In Egypt, as in many other parts of the formerly-colonized world, numerous tensions and conflicts re-volve around gender issues. Women are often caught between the privatization of the state and the liberalization, a pervasive nationalist rhetoric of ‘au-thenticity’, processes related to Islamization and on-encroachments. Those women who are actively engaged in contesting existing gender relations and social injustices are particularly vulnerable to being stigmatized as anti-nationalist and anti-religious. Indeed, contemporary women activists in Egypt have increasingly been accused, particularly by Islamist movements and conservative nationalist forces, of collaborating with Western imperialism by importing alien ideas and practices and disseminat-ing them throughout society.

But how do the women themselves perceive these tensions and conflicts? How do they cope with accusations of being ‘Westernized’? How do the state and ‘authoritar-ian state’ mean to Egyptian women activists? These and many other questions were paramount in my mind, as I embarked upon my research on which my recently published book is based. My own involvement in the Egyptian women’s movement (from 1992 to 1994) proved to be a vital impetus to pursue an academic career. Yet, my specific focus and interests grew out of a sense of disenchant-ment with depictions of secular constituencies in much of the literature in the Middle East. If not omitted altogether, secular constituencies tend to be essentialized (those who are not Islamist) and portrayed in a ho-mogenized manner (thereby glossing over political, social and cultural differences with-in secular constituencies).

Redefining secularism in Egypt and the Middle East

My research, then, reflects the pursuit of several aims. On one level, it presents the at-tempt to problematize and re Define the no-tion of secularism in Egypt and within the wider context of the region and the ‘Muslim world’. In addition to exploring the range of interpretations, practices, policies, lifestyles and beliefs of one specific secular-orientated constituency, the book provides a detailed ethnographic account of the context, content and political significance of contemporary women’s ac-tivism. This is mainly achieved through an analysis of interviews with more than 80 members of activist groups and individual activists. In these interviews, questions per-taining to women activists’ goals and motiva-tions, their political outlooks and affiliations, their activities as well as their personal successes and affiliations were asked. In this context, women’s activism cannot be analysed without context-ualizing it in the wider political culture in which it takes place. Therefore, a range of fac-tors was explored, such as the historical and political development of the Egyptian state and its relationship to the women’s movement, the role of Islamist constituencies and the po-li-ticization of personal experi-ences and agendas. All these elements, in one way or another, have an impact upon the forms, content and discourses of contempo-rary women’s activism.

But what is actually meant by ‘secular-orien-tated’ activists? Initially, a working definition of one specific secular-orientated constituency, the book provides a detailed ethnographic account of the context, content and political significance of contemporary women’s ac-tivism. This is mainly achieved through an analysis of interviews with more than 80 members of activist groups and individual activists. In these interviews, questions per-taining to women activists’ goals and motiva-tions, their political outlooks and affiliations, their activities as well as their personal successes and affiliations were asked. In this context, women’s activism cannot be analysed without context-ualizing it in the wider political culture in which it takes place. Therefore, a range of fac-tors was explored, such as the historical and political development of the Egyptian state and its relationship to the women’s movement, the role of Islamist constituencies and the po-li-ticization of personal experi-ences and agendas. All these elements, in one way or another, have an impact upon the forms, content and discourses of contempo-rary women’s activism.

In this context, Hania K. and other activists complained about the tendency among Western scholars conducting research in Egypt to dismiss individual everyday experi-ences and the capacity to creatively synthe-size from various value systems. Human agency is mainly framed in terms of collective ideologies – whether secular or religious – and very little space is given to individual im-provisation and resistance.

Overcoming the cultural- ization of political issues

Throughout my analyses of the notion of secularism and the political culture in which the Egyptian women’s movement is embed-ded, I attempt to achieve a further goal, i.e. to transcend notions of cultures being bounded entities and to acknowledge the entanglements and creative encounters be-tween and within cultures. Being of mixed cultural background myself (Iraqi-German), I have been extremely sensitive to and sad-dened by the essentialized rhetoric of ‘us vs. them’. I do, of course, understand the histor-ical and current power relations, colonial and neo-colonial configurations and imperi-alist policies, and also acknowledge the dualities and creative encounters between cultures. Nonetheless, I hope to unravel many of the tensions and conflicts that mark the complex processes of decolo-nization and continue to shape contempo-rary political culture. Egyptian women’s ac-tivism today is very much shaped by the fear of transgressing the norms and values deemed permissible within the national fabric. The question of identity is as central to their activism as concrete struggles over women’s rights and aspirations. Much is at stake for secular women activists as their re-jection of Islam as the only possible frame-work for political struggle and nation building evokes suspicion and doubt about their belonging within the indigenous landscape of ‘traditions’ and ‘authenticity’.

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