices owe their legitimacy to reinterpretation of the Islamic text. The fact that they also enable action, possibly of an unforeseen nature, points to axioms three and four.

Hajja Faiza left to her students the final decision of whether they should follow the Hadith. She empowered the audience with choice. Like SIS, Faiza's agency resides in offering a choice and opening a space that did not exist before. This knowledge of choice results in a variety of predictable

and unpredictable consequences related to how her students choose to act out their choices and how their families and communities will respond to those actions (axiom three).

Heba Ra'uf: Academic

Heba Ra'uf represents the younger generation of *hurriyat al-mar'a* in Egypt.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, in spite of being a *hurriyat al-mar'a*, she has managed to give credence to the concept of "women's issues." First, in her master's thesis, she showed how revered Islamic scholarship supported women who qualified for high public positions, leading her to conclude that women should be allowed to become judges or heads of state. As Karam points out, this stance is "extremely contentious," especially among the Muslim Brotherhood, but largely appeals to young, educated Islamist women.¹⁰¹ Ra'uf also believes that, ultimately, a Muslim society seeks a united and religiously governed national *umma*. At that time, an ideal role for women will come into effect: women will not venture outside the home.

Karam calls her position on women "innovative."¹⁰² Ra'uf clarified her position on women in an interview that appeared in the *Middle East Report* in 1994: "She argued that women's liberation in Muslim societies 'necessitates a revival of Islamic thought and a renewal within Islamic jurisprudence.'"¹⁰³ In the same article, she explained that she wishes to defend Islam from "stagnation and bias" rather than "reconstruct Islamic law."¹⁰⁴ Ra'uf reflected on the divisive nature of feminism in an interview with Karam: "Feminism aims only at women; has one ever heard of 'masculinism'? In order to address the whole issue of women's oppression, one must address the whole society."¹⁰⁵ She criticized association of the family with only private matters, contending that the way to women's liberation lies through the primacy of the family as an essential *political* unit for Muslims.¹⁰⁶ Here Ra'uf was channeling the Islamic teaching of Sayyid Qutb, who referred to the family as "the basis of society."¹⁰⁷ She might also have been building upon Labiba Ahmad's generalizability of the concept of "woman as mother" to "woman as caretaker of the nation."

In effect, Ra'uf's main contention in terms of centrality of the family is that the family unit is the one institution the state cannot ban. Thus, the family protects its members against state oppression. Further, because the Muslim state is in a state of jihad (holy war), women should serve in the

military and participate actively in the management of their country (*umma*).¹⁰⁸ According to Ra'uf, the only roles that women would be allowed to pursue are those which further the Muslim state under the veil of jihad.¹⁰⁹

She mentioned that raising a family is not an obstacle for women but a political act, after which they are free to “perform other public and equally important roles.”¹¹⁰ Karam contends that Ra'uf's efforts to collapse the private and public together give women space to do something other than raise a family, thus serving “to protect and enhance women's socio-political roles and rights.”¹¹¹ She concludes that Ra'uf fashioned a way to deconstruct and reconstruct Muslim women's roles, doing so by combining the public and private and by deglorifying motherhood as well as politicizing it.¹¹² In other words, Ra'uf's legitimate reinterpretation of the role of women from within an Islamic framework redefined that role as political and public (at least temporarily), while reinforcing Islam itself. This reinterpretation offers yet another, though more sophisticated, example of how some Egyptian Muslim women have validated and redefined new space within the context of Islam. Ra'uf's creativity intersects the structures of Islam as well as the male interpretation of Islamic texts and the Egyptian patriarchy (axiom one). Her method of collapsing the public and the private points to Sewell's second axiom, in which learned actions that guide rules are generalizable to new situations. She remains within an Islamic framework but reinterprets the role of women as political units within Islam and does so in scholarly writings. That reinterpretation reflects Sewell's fourth axiom: resources such as knowledge can empower unforeseen actors and teach different rules of action.

Conclusion

The articulation, manipulation, reinforcement, and undermining of any given structure may happen at any time naturally. Each structure overlaps with others and relies on agents to reify itself. How and why and within what context agents act constantly reshape the structures with which they engage. In the evidence presented above, some Muslim women are working to transform Islam from within itself. Consequently, they are also able to make legitimate the changes they have attempted, thus empowering their

actions and perhaps causing unintended as well as predictable consequences in their readership or classrooms.

Sewell's axioms provide a compelling means of talking about the interaction of structure and agency in terms of Muslim women in Egypt and Malaysia. In the latter country, the Sisters in Islam organization reinterprets Islamic texts in order to question the role of Muslim women in Malaysian society. SIS legitimizes its arguments and actions by questioning within an Islamic framework, thereby justifying better treatment for women by building upon a history of debating the meanings contained within the Qur'an, Sunnah, and Hadiths. In Egypt, Islamic teachers like Hajja Faiza offer a choice of reinterpretation to women like Abir. Through textual reinterpretation, both have become agents of change by finding room to maneuver within the context of Islam's overlapping structures. For generations, Egyptian activists such as Labiba Ahmad and Heba Ra'uf have been transforming ways to think about the role of women among Egyptian Muslims. They give their actions validity by adhering to a strict Islamic framework.

In spite of this article's contribution to the area of Islam-oriented feminist studies, much work remains. Field research would likely clarify Sewell's theory of the interaction between structure and agency by providing more evidence, for example, that unintended consequences or actors do in fact produce change in some cases. It would be useful to know in how many instances change did occur from said unintended consequences or actors and how much change occurred.

Further, an in-depth analysis of male contributions to the area of Islamic/Muslim feminism would prove interesting and pertinent. Are some Muslim men empowered by the actions or writings of some Muslim feminists? How many Muslim men fight for something like gender equality within an Islamic framework? And do those men resemble Islamic/Muslim feminists or *hurriyat al-mar'a*?

Notes

1. "What is the difference between Sunnah and Hadith? As Sunnah means the mode of life, the Sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.) means the mode of life of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and Hadith means the narrations of the life of the Prophet (s.a.w.); the two terms came to be used almost interchangeably, in spite of the slight difference between them. . . . There have been however differences of opinion." Nik Noriani Nik Badlishah and Norhayati Kaprawi, *Hadith on Women in Marriage* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Sisters in Islam, 2004), 2.

2. William H. Sewell Jr. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (July 1992): 9.

3. This definition is adapted from a broader discussion on empowering women by Zoë Oxaal with Sally Baden, "Gender and Empowerment: Definitions, Approaches and Implications for Policy," revised (Brighton, UK: University of Sussex, October 1997), a briefing prepared for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), <http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/re40c.pdf>.

4. Julie McLeod, "Feminists Re-reading Bourdieu: Old Debates and New Questions about Gender Habitus and Gender Change," *Theory and Research in Education* 3, no. 1 (2005): 24.

5. Sewell, "Theory of Structure," 1–29.

6. Sherine Hafez, *The Terms of Empowerment: Islamic Women Activists in Egypt* 24, no. 4, Cairo Papers in Social Science (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 34.

7. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, "Women in Islam: The Mother of All Battles," in *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, ed. Suha Sabbagh (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2003), 147.

8. Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1998).

9. Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Women's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004); Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002); Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Riffat Hassan, "Rights of Women within Islamic Communities," in *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Religious Perspectives*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Johan D. van der Vyver (Cambridge, MA: Kluwer Law International, 1996), 361–68; and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2007).

10. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 206.

11. *Ibid.*, 220.

12. *Ibid.*, 219.

13. Cited in Sewell, "Theory of Structure," 4.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 2, 6.

18. *Ibid.*, 6.

19. *Ibid.*, 8.

20. *Ibid.*, 9.

21. *Ibid.*, 10.

22. *Ibid.*, 16–19.

23. *Ibid.*, 18.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 19.

26. *Ibid.*, 16.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

29. *Ibid.*, 17.

30. *Ibid.*, 18.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, 19.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*; and Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

39. Zahra Kamalkhani, "Reconstruction of Islamic Knowledge and Knowing: A Case of Islamic Practices among Women in Iran," in *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations*, ed. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1998), 178.

40. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 176–97.

41. Historical and contextual information about Malaysian society and culture is drawn from the following unless otherwise noted: Anna Spiegel, "Women's Organisations and Social Transformation in Malaysia: Between Social Work and Legal Reforms," in *Negotiating Development in Muslim Societies: Gendered Spaces and Translocal Connections*, ed. Gudrun Lachenmann and Petra Dannecker (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 67–92.

42. Chinese make up 34 percent of the population; about 10 percent are Indian.

43. Spiegel, "Women's Organisations and Social Transformation in Malaysia," 68. "From 1970 until 1990, a general programme of affirmative action, known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), guaranteed favourable quotas for Malays in many educational and occupational arenas, and special financial assistance in many sectors of the economy. This programme was essentially renewed, with minor modifications, as the New Development Policy (NDP) in 1991, and has not reversed the trend towards state capitalism." Judith Nagata, "How to Be Islamic without Being an Islamic State: Contested Models of Development in Malaysia," in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, ed. Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994), 87.

44. All information about SIS is drawn from that organization's Web site, unless otherwise noted. See <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my>. The other two organizations are the Women's Aid Organization and the All Women's Action Society. The original women's movement in Malaysia dates back to anticolonial struggles against the British and then the Japanese. The new women's movement emerged in the 1980s in the wake of the UN's Women's Decade. It differentiated itself from the old by constructing itself "as cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, and multireligious with a clearly defined critical attitude toward the state." Spiegel, "Women's Organisations and Social Transformation in Malaysia," 69, 71.

45. Zainah Anwar, "Islamisation and Its Impact on Laws and the Law Making Process in Malaysia," in *Warning Signs of Fundamentalism*, ed. Ayesha Imam, Jenny Morgan, and Nira Yuval-Davis (Nottingham, UK: Women Living under Muslim Laws, 2004), 74.

46. For example, in 1997 in response to a Sharia ruling on criminal offenses that included vaguely worded rulings such as punishment for defying or disputing religious authority or behaving in an offensive manner publicly, SIS asked the government to "promote the interpretation of religious texts and the formal and informal teaching of Islam that reflect the spirit of justice and equality granted to women in the Qur'an, and that also take into consideration the changing role and status of women in the family and the community." Sisters in Islam, "Syariah Criminal Offences Act and Fundamental Liberties, 1997: Memorandum on the Provisions in the Syariah Criminal Offences Act and Fundamental Liberties," 8 August 1997, http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=699&Itemid=209.

47. Nagata, "How to Be Islamic," 80.

48. *Ibid.*, 79–80. The members of SIS are aware that to some individuals, referring to the Hadith or the words of the Prophet (s.a.w.) as "of uncertain, and sometimes contradictory status" amounts to heresy. *Ibid.*, 79.

49. Nora Murat, "Sisters in Islam: Advocacy for Change within the Religious Framework," in *Warning Signs of Fundamentalism*, ed. Ayesha Imam, Jenny Morgan, and Nira Yuval-Davis (UK: Women Living under Muslim Laws, 2004), 144–45. Nora Murat is a member of SIS.

50. Spiegel, "Women's Organisations and Social Transformation in Malaysia," 185.

51. Terry Lane, "Feminist Islam," *National Interest*, 4 January 2004, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/natint/stories/s1012873.htm>.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Ibid.

54. John L. Esposito, "Introduction: Women in Islam and Muslim Societies," in *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), x.

55. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 132.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 101.

58. "Unlike the Qur'an, which was taken down in writing during the lifetime of the Prophet (s.a.w.), most of the Hadith was recorded after the death of the Prophet (s.a.w.). Therefore, while the authenticity of the whole Qur'an is unquestionable, the authenticity and authority of a substantial amount of Hadith has [*sic*] been open to dispute and debate among various scholars. It is generally known that the Prophet (s.a.w.) discouraged the documentation of his sayings and Sunnah in the early stages of his mission, in order to prevent the possibility of confusion between the Qur'an and his Sunnah. . . . Therefore, the collecting of the Hadiths only began in the second century of Islam [early eighth century CE]. By then, the Muslim territories had spread widely, and Hadith collectors travelled to various parts of the Muslim world in search of those who had information on the sayings and deeds of the Prophet (s.a.w.). The narrations, traditions and stories recorded in the Hadith collections are reproduced through *isnad*, which refers to the transmission of Hadith through a chain of narrators. It is important to note that the authenticity of a Hadith depends on the reliability of its reporters and the linkage or transmission among them, i.e. the *isnad*" (italics in original). Badlishah and Kaprawi, *Hadith on Women in Marriage*, 3–5.

59. Ibid., 6–7.

60. Ibid., 12–15.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid. "And the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'" Genesis 2:21–23. Ibid., 12–15.

63. Ibid., 15.

64. Ibid.

65. Sewell, "Theory of Structure," 16–17.

66. The four schools of thought (Sunni) are Shafi'i, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Maliki. For more on their differences and similarities, see al-Qadi As-Safadi, *The Mercy in the Difference of the Four Sunni Schools of Islamic Law* (London: Dar Al Taqwa, 2004).

67. Zaitun Mohamed Kasim, *Islam and Polygamy* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Sisters in Islam 2002), i. All quotations on polygamy are drawn from this source unless otherwise noted.

68. *Surah* should not be confused with *Sunnah*. A *surah* is a section of the Qur'an.

69. Zainah Anwar, "Sisters in Islam: A Voice for Everyone," *Fellowship Magazine*, September/October 2004, accessed 10 January 2010, <http://www.forusa.org/fellowship/sept-oct-04/anwar.html>.

70. Murat, "Sisters in Islam: Advocacy for Change," 142.

71. Anwar, "Sisters in Islam: A Voice for Everyone."

72. Zainah Anwar, "Whither Modernization?," *Star*, 24 October 2009, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my>.

73. Anwar, "Sisters in Islam: A Voice for Everyone."

74. "*Ijtihad* therefore is an exercise of one's reasoning to arrive at a logical conclusion on a legal issue done by jurists to deduce a conclusion as to the effectiveness of a legal precept in Islam." Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Shari'ah: The Islamic Law* (London: Ta Ha Publishers, 1984).

75. Ida Lichter, *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices against Oppression* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books 2009), 245.

76. *Nusyuz* or *nushuz* is "a state of disorder between a married couple." Sayyid Qutb in Sisters in Islam, "Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat Their Wives?," http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=601&Itemid=298. All quotations to follow about wife beating are taken from this source unless otherwise noted.

77. Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 190.

78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 201.
80. Ibid., 198.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., 201.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid., 206–9.
86. Ibid., 206.
87. Ibid.
88. All information about Abir’s life is summarized from Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 176–88.
89. Soroya Duval, “New Veils and New Voices: Islamist Women’s Groups in Egypt,” in *Women and Islamization*, 62.
90. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 85.
91. Ibid., 87.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid., 87n14.
94. Ibid., 87. “*Bid’a* is distinct from heresy (*ilbad*): the latter is considered to be an act of conscious rebellion, and the former the result of confusion, especially when it refers to disagreements about the authority of pertinent Prophetic traditions.” Ibid., 87n18.
95. Ibid., 87–88.
96. Ibid., 88.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid., 85. The authenticity of each Hadith is determined by the way the information was collected and recorded, the constancy of the content of the Hadith with that of the Qur’an, and the ability and trustworthiness of the reporter. Badlishah and Kaprawi, *Hadith on Women in Marriage*, 8–11.
99. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 85–86.
100. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 223.
101. Ibid. While spending time with Ra’uf, Karam experienced first hand the appreciation that she evoked in young Islamists. Moreover, the Brotherhood likely does not despise Ra’uf because that organization allowed her to edit the women’s page of its weekly opposition newspaper, *Al-Sha’b*. Ibid., 224.
102. Ibid.
103. Ibid.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
106. Ibid., 225.
107. Ibid.
108. Ibid., 227. In this, Ra’uf’s ideas coincide with those of other Islamists, such as Muhammad Al-Ghazali. However, the latter restricted suggested military service for women to duties such as nursing and meal preparation. Ibid., 226.
109. Ibid., 228.
110. Ibid., 227.
111. Ibid., 228.
112. Ibid. Male Islamists like Sheik Al-Ghazali and Adel Husayn both emphasized the importance to Islamic society of women’s role within the home, but “theirs was a quest to reconstruct the social glorification of motherhood which in itself is not new.” Ibid., 229.