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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? WOMEN, THE EGYPTIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY

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**ABSTRACT:** The article suggests that the gender politics advanced by the young female members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the family sphere after the 2013 military-led coup challenges the movement's ability to re-emerge from repression based on traditional patriarchal values and principles. A patriarchal division of labour, epitomized in women's position in the family, sustains the Brotherhood in times of repression and in its absence. The research shows that the circumstances of repression against the movement have caused women to reconsider the Brotherhood's patriarchal structures, with potential consequences for the organisation. The article does so by analysing women's articulations of their role in the family and in marriage relationships. Using love as an analytical lens, the article argues that women's demand for love in marriage suggest their desire to commit the Brotherhood to attending women's needs, desires and aspirations.

**KEYWORDS:** Muslim Brotherhood, women, activism, repression, identity, love, commitment.

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## 1. Introduction

Women are central to Islamist movements, their operations and running, as well as to their ability to survive repression. In Islamist movements, women take care of the upbringing of new generations of activists (Cook 2001, 90), perform *da'wa* (preaching) among other women and their communities (Clark 2004b; Mahmood 2012), thus helping Islamists to propagate their message and ideology. Additionally,

women are a significant number of the activists that sustain Islamists' networks of social and religious associations (Clark 2004a; Wickham 2004). Their role is not confined to social and religious activism but also includes politics. Although women are seldom included in the leadership offices of Islamist organisations, they play an important role as voters and recruiters of votes for Islamists in times of elections (Blaydes and El-Tarouty 2009; Dalmasso and Cavatorta 2012; Biagini 2020a). Notably, women's activism is essential to Islamist movements' survival under repression. Karam (1998) narrates at length of how it was the women who sustained the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth Brotherhood) during President Gamal Abdul Nasser's crackdown against the movement in the 1950s and 1960s, by looking after the prisoners and their families. Likewise, Zollner (2007) recounts of how Zeinab al-Ghazali, a prominent Sisterhood leader, contributed to the Brotherhood's ideological renewal during repression by smuggling Sayyid Qutb's political writing outside prison until her arrest in 1965.

Brotherhood female members, grouped in the all-female wing of the Muslim Sisterhood (henceforth Sisterhood or Sisters), have been playing a similar role since former general and current President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi led a *coup* against the movement on 3 July 2013, ousting elected President Mohamed Morsi, a Brotherhood member, and instigating a new wave of repression against Islamists. Since then, the Sisterhood and their activism have been indispensable to the Brotherhood's survival. After the *coup*, the Sisters sustained Islamists' mobilisation by leading and participating in protest activities, took care of the Brotherhood prisoners and their families, raised awareness about the regime-led human rights abuses against Islamists via local and international organisations, led hunger strike campaigns in support of the prisoners, set up and coordinated networks of Brotherhood lawyers to follow up the prisoners' legal cases, provided support to the victims of regime violence, raised funds for the movement and looked after the upbringing of Brotherhood children (Biagini 2017). Therefore, to this day, the Sisterhood's activism remains essential not only to the Brotherhood's ability to endure the current crackdown under al-Sisi but also to re-emerge from it in the future.

The crucial, albeit often invisible and of background, role that women play in Islamist movements reflects a patriarchal division of labour, which demands women to support the movement and its reproduction so that men can practice politics and risk repression. However, the Sisters' activism after the 2013 Brotherhood ousting indicates that women's experience of repression has caused some of them to reconsider the movement's patriarchal gender regime. This is particularly relevant among young female members who have since 2011 advocated for greater emancipation and power-sharing in the Brotherhood, and raised claims centred on bodily integrity and autonomy (Biagini and Rivetti 2020; Biagini 2020b). After 2013, in the absence of the male leadership - either arrested, killed or in exile - and the associated weakening of the Brotherhood's organisation due to repression, disenchanted members, including women, took advantage of new spaces to implement initiatives aimed at advancing gender reforms and to play roles previously denied to them under the Brotherhood (Ardovini 2020; Biagini 2017, 2020b). This renewed entrepreneurial spirit, evinced in women's activism and demands for greater autonomy, challenges the Brotherhood's patriarchal regime and division of labour, creating opportunities for gender change in the movement.

Specifically, this article looks at how the circumstances of repression caused the Sisters to reconsider gender relations within the family and marriage, and interrogates the effect that this might have on the Brotherhood's organization. Relying on interviews with Sisterhood members in Egypt after 2013, the article examines women's articulations concerning their role within the family and marriage. Using love as an analytical lens, the article argues that women's demand for love within the realm of marriage suggests their desire to commit the Brotherhood to attending women's needs, desires and aspirations. Looking at how women's activism within the family affects the Brotherhood's organisation makes a unique contribution to the literature. While extensive scholarship places the family at the centre of the Brotherhood's politics and

patriarchal culture, no attention has been given to how changes in gender relations within the family may affect the movement as the organisational level.

## 2. Islamist Movements, Women's Reproductive Work and Love

Women's identity as mothers is central to conceptualisations of gender in Islamist movements, causing Islamists to embrace heteropatriarchy as the dominant gender regime and ideology (Saktanber 2002; Mahmood 2012; Ozyegin 2015; McLarney 2015). Islamists subscribe to a complementarian gender worldview that attributes men and women different roles in a male-headed family (Badran 2011, 332). These roles are ascribed to men and women based on a normative model of selfless femininity and protective masculinity (Ozyegin 2015, 3), reflecting what Islamists believe to be innate characteristics of the two sexes. Within this model, women are understood primarily as mothers because of their reproductive capacities, and are believed to have innate qualities such as selflessness, nurturing and caring, which make them naturally inclined to play a caregiving role in their families and communities, and provide comfort to their husbands. As Saktanber notes, "In so far as women [are] thought of as having been created with the innate qualities of motherly mercy and affection, they [are] also expected to give rest and comfort to men, who in return [are] expected to take care of women" (cited in Ozyegin 2015, 222). By contrast, masculinity constructions demand men to play a main role as providers and protectors of women and their families.

Islamists' heteronormative femininity and masculinity constructions free men from reproductive and caregiving responsibilities, thus allowing them to perform politics and risk repression insofar as women are those taking care of sustaining and reproducing the movement. Starting within the family, women undertake all the necessary house chores such as cooking, cleaning, schooling the children, and so forth. Women are also the ones bearing and nurturing children, thus ensuring the reproduction of Islamist movements' new generations of activists. Hamdan (2019) makes a similar observation about the Palestinian resistance movement, asserting that women's role in the family ensures the movement's "biopolitical" resistance, guaranteeing its organic and ideological reproduction.

Islamist movements' patriarchal division of labour does not preclude women from entering the public sphere to pursue education, work or politics. However, it politicises these women's endeavours as an expression of motherhood, subordinating their undertakings to this primary identity. Accordingly, women's education is promoted as necessary to develop better mothers so that they can raise better children in turn, while women's entrance into the public sphere of politics is pursued with a view at promoting the protection of the patriarchal family and women's primary role in it (Karam 1998; Baron 2005; Badran 2011). Women can work outside the home, but only if necessary and insofar as it does not compromise women's ability to fulfil their family duties. Importantly, Islamists set rules around what are considered appropriate women's occupations, channelling women towards sectors such as education and nursing, for instance, believed to fit best women's innate nurturing and caregiving qualities (Inge 2017, 168; see also Hochschild 1983).

Two important points follow. First, given the centrality of motherhood to Islamist movements and their identity politics, women are asked to subordinate their needs, desires and aspirations to the role, spaces and positions that Islamists ascribe to women (see also Vickers 2006). Second, Islamists' feminine constructions set expectations for women to undertake reproductive work for the movement without having the prospect to be compensated for it in return. That is, by ascribing nurturing and caregiving as innate women's qualities, Islamists not only understand reproduction as a "work that women have always done" (Hochschild 1983, 171), but also recognise this as women's free labour and moralise it as their outmost expression of love (Federici 2011, 2004). The moralisation of women's reproductive work is important to counter their

“potential rebellion against the sense of suffered injustice” (Federici 2011, 69) and to detract men the duty to reciprocate or reward women for it.

Feminist scholars and historians have interrogated at length when and how women’s work in the family became devalued when compared to the work that men undertake outside of it (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Federici 2004, 2011; Smith 2020). Federici (2004) demonstrates that harnessing women’s socially reproductive labour and controlling women’s entrance into the labour force, while creating clear demarcations between productive and reproductive work, was essential to the development of a capitalist society that relied on the supply of a workforce produced and reproduced by women in the family, to fill the ranks of the expanding industry. From this, women’s work was understood as reproductive and thus as non-remunerated, in contrast to that of men, which was associated with productive industrial work, and thus as remunerated. As Smith (2020) shows, during the same period women’s reproductive family work became moralised as the outmost expression of their love. This was necessary to create a new moral order able to regulate women’s sexuality and harness their labour to the family amid growing values such as individualism and autonomy. Consequently, the institution of marriage projected a connection between “body and soul and, hence, between sex and love”, thus serving the “dual purpose of procreation and companionship” (50). Under the new model of marriage as a love relationship, men’s power and authority in marriage were not undermined; rather, they were “further legitimated ... since wifely obedience was now a ‘choice,’ indeed an expression of love” (Ibid).

To emphasise the centrality of women’s reproductive work to a patriarchal division of labour and how this is not only normalised as essentially feminine, and therefore free, but also moralised as women’s outmost expression of love, allows doing two important things in this study. First, it allows understanding why women’s emancipatory demands that would take them away from the family sphere encounter severe resistance by Islamists. At the very least, women’s moving away from the family would demand men to share in reproductive work or to devise alternative ways to compensate for the work women no longer undertake in that sphere. Also, it may compromise Islamist movements’ secure and free reproduction, with consequences for their ability to thrive and resist repression. Second, it allows understanding how women’s demand for love can be interpreted as suggesting their desire to shift the direction of commitment from the movement to the women. A feminist approach to love emphasises the relationship that exists between love and power. Within this approach, love is more than a feeling, because it is interwoven in the activities and interactions in which the members of the relationship participate (Thagaard 1997, 358). In egalitarian relationships, partners do not understand love as free, but as something extra, a gift, that they bring to the relationship, and to which the other partner should respond with gratitude and reciprocity (Horchschild 1989). Because the family work that women undertake and sustain Islamist movements is promoted as their outmost expression of love, this may create expectations among women to be reciprocated. To this day, however, women have been mainly on the giving end of love, channelling their energy in the service of the movement and its goals, while receiving little in return. Therefore, women’s demands for love in the family sphere and marriage may suggest their desire to be on the receiving end of Islamist movements’ love.

Investigating the role that emotions play in Islamist movements is important also in light of recent research. Following the cultural turn in social movement theory since the 1990s, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) scholars have advanced novel understandings of how emotions work alongside strategic, material and individuals’ motivations for mobilisation (among others see Perlman 2013; Jument 2017; Wedeen 2018, Rivetti 2020; Chamas in this Special Issue). This scholarship has challenged pejorative connotations associated to the role of emotion in collective action, which connected emotions with notions of “crowd feelings” and irrationality, contributing instead to an understanding of how emotions shape processes of mobilization and politics (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2004; Goodwin and Jasper 2006, 612).

Investigations into the role that emotions played in the events of the 2010-2011 uprisings show that they were important to foster activists' mobilisation against authoritarian regimes when rational calculations would have suggested activists not to mobilise (Perlman 2013), and also why many ordinary Egyptians citizens refrained from taking action during the same period (Jumet 2017). Importantly, inquiries into the role of emotions are also revealing of how political change is sustained under authoritarian strengthening and apparent demobilisation. In particular, Allam's (2018) research on Egypt's women's movement demonstrates that activists responded to the disappointment that followed the re-establishment of a military regime by engaging in alternative forms of expression to promote gender change, such as art, for instance. Similarly, Matthies-Boon's (2017) work on trauma among Egypt's post-revolutionary youth shows that focussing on personal lives became an important coping mechanism for activists to give meaning to past experiences and endured sacrifices.

Inquiries into the role of emotions in Islamist movements also show that emotions are important to Islamists' processes of recruitment and mobilisation (Pahwa 2019), and to forming the collective identity that sustains their unity and resistance under repression (Al-Anani 2016). Regarding the specific emotion of love, nurturing love for God and for the community is a main endeavour that Islamists undertake to cultivate members' commitment towards the movement and its goals (Kandil 2015, 12). This is true to such an extent that disengaging from Islamist groups also becomes an intense, and at times traumatic, experience for members, as their material, kinship and emotional worlds break down in the process (Vannetzel 2014; Menshawy 2020; Ardovini 2020). However, research into the role that emotions play among women in Islamist movements remains scant, despite women's work and gender roles being particularly loaded with emotional expectations (Hurwitz and Taylor 2012).

Therefore, how can we interpret Islamist women's demands for love in the sphere of marriage, when Islamist movements expect women to be the primary givers of care and love to their families and communities? And what would mean for Islamist movements and their organisations, were they to commit to women's demands for love? These are the main questions this article addresses. Social movement scholars agree that insofar as women are those undertaking the larger share of emotional work, their "expression of 'outlaw emotions' can become the basis for powerful political challenges" (Goodwin et al. 2004: 9). What is less clear is how women's emotions interact "with organizational and strategic dynamics" (Ibid). Research shows that love can contribute to shifting members' commitment towards a movement by altering the salience of personal identities and preferences (Kim 2002). However, among all emotions, love remains the most ambivalent (Ibid.), meaning that love can be appropriated by members to resignify their relationship with their movements.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it presents data and methods. Second, it illustrates the gendered character of the Brotherhood's collective identity, to show that women's abidance to heterosexual and patriarchal femininity constructions equates to their commitment to the movement and its goals. The ensuing section brings attention to the critique that women have advanced against the Brotherhood's gender regime following the movement's efforts to bring women back into the family after repression, a period when women enjoyed greater opportunities to expand their activism and roles to new areas. The last section presents an analysis of women's demands for love in marriage relationships. The results show that women's demands for love from their husbands reveal their desire to make their husbands equally invested in attending women's needs, desires and aspirations, so that women can be selves outside being mothers and wives. This has implications for the Brotherhood as a movement for the very nature of gender being a relational category. For women to inhabit the identities they have created for themselves, the heterosexual and patriarchal character of the Brotherhood's ideology also has to change, meaning that the Brotherhood

also has to commit to attending to women's needs, desires and aspirations. The conclusion summarises the main findings.

### 3. Data and Methods

Data for this article include 55 semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face with 35 Sisterhood activists in Cairo, Egypt, between 2013 and 2018. During this time, I grew close to a number of Sisterhood activists, a privilege that allowed me to interview some of the women multiple times and observe how their activism and personal lives changed with changing political circumstances in Egypt. All of the interviewees were Sisterhood members; they were either born into Brotherhood families (n. 26) or had joined the movement prior to Egypt's 2011 uprising (n. 9). They were aged between 19 and 65 years old, with the largest majority (n. 25) being in their twenties and thirties. Therefore, while I ensured to diversify among participants to include middle-generation and senior Sisters, the article relies heavily on the views of young Sisterhood members, whose voices, like those of Egypt's youth (Matthies-Boon 2017; El-Tohamy 2016), were significantly marginalised after the uprisings. Their voices are important to acknowledge because they represent those of the future generations of female Brotherhood activists and leaders.

Field research began in 2013, coinciding with the beginning of the Brotherhood's repression. This complicated issues of access to the participants and influenced the biographies of the women I was able to interview. Access to the Sisters was gained with the support of liberal-secular activists sympathetic to the Brotherhood. As it happen with closed groups, after gaining access it was the Sisters who took care of introducing me to other members. Because of this, many of the Sisters interviewed belonged to the same Cairo district. This was one of the largest districts in Cairo, with a conspicuous Brotherhood presence, including that of its student movement. As fieldwork progressed, I also interviewed Sisters active in the broader Cairo area, including members who had relocated to the capital from the governorates of Dakahlia, Port Said and Soagh, upon beginning college. Interviews took place in the Sisters' houses and, occasionally, at Sisterhood meetings and political gatherings.

Class was an important Sisterhood's characteristic. All of the Sisters interviewed were highly educated, held college degrees or were in the process of obtaining one; some held a master degree or a doctorate. Women's middle-class status was often reflected in their motivation to play a greater role in the Brotherhood and society. In terms of women's position in the Brotherhood, the young Sisters held no leadership posts in the movement's political and administrative offices. The Brotherhood is a hierarchical and gerontocratic organisation, assigning posts of leadership and authority to members based on their seniority and demonstrated loyalty to the movement, its leaders and principles (Al-Anani 2016). Furthermore, the Brotherhood has kept the Sisterhood into a separate division from the organisation since the Nasser's repression to keep women out of harm's way (Abdellatif 2008). Consequently, while the Sisters may hold leadership posts, these are usually reserved to senior Sisters who exercise their leadership upon other women in women-only spaces (Biagini 2020a). Among the middle-generation Sisters interviewed, one was a district coordinator holding a considerable degree of influence over the female members of the Brotherhood's student movement in the Cairo district where many of my interviewees were active; one had held a post as the head of the Women's Section of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in 2011-2013, the Brotherhood-led party, in another large district of Cairo with conspicuous Brotherhood presence; one senior Sister was highly influential in the Brotherhood due to her being a prominent human rights lawyer and her marriage to a senior Brotherhood member, also a human rights lawyer.

All of the women had been politically active since Egypt's 2011 uprisings. Most of the young members had taken part in the mass protests that swept Egypt in 2011; some had been active since the 2000s as part of

the Egyptian movement in support of Palestine, the one against the Iraq war, the student-led movement for universities' independence and Kefaya (see also El-Tohamy 2016). They were all present in the Rabaa al-Adawiyya sit-in and during its dispersal, playing roles as journalists, as organisers and collectors of information, and assisting in field hospitals. After the 2013 repression, all of the interviewees (but one because of age and health reasons) had mobilised as part of the Islamists' resistance, taking part in street protests, local committees and as members of the Women Against the Coup, an umbrella movement led by the Sisters, comprising diverse Sisterhood-led sub-groups. Some of the youth members interviewed had played a role as members and leaders of the Sisterhood youth-led Ultras Banat and Bint al-Thawra movements (see Biagini 2017, 2020b).

Despite the Sisters interviewed share an experience of activism, the article does not claim that they also collectively mobilised in the family sphere demanding love after 2015. Individuals follow diverse trajectories of activism, despite their past attitudes and behaviours often influence their choices (Fillieule 2010). The Sisters have demonstrated creativity in finding new ways to remain active amid repression, seeking alternative spaces and modes of expression to bring forward demands for gender reforms and emancipation that emerged during Egypt's uprising. Under repression, the family and marriage relationships became important venues for the young Sisters in particular, to bring forward those gender reforms they had advocated for since the uprisings. All of the names reported herein are pseudonyms.

#### 4. The Brotherhood, Women and Organisational Identity

Hassan Al-Banna established the Brotherhood in 1928 in Egypt with the goal of reviving Islam in society and resist Western colonialism. He advanced a religious inspired nationalist model whose focal point for reforming the moral, cultural, political, economic and legal character of society was resolutely anchored in Islam. Al-Banna's message was appealing because it identified the source of power to rectify Egypt's socio-political weakness in individuals' personal change rather than in material conditions. For him, it was the "moral character of men rather than the impact of structural forces which determined the evolution of history" (Gershoni and Jankowski 1995, 88). His model was also promising because the tools to change society were readily available and resided in individuals' resolve and dedication (Ibid.). Consequently, Al-Banna made of cultivating good Muslim individuals the Brotherhood's first step and ultimate goal to regain the glory of an Islamic nation.

Love plays a central role in the Brotherhood because it sustains members' unity and provides the basis for their commitment to the Islamic project. In Al-Banna's view, "religion was all what was necessary to create individuals' bonds of love and loyalty to the nation" (Ibidem, 82). Accordingly, awakening Islam in individuals was an affair of the spirit for Al-Banna. As he wrote, the Brotherhood's "primary concern is to arouse the spirit, the life of the heart, to awaken the imagination and sentiments. We place less emphasis on concrete ideas ... than on touching the souls of those who we encounter" (Al-Banna cited in Kandil 2015, 10).

Love for fellow Muslims and for God is instilled in members through means of *tarbiyya* (education). For a long time, scholars dismissed *tarbiyya* as simple religious indoctrination. However, as documented by Kandil (2015, 6), *tarbiyya* is an elaborate activity the end goal of which "is not to win over more believers, but to produce a new kind of person: the Muslim Brother." *Tarbiyya* takes place in small units of members called families (s. *usra*; pl. *usar*). The name choice is not accidental. The reference to the biological family indicates the strength of bond and commitment that members are encouraged to pursue.

While most of the inner values that the Brotherhood instils in members apply equally to men and women, such as the love for God, Islam and the community, and sincerity and loyalty to the leaders, others differ

among members according to their gender. This results in the creation of specific femininities and masculinities that form the basis of the Brotherhood's collective identity. This is evinced in the content that the Brotherhood's *tarbiyya* curricula for men and women address. The curricula are drafted centrally by the Brotherhood and imparted to all members; therefore, they are important to instil in members the movements' norms and values. Up to 2013, Brotherhood's curricula for women focused on religious scriptures and chapters of the Qur'an (s. *sūrah*) whose content addressed primarily women, their position in the family, and showcased the husband's and wife's rights and duties in marriage, such as *sūrah al-Nisā'* (The Women). In contrast, men's curricula focused on religious scriptures containing *jihad* (resistance), such as *sūrah al-Anfāl* (The Bounties [of War]) and *sūrah al-'An'ām* (The Grazing Livestock), to reflect the roles men play in society.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, women's curricula encouraged them to cultivate feminine qualities such as modesty, shyness, softness and selfless sacrifice for the family. In contrast, men curricula prepared them for a future life of repression. The Brotherhood's feminine construction is not unique to the movement, but resembles those adopted by other piety movements across the MENA region (Ozyegin 2015; Mahmood 2012; Joseph 1994), and also serves Islamists' patriarchal division of labour.

By virtue of their central position in the family, women play a key role in the Brotherhood's project of establishing an Islamic society. Women are the main biological and cultural reproducers of the ideal Islamic community the Brotherhood ought to establish, and thus they are the depositaries and the transmitters of the group's identity (Yuval-Davis 2008; McClintock 1993). Al-Banna clarified women's centrality to the movement and its goals in a letter titled "The Muslim Woman" (*Al-Mara'a al-Muslima*), in 1936, in which he stated that "women are half of the society", and indeed "the half who exerts the strongest influence on society, because they are the first educators of the new generations" (Badie 2011, 281). The Brotherhood believes that a patriarchal family is central to Islam, and thus to an Islamic society. This patriarchal family places men in a position of guardianship over women, consequently sanctioning men's leadership and control over women and the family, while demanding women's obedience to their husbands in return. A man's position of leadership in the family and a woman's duty to abide to his orders are epitomised in a sentence often cited by Sisterhood members stating that "a ship with two captains will sink," meaning that if both men and women were to play an equal role in the family, this will be marred by conflict.

Women are demanded to comply with the Brotherhood set standards of femininity also at the organisation level. The Brotherhood's hierarchical organisation is structured to promote the movement's collective identity. It does so by binding members' advancement into its ranks based on their seniority and their abidance to the Brotherhood's ideology, norms, values, and codes of identity (Al-Anani 2016, 3). According to Al-Anani (2016, 4-5), the Brotherhood's identity does not prevent members from having other social roles, because one can be a Brother and also a father or a teacher, for instance. However, the gender dimension of the Brotherhood's identity remains overlooked in Al-Anani's work. While true that members can have other social roles, these are influenced by the gender of members. The Brotherhood channels women into roles that it perceives more adept for women. These are supportive roles to the movement and exclude leadership roles. The Brotherhood also demands women to abide to specific feminine qualities to be accepted as members, meaning that while one can be a Sister and a mother, a teacher and even a member of parliament, only those mothers, teachers and female politicians who embody the value system and feminine qualities that the Brotherhood ascribes to women are believed to be worthy of membership and leadership in the organisation. These values include women's commitment to motherhood as their primary role, their abidance to a patriarchal family structure, the husband's orders and that of the movement, piety and modesty,

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<sup>1</sup> Nour, interview, 2017.



among others. Indeed, the Brotherhood rewards compliant women with political participation and leadership (Biagini 2020a), while it marginalises those who do not (Biagini 2020b).

Therefore, motherhood epitomises the Brotherhood's identity politics, and women's abidance to this role, along with to the Brotherhood's set femininity standards, a patriarchal family and a clear-cut division of labour, equates to women's commitment to the movement and its political project. Indeed, the Brotherhood, its organisation and activism, rest on a strict patriarchal division of labour, which attributes women a primary role within the family, sanction their abidance to the orders of their husbands and the movement, and demands of them auxiliary roles in both times of repression and its absence. These gendered arrangements demand women to give more love than they receive. Women are expected to supply the movement with emotional and reproductive labour without which the movement could not sustain itself, while giving up on personal desires and ambitions that do not match the movement's goals, and without having to expect anything in return.

In the current period of demobilisation, the Brotherhood is focusing on re-building the movement. Under these circumstances, its ability to survive prolonged repression rests equally on its capacity to sustain its networks, keep resources flowing and cultivating new generations of committed members. With many of the male members imprisoned and in exile, these tasks have fallen to a significant extent upon women and the networks they sustain. However, it is precisely at this time in which women and their family work has acquired even greater centrality for the movement and its survival, that women are advancing claims to expand their freedoms and autonomy within that sphere. As field research reveals, some Sisters have been questioning the Brotherhood's patriarchal structures along with men's position of privilege in the family. They have been demanding love from their husbands, suggesting women's desire to commit their husbands and the movement to women's needs, desires and aspirations, even when these contravene the Brotherhood's gender code and division of labour.

## **5. Sisters, Brothers and the family post-2013**

Women's demands for greater emancipation in the Brotherhood emerged in the 1990s (El-Ghobashy 2005) but the movement never fully met them. Egypt's 2011 uprising renewed members' desire for change, but the Brotherhood continued to resist calls for internal reforms, transparency, pluralism, and participation, marginalising progressive members' voices further. Albeit counterintuitive, it was the 2013 repression that provided disillusioned members, women included, with greater opportunities to play roles previously denied to them in the Brotherhood. The absence of men, incarcerated or otherwise hit by state repression, along with the fragmentation of the Brotherhood's organisation, opened up new spaces for members to play new roles and act as agents of political change (Ar dovini 2020). Women also seized these spaces, expanding their decision-making powers and leadership roles to new areas. After 2013, young Sisters established all-women opposition movements, thus emerging as key actors of street protests, and advanced an agenda in partial autonomy from the Brotherhood (Biagini 2017). Their activism challenged Brotherhood principles such as loyalty and obedience to the leaders, and norms of femininity such as piety and modesty (Biagini 2020b).

The Brotherhood initially condoned women's activism because it showcased support for Islamists amid growing popular opposition against the movement (Ibid). However, the Brotherhood soon withdrew its backing to the women activists. Increasing regime violence against women caused hundreds of them to fall under arrest and to be subjected to disappearances, following which the Brotherhood demanded the Sisters to abandon the streets as a protection measure.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, repression heightened divisions within the

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<sup>2</sup> Farida, interview, 2017.

movement. The brutality of regime violence had caused revolutionary ideas to gain popularity among Brotherhood factions. Some among the young Sisters also began to support the use of targeted violence against the state as a form of retribution.<sup>3</sup> Soon, the rifts that emerged in the streets propagated at the level of the movement's higher leadership. For the first time in decades, the Brotherhood was deeply divided and risked internal radicalisation (Willy 2021). Therefore, by late 2015, senior Brotherhood leaders returned to a traditional self-restraint approach to repression to minimise the damages to the movement, maintain unity, and to regain control of the members.

To support this effort, the Brotherhood demanded women to return to their traditional role in the family, sustain its networks, bring up new generations of members, and conduct ancillary activities in support of the movement, the prisoners and their relatives. The Brotherhood saw this role of women as necessary to its cohesion and survival. As one Sister stated referring to the expectations that the movement had of women, "women are not supposed to weaken their husbands or the movement when they fall under arrest."<sup>4</sup> Undeniably, under repression, the auxiliary roles that women play in the Brotherhood are even more important to ensure the movement's survival (see Hamdan 2019). Indeed, several Sisters willingly focused their efforts back into the family, knowing how vital this was for the movement. As one Sister remarked, women were the ones who "allowed the Brotherhood to regain power during Sadat", and those Sisters who gave up street politics to dedicate themselves "to the families of the martyrs and of the injured, taking care of their kids and making sure that they get emotional assistance" were ensuring the Brotherhood's survival under al-Sisi.<sup>5</sup>

The Sisters took other initiatives to retain some of the autonomy they had gained during the intense period of Islamist mobilisation. These took place in alternative spaces and addressed areas upon which women still retained some control. One of these initiatives saw the Sisters revisiting the Brotherhood's *tarbiyya* curricula for women. The repression had caused the fragmentation of the Brotherhood's organisation, making the movement unable to draft members' educational curricula centrally, thus presenting women with the opportunity to draft their own. In the Cairo district where many of my interviewees were active, the Sisters revised the *tarbiyya* curricula that women used in their weekly *usra* meetings. They did so by reintroducing Hassan Al-Banna's writings in the curricula in their integral form. As the Sister coordinator of this district stated, in the decades leading up to 2013, conservative and Salafi-leaning Brotherhood members imbued the movement of Wahhabi<sup>6</sup> doctrines and ideology that contradicted the moderate Islam that Al-Banna sought to promote. They "picked and chose" extracts from Al-Banna's writings to suit their objectives and their conservative and exclusionary rules. Returning to Al-Banna's texts, in their original and integral form, was therefore important to "purify" the Brotherhood from strictly conservative and narrow Islamic interpretations. It was also important to retain the younger generations to the movement, who held more progressive Islamic interpretations with regard to women in Islam and their role in the movement and society.<sup>7</sup> This view was shared by young Sisters advocating for greater emancipation for women in the movement. As one of them stated, many Brotherhood leaders "have more conservative ideas about women because they spent a long time in Saudi Arabia and other countries where Wahhabi Islam is prominent. They

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<sup>3</sup> Nour, interview, 2017; Alya and Sarah, interviews, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Reem, interview, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Islam prevalent in Saudi Arabia and Arab Gulf countries, considered to be the most conservative. Wahhabism permeated the Brotherhood in the 1960s and 1970s, after the return of Brotherhood members to Egypt who went in exile in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf to escape Gamal Abdul Nasser's repression. See Tammam (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Nour, interview, 2017.

think that as a woman you must limit yourself, that there are only limited works you can do and limited roles you can play”.<sup>8</sup> The Sisters’ endeavour to revise the educational curricula for women emphasises their desire to implement a more moderate gender approach in the movement, which could guarantee the Sisters greater roles, personal choice and freedom.

Paralleling a trend observed by other scholars (Ardovini 2020; Matthies-Boon 2017; Allam 2018), under authoritarian strengthening, women activists focused on their personal lives to make sense of their past experiences and endured sacrifices. In particular, the Sisters concentrated on pursuing personal development and professional skills, often building up on roles played and skills gained during the time of mobilisation. Some enrolled back in higher education, choosing subjects such as literature and political science, rather than religious studies and education, where the Brotherhood used to channel women. Some sought professional training in the fields of media and journalism, human resources and psychology, building up on the roles they had played as activists in the uprisings and the repression of Islamists. The pursuing of personal development by women signalled both their desire to acquire skills denied to them under the Brotherhood and to regain a sense of self-worth after other venues for participation were foreclosed to them.

In the last years of fieldwork, the Sisters began to advance a critique to the Brotherhood’s traditional division of labour. As a middle-generation Sister remarked, women had suffered disproportionately under repression “because they [the Brotherhood] pushed them continuously in the house and made them unable to look after themselves”.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the Brotherhood “looked at women who are ambitious and want to achieve a high personal status and at their objectives with great suspicion and doubt”.<sup>10</sup> Among young Sisters, sentences such as “women are subjected to many forms of discrimination starting from within their houses and families”,<sup>11</sup> and “women are grown up in the belief that we need to worship male members, beginning with our father, then our brother, our uncle, and then our husband and male children”<sup>12</sup> abounded. At times, the Sisters interpreted the Brotherhood’s patriarchal culture as a movement’s tool to erase their identities and individualities. As a young Sister remarked, “Women are considered maids first, then wives, mothers and sisters. Their individuality, their desires of what means to be a woman outside these roles is not even considered”.<sup>13</sup>

Women’s effort to pursue their ambitions, desires and aspirations during the period of Islamists’ demobilisation, challenged the Brotherhood’s traditional approach to resist repression. It implied a move away of women from the family sphere and from the movement as the recipients of their attention, redirecting women’s focus on themselves, their demands and desires. Women’s focusing on activities outside the family also compromised the Brotherhood’s gendered division of labour that sustained the movement. The movement, along with women’s husbands, put pressure on the Sisters when it believed that women’s aspirations compromised the movement’s goals and their families. Some of the Sisters who pursued education or work outside the home, for instance, recounted being asked monetary compensation from their husbands, on the basis that their wives were “not fulfilling those duties that come upon them from the marriage, and according to which the husband pays for, by providing for the family”.<sup>14</sup> At times, husbands sought the help of senior Brotherhood leaders to pressure women to abandon initiatives aimed at gaining

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<sup>8</sup> Hessa, interview, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Reem, interview, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Menna, interview, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Reem, interview, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Reem, interview, 2018.

professional skills, education and a paid job.<sup>15</sup> Both the husbands and the movement believed that women's increased autonomy, including economic autonomy, made them less reliant on their husbands, and thus facilitated women's decision to rescind from their family obligations or refuse their husbands' orders.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Sisters' Demand for Love

Scholars working on love in Arab societies show that concerns such as personal status and alliances, other than love, often dictate individuals' choices when selecting their marriage partners (Fortier, Kreil and Muffi 2016). Traditionally, also Brotherhood marriages take place following arrangements between the members of the movement. The coordinators of Brotherhood's and Sisterhood's families are often the one proposing potential partners, or are consulted in the process. These arrangements serve to guarantee the establishment of families where both partners are committed to the movement and its goals (Kandil 2015; Menshawy 2020), and where a life dedicated to high-risk activism, and often the need to maintain this secret, does not create frictions in the relationship. Women are trained since an early age to become model Brotherhood's wives. They are taught to be faithful, obedient and supportive of their husbands, even in situations of disagreements, to ensure harmony within the family,<sup>17</sup> and to be able to bear situations of difficulty, such as when their husbands are arrested, for instance.<sup>18</sup> This means that love within marriage only acquires second place in the Brotherhood, after members' commitment to the movement. Indeed, in the Brotherhood, love between couples is something that the movement believes to grow with time and not the main reason for two people to marry.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the Brotherhood "exercises pressure on couples to remain together and work out personal differences" even in unhappy marriages, because divorce is believed to be against religion's dictates and to damage the movement's unity, along with the fabric of society.<sup>20</sup>

The circumstances of repression, along with the pressures that the Sisters were subjected to by their husbands and movement to return to their traditional family role, caused some of them to advance a critique of the Brotherhood's patriarchal family and to reassess their marriage relationship. Love figured prominently in women's discussions. In particular, the Sisters criticised the authority that husbands attributed to themselves to rule over their wives and to demand their love, care and obedience, based on men being the main providers of women and the family. In contrast, the Sisters imagined a marriage relationship characterised by greater power-sharing, where their husbands also loved them, and attended to their needs and desires because of love. As this young Sister stated:

*In Islam, men should provide for the family, it's their role, but they use this role to exercise power over women. [Men] believe that just because they pay, they can buy your support, love, time and everything, that they can own you and control you ... [But] money doesn't buy more assets in the relationship of marriage ... If you are not here for the love and respect and because you want to share this journey together, then you lose me. If you are not able to convince me that you are worth keeping in my life, women who have the means will buy themselves off.<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Reem, interview, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Nour, interview, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Reem, interview, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018

<sup>20</sup> Farida, interview, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Lamia, interview, 2018.

Herein, the Sister gives love and care the meaning of a gift, something extra that women bring to the relationship of marriage. Giving a gift creates the expectation to be reciprocated by those who receive it, although for reciprocation to take place, the receiver must also understand love to be a gift (Hochschild 1982). The Sister also believes that the love that women give cannot be reciprocated (or bought) by their husbands with the money that they spend on the family, because a man's spending on the family is a husband's religious duty, and therefore it does not bring anything extra to relationship of marriage, and cannot be used to reciprocate a gift. Rather, in the Sister's words, her demand of love from her husband indicates her expectation for her husband to reciprocate the gift with equal acts of love, care and respect. The relationship the Sister envisions is therefore one where love is mutual and it is part of both the husband's and the wife's actions within the relationship. This makes marriage a relationship characterised by greater power-sharing, where both partners take decisions in the relationship (Thagaard 1997).

Differently from other studies (see Thagaard 1997), I use power-sharing rather than equality to emphasise that the goal the Sisters aspire to in marriage when demanding their husband's love is not to rescind from traditional gender roles in the family, but to increase women's rights in marriage, so to balance these with the rights that men enjoy. In particular, what the Sister demanded was her right to have an identity of her own, to pursue her interests and to be her own self outside being a mother and a wife. As she continued:

*What he [the husband] pays for is the time that the wife invests in the house, in the upbringing of children, in looking after him and his needs and the house chores. As a wife, my product is the time that I spend in the house and keeps it running. But I am still a human being like he is, I have my own journey too, my own desires, my own objectives and my own material and financial means! ... When we marry we need to compromise ... men's duty is to fund the time that I spend at home, my own time. However, in Islam, if a man has extra money he disposes of it as it pleases him, I have no right to interfere in how he spends it, as far as he covers the basics expenses in the house. So, the same should be for me, once I have fulfilled my role [at home] you don't have the right to control what I do with the rest of my time, or prevent me from pursuing my objectives.<sup>22</sup>*

The Sister's articulation of a marriage relationship characterised by greater power-sharing and freedom, went hand in hand with her reimagining marriage as a loving relationship. In the Sister's view, a loving husband was essential for her to be herself outside being a mother and a wife, to cultivate her desires, ambitions and autonomy. Ozyegin (2015) makes a similar observation in her study of upwardly mobile young Muslim women in Turkey. She found that those who aspired to pursue a career and to retain their personal interests after marriage sought a "marriage of compatibility" as opposed to a "marriage of logic". In these women's view, a "marriage of compatibility" was one established on an ethics of mutual care between husbands and wives, whereas interests other than mutual love dominated a "marriage of logic". Love was central to a "marriage of compatibility" because only a man who loves his wife would be able to recognise a woman's value. Therefore, in a "marriage of compatibility", women searched for "the emotional contribution of a man to a woman's growth ... realised through the medium of love. His love spoils her, bolster her confidence, incites her growth, and supports her in pursuing desires and needs of her own" (214). The Sisters in this study share many characteristics with the women Ozyegin interviewed. Most are in their 20s and 30s, pursuing education, professionalism and skills that they wish to place at the service of society and the movement. Women's entrepreneurial spirit was also bolstered by their experience in Egypt's uprisings and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

the roles they played in the resistance of Islamists since 2013, consequently to which they acquired greater awareness of their value as women and as members of society outside that of being wives and mothers.

Because gender is a relational category, imagining new masculinities was essential for women to inhabit the identities they had created for themselves (Oziegyn 2015, 225). Making their husbands love them and understand their value as women, outside that of being wives and mothers, was indeed important for the Sisters to be the women they wished to be, their own selves. Importantly, their husbands had to be able to love them unconditionally, and support them regardless of whether the aspirations they pursued transgressed feminine notions and roles that the Brotherhood ascribed to women, as the words of this Sister suggests:

*As a mother you provide because of love, not because you have to or because you expect your kids to behave a certain way. What do you do if your kid is sick and needs help, but he just misbehaved before? Don't you take him to the doctor? You do, because it's your kid and you love him. The same should be between husband and wife. Husbands should not use guardianship to blackmail their wives. They should provide and look after the family because they are in love.<sup>23</sup>*

Herein, the Sister is imagining marriage as a loving relationship, in which her husband fulfils his duties towards the family out of love, attending to her needs even if she “misbehaved” or disobeyed his wishes, as the example of the child the Sister makes suggests. In this loving relationship, the husband’s primary role as provider of the family does not exonerate him from the duty to care for and love his wife. Rather, it demands the husband to love her, whether she complies with her husband’s expectations in marriage or not.

As the Sisters’ articulations suggest, women’s demand for love from their husbands reveal their desire to establish marriage relationships where husbands are equally invested in attending to women’s needs, desires and aspirations, even when these contravene traditional gender roles and notions of femininity, so that women can be selves with identities of their choosing, other than uniquely mothers and wives. Women’s demand for love in the family sphere has implications for the Brotherhood as a movement for the very nature of gender being a relational category. Women’s demands for their husbands to commit to their needs cannot be accomplished without a change in the heterosexual and patriarchal character of the ideology that governs the Brotherhood’s family, its notions of masculinity and femininity that inform its collective identity, and the division of labour over which the organisation stands. As such, women’s demand for love from their husbands also extends to the Brotherhood and implies a shift in the Brotherhoods’ commitment to attend to women’s needs, desires and aspirations.

## **7. Conclusion**

Women’s activism is central to the Brotherhood’s ability to sustain itself under repression and its absence. Starting within the family, women undertake the largest share of work that is necessary to the movement’s organic and ideological (re)production. This frees men from the responsibility of reproductive work, giving them the opportunity to practice politics and risk repression. The Brotherhood’s heterosexual and patriarchal ideology normalises this women’s work as free and moralises it as women’s outmost expression of love. It also equates women’s family role, their abidance to motherhood and to a normative model of selfless femininity, to women’s commitment to the movement. This arrangement comes at the expenses of women’s autonomy and of their ability to pursue needs, desires and aspirations that contravene the Brotherhood’s gender regime, goals and mission.

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<sup>23</sup> Farida, interview, 2018.

These gendered arrangements have grown increasingly challenged by a young generation of Sisterhood activists since the 2013 repression of Islamists, and were further nurtured by the Brotherhood's efforts to channel women back into the family sphere after a period of women's expanded freedom and autonomy. In the current period of authoritarian strengthening, all other opportunities for political participation being foreclosed to them, women have focused on their personal lives to bring forward the gender reforms they advanced and hoped for since Egypt's uprisings, and to give meaning to their endured sacrifices. This women's new entrepreneurial spirit challenges the Brotherhood's ability to sustain itself under repression because it implies a shift away of women from the family and the movement as the primary units of their attention.

Under the Brotherhood's pressure to comply with their traditional family role, women have advanced demands for love from their husbands in marriage relationships. As the article's analysis puts forward, women's demand for love from their husbands reveal their desire to establish greater power-sharing in marriage, and make their husbands equally invested in attending women's needs, desires and aspirations, even when these contravene traditional gender roles and notions of femininity. Women see obtaining their husbands' love as necessary to inhabit identities they have created for themselves outside that of being mothers and wives. Women's demand for love in marriage has implications for the Brotherhood as a movement for the very nature of gender being a relational category. Women's demands for their husbands to commit to their needs cannot be accomplished without a change in the heterosexual and patriarchal character of the ideology that governs the Brotherhood's family, its notions of masculinity and femininity that inform its collective identity, and the division of labour over which the organization stands. As such, women's demand for love from their husbands extends to the Brotherhood and implies a shift in the Brotherhoods' commitment to attend to women's needs, desires and aspirations. Consequently, women's activism within the family sphere is yet another internal challenge the Brotherhood has to deal with in the aftermath of the 2013 repression, and one that has the potential to compromise the Brotherhood's ability to re-emerge from this crackdown based on traditional patriarchal organizational structures, principles and values.

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