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Nicola Pratt

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# The Gender Logics of Resistance to the ‘War on Terror’: constructing sex–gender difference through the erasure of patriarchy in the Middle East

NICOLA PRATT

*ABSTRACT* This article asks, ‘How are femininities constructed in resisting the “war on terror” and with what implications for women’s agency and the conceptualisation of gender?’ It examines the under-studied gender logics of non-violent resistance to the ‘war on terror’ by focusing on a series of conferences held in Cairo, between 2002 and 2008, uniting opposition to imperialism, Zionism, neoliberalism and dictatorship. Whereas much feminist scholarship conceptualises sex–gender difference within patriarchy as the major source of women’s subordination, women speakers at the Cairo conferences erased patriarchy as a source of subordination and valorised sex–gender difference as a source of agency in resisting the ‘war on terror’. Femininities were constructed against the dominant narratives and practices of the war on terror through the representation of national|religious or class differences. These ‘resistance femininities’ represent strategically essentialised identities that function to bridge differences and mobilise women against the ‘war on terror’.

Feminist scholars have highlighted how the so-called ‘war on terror’ is ‘gender-ed’, as well as ‘race-ed’, ‘sex-ed’ and ‘class-ed’.<sup>1</sup> This literature illustrates how the war on terror has been constituted by and constitutive of constructions of ‘brown women’ in need of saving from ‘barbaric’ ‘brown men’ by Western militaries, evocative of Gayatri Spivak’s description of colonialism as ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’.<sup>2</sup> Such tropes have been criticised for stereotyping Muslim women as ‘passive’ and ‘oppressed’, Muslim men as ‘terrorists’ and Western governments and militaries as ‘enlightened’, thereby helping to naturalise and even to perpetuate the war on terror.

*Nicola Pratt is in the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK. Email: n.c.pratt@warwick.ac.uk.*

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It is important to recognise that the war on terror (which constitutes a number of different but interconnected processes, including military and intelligence measures, economic restructuring, and political and diplomatic alliances) not only has differential effects on different social groups (according to the configurations of intersecting gender, class, ethnicity, nationality and other significant relations of power) but that groups *resist* these processes in ways that also have implications for gender and other relations of power, and, in turn, for wider political, socioeconomic and cultural processes. However, the subject of resistance to the war on terror has been understudied.

While some attention has been paid to the construction of militarised masculinity in violent resistance to the war on terror (sometimes depicted as mirroring the militarised masculinity of the US army and its military allies),<sup>3</sup> until now the theorising of non-violent resistance to the war on terror and how it may be gender-ed, race-ed, class-ed and sex-ed has been almost neglected. Those scholars who have written about the gender-ed dimensions of non-violent resistance to the 'war on terror' have focused on feminist or 'feminist-friendly' resistance,<sup>4</sup> often highlighting the links between war, militarism and masculinity/'patriarchy'.<sup>5</sup> Yet such an approach implicitly assumes that patriarchy, capitalism, racism and militarism are mutually reinforcing, thereby rendering it unproblematic for women to resist all of these simultaneously.<sup>6</sup>

This article examines how gender-ed identities, or particular femininities, are constituted by and constitutive of resistance to the war on terror, focusing on the case of the Middle East. Towards this end, the article begins by attempting to theorise resistance in the context of international relations, highlighting the significance of (strategic) identity construction. The following sections examine the processes of constructing femininity in and through resistance to the war on terror at a series of conferences against imperialism, Zionism, dictatorship and neoliberalism, held in Cairo between 2002 and 2008. I find that women mobilise to resist different relations of domination based on imperialism, Zionism, neoliberalism and dictatorship through the construction of national, religious or class differences. However, the gender logics of the war on terror shape the performance of a femininity that valorises sex-gender difference as a source of agency (rather than a source of oppression). I argue that this notion of femininity is constructed strategically to foreground the national, religious and class dimensions of power relations that underpin the war on terror, while erasing 'patriarchy'/gender-based domination. This notion of femininity also enables the bridging of class and ideological differences among women.

This suggests wider implications for how we understand the construction of gender-ed identities in international relations, the significance of gender in women's activism and the relevancy of feminism in struggles against multiple and transnational relations of power. Rather than speaking of anti-feminist blowback in the war on terror, it is perhaps more useful to problematise the construction of resistance femininities as the outcome of a dialectical relationship between, on the one hand, multiple relations of power at the

interpersonal, national and transnational levels and, on the other, the need to bridge multiple identities to build collective resistance to these structures.

### **Theorising resistance in international relations**

Within the field of politics and international relations or international political economy there have been relatively few studies of non-violent or unarmed resistance.<sup>7</sup> Feminist scholarship has highlighted the ways in which women organise as women to resist the gender-ed impacts of globalisation and/or militarism and how women's resistance negotiates multiple hierarchies and dimensions of power (not only material but also cultural/ideological/discursive), engaging with different sites (public/private, local/transnational) and employing multiple practices of resistance (from public protests to support groups).<sup>8</sup> In other words, women resist interlocking systems of oppression, based on gender, race, class, nationality and sexuality, or what Patricia Hill Collins has referred to as the 'matrix of domination',<sup>9</sup> and employ different strategies in order to do so. Within such a framework any resistance that only targets one of those systems of oppression, such as gender, therefore leaves in place the other systems of oppression. This has been the main criticism levelled at 'Western' feminism by postcolonial and black feminists, including Hill Collins.<sup>10</sup> That said, given the multiple nature of power relations and the different ways an individual may be positioned in relation to these, anthropologists have observed that social actors may simultaneously resist one set of power relations while accommodating another set.<sup>11</sup>

In theorising collective resistance, feminist scholarship has noted the tensions between women that result from their differential positioning within interlocking power relations on the basis of sexuality, class, race, ethnicity and/or nationality.<sup>12</sup> In order to create solidarity and enable effective resistance, it is necessary to forge a shared political identity that may depend upon 'the temporary setting aside' of differences.<sup>13</sup> I would argue that the process of deciding to temporarily 'set aside' particular differences involves what Gayatri Spivak has called, 'strategic essentialism'; that is, the temporary construction of a particular identity (whether based on gender/sex, race/ethnicity, class, nationality or another significant relation of power) as a means of forging solidarity.<sup>14</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis warns that essentialised identities may become conflated with 'descriptions of positionality', thereby 'render[ing] invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category', whether the working classes, women or the rural poor.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the decision to 'set aside' may unintentionally operate to exclude particular objectives from collective action. However, in an interview Gayatri Spivak has argued that 'strategic essentialism' is often misused to justify essentialism (with all the potential negative consequences that that implies) rather than to think about the meaning of 'strategy' within identification processes.<sup>16</sup> These identification processes occur within 'the micro-politics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as [...] the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes'.<sup>17</sup> In

other words, we must be attentive to both context and structure in studying identities in collective resistance and consider identification within movements as strategic in the forging of a shared political identity, as well as strategic in terms of responding to those wider relations of power within which movement members are subordinated, materially and discursively. Identity construction is constituted by and constitutive of resistance to relations of power. However, given the multiple relations of power that constitute the 'matrix of domination', and the difficulties of resisting them all simultaneously, movements may also 'set aside' issues pertaining to particular relations of power through their strategic erasure within identification processes.

In this article I examine the attempts to construct essentialised identities and strategically erase patriarchy as a strategy of both mobilising support for and performing resistance to the war on terror. I investigate resistance to the war on terror through the case study of a series of conferences against US imperialism, Zionism, neoliberalism and dictatorship, called the 'Cairo conferences' for short, which occurred between 2002 and 2008.

### **The Cairo conferences: spaces of resistance to the 'war on terror'**

Between 2002 and 2008 a series of conferences, which came to be known as the 'Cairo conferences', aimed to create space for resistance to the war on terror. Through the plenaries, workshops and various sessions of these conferences a critique was articulated against US military intervention in the region post-9/11, linking it to Zionism, US-allied dictatorships and neoliberal economic reforms.

The first Cairo conference was held in December 2002 with the aim of building an international movement against the US-led invasion of Iraq. Following that, Cairo conferences were held in December 2003, March 2005, March 2006, March 2007 and March 2008 (a planned conference in May 2009 was cancelled as a result of Egyptian government pressure) and attracted a growing number of Arab and international activists each year, with delegations coming from Europe, North America and the global South. Perhaps most significantly the conferences also became important new opportunities for building alliances among Islamists, leftists and nationalists, mainly of Egyptian nationality, who were all part of the conference organising committees, and for articulating new discursive alliances between different groups formed to oppose imperialism, Zionism, dictatorship and neoliberal economic reforms.<sup>18</sup>

By 2008, when I visited Cairo and interviewed a number of different activists, there were concerns about the failure of the Cairo conferences to reach out to ordinary people within Egypt and also to coordinate a more systematic programme of international resistance to US imperialism, Zionism and neoliberalism. Notwithstanding these criticisms, many activists participated in the 2008 conference and continued to view the Cairo conferences as important spaces where new discursive alliances between different political, ideological, social and national groups were formed and

resistance to the war on terror was expressed. In a context where spaces for independent political action under the regime of former president Hosni Mubarak were circumscribed and local media were censored, the creation of spaces independent of the regime was, in itself, important for many participating in the conference and may have been the reason for the regime's attempts to stop the conference in 2009. Moreover, the discursive and practical alliances forged through the Cairo conferences were part of the growing terrain of dissent that set the stage for the 25 January Revolution, 2011.

Thus the Cairo conferences, in and of themselves, were venues for performances of resistance to the war on terror.<sup>19</sup> As such, they aimed to produce affect among the conference participants as a means of mobilising support for resistance to the war. To understand these performances entails analysing them dialogically against the larger (gender-ed, sex-ed, race-ed and class-ed) narratives of the war on terror, which both underpin as well as help to produce Western military, economic, geopolitical and cultural domination of the Middle East. The (gender-ed, sex-ed, race-ed and class-ed) logics of the war on terror', in combination with the need to forge alliances across political and social groups, produced the strategic construction of essentialised identities, in which patriarchy was erased and feminine sacrifice was valorised.

#### *Gendering resistance to the war on terror*

It was not difficult to find women at the Cairo conferences. There were lots of women participants, of different ages, nationalities and political orientations. There were secular-oriented women (socialists, other leftists, nationalists, Nasserists and pan-Arabists) and Islamist women (predominantly from the Muslim Brotherhood). Women made up a significant percentage of the audience as well as several of the speakers (although the opening session, where the leaders/representatives of different political and social groups took it in turns to give a short-(ish!) rhetorical speech, was dominated by men).

From 2005 onwards a 'Women's Forum' was held as one of several social forums that ran in parallel as part of the conference. The Women's Forum was organised by women representing the different political/ideological trends on the conference organising committee: namely, Islamist, nationalist and leftist. I analyse the Women's Forums as sites where resistance to the war on terror was performed. Unlike the majority of other sessions and plenaries in the conferences, these performances aimed at resisting the explicitly gender-ed dimensions of the war, while also negotiating differences among women participants from different political/ideological groups and national/religious and class backgrounds.

#### *Women and resistance*

This was the title of the Women's Forum at the Cairo Conference in 2007. Within this session women from various political parties and social

movements in the Arab world represented women's role in resistance against US imperialism and Zionism. The majority of speakers highlighted several themes: 1) that women are agents of resistance; 2) that women's resistance blurs public and private divides; 3) that sex–gender difference is a key source of agency (and is constructed through national/religious difference).

By highlighting women's agency as part of the resistance against the war on terror, the women speakers at the Forum implicitly resisted Orientalist stereotypes of Arab and Muslim women as 'passive', 'oppressed' and 'victimised' by their menfolk. Rather than pointing to Arab men as the problem, for the most part these women identified the source of oppression and violence as the USA and its allies, including Israel and the Egyptian government. Amani Abu-l-Fadi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and session chair, began by introducing the women who were invited to speak: 'We are the Arab women who are being injured and shot in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. We are sexually harassed in Egypt by the police.'<sup>20</sup> Following this, there was a showing of a video clip of Jamila Shanti,<sup>21</sup> a Hamas MP in the Gaza Strip, who had helped to organise a women's protest to free Palestinian gunmen sheltering in the mosque of Beit Hanoun, during a six-day incursion by Israeli forces in November 2006. 'We heard the calls from the mosque to support our brothers in Beit Hanoun. We were 3000 women. I hoped to return a martyr. They [the Israelis] started shooting at us, the women. I was shot in my right leg.'

The forum speakers also represented women's resistance as crossing public–private divides. Rima Fakhri of Hizbollah spoke about women's involvement in the Lebanese resistance through their roles in child rearing and socialisation: 'Women began to build the resistance against the Zionist invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It is a national and religious obligation and sacrifice. . . Women have supported the men by building a resistance culture, by spreading pure Islam and by building social welfare programmes.' Najla' al-Qaliyubi from the Amal Party (an Egyptian party that blends Islamism with pan-Arab nationalism) spoke about the many forms of resistance in which Arab women were involved:

Arab women have entered the battles in Palestine and Iraq and are supporting their husbands and sons. In Beit Hanoun, women freed their men in the mosque. In Iraq, women are helping to transport weapons to men. In Egypt, women are supporting their menfolk in prison. . . I don't want to be equal but I want to move freely as a *mujahida* [a fighter].

Here, the different speakers represent hegemonic feminine roles (mothers, sisters, wives) as constitutive of resistance. The expansion of women's roles in this way is a challenge to the historical gender politics of Islamist organisations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, which have emphasised women's domestic roles and viewed women's political activism as only necessary in exceptional circumstances.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Islamist women's activism has generated debates within their respective organisations over the future position of women within the organisations' structures.<sup>23</sup>

Another common theme among speakers was that sex–gender difference (seen by most feminists as a source of women's oppression) was represented

as a source of agency. In the Forum sex–gender difference was constructed through national or religious difference. Amani Abu-l-Fadi told participants at the Women's Forum:

They [the West] try to influence us with their consumerism and immorality. They want us to be like their women. Do not teach us freedom because we know what freedom is. Freedom is getting rid of the occupation and controlling our own wealth. It is not the freedom of homosexuality and immorality. It is not the freedom promoted by Condoleezza Rice.

The rejection by this speaker of 'Western' sexual and gender norms as immoral appears to be in keeping with long-standing attitudes amongst Islamists as well as nationalists concerning issues of women's rights and sexual freedoms.<sup>24</sup> However, rather than viewing Abu-l-Fadi's comments as a reflection of Islamist or other conservative ideologies, the articulation of homosexuality, freedom and Condoleezza Rice together constitutes resistance to dominant narratives of the war on terror. The administration of George Bush waged war against Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of 'liberating' Iraqi and Afghan women.<sup>25</sup> It also established the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in 2002, to fund civil society organisations in the Middle East to 'better the lives' of people in the region as a means of eradicating 'terrorism'. The 'empowerment of women' is one of the four pillars of the MEPI. As Zakia Salime argues, women in the Middle East are targeted by the US administration because it is believed that they are victims of patriarchal Islamists and, therefore, natural allies in fighting Islamist 'terrorism'.<sup>26</sup> The types of projects funded include training women as 'micro-entrepreneurs' and advocates of political reform. A number of first ladies in the Middle East, including Suzanne Mubarak, wife of the former president, Hosni Mubarak, have been heavily associated with MEPI activities.<sup>27</sup> In addition to being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Amani Abu-l-Fadi is founder of an organisation called 'Women's Priorities', which accuses Egyptian NGOs and civil society organisations of introducing 'Western feminist agendas' to Egypt by implementing micro-loan programmes and projects to combat domestic violence—projects similar to those funded by MEPI and supported by the Egyptian National Council for Women, previously headed by Suzanne Mubarak.

Simultaneously one of the main actors within the US administration responsible for pursuing the war on terror was Condoleezza Rice. As I have argued elsewhere, Condoleezza Rice embodies 'a neo-colonial feminism that seeks to improve the condition of women abroad and "liberate" them from the oppressive traditions of Islam. She strives to represent a universal norm; the standard to which Middle Eastern women should aspire.'<sup>28</sup> Abu-l-Fadi's rejection of Rice occurs simultaneously with her rejection of 'homonormativity', which, as Jasbir Puar argues, has become tied, 'both legally and representationally, to the national and transnational political agendas of US imperialism' since 9/11.<sup>29</sup> Abu-l-Fadi constructs sex-gender difference through 'Muslim/Arab' difference from the 'West' and, in so doing, performs resistance to Rice's neo-colonial feminism and the US administration's

attempt to co-opt Muslim women as ‘counter-insurgents’ through NGO programmes aimed at ‘women’s empowerment’.

What is noteworthy in the Forum is that almost none of the speakers framed their statements in terms of ‘gender equality’—indeed, one speaker explicitly rejected the concept. Magda Adly, from Al-Nadim Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture, a long-standing leftist activist and member of the Egyptian women’s movement, also spoke at this session and her statement stood out as an attempt to recognise structures of domination rooted in imperialism and dictatorship, but also in patriarchy:

Resistance is not only for men. Women are struggling and we have to respect their achievements. . . This is not a Western agenda. . . There is oppression in our homes and I am not ashamed to speak about this here. . . This is not a side issue. I don’t want oppression in my country nor in my home. . . We must not only support women in resisting against imperialism but also in their struggle for equality.

Magda’s opposition to the other speakers’ definition of gender equality as a Western agenda recalls the efforts of women’s rights activists in many situations to struggle against the marginalisation of their concerns following accusations of them being ‘Western agents’, undermining the nation or community and representing foreign demands.<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that in 2007, more than a century after the beginnings of the women’s movement in much of the Middle East, activists were still obliged to make those arguments. The gendered narratives of the war on terror present new obstacles for women’s feminist activism in the Middle East. Even though Magda spoke out against US imperialism and Egyptian dictatorship, nevertheless, her performance was not in line with the other performances of resistance at the Forum. Through her advocacy of ‘women’s equality’ Magda failed to construct sex–gender difference, through national/religious difference from the ‘West’, as a crucial source of agency in resistance against the war on terror.

However, the rejection by most speakers of ‘gender equality’ does not mean that they were not challenging hegemonic sex–gender roles. Different speakers described their resistance in terms of ‘martyrdom’, ‘rescue’ and being a ‘fighter’—roles that are ‘traditionally’ associated with men, rather than women. Women’s victimisation at the hands of imperialists and Zionists was re-inscribed by the speakers as sacrifice in the service of resistance. The notion of feminine sacrifice in this context, crossing the private–public divide, represents a renegotiation of women’s ‘traditional’ domestic roles and a subversion of the hegemonic gender order. Implicitly imperialism and Zionism are represented as corrupting the ‘natural’ (hegemonic) gender order by obliging women to sacrifice for their nation—a role that, in ‘normal’ times—would be performed by a male soldier or political leader. By associating this renegotiation of gender roles as an ‘emergency measure’, these women carve out a space for legitimate agency but also leave unanswered the question of whether these ‘emergency’ sex–gender roles should be maintained in times of ‘normalcy’.

*Women and socioeconomic struggles*

In 2008 the Women's Forum was dedicated primarily to women's socioeconomic struggles, such as workplace strikes and protests and struggles over land and housing. While the implementation of neoliberal reforms in Egypt, tied to conditional loans from the IMF and World Bank, pre-date 2001, these economic reforms were speeded up after 2003. The implementation of market reforms was another of the four pillars of MEPI and, therefore, seen as a means of eradicating 'terrorism' in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> The introduction of neoliberal reforms, including the sale of public assets and deregulation of markets, created new opportunities for the regime to co-opt businessmen through corrupt practices of crony capitalism, thereby bolstering support for the regime and its repression of dissent. These reforms have had a detrimental impact on conditions for working people and Egypt witnessed rolling strikes by workers, protests against the price of bread and lack of clean water, among other signs of social unrest, particularly after 2004,<sup>32</sup> providing a prelude to the 25 January Revolution.

Many women have been at the nexus of these changes as workers and mothers. The forum represented an attempt by women in political parties/movements to incorporate these socioeconomic struggles into the resistance against imperialism and Zionism. As in the previous year the interventions by different speakers tended to highlight the fact that: 1) women are agents of resistance; 2) women's resistance blurs the boundaries of private and public spheres; and 3) sex-gender difference (this time constructed through class difference) is a source of agency.

Several of the speakers at the 2008 Women's Forum were women who had not only participated but also played important roles in a significant strike wave that rolled across Egypt in 2006-07.<sup>33</sup> By global standards Egyptian women's participation in the workforce is low but it has increased dramatically since 1981 as a result of the economic necessity for two household incomes.<sup>34</sup> As Iman, a worker in a privatised factory in Suez, told the forum's audience:

Many women have to work to support their families. We organised a lot of strikes and some things changed. But the factory owners are friends with the government [. . .] We don't see our kids because we have to work to support our children [. . .] We're women who work for the sake of earning money for our children. If we all help each other, Egypt will be the best country.

Like Iman, several other women spoke about intimidation at the hands of the security services and emphasised the need to 'stand together' in order to defeat the government. Mervat, who participated in the real estate tax office strike involving some 55 000 workers, many of whom, including herself, camped outside overnight, said: 'We know how to stand against injustice and for our rights. We'll stand by anyone who wants to do the same. If we all stand together, all the people fighting against injustice, we can achieve our rights. If we stick together, we can achieve everything we want.'

I had been fortunate to hear many of these and other women leaders speak earlier that day at another event organised by the New Woman Foundation (NWF), one of the pioneers in the second wave of women's rights activism in Egypt. It is significant that members of the MEPI were not involved in the Women's Forum at the Cairo conference, illustrating the fissures between different progressive struggles and activists with regard to the conference. Nawla Darwiche, a prominent figure within the NWF and one of the event's organisers, told me why they, as a feminist research centre, had become involved in supporting women involved in socioeconomic struggles.

Egypt is in a moment of change [...] There's something happening—protests, strikes, forms of refusal. We feel that our role is to help women to organise themselves. We are supporting groups of women at the grassroots [...] Other women's organisations don't make this sort of initiative. This is very special work as there are very few feminist organisations in Egypt.

Nawla differentiated the NWF from many other self-identified women's NGOs in Cairo that did not address women's roles in resisting poor socioeconomic conditions. Instead, these other organisations tended to deal with women as 'beneficiaries' or 'recipients' of NGO services and assistance. Prominent Egyptian NGOs, such as the Egyptian Women's Rights Centre, the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance and the Association for the Development and Empowerment of Women, work on issues such as raising awareness among women about their rights, supporting women victims of violence, or providing micro-credit for women. In other words, the sorts of programme that are criticised by Amani Abu-l-Fadi and her NGO, Women's Priorities, as well as the sorts of programme that are supported by MEPI as part of the USA's 'soft' counter-terrorism strategy.<sup>35</sup> Not only were there similarities between some women's NGO programmes and MEPI-funded programmes, but some of these organisations were also co-opted by the former National Council for Women headed by Suzanne Mubarak.

It is widely acknowledged that women were at the forefront of a wave of strikes across Egypt in 2006–07 against poor working conditions, low wages, unpaid bonuses and corrupt bosses.<sup>36</sup> The Women's Day event organised by NWF in celebration of women's participation in these protests and strikes was attended by roughly 100 people, which included the families, friends and colleagues of the women being honoured. As part of the event several women received awards, including Aisha and Mervat (who spoke at the Cairo conference), in addition to Amal from Mahalla al-Kubra and Naima living near the Alexandria cement factory. Their speeches were longer than the interventions allowed in the Women's Forum, providing details about the women's perseverance in the face of harassment by the government, security forces and company bosses. In Amal's words:

At the Mahalla sit-in, women had a very active role [...] at first we were scared, afraid that [...] we were going to be arrested [...]. We slept over and camped in

tents [...] and we were determined not to leave until they granted us our rights [...] on later days we started going back home to cook some food and bring it back with us for the men, who honestly did not leave the sit-in; may God bless them and us all. So, women were actually playing two roles; taking care of their families and children, and participating in the sit-in; spending there as much time as possible [...] And today we truly feel that the women's role is no less significant than that of men [...] we [the workers] are the ones who are living the hardest conditions, we are a productive class; we work the hardest and toil the most, so we are considered the nerve of this country [...] they [officials] are totally disregarding us.

Naima also drew attention to both the struggles of women and the class inequalities of Egypt that were producing the injustices against which they were struggling. She came from a neighbourhood affected by pollution from the nearby Alexandria Portland Cement Company.

My son has been sick since he was three months old; suffering from severe respiratory problems [...] I sold all my jewelry and bought a respiration machine, so that I wouldn't have to leave the house [to go to the hospital], because he has a baby sister who was 3 years old at the time [...] how was I supposed to drag her around with me as I spent nights out of the house? So I got the machine, and I started telling the women of my community, who I used to run into at the hospitals, that I had a respiratory machine at my house and that they were welcome to use it; because most of the children in my district suffer from acute nightly respiratory attacks, which sometimes can lead to death [...] The cement company was [...] bought by a French company [...] they couldn't care less about us being covered with cement dust. And let me tell you, when the debris from the factory lands on your skin it burns; it scorches it and leaves behind brown spots. And if it touches your clothes and you try to rub it off, it discolors them. So imagine what it does to us when we inhale it!

Like the women who spoke at the 2007 Women's Forum, the women who spoke at the Women's Day event also illustrated the blurring of lines between private and public. Women play the roles of wives, mothers, workers and community organisers simultaneously and represent these roles as inextricably linked. Socioeconomic necessities and class positionality have forced women to take on these roles simultaneously, thereby expanding hegemonic notions of gender identity and roles.

What was striking about the speeches of the women in the Women's Day event was a sense of agency drawn from their sacrifice. In comparison, the interventions at the Women's Forum later that day did not always articulate women's agency but, rather, emphasised women's victimisation. For example, a short film was shown about the residents of Kafr Al-Elou, near Helwan, in the southern suburbs of Cairo, who were evicted from their land by the government in October 2007 to make way for a water purification plant and, at the time, were living in tents, like refugees.<sup>37</sup> One evicted woman was interviewed in the film. 'I'm a peasant. We were forced off the land because we can't afford to pay the rent. Police came to evacuate us. We were only seven peasants and there were 75 soldiers. They arrested us and beat us and shot at us...Everything is lost.' Um Ahmad, a resident of

Al-Qursaya Island, a small island in the River Nile, near central Cairo, told the audience at the Forum how the Egyptian government was trying to force out the residents of the island through repeated harassment in order to open up the island to real estate development. 'We can't leave our land, we'll be homeless. I make money from my animals on this land to pay for my children's education. I'd rather be killed on this land than leave it.'

As in the 2007 Women's Forum, women's victimisation, this time at the hands of dictatorship and the business cronies of the regime, was re-inscribed as sacrifice for the sake of resistance. However, through the staging of the performances, the agents of resistance were not presented as the women victims themselves; rather the women of the political parties and groups positioned themselves as the 'rescuers', in addition to mobilising the audience to 'rescue' the women, as a means of resisting dictatorship. The differences in class positions between working class women involved in workplace and community struggles and the women from political parties and movements, who dominated the organising committee of the women's forums, undoubtedly shaped the differential representations of feminine sacrifice, as well as highlighting the tension between these positionalities.

Working class women speaking at the 2008 Women's Forum and the Women's Day Celebration highlighted women's victimisation at the hands of the Egyptian regime and business owners allied with the regime, thereby constructing sex-gender difference through class difference. This differentially positioned these women from the women of the political parties or groups, including women of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nagwa, the wife of an arrested member of the Muslim Brotherhood, spoke at the 2008 Forum about her ordeal. Along with the wives and daughters of 32 arrested Muslim Brotherhood supporters and members, Nagwa had held a sit-in three months previously to highlight their case. 'My husband is a good man. He is good at home. He was the owner of a real estate company, which employed 1000 people. They closed his company and his employees were unemployed. Instead of thanking him for creating 1000 jobs, they [the authorities] closed his company and accused him of money laundering! He has built many projects for the government. Our human rights are being violated.' During the opening ceremony of the Cairo Conference, Zara' al-Shatir, daughter of imprisoned Muslim Brotherhood member Khayrat al-Shatir, gave a speech in which she also drew attention to the injustice of her father's imprisonment:

The [Egyptian] government is imprisoning the opposition, even though they are calling for reforms and investing in the country. Instead of thanking these people for what they have done for their country, the government imprisons them, closes their companies, freezes their money, stops them from teaching or practising medicine. Their employees, students and patients suffer [...] Our cause is the cause of every honest person.

Nagwa and Zara' attempted to universalise the injustice of their male relatives' imprisonment. However, the framing of demands in terms of universalist concepts of human rights and freedom operated to mask the particular class positions of these two women—whose male relatives are

successful businessmen, benefiting from neoliberal capitalism, but persecuted by the regime because of their political affiliations. Meanwhile, Aisha, Mervat, Amal, Naima and other working class women were simultaneously exploited by the owners of capital and their friends in the government.

In a later session organised by women members of the Muslim Brotherhood on 'Women against Globalisation', the impact of globalisation was discussed in terms of the West exporting particular 'feminist' concerns—such as, domestic violence, gay rights and the eradication of female genital mutilation—rather than the (gender-ed) impacts of neoliberal economic policies on Egypt's working people. The consensus of the session was that Western moral and cultural values were corrupting 'Egyptian womanhood'. The construction of sex-gender difference through national and religious difference is in tension with that of class difference and class inequalities generated by neoliberal economic reforms.

Despite the fact that many leftist women, if not necessarily feminists, were present at the Cairo conferences, the left (both Egyptian and international) did not engage in discussion on the question of gender and was not present in significant numbers at the Women's Forum or other sessions relevant to discussing gender issues. It is not that the left in Egypt converges with the Islamists and nationalists on understandings of women's role in society, but rather that it concedes this debate to the Islamists and nationalists by not actively engaging in it. Indeed, one member of the Revolutionary Socialists, speaking at a plenary session on building links with Islamists, said that the left should not emphasise its differences with Islamists, such as over the question of women. In other words, participants in the wider Cairo conferences are involved in a process of negotiation and strategic erasure for the purpose of constructing a shared political identity in order to build alliances to resist the war on terror.

Recognising that the Muslim Brothers bore the brunt of political repression under the Mubarak regime, Sameh Naguib of the Revolutionary Socialists published a book that called for standing with the Brothers against the state in their demands for the end of dictatorship.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the UK Stop the War Coalition, US ANSWER and Canadian Peace Alliance (all anti-war groups involved in the Cairo conferences), saw the building of alliances with Muslims in the West as a necessary part of the struggle against the Islamophobia that is both constitutive of and constituted by the war on terror. However, some leftists abandoned the Cairo conferences once the Islamists began to participate in large numbers for what they regarded as an unacceptable compromise over issues such as 'women's rights'. On the one hand, their concerns are illustrated by the dominant discourses of the Women's Forum of 2007, but on the other hand, the Women's Forum in 2008 illustrated how tensions between the nationalist/Islamist performances and working class performances of gender-ed resistance how there are ongoing negotiations that prevent closure around Islamist positions.

The women's forums demonstrated that there were no unified women's interests at the Cairo conferences but there was an attempt to mobilise women through the construction of particular notions of femininity. In attempting to build an alliance between different women, the Women's

Forum privileged women's sex–gender identities as a source of resistance and solidarity but erased patriarchy as a source of oppression. This notion of femininity is not merely the outcome of the dominant ideologies represented at the conference (that is, Arab nationalist and Islamist) but is shaped by the logics of the gender-ed power relations and structures that underpin the war on terror and the need to mobilise a shared political identity to resist these. Irrespective of class, national or religious belonging, femininity is constructed as linked to values of sacrifice and steadfastness for the sake of family and community relations (however the 'community' and its implicit other is defined). This notion of 'resistance' femininity provides new opportunities for women's legitimate agency in the public sphere, while also limiting notions of legitimate femininity in the Egyptian/Arab context.

### Conclusion

I seek to demonstrate how the building of non-violent or unarmed resistance to the 'war on terror' is constituted by as well as constitutive of performances of particular notions of femininity that create spaces of agency for women resisting the war on terror. These performances of 'resistance femininity' are constructed through the erasure of 'patriarchy'/gender subordination, while sex–gender difference is valorised as a source of agency. Nevertheless, in so doing, these performances challenge hegemonic gender norms and relations.

The resistance femininities performed at the Cairo conferences are strategically constructed against the gender-ed logics of the war on terror and the systems of oppression that underpin it: imperialism, Zionism, neoliberalism and dictatorship. In addition, the construction of a shared sex–gender difference operates strategically to bridge differences among women based on class and national or religious identities as well as political ideology. In other words, the performance of this strategic essentialism at the Cairo conferences constitutes and is constitutive of resistance.

This article has suggested the need to understand the construction of femininities as both shaped by resistance to particular political, economic, social or cultural power structures and also contingent upon the context in which social actors seek to mobilise resistance. Such a framework enables us not only to analyse the construction of identities in and through resistance to the war on terror, but also to explore and understand women's resistance and agency since the onset of the 'Arab spring'. Moreover, it demonstrates both the opportunities for and challenges to reconstructing femininities in the context of the ongoing war on terror and despite the upheavals of the 'Arab Spring'.

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### Note on contributor

**Nicola Pratt** is Associate Professor of the International Politics of the Middle East at the University of Warwick. She has researched on Middle East politics, resulting in a book, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (2007), in addition to a number of articles and book chapters. Her recent work is on gender and security, with a focus on the Middle East. She is co-author of *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (2009) and co-editor of *Women and War in the Middle East* (2009) and a special issue of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* on ‘Women, Peace and Security’ (2011).