

Ph.D. Abstract

Islamist women's Politics and Gender Activism

A Case Study from Sudan

This study is about al-Akhwat al-Muslimat—the Islamist women’s group formed by the Sudanese Islamist movement to counter among other things the communist influence among Sudanese women’s associations. This study seeks both to evaluate al-Akhwat political and gender activism and deconstruct the stereotype of Islamist/Muslim women as passive, without agency and perpetuating women’s subordination. Instead, al-Akhwat to reiterate Hale’s idiom (1997) are far more than the ‘Greek Chorus’ of the Islamist movement; they have been among the central organizers and socializers.

The main purpose of this study is to explore al-Akhwat’s perspectives on women’s issues and their political stances vis-à-vis the Islamic state gender policies to decode first, al-Akhwat gender perspectives within the feminist theory and second, to delineate their relationship with the Islamist movement and the Islamic state. Through reflecting al-Akhwat’s experience, this study hopes to provide and secure information on strategies developed by Islamist women to confront patriarchal norms embedded in Islamic tradition, society, and the state.

Data for this study was extracted through multiple techniques varying from in-depth interviews, collecting archival records and manuscripts, to attending a variety of al-Akhwat gatherings—formal and informal—at workshops, conferences, and students’ union elections. The interviewees do not constitute random samples since it is not feasible or theoretically possible to do random samples among groups whose total number is unknown; I chose to sample with *purpose* in mind. The interviewees were chosen from varying age groups to reflect intra-intergenerational relationship(s) and perspective(s). The interviewees selected in this study represent the most active and politically enthused groups—politicians, academicians, and students’ union members.

Investigating al-Akhwat’s activism brings some insights on the impact of Islamism on the experience of women’s associations. The journey within the fieldwork has uncovered both the intellectual aspect of Islamist women and their relationship with both Islamist movement and

Islamic state. The notion of homogenous and harmonious Islamist women and Islamists is problematized in this study.

On one hand, it is proved that al-Akhwat espouse multiple perspectives on women's issues varying from conservative, to less conservative to liberal. The liberal group has shown pragmatic-feminist consciousness, which *evolves* in response to the status quo and other social or political forces, with *purpose* to challenge the classical Islamic tradition and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and promote *fiqh al-nissa* (women's jurisprudence) within the contemporary women's needs. The essentialist group endorses the primacy of the family where the family is politicized and the political mother has emerged to set the ideals of Islamist women and bring the Islamic state to reality. On the other hand, al-Akhwat are not always compliant or acted upon. This study has illustrated how al-Akhwat through their private agencies interact, react and redefine their relationship with both the Islamist movement state and Islamic state.