

RADCLIFFE-BROWN LECTURE IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

# Anthropology in the Territory of Rights, Islamic, Human, and Otherwise ...

LILA ABU-LUGHOD

*Columbia University*

IT IS AN HONOUR to deliver the 2009 Radcliffe-Brown Lecture. On such occasions one feels a mixture of awe and discomfort: awe at the prospect of filling the shoes of, or paying tribute to, a major forefather in one's discipline; discomfort at the distance between the kind of world that anthropology was then and what it is now. Colonialism was the enabling backdrop to Radcliffe-Brown's anthropological research and theory-building, which spanned the first half of the twentieth century. The colonial condition was evident in his travels and the remarkable range of ethnographic cases he could marshal for his theories—from Australia, the Andaman Islands, and Native North America to West, South, and East Africa. It also informed, as Adam Kuper (2005)<sup>1</sup> has suggested in his 'alternative histories of British social anthropology', such matters as the problematic of tribes and kinship in African political order, since indirect rule was based on these, even if Radcliffe-Brown and his followers distanced themselves from the messy contact that Malinowski's rival group sought with colonial policy-makers. This larger political condition was only occasionally acknowledged in Radcliffe-Brown's more theoretically oriented investigations of social structure, kinship, law, and religion. In passing, for example, he might mention that his analysis of the role of the mother's brother in South Africa—of interest from the point of view of structural-functionalist theory—supported a decision of the Native

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Kuper (2005) relies on the work of Benoît de L'Estoile (2004).

Appeal Court on a matter of rights to bride-wealth cattle (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 30).

Anthropologists working today find themselves doing ethnography in a world characterised by new forms of empire—some call it liberal—that are intertwined in complex ways with the transnational hegemony of rights discourse, especially human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was issued at the twilight of Radcliffe-Brown's career and it has taken half a century for it to have become what Wilson (2006: 77) has characterised as 'a political value with global ambitions analogous to political metanarratives such as "liberal democracy" or "socialism"'. If only a few European anthropologists did ethnography of the colonial encounter, even while many worked in various ways either in tension or collaboration with colonial officials and missionaries, many anthropologists today are taking the human rights system as an explicit object of study, even as others work more or less comfortably alongside human rights advocates on behalf of subaltern communities whether in the Amazonian jungle or the Palestinian refugee camp.

I entered this territory of 'rights' not so long ago because of my consternation about the international politics of Muslim women's rights (Abu-Lughod 2002). It was the campaign to treat women's rights as human rights that brought me in contact with debates about human rights. And the advances of feminists into the international institutions and local organisations of transnational governance led me to think about rights activists as not outside power, even if the structures or imaginations of solidarity and common subordination differentiate women's rights work from some other forms of international human rights work.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps because I was a late-comer and an anthropologist whose ethnographic work over thirty years had not been organised around rights, human or otherwise, I have struggled uncomfortably with the framework.<sup>3</sup> I want to reflect on some problems of fit I experience when I think about 'rights' in light of two kinds of ethnography I have done, one 'thick' and one 'thin'. The thick ethnography is of everyday life in a village in rural Egypt where I have worked for over fifteen years. The thin is some modest research I have done on organisations that promote women's rights in and

<sup>2</sup>Mandating women's rights as individual humans, MacKinnon (2006) plaintively charges: 'Are women human?' Yet as Janet Halley *et al.* (2006) have examined, we are witnessing now the emergence of Governance Feminism in international institutions from the UN to the World Court.

<sup>3</sup>I drew some implications of feminist ethnography for debates about rights in the preface to the new edition of my ethnography, *Writing Women's Worlds* (2008).

across the Muslim world. My question is: does anthropology have something particular to contribute to the analysis of the growing hegemony of 'rights' as the means of addressing and redressing suffering and social injustice?

Most of the anthropological literature on rights has been on *human* rights. One could think of these developments as bookended by two strong edited volumes, one published in 2001 by Jane Cowan, Marie-Benedicte Dembour, and Richard Wilson, the other in 2009 by Mark Goodale.<sup>4</sup> Taking the world of rights, both conceptual and practical, as their objects, anthropologists have considered everything from rights as cultural and performative (Slyomovics 2005), through to the ways rights talk is mobilised (Hodgson 2002, 2003, forthcoming), the dynamics of transplantation and vernacularisation of 'rights' frames, and the social machinery of the production and reproduction of rights (Merry 2006; Levitt and Merry forthcoming). Others have invoked human rights to find ways to assist indigenous communities (Robbins and Stamatopoulou 2004).

Those more critical of the rights regime and its terms range from political theorists who denounce human rights and humanitarianism as the new colonialism or interrogate the 'paradoxes' of rights at the heart of liberalism (the assertion of rights resting on and therefore ossifying identities based on injury, (Brown 2004))<sup>5</sup> to anthropologists who interrogate the workings of rights claims and practices on the ground. Anthropologists, for example, have been sharply critical of the binds into which aboriginal Australians are placed by the demands of liberal multiculturalism and recognition (Ginsburg 2002; Povinelli 2002); others working in Africa, like Englund (2006) and Jackson (2005), writing on Malawi and Sierra

<sup>4</sup>As Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson (2001) note, anthropology's breakthrough has been to see the pursuit of human rights 'itself as a cultural process which impinges on human subjects and subjectivities'. In the introduction to the latter volume, Goodale (2009: 11) argues that there are three modes of anthropological engagement with human rights: making anthropological knowledge relevant for activists; developing methodologies that could 'reveal the contradictions and unintended consequences in the practice of human rights'; and criticising the misapprehensions of 'culture' in both theory and practice in the rights field. In reflecting on her earlier effort and the current state of the field, Cowan (2009: 325) calls for empirically grounded but theoretically informed studies that can force us to confront 'the messiness, contradiction, ambiguity, impasses, and the unintended consequences' that tidy theory and plans for political reform cannot anticipate.

<sup>5</sup>For the most sophisticated critique of 'human rights' as reducing people of the non-West to wards of a freshly laundered international order whose Western base and civilisational mission is disguised, see Asad (2003). For a classic critique that focuses on whether human rights are doing more harm than good, see Kennedy (2002; 2006 for an update).

Leone respectively, have explored the function of human rights in promoting social distinction, opening career paths, and depoliticising power in situations where human rights discourse participates in transnational governance and neoliberal governmentality (see also Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Some have worked on humanitarianism (e.g. Fassin 2005; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Redfield 2005; Ticktin 2006) while others have worried about how human rights claims that depend on naturalised suffering displace other sorts of political claims. As Lori Allen (2009: 163), who worked with Palestinians, puts it, one problem is that ‘appeals to human rights constitute a particular kind of subject whose rights are seen to arise not from a political status but from the state of (human) nature’.

Feminist critiques of human rights as/and women’s rights have taken various forms from Ratna Kapur’s (2002) biting charge that such discourses construct women of the so-called Third World as ‘victim-subjects’ to the more Foucauldian argument that women’s rights partake in a larger complex of human rights which Inderpal Grewal describes as ‘a regime of truth disseminated through transnational connectivities which came to power as a mode of transnational governmentality producing technologies of welfare alongside modes of disciplinary and sovereign power’ (2005: 125).

Feminist anthropologists have tended instead to observe the workings of women’s rights in particular contexts, whether CEDAW Commission hearings (Merry 2006) or local women’s organisations. The development of such organisations is often accompanied by tensions between what elite nationals and transnational feminists, not to mention donor organisations, want and the women’s priorities in their communities (Hodgson forthcoming; Walley n.d.).<sup>6</sup> In an important contribution aptly titled ‘Rights inside out’, Riles (2002) has shown the peculiar way women’s groups in Fiji adopted ‘women’s rights as human rights’ as a framework, despite their own doubts, convinced of the efficacy of a discourse that they imagined others ‘out there’ found persuasive.

Despite a history of anthropologists acting as activists and advocates, Jean-Klein and Riles (2005: 174–5) have made a strong case that anthropologists’ role in the rights world should be as ethnographers.<sup>7</sup> They argue

<sup>6</sup> Hodgson (forthcoming), for example, gives a wonderful account of the resistance of Maasai women’s groups to pressures to focus on female genital modification; they keep insisting that their priorities are land, livelihood, and health; they want political and economic empowerment not the eradication of ‘cultural’ practices.

<sup>7</sup> They argue that, as anthropologists, our job is neither to denounce human rights regimes and machineries nor to co-construct them by empathetically amplifying claims made in the name of rights or working alongside those doing rights work—lawyers and others.

that ‘Ethnography, and the commitments it demands, is in fact the only form of engagement that our profession is uniquely qualified to administer.’ This is a compelling argument. But I would suggest that doing disciplined ethnography often leads to profound critiques of both the framework and practices of rights. In this lecture, I hope to illustrate this through a look at some new initiatives that are seeking to establish women’s rights through Islam, whether through reform of Islamic law, particularly family law, or simply through offering interpretations of the Qur’an not driven by ‘patriarchal’ thought.

My ambivalence about such activist projects—diverse, innovative, and potentially transformative as they may be—arises from trying to think about them in light of what I know about women’s lives in one Egyptian village where I have done ethnography for fifteen years. Such women are the imagined beneficiaries of the new Muslim feminists’ efforts to guarantee women’s rights through a more indigenous framework and in the spirit of contributing as insiders.<sup>8</sup> If I entered the territory of rights because I was critical of the way outsiders justify military, political, and economic intervention in the name of bringing rights to Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002), the question that now troubles me is whether these very different initiatives that are distinct from imperial projects and that distance themselves from more secular traditions of women’s rights work in their regions, manage to resolve the problems of power that haunt other rights projects.

There are two parts to my argument. In a sociological vein, I ask whether such initiatives can be understood as outside the frames of global governance that are tied to class privilege and education, even though the participants work with a shared sense of religious community and, in some cases, religious knowledge that is substantial and important. Second, I ask whether any legalistic framework of ‘rights’, even the alternative one based on Islamic principles, guidelines and aspirations, can do justice to the complexity of women’s lives and suffering. A glimpse into the lives of women in one Egyptian village leads me to suggest that there is always a certain incommensurability between everyday lives and the social imagination of rights, whether by outsiders, veterans of women’s activism in the region, or these new cosmopolitan Islamic feminists.

<sup>8</sup> As Norani Othman (1999: 192), one of the founders of Sisters in Islam, explains, ‘The experience of many women’s groups operating in Muslim countries these past two decades demonstrates that in their daily battles a great deal more progress is achieved by working with their religious and cultural paradigm.’

I will tell only one story from the village about a case of ‘domestic violence’—a classic violation of women’s rights in the international language of rights and a focus of at least one of the new Muslim feminist initiatives—to try to articulate my discomfort with the application of a ‘rights’ frame.<sup>9</sup> My main concern is that, given the current geopolitical distribution of power, the rendering of women’s lives in the Muslim world primarily in terms of ‘rights’ risks reinforcing already existing (and sometimes malicious) simplifications of their complex lives. This is the case even though most of those working to improve women’s rights in these communities do not share these negative or simplistic views and even though women across the world now, even in villages such as this one in rural Egypt, use various languages of rights—hybrid and complicated—to assert claims.

### I. Women’s rights and Islamic reform

Several recent transnational initiatives suggest the emergence of a new social configuration and playing field for advocacy of Muslim women’s rights. Building on many local initiatives in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Egypt, and responding in complex ways to the Islamic revival and the growing appeal of Muslim politics, many educated cosmopolitan Muslim women are no longer defensive about ‘faith-based’ feminism.<sup>10</sup> I want to describe two such initiatives (distinct from and contrary to the highly publicised and pernicious efforts of some individual women in the West who claim to criticise Islam ‘from within’) before asking how such initiatives relate to the everyday lives of women in one village.

#### **Musawah**

Musawah (equality) is one important new initiative, announced by a brochure in 2008 and then a public launch in Kuala Lumpur in February

<sup>9</sup>The focus will be on one of the key ‘violations’ of women’s human rights that has mobilised the transnational community in recent years: domestic violence; see Grewal (2005). For a questioning of the capacity of legal language to capture the experience of violence, see Hastrup (2003).

<sup>10</sup>Those concerned with women’s rights realised that for the ‘grassroots’—their objects of concern and intended beneficiaries—the moral appeal of fidelity to Islam had never wavered, and in fact has been enhanced in the last few decades with the spread of education, media, and the growing funding of Islamic education and proselytising.

2009.<sup>11</sup> Calling itself ‘a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family’, it was spearheaded by the Malaysian-based feminist organisation, Sisters in Islam.<sup>12</sup> Registered as an NGO in 1993, SIS has been active since the late 1980s in advocacy around Muslim women’s rights and discriminatory family law. It is a leading organisation in what some call Islamic feminism.<sup>13</sup> Musawah’s goals were formulated, as its brochure states, by ‘a planning committee of Muslim activists and academics from 11 countries’ that included, very centrally, the prominent British-based Iranian legal anthropologist and filmmaker Ziba Mir Hosseini. The brochure notes that Musawah drew inspiration from Moroccan feminists (a major figure among whom is listed on the planning committee) who are credited with having just successfully campaigned for reform of family law.

I want to note three features of Musawah’s mission statement: ‘We, as Muslims and as citizens, declare that equality and justice in the family are both necessary and possible. The time for realising these values in our laws and practices is now.’ First, note the ‘we’ as an entitlement to speak from within. Second, note the mixed religious and political identities (as Muslims and citizens) that define the rights claims. Third, consider the hybrid sources of rights they invoke in the two sentences that follow: ‘Musawah declares that equality in the family is possible through a framework that is consistent with Islamic teachings, universal human rights principles, fundamental rights guarantees, and the lived realities of women and men.’ Musawah’s reasoning follows two principles: they prioritise the objectives (maqasid) of Shari’ah rather than the legal schools as they have developed historically, and they insist that there must be a fit with the contemporary world: ‘Muslim laws and practices must reflect justice, which is the indisputable objective of the Shari’ah. They must also uphold equality, which is an essential part of today’s understanding of justice.’<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Their website went live in conjunction with the public launch: <<http://www.musawah.org/>>

<sup>12</sup> SIS was, according to some accounts, catalysed when theologian Dr Amina Wadud, who has since achieved fame through her books like *Inside the Gender Jihad* and through leading a mixed congregation prayer, came to teach in Malaysia (Sunder 2009). See Anwar (2005), Barlas (2005), and Al-Hibri (2000, 2000–1) for other important arguments about achieving women’s rights through feminist interpretations of the Qur’an. For an overview of issues, see Badran (2009) on Islamic feminism.

<sup>13</sup> But Basarudin (2009: 14), writing her dissertation about SIS, describes the organisation more neutrally as those ‘working from within their religious and cultural frameworks’.

<sup>14</sup> The statement continued, ‘Today’s Muslim family laws are human interpretations of the Shari’ah, based on juristic theories and assumptions. Therefore, they can change in accordance with the changing realities of time and place and contemporary notions of justice.’

According to one report from the February launch, SIS and Musawah were accused by a Malaysian group of being part of a plot by Western funders to 'liberalise Islam'. What might this mean? And what basis might there be for thinking so? On the one hand, a statement like this must be dismissed as the sort of hysteria that has become a tired feature of polemics and politicking across the Muslim world: discrediting women's rights work as a western plot in order to bolster the legitimacy of Islamist groups, conservative social forces, or states.

On the other hand, without doubting the sincerity of the participants or their seriousness of purpose, one still needs to study the framework and suppositions of the initiative. The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women who gave the keynote speech at the launch used only a rights-based language, reducing religion to an aspect of 'culture'. Her only concession to the conference was to praise Musawah's 'strategy' of using a religious framework for women's rights by noting that she herself always sought to 'identify viable entry points within a given country context where change can be introduced'. What is the significance of choosing as your keynote speaker a Turkish feminist who neither invokes the authority of God nor declares her piety and who instrumentalises the religious grounds for arguing for rights?

Second, it is apparent that the generic models for Musawah are drawn as much from the ideational world of liberal international organisations as Islamic legal or moral discourse. Take its 'Framework for Action'. This is a standard element of UN campaigns. A recent example is the 2008 'Framework for Action of the UN Secretary-General's Campaign to End Violence against Women'.<sup>15</sup> Musawah's 'Framework for Action' is structured along the lines of documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: it has a preamble that declares principles and states the conditions, followed by a delineation of principles using the form of numbered articles. What distinguishes it from its models and marks it as a hybrid form is its religious opening line: 'We hold the principles of Islam to be a source of justice, equality, fairness and dignity for all human beings.'<sup>16</sup>

The third issue to consider in Musawah's construction of its reform project is its family resemblance to some political efforts from which it

<sup>15</sup> <[http://www.un.org/en/women/endviolence/pdf/framework\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/women/endviolence/pdf/framework_booklet.pdf)> (accessed 26 May 2010). In fact, Ziba Mir Hosseini (e-mail communication, 23 Aug. 2010) says that Musawah deliberately modeled their documents on the VAW campaign and explains that part of their strategy has been to persuade secular feminists to ally with them.

<sup>16</sup> <[http://www.musawah.org/framework\\_action.asp](http://www.musawah.org/framework_action.asp)> (accessed 23 May 2010).



would distance itself unequivocally. In her provocative article 'Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: the politics of Islamic reformation', Saba Mahmood has drawn attention to the awkward relationship between liberalism and US imperial projects directed at the Muslim world (Mahmood 2006). As she notes, somewhat surprisingly for a secular state, 'the United States has embarked upon an ambitious theological campaign aimed at shaping the sensibilities of ordinary Muslims whom the State Department deems to be too dangerously inclined toward fundamentalist interpretations of Islam' (2006: 329). She argues that 'secular normativity' is not, as it avers, about separating church and state or promoting tolerance of differences but about 'remaking religious subjectivities' (p. 328) and that this can be seen in the targets of US fears (the 'traditionalist Muslim'), the goal of their reform efforts (encouraging 'moderate Islam'), and their methods, which are, as she describes them, theological. She notes, for example, that a portion of the \$1.3 billion allocated to the Muslim World Outreach initiative has gone into training Islamic preachers, establishing Islamic schools that could counter the 'madrasas', and shaping the content of religious debate in the media. This is perfectly in line with the media efforts of states like Egypt to drive a wedge between a good moderate enlightened Islam and bad and wrong-headed extremism (Abu-Lughod 2005). What Mahmood argues, however, is that the partners these US initiatives have sought to encourage are those who consider themselves moderate Muslim reformers who are distinguished by the fact that they agree with the 'diagnosis that the central problem haunting Muslim societies lies in their inability to achieve critical distance between the divine text and the world'. So it is not just ideology or practice but hermeneutics that distinguishes the reformers to be encouraged from the rest of society that is dangerously literalist, ritual-bound, and in danger of being therefore attracted by the messages of extremists (2006: 330–1).

Although some might (and do) disagree strongly with her reading of the reformers' diagnosis of the problem as hermeneutical, Mahmood draws our attention to a possibly uncomfortable connection between reformist Muslim thinkers and an imperial project. The history of modern Muslim reform is complex, usually traced to the turn of the century Egyptian Muhammad 'Abduh and, in Hallaq's summary, arising from the confrontation with colonialism and the West and branching out in two directions that he characterises as utilitarian and liberal (Hallaq 1997: 207–54). If the utilitarians stripped away the history of jurisprudence and elevated the minor principle of *istislah* (interest or benefit) to guide legislation for modern problems and social worlds, while not forfeiting the

Qur'an and Sunna, the liberals more properly historicised the Qur'an, separating clearly the truths of religion from human interpretations. Among the latter, Hallaq names Fazlur Rahman, a modernist reformer whose projects and associations Hicks has traced carefully in new research to a Cold War effort, moving through McGill University and Harvard, to cultivate moderate Muslims (Hicks 2010). This suggests an earlier connection between US interests and Muslim reform, even if the local histories and impetuses to religious reform must be taken seriously.

The question that presents itself about the Muslim feminists who have established organisations like Musawah is whether their reformist project shares qualities of thought and argumentation with those Mahmood has described, not to mention their predecessors in North America in the 1950s and 1960s. The explicit focus of Musawah is Muslim family law. It does not engage in debates about how best to interpret the Qur'an; instead it begins with the more modest and sound observation that family laws are man-made, the result of interpretations shaped by the social conditions of the periods in which Islam's sacred texts were turned into law by jurists.<sup>17</sup> However, it also follows the standard modernist reformist arguments of the last century that one must seek an ethical Islam, true to its spirit and guided by the objectives of Shari'a, as noted above, and to thus make Islam appropriate for contemporary realities. The objects of their critiques are the jurists and the claims to expertise and authority of those conservatives who claim to follow them. To support its stance, Musawah reminds people of the importance of diversity of opinion in the Islamic tradition, points to specific verses of the Qur'an that promote equality and thus exposes the corruption of human interpretation (a feminist strategy that has been central in the scholarly world since the 1970s), and highlights concepts within the tradition that could support human rights.<sup>18</sup>

Musawah's form of argumentation is saturated with the vocabulary of democratic liberalism (which Mahmood and others label secular, though many Muslim reformers argue is integral to Islam). A key concept in Zainah Anwar's introduction to the resource book, *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family* (2006), is holism. She notes that women's groups in various Muslim countries 'have begun to explore a broader,

<sup>17</sup> Mir Hosseini's (2009) contribution to Musawah's resource book is 'Towards gender equality: Muslim family laws and the *Shari'ah*' but she has published widely on such issues, starting with her excellent piece in Yamani (1996) and extending to her essay in *Critical Inquiry* (2006).

<sup>18</sup> The latter article is by Khaled Abou Fadl, named in Mahmood's article as one of the 'good Muslims', the moderate Muslim thinkers with whom the US government wishes to partner even if they are more or less critical of US policy in the Middle East.

more holistic framework that argues for reform from multiple perspectives—religious, international human rights, constitutional and fundamental rights guarantees, and women's lived realities' (Anwar 2009: 3). One aspect of holism for Anwar is thus limiting the role of religion: she advocates treating religion as only one source for policy and legal reform. She extols pluralism and internal dissent and then goes on to argue that 'the right to define what these religious beliefs are and what role they should play in public law and policy must be open to public debate and pass the test of public reason' (Anwar 2009: 8–9). The concept of public debate and public good are certainly part of the tradition of Muslim argumentation, especially modernist reformist traditions, as noted above, but the use of 'public reason' in this context seems innovative. What concept does this translate and what discursive tradition does it index?<sup>19</sup>

Mahdavi Sunder (2003), a legal scholar, celebrates groups such as SIS, Women Living Under Muslim Law, and now Musawah, as heralding a New Enlightenment in the Muslim world. This suggests that at least some people associate such reform initiatives with the tradition of secular liberalism. The clever title of her blog about the Musawah launch played on, and thus reinforced in a ghostly way, a key literary text in the 'liberal' critique of the oppression of Muslim women that has been promoted so hard by neoconservatives in the US. 'Reading the Quran in Kuala Lumpur' (Sunder 2009) inflects Azar Nafisi's bestselling *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003).<sup>20</sup> Thus at least this representation of Muslim women's rights groups like Musawah reproduces the standard liberal views, both within and outside the Muslim world, that contrast religious backwardness and conservatism to enlightened modernism.

Before turning to another initiative and considering the sociology of these new groups (their metropolitan weight, their professional middle class character, and their sources of funding), I want only to point out how Sunder's analysis of what these Muslim women's groups are doing echoes uncannily the self-representations of the likes of Irshad Manji, despite the fact that Sunder and the Islamic feminist initiatives she describes take opposite views on the value of Islam (they value it) and on imperial politics (they are critics). On the Macmillan speaker's bureau website, Irshad Manji, the 'best selling author' of *The Trouble with Islam Today: a Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith* (2004) offers a number of

<sup>19</sup> Basarudin (2009) has described the launch and the issues; she notes in the piece that a part of her dissertation will discuss Musawah and Sisters in Islam.

<sup>20</sup> For more on Nafisi, see Alami 2006; Bahramitash 2005; Dabashi 2006; Mahmood 2008.

high fee public lectures. One is titled ‘Women as the key to reforming the Muslim world’. Its summary begins: ‘Women’s rights are human rights. But Muslim women today still suffer profound ill-treatment. Is there something inherent to Islam that opposes women’s equality? Or is the issue more cultural than religious? Above all, how can liberating the entrepreneurial talents of women be the key to reforming the Muslim world?’<sup>21</sup>

If Mahmood (2008: 87) is right to suggest that women like Manji ‘authenticate and legitimise’ anti-Muslim sentiment (the emancipatory models of their autobiographical writing tightly linked to the cultural imagination of democracy, freedom, and secular reform that justifies all forms of intervention and promotes civilisational thinking), the question is whether the more sober, sophisticated, knowledgeable, and committed Muslim feminists involved in genuinely grounded reform organisations like Musawah can keep their distance from, or avoid being appropriated by, those who glorify projects like Manji’s that they abhor. As we have seen, they use some of the same available language and have at least one foot in that same international or global public sphere organised in terms of the value of human rights and/as women’s rights in which these others’ work circulates. This is a public sphere generally considered secular.

### **Women’s Islamic Initiative for Spirituality and Equality**

Not as far along in its institutionalisation is another initiative that dovetails with Musawah, treading some of the same pathways and having some overlapping membership. With a very different kind of institutional base and orientation, a more cosmopolitan and deterritorialised outlook, and a more explicitly religio-spiritual cast, the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) had its first public event in 2006 in New York.<sup>22</sup> Out of this conference came the decision to form a global women’s Shura Council (consultative body) to address a perceived ‘lack of women’s participation in the discourses on Islamic law’. WISE is directed by Daisy Khan as part of the American Society of Muslim Advancement (formerly the American Sufi Muslim Association, ASMA, though nowhere in their materials is this acknowledged) that was founded in 1997 in New York by her husband, Imam Feisal Abdel Raouf. ASMA is closely connected to an

<sup>21</sup> <[http://www.harrywalker.com/speaker/Irshad-Manji.cfm?Spea\\_ID=702](http://www.harrywalker.com/speaker/Irshad-Manji.cfm?Spea_ID=702)> (accessed 12 October 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Their sophisticated new website is <<http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/>> (accessed 21 May 2010).

initiative he now directs: the Cordoba Initiative dedicated to ‘Muslim-West understanding’ and ‘bringing back the atmosphere of interfaith tolerance and respect that we have longed for since Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together in harmony and prosperity eight hundred years ago’.<sup>23</sup> Moderation, pluralism, toleration—these are the watchwords of liberalism and allegedly crucial in a polarised world.<sup>24</sup>

I was invited to participate in and observe one of WISE’s preparatory meetings in 2008. This is the kind of fieldwork that anthropologists of human rights do when they work with lawyers and commissions, or observe the social processes of the bureaucracies that establish and negotiate human rights issues. What struck me most about the daylong deliberations was how complex, creative, and unpredictable is the process by which collective decisions are made. No sweeping critiques about rights regimes or humanitarianism as the new colonialism capture this fact. The women who gathered for this meeting brought to the table a cultural imagination formed by modernist liberal Sufi ideals, UN and human and women’s rights documents, models of transnational feminist organising and activism, as well as academic conferencing. They brought tools of knowledge drawn from everything from Qur’anic exegesis to feminist historiography and quantitative social science.<sup>25</sup>

Like any emergent organisation, especially one that seeks to be participatory and collective, WISE is evolving. Even in its short lifespan its mission has shifted as a result of participants’ contesting views, constraints and funding opportunities, and the assessment of the realistic prospect of achieving certain goals. For example, although WISE initially planned to create training programmes for women in the Islamic legal traditions, it has prioritised in the short run the issuing of learned statements on women’s Islamic rights that could persuade and be useful tools for other Muslim leaders and activists.

In a survey sent out to members in 2008, the steering committee had proposed five potential issues to research and then use as the testing

<sup>23</sup> See Cordoba Initiative: <<http://www.cordobainitiative.org/>> (accessed 21 May 2010). See Hicks (2008, 2010) for more on the cosmopolitan ideology of Sufis in New York and the work of Imam Feisal.

<sup>24</sup> Brown (2006) shows that contemporary liberal tolerance discourse in the US masks some unsavory politics.

<sup>25</sup> Even the visions of femininity were multiple. Some capitalised on the fact that the acronym WISE had a meaning: some of the women present spoke about women’s wisdom as a source of authority. Others were uncomfortable with the essentialisation of femininity sometimes invoked.

ground for its first fatwa or statement (as they began to call it more neutrally, to draw away from the negative cast of fatwa in the West and perhaps not to antagonise official sources of fatwas in different countries). The statement was to constitute the focus of the official launch of the Women's Shura Council in July 2009 in Kuala Lumpur. The membership overwhelmingly voted for two issues: domestic violence (40 per cent) and women's religious authority (31 per cent). Much less popular were the other three candidates on the ballot. These were staples of sensationalised Western media representations of negative practices in the Muslim world: female genital mutilation (FGM), honour killings, and forced marriages.

Yet in the give and take of the meeting, a consensus emerged around a slightly different focus for the Shura Council's first pronouncement. To the initial consternation of the steering committee, who felt committed to the membership they had consulted and who ultimately had responsibility for doing the preparatory work for the conference and wanted a simple and appealing issue, the free flow of discussion took the group away from the survey. A few strong personalities led them to an ambitious project: they would deal with domestic violence and violence against women more broadly, but in tandem with violent extremism. Over the course of the day and with thoughtful objections being raised by different participants to aspects of what was being proposed (for example 'How was extremist violence a gendered issue?', 'Weren't there formidable analytical challenges in linking domestic and military violence?', 'Weren't the religious textual sources that would have to be brought into conversation quite diverse?', and 'Wasn't it dangerous to invoke the term jihad?'), a general enthusiasm developed for 'Jihad against Violence' as the Shura Council's first campaign.<sup>26</sup> Although the staff communicated criteria for choosing an issue—its importance to women, its likely support by women, its feasibility in terms of research, its ability to draw media attention, and the level of resistance it might provoke from traditional institutions—the outspoken professional women at this meeting, mostly academics, journalists, and lawyers, went their own way.

My ethnography, thin as it was, reveals that the outcome emerged from a lively social process, not a conspiracy or any sort of engineering. Those with strong convictions, good analyses, and experience shaped the result. Diverse in outlook and background (with family origins in South Asia, the Arab Middle East, Turkey, Iran, and the US), some were experts on

<sup>26</sup> See poster on website <<http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/pdfs/jihad-report.pdf>> (accessed 21 May 2010).

Islamic law and practice, some were experts on the Qur'an and the history of Islam. Some seemed to use the vocabulary and tools of Islam strategically because of their imagined persuasive power for others; others were secure in and vocal about their conviction that the Qur'an was the word of God. Some were devout followers of Sufi Shaykhs, learned and philosophical students of the faith and veterans of interfaith dialogue. Some covered their hair, some didn't. Notably, some were sharply critical of western imperialism while others were more supportive of the US government's 'war on terror'.<sup>27</sup> The discussion was heated at times, but the participants remained civil and respectful over these divides. The democratic, inclusive, and positive tone set by the director helped the women work hard toward the common goal of figuring out what the Shura Council might best do.

WISE had already achieved a good deal in its two years of existence. It had a structure (diagrammed neatly in its 2008 report), a talented staff, a strategic plan and vision, and a major conference and several planning meetings under its belt. It had hammered out a Compact that, like Musawah's brochure, drew on Shari'a by grounding their commitment to women's rights in 'the six objectives [maqasid] of Shari'a—the protection and preservation of religion (al-din), life (al-nafs), the intellect (al-'aql), the family (al-nasl), property (al-mal), and dignity (al-'ird)'. These, the accompanying letter sent to the membership explained, 'have a long history in the Muslim tradition and are protections that are rooted in the Qur'anic text'.<sup>28</sup>

WISE had also been successful in fundraising. It had just won a €1million grant from the Dutch Foreign Ministry's MG3 Fund, an initiative related to the third Millenium Development Goal of 'Gender Equality

<sup>27</sup>The ideological positioning of one of the most forceful women in the group placed her squarely in that camp that Mahmood called reformist. Her biographical sketch notes that she 'has spent the past decade assisting moderate Muslim communities around the world to resist the ideological onslaught of Islamic extremism. She advises both government and civic leaders on the threat posed by the extremists, as well as on policies to transform stifled Muslim societies into progressive participants of a free society.'

<sup>28</sup>What follows in the Compact is a series of declarations about exactly what, in these six domains, WISE women are dedicated to: in the sphere of protecting religion, for example, the Compact states, 'We are dedicated to advancing Muslim women's positions as religious and spiritual authorities.' In the sphere of the intellect, 'We are dedicated to defending Muslim women's freedom to interpret, think, and express, especially concerning Islam's primary texts.' Under property they support 'Muslim women's financial independence.' And under dignity, 'We are dedicated to empowering Muslim women to make dignified personal, familial, and career choices' <<http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/resources/>> (accessed 21 May 2010).

and the Empowerment of Women'.<sup>29</sup> €70million went into grants for NGOs that were working on the ground to help realise this goal.<sup>30</sup> In seeking the grant, ASMA's WISE proposed to 'work with local and national women leaders and the organizations they work in' to provide: 'a) a global infrastructure for shared work among Muslim women's groups, organizations, institutions, and networks, b) religious context for Muslim women's dialogue about, and advocacy for, their rights, c) an institutional voice for gender equality, and d) accessible knowledge about effective ways to promote the equitable ethic of Islam'.<sup>31</sup> As Daisy Khan stressed at the meeting, WISE planned to facilitate and enhance the work of others, not to compete.

The meeting I attended was followed four months later by a two-day retreat at which certain principles were agreed upon. After this retreat, in its usual consultative manner, the WISE steering committee sent out to the membership a summary, built into which were survey questions again. They were to vote on how best to organise the research and disseminate findings, what slogans to use, what mode of representation to use for what was now called 'the report', and to whom the solutions proposed to the problem of violence should be addressed.

Again, there was an unanticipated outcome in terms of content and rhetorical strategy. The major breakthrough of the brainstorming meeting was to have found a way to link domestic and extremist violence.

<sup>29</sup>Ironically, at the same time one of the more extraordinary scholarly ventures of the last decade on Islam and the Muslim World lost its funding from another Dutch ministry: The Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM).

<sup>30</sup>As the publicity for the grant notes, 'Concrete action is called for to achieve equality between women and men. As a result Dutch NGOs, companies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have decided to put their back into the fund.' Note the partnership between government and corporations and that PricewaterhouseCoopers and a feminist consulting firm were administering it for the Dutch government. <[http://www.minbuza.nl/en/Key\\_Topics/Millennium\\_Development\\_Goals\\_MDGs/Dutch\\_aim\\_for\\_MDG\\_3/MDG3\\_Fund/Parties\\_involved](http://www.minbuza.nl/en/Key_Topics/Millennium_Development_Goals_MDGs/Dutch_aim_for_MDG_3/MDG3_Fund/Parties_involved)> (accessed 21 May 2010).

<sup>31</sup>Since the grant had listed twelve countries in which it would work with women leaders and develop training programs, the instructions for drawing case studies to use in the research and statement on domestic/extremist violence for the launch cautioned participants to focus on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Egypt. Since obtaining the grant, WISE had shifted its goals slightly, or at least made priorities. According to the invitation letter for the Kuala Lumpur 2009 launch, the conference would convene 'the first-of-its kind global Muslim women's Shura Council'; unveil 'a newly created Muslim Women's Fund, to provide funding opportunities for strategic projects'; and create a 'state of the art Muslim women's online portal' to share information. Announcement of the grant can be found at <[http://www.minbuza.nl/en/Key\\_Topics/Millennium\\_Development\\_Goals\\_MDGs/Dutch\\_aim\\_for\\_MDG\\_3/MDG3\\_Fund/List\\_of\\_45\\_Projects/American\\_Society\\_for\\_Muslim\\_Advancement\\_ASMA](http://www.minbuza.nl/en/Key_Topics/Millennium_Development_Goals_MDGs/Dutch_aim_for_MDG_3/MDG3_Fund/List_of_45_Projects/American_Society_for_Muslim_Advancement_ASMA)> (accessed 21 May 2010).



Drawing on the Islamic tradition, the two would be linked by the question of leadership.<sup>32</sup> The Queen of Sheba story would be used as the organising parable. This creative choice is perhaps significant in that the Queen of Sheba is mentioned in all the Abrahamic traditions, and it is precisely this Abrahamic identity for Islam that ASMA and the Cordoba Initiative, as Hicks has argued, are actively promoting.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the final digest (WISE 2009: 17–18) of the ‘Jihad Against Violence’ goes to the Qur’an to find ‘different models of behavior in which some characters dictate reality and resort to coercion, while others—those at peace and willing to change themselves—achieve change gently’. They contrast the tyranny of Nimrod and the Pharaoh to the Queen of Sheba who in Surah 27 is powerful but noncoercive.

At this retreat, multiple models and genres of representation and argumentation were brought into play by the worldly participants who shared deep Islamic knowledge and the skills and vision of the cosmopolitan professional women Merry (2006) has described as those who get heard in transnational women’s rights initiatives: they are fluent in the languages of English, rights, and bureaucratic UN-speak.<sup>34</sup> The document they produced had a Preamble, for example. The women also used the social science-based instruments of ‘democracy’—surveys and polls. Yet at the same time, they made arguments on precisely the same ground as male religious authorities by quoting from and interpreting the Qur’an and hadith. One of the members of the steering committee is the first woman

<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, ASMA’s other big initiative is to train young leaders.

<sup>33</sup> See Hicks (forthcoming). Daisy Khan deliberately places this initiative in an American setting, as is evident in the 2009 interview she gave to the online magazine, *Sojourners: Faith, Politics, Culture*. She stated:

Our country was founded as a shining beacon of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For many Americans, this ideal proved true. Many other Americans, however, only lived in the shadow of this beacon. Religious women courageously stepped into this arena and shook up the status quo. Driven by faith to fight for their freedoms, women such as Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, and Amelia Boynton Robinson led some of our country’s most extraordinary large-scale political and social changes, including the abolitionist, suffrage, and civil rights movements. . . . [T]he passionate, courageous, and dynamic Muslim women who have dedicated their lives to the causes of justice and equality, fighting for the rights of Muslim women, are contemporary inheritors of this great American legacy of women’s faith-based activism.

<sup>34</sup> Sally Engle Merry has written an ethnography of the transnational feminists who attend the meetings in New York, Geneva, and Beijing where the Commission on the Status of Women holds its hearings on CEDAW and where documents and platforms are tortuously composed to produce consent by delegates from many nations.

to have published an English translation of the Qur'an.<sup>35</sup> Even more prominently than in the case of Musawah, WISE's discourse of religious exegesis and quotation sits side by side with the generic conventions of culturally secular international rights work.

Initiatives like Musawah, WISE, and the Women's Shura Council seem to be the wave of the future. Although they build on a decades-long tradition of Muslim women's activism, some of which has been explicitly grounded in religious identity and conviction, they are finding surprisingly strong support now from western foundations and governments.<sup>36</sup> Their efforts are commendable, particularly in light again of recent Western alarmism about Shari'a and headscarves, represented in the

<sup>35</sup> A follower of the reformist Sufi thinker Seyyed Hossein Nasr, she has come under some fire for being neither an Arabic speaker nor a trained Qur'anic scholar. For more on Nasr's involvement in moderating Islam during the Cold War development of Islamic Studies in North America, see Hicks (2010).

<sup>36</sup> In addition to the major competitive grant from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, WISE lists an impressive group of supporters: The United Nations Population Fund; William & Mary Greve Foundation; Rockefeller Brothers Fund; Sister Fund; Ford Foundation; Global Fund for Women; Danny Kaye and Sylvia Fine Kaye Foundation; Graham Charitable Foundation; Deak Family Foundation; Henry Luce Foundation; Elizabeth Foundation; and Ms. Foundation. Although the women participating in its projects are volunteering their time, all having professional positions in universities and elsewhere, they do get compensated for their travel to the conferences and retreats. Sisters in Islam, the Malaysian-based organisation, has also been successful in fundraising, although, again, a good deal of hard volunteer work has gone into it for years. Since 2005, for example, it has been a grantee of the Sigrid Rausing Trust, which claims to fund international human rights work; the current £100,000 sterling grant they have seems to be for establishing Musawah, the organisation discussed above.

An intriguing initiative out of North Africa that has received extensive European government funding has produced something more concrete and defined than the wide-ranging ambitions of these two organisations: a way to try to guarantee women's rights through a legitimate instrument within the Islamic tradition, the prenuptial contract. The Model Marriage Contract, published in 2008, was developed out of coordinated efforts in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria through partnering with Global Rights, self-described as a thirty-year old international human rights advocacy organisation <[http://www.globalrights.org/site/PageServer?pagename=gr\\_index](http://www.globalrights.org/site/PageServer?pagename=gr_index)>. The North African feminists who developed the Model Marriage Contract consulted with a wide range of ordinary women about their experiences and desires in marriage and the published contract is 'intended to guide future spouses as they draft their marriage contract by providing suggestions for topics to discuss as well as examples of clauses to stipulate'. The booklet recognises that contracts must be tailored to individual situations but insists that they should be 'rights protective for women' and should promote 'equality within marriage'. Like so many of the feminist projects of the last decade and a half that work for reform within an Islamic framework, the project found enthusiastic funding from outsiders: the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office Global Opportunities Fund, the British Embassy in Rabat, the Norwegian Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Norwegian Embassy in Rabat are thanked. In turn, the drafters' expertise was sought by Musawah. <[http://www.globalrights.org/site/DocServer/Conditions\\_not\\_Conflict\\_Marriage\\_Contract.pdf?docID=10183](http://www.globalrights.org/site/DocServer/Conditions_not_Conflict_Marriage_Contract.pdf?docID=10183)> (accessed 21 May 2010).

British and Canadian outrage at Shari'a family arbitration councils, proposed bans on burqas in France and Belgium and absurd proposals such as the 'Jihad Prevention Act' introduced by a Republican in the United States House of Representatives in 2008 which would require aliens to attest that they will not advocate installing a 'Sharia law system' in the United States as a condition for entry visas and even naturalisation.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, as with the hysteria about NGOs in places like Egypt, where these facts of outside funding could be—and often are—blown out of proportion and used to discredit rights initiatives in the service either of the religious right or states anxious to limit independent political activity (Sakr 2004; Abdelrahman 2004, 2007), one must be cautious about making too much of foreign funding of Muslim projects of internal reform.

However, the new consensus in the international rights community and among many Muslim feminist activists and scholars that Islam and women's human rights must be reconciled and that internal reform is necessary is a phenomenon worth examining more closely. A human rights lawyer and scholar published in 2006 an important article about the crisis facing international nongovernmental organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International that have been working in the Middle East and Muslim world. Uncomfortable about how the human rights movement's rhetoric 'echoes that of the Bush administration', the dilemma facing the practitioners, she noted, was 'how the human rights movement should deal with Islamic law' (Modirzadeh 2006: 192). Current practice, she argued, was to evade the issue by beginning every report with a caveat that it would take no position on Islamic law (to appear neutral and non-imperialist) but then proceeding in the body of the report to report violations that are linked to 'rules of Islamic law' without admitting it explicitly (Modirzadeh 2006: 207). She offered three ways out of the dilemma. She was surprised, two years later, at the outcome of her assessment of the way International NGOs dealt with or avoided dealing with Shari'a. Human Rights Watch decided to create a position for an in-house Shari'a expert.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> This act, presented to the Judiciary Committee, would amend the Immigration and Nationality Act by including the following: 'Any alien who fails to attest, in accordance with procedures specified by the Secretary of Homeland Security, that the alien will not advocate installing a Sharia law system in the United States is inadmissible'; 'The visa of any alien advocating the installation of a Sharia law system in the United States shall be revoked'; and the Act would even make advocating Sharia grounds for revoking naturalisation. The bill was proposed by Congressman Tom Tancredo. I thank Mahmood Mamdani for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>38</sup> Modirzadeh's presentation was at the workshop, 'Who's Afraid of Shari'a?' held at the *Center for the Critical Analysis of Social Difference* (co-sponsored by the *Institute for Religion, Culture,*

Twenty years ago, no one would have predicted that Muslim women's rights would be travelling so regularly in and out of Islamic law, Islamist parties, and the discourses and practices of moderation and Islamic reform among an educated and cosmopolitan professional elite.<sup>39</sup> Rather than question the authenticity of such projects, as an ethnographer I have been looking at some of the social, political, and economic circuits in which they participate and the multiple cultural resources they draw on to formulate their quite distinct 'rights' projects.

However, one of the most important questions an anthropologist like me with experience in rural areas and among nonelite women feels compelled to ask is how such organisations, conceived and run by educated urban elites who spend a good deal of energy studying, thinking, drafting position statements, applying for funds, and presenting Islam to the West (and the East) as something not incompatible with gender equality, relate to those in whose name and on whose behalf they work. These are what are often called 'the grassroots'. These new groups working within the framework of Islam hope to ameliorate the lives of women by finding locally and personally meaningful resources. They also hope to avoid accusations that they are importing foreign ideologies, devaluing women's commitments to being good Muslims, or not caring about God, even while most of them argue that religion is a matter of private faith. How do

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*and Public Life*) at Columbia University, 3 Oct. 2008. I am grateful to Katherine Franke for bringing this job advertisement to our attention. Posted in 2007, it was for an 'Advisor on Sharia in the Women's Rights Division'. This person was to provide HRW 'with advice on the application of sharia as a legal system, the variations in its employment by states and other agents in different regions of the world, and how it is used to advance or restrict women's human rights, in areas including civil and political rights, family law, and sexuality'. The qualifications included 'deep expertise in Islamic jurisprudence and history' and 'a history of involvement with women's organizations and human rights organizations in Muslim communities'. Also required was an advanced degree, work experience, fluency in English, and advanced Arabic. Described as 'beneficial' were other linguistic talents: 'knowledge of one or more of the languages of countries in Asia, Africa, or the Middle East with substantial Muslim populations' and 'knowledge of international human rights law and experience with field research, report writing, advocacy, and media work'—in other words, the transnational language of rights. A tall order. Three feminist anthropologists I know who work on Islamic law or Muslim societies were rejected for the position; they believed that HRW had a very specific kind of candidate in mind: a more 'authentic' Muslim woman trained in Islamic legal studies, perhaps wearing a hijab. This just might be the kind of woman that the Women's Shura Council has envisioned training and that, as the President of Union Theological Seminary the Reverend Serene Jones would announce at their conference in Kuala Lumpur in 2009, her institution was prepared to help train (Elass 2009).

<sup>39</sup>For various treatments of women in/and Islamist parties, see Deeb (2006), Jad (2005) and Shehabuddin (2008). For more on NGOs and the introduction of debate about Shari'a in Egypt, see Abu-Lughod (2010).

these new reformist projects, with their constructions of women's rights in terms of Islamic law, spirit, and tradition, yet arising from these women's own social locations in global fields of feminist governance in which elites from the South have a very visible and prominent place, sit with or fit with the everyday lives of ordinary Muslim women in particular communities?

## II. Incommensurate lives: religion in the everyday and violence in the domestic sphere

No one can pretend to 'represent' ordinary women. But I think it is fair to use some stories from one Upper Egyptian village to clarify the conundrums I face as an anthropologist trying to think about the complex terrain of women's rights in the Muslim world today. Ethnography allows us to reflect on existing frameworks for addressing Muslim women's problems that organise initiatives like WISE or Musawah or, for that matter, other international and local projects of empowerment and rights advocacy. I have found that the incommensurability between the lives of these particular 'grassroots' women and the terms in which they are being imagined in the field of rights, Islamic or otherwise, is profound.

I begin by outlining some of what religiosity or piety means to some women these days in this one Egyptian village in which I have been working for over fifteen years, drawing a picture of the varieties of and tensions among 'everyday forms of the religious life' and the ways these have changed over the past fifty years. This might clarify the particular cast and the class politics—both national and international—of the projects of Islamic reform I have been describing. One question that the juxtaposition of projects and lives raises is how far visions of a modern enlightened interpretation of the Qur'an or legal reforms guided by the 'objectives' of Shar'ia take into account the variety of meanings of Muslim religious experience in this village. A more urgent question is what authority and channels might such projects find in order to compete with existing authorities and institutions on the ground, from Sufi brotherhoods to new Islamic institutes, from teachers in Azhar schools or local kuttabs (Qur'anic schools) to popular televangelical preachers? Then I move on to a single case of 'domestic violence' in the village to ask again whether the framework of rights can begin to capture the complexity of this vexing problem in the lives of women in this village and, by extension, elsewhere.

Islam in village life is evolving and variegated. There are generational differences related to the political, social, economic and cultural

transformations in Egypt over the past decades. Older women think of themselves as good Muslims and wear modest wide clothing and cover their hair. The oldest generation also still wears the traditional black wool cloak over their clothes for social visiting but this has been replaced, for the women in their forties, by the more fashionable abaya, or tailored overcoat. Although the national trend to become more strictly observant had already reached the village when I arrived in 1993, older women's regular prayers were not something new.

For the new generation, the key factors have been the simultaneous spread of the influence of education and television and the Islamic revival. They increasingly express their faith in other ways and dress differently. Some young women wear jeans and various forms of long-sleeved fashion tops or tunics. Some wear sweaters and long skirts. These are urban forms of dress that link them to Luxor and Cairo. No one would think of leaving the house without a hijab or headscarf; the more fashionable wear colourful hijabs that change with the current styles. But not all the young women are like this. Those who attend the Azhar schools, a parallel system that follows the national curriculum but includes significant Islamic studies, pull their hijabs more fully over their hair and wear long shapeless dresses (albeit of pretty fabric). These are the girls whose families prefer schooling that is not co-ed, where the fees are lower, and where religious study is more serious. Many appreciate the more plentiful opportunities for higher education because of the lower standards and the greater choices of fields to go into after secondary school.

Multiple religious activities engage girls in the village. Most girls and boys are sent from a young age to the kuttab, to learn Qur'an, as an after-school and summer holiday activity. In fact, most parents swear that the only way their kids learn to read is from the kuttab. Those who have the interest and talent continue; many of these are also in the Azhar schools where religious knowledge is valued. Through the kuttab children gain new opportunities, the most exciting of which are annual competitions held in Cairo for Qur'anic recitation. Smart and studious girls relish the trips to the capital with their group: the nine-hour train journey, the thousands of kids from all over Egypt during the day of the competition, the trips to the Zoo and the Citadel on the second day. In addition to whatever religious reward and social approbation they gain along with certificates and complete sets of the Qur'an recorded on cassette, they have a chance to win prize money. One girl in the community had come first two years in a row—she got 750 L.E. (Egyptian pounds, worth approximately £85) one time, 500 L.E. the other. This is significant for a fourteen year

old, given that a local teacher might have a salary of 100 L.E. per month and someone working for the Antiquities Service, the big local employer, gets 80 L.E.

More recently, an Islamic institute for girls has opened in the next village. Young women are eagerly taking up training in religious studies both for its own sake and because it is meant to prepare them to teach in the Azhar schools where there is a shortage of women teachers. For one young woman I knew, working toward the certificate was her salvation from boredom. Having finished her vocational business degree, she had found herself stuck at home. It was hard to go from dressing up and heading off to Luxor every day to study, take exams, mix with other girls, and endure the pleasant annoyance of the boys who hung around the school, to doing housework. An avid soccer fan, she came alive cheering her teams on television. But most of her time was taken up with lonely housework that she did to relieve her mother, who herself was busy with the cows and sheep that helped supplement her husband's income from farming and stonemasonry at a Pharaonic temple. Only a marriage proposal would give her a different life since there is precious little employment in the area, especially for a girl from a poor family with no connections. While she waited for someone to come and ask for her hand—and perhaps mindful of the increasing number of young women in the village who never got asked—the religious institute gave her intellectual challenge, an unimpeachable moral claim to be out and about (after four years in the house), and possibly, later, a respectable way to make some kind of living. She could go for up to eight years; she would get a certificate after two years, then another after two more. She said she liked knowing more about her religion and she loved studying, though she was finding terribly confusing the different interpretations of the four schools of Islamic law.

All those in the Azhar schools, the kuttabs, the university courses in religious studies, and this new kind of institute were becoming knowledgeable about Islam in ways their mothers, and even fathers, were not. They were literate and they studied the Qur'an, Islamic history, exegesis and law. They were empowered by this knowledge: others in the local setting, and even their families, respected them for it. They had confidence and knew more about their rights. They were also empowered in practice as they had good reason to be out and about, independent. But the kind of religious education they were receiving was, by the standards of the US State Department initiative and the modernist reformers discussed above, distinctly traditionalist. Though the students might be equipped to understand the grounds on which arguments by Musawah or the WISE Shura

Council were being made, at least insofar as they draw on Islamic concepts and sources, it is unlikely that they will ever hear such arguments. And the interpretations of women's role in Islamic society they are hearing in such institutes is probably far from egalitarian or revolutionary, even if some key principles, such as the importance of consent to a marriage, have now become widely established among this group of young women.

This new generation is participating in forms of religious life that are in tension with the more 'popular' local traditions of religious experience and practice, some associated with the Sufi brotherhoods, that are still strong in Upper Egypt (Chih 2004). One small indication of this new conception of proper religiosity can be seen in young women's ambivalence about such practices as possession or other popular religious practices of uneducated women of an earlier generation. Funeral lamentation, traditionally an elaborate expressive form in which some women excelled, is now considered religiously wrong (*haram*) and no young women participate (Wickett 2010). Piety is becoming more and more limited to conventional prayer, fasting, and scripture.

It is women and girls like these in one village in Egypt that the cosmopolitan professional women of Musawah and the Shura Council project as the beneficiaries of their efforts to reinterpret Islam and introduce reforms in the laws governing family and marriage. These are the sorts of marginalised women and girls the grant proposals promise to train in their rights. Yet the distance between the reformers and these girls and women embedded in the particular socio-religious institutions of one village in Egypt, and similar ones elsewhere, is vast. What social and political mechanisms might bridge this?

A different gap exists between the framework used by reform organisations and these village women's imaginations of social responsibility and individual desire. To explore this, I want to unpack one case of 'domestic violence' in the village. Domestic violence is a cornerstone of women's rights work in NGOs around the world and in international forums, in recent years the splashiest issue the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) is promoting. It is also, as we will recall, a central element in the WISE Shura Council's first campaign, 'Jihad against Violence', and something that Musawah would treat as a key dysfunction in marriage and family that reform of Islamic family law and education about more just interpretations of Islam must address. For this part of the world, such violence—now labelled a violation of women's human rights—is generally represented as the result of tradition or patriarchal culture. If outsiders blame Islam for this 'culture' (see Abu-Lughod 2011),



the Muslim feminists of Musawah or WISE are quick to argue that the fault lies in cultures that, contra the arguments of some Muslim conservatives, are based on insufficient knowledge of, or adherence to, true Islam. Islam, they want to argue, enshrines justice, equality, human dignity, and love and compassion among humans and in the family.

I want to show why village women's lives confound for me this subject of advocacy for women's rights. As an anthropologist familiar with the complicated lives of women in this one village, I stumble when I try to apply the standard feminist framing of and solutions to domestic violence. The standard idea is that patriarchy is the problem and the solutions are shelters, police training, anger management training, media campaigns to increase awareness, the development of women's rights consciousness, holding governments accountable for not protecting women, modernising or, now, increasingly looking for bases in Islam for care, love and peace within families, as the 'Jihad against Violence' campaign and Musawah's appeal to basic principles do.<sup>40</sup>

The case of one young woman whose situation has troubled me ever since I met her more than twelve years ago suggests the inadequacies of these analyses and solutions. I will sketch the contours of Khadija's situation to show why an anthropologist might be reluctant to mediate such an unhappy story through the language of women's rights, Islamic or otherwise.<sup>41</sup> Resisting the women's rights frame and exposing the poverty of the categories set by the Violence Against Women (VAW) discourses, including on 'domestic violence', her domestic life needs to be understood in terms of both global forces and local bonds of attachment and dependency.<sup>42</sup> I also note the special remainder, a personal circumstance that complicates her marriage further, with the goal of suggesting that there

<sup>40</sup> As Merry (2006) notes of successful social work projects against domestic violence in Hawa'ii, anger management for men and police training are among the practices that have been transplanted to that locale that may be helping women develop 'rights consciousness'. (See also Merry 2009.)

<sup>41</sup> For some examples of such projects in Egypt and Palestine, see Abu-Lughod (2010).

<sup>42</sup> I am not arguing with the Egyptian feminist, scholar and would-be parliamentarian Iman Bibars (2001: 170), who anticipates criticisms of her focus on battering in her study of the urban poor by saying, 'I could be accused of applying my Westernized middle-class biases in assessing, interpreting, and analysing the stories of the women interviewed in this study', but the issues came from them. 'Wife-battering is a violent and humiliating experience, as stated by the women themselves in their own words.' Then she quotes one informant who said, 'I felt like dying. I hate him and hated my life.' The question I ask, instead, is how the things these women say about their husbands or brothers or fathers are translated into the language of women's rights through the medium of reports and projects by rights advocates, and how the re-embedding transforms their own readings. I am fully aware that my own intimate rendering of Khadija's situation as an ethnographic case study may make her stories part of the rights discourse (Lazreg 2002).

may always be such particulars that confound easy generalisation. Khadija's life need not be typical to teach us something general about the relationship between everyday life and rights frames (Abu-Lughod 1993).

When I saw her mother in the spring of 2009, I learned that Khadija had just returned to her husband after a month or so living back home. This had become a pattern in her six-year marriage. Khadija was unhappy and her husband was sometimes violent. Khadija's mother was particularly galled that during her daughter's latest crisis, when her hands had been clenched and her body twisted, the husband had taken her to the local hospital and, in front of a group of people who knew them, announced loudly, 'She has the worst kind of illness there is.' I knew that, for her part, Khadija complained that her husband did not like her to leave the house or go to visit her mother. He stayed at home most of the time and would start drinking early in the morning, first coffee (when most villagers drink tea), then beer, then whisky. During this latest escape home Khadija was taken by her brother to Cairo (which neither had ever visited) to consult a psychiatrist recommended to them by a European expatriate neighbour. The doctor, according to Khadija's mother, had talked with her at length and told her there was nothing wrong with her except unhappiness. He advised her to come talk to him every three days. And to leave her husband.

As Khadija's mother explained, neither was possible. There was no way her family could afford to stay in Cairo or pay the psychiatrist's fees. Even the medicine he had prescribed was expensive. They could not afford to refill the prescription. But why couldn't Khadija leave her husband? Her mother put it starkly: she has two children already, and one on the way. Who would support them? How could she bring them with her to stay in their crowded house? Khadija's mother and father were long divorced. Khadija's mother lived with and was supported by her brother, along with her son, her parents, her widowed sister-in-law and her three children. This maternal uncle of Khadija's was the only one in the family with a job, and since it was as a teacher it paid little. Khadija's father had little work and had a new family to support.

The vectors of oppression that consign Khadija to remaining in a conflictual and violent marriage can be traced here not so much to traditional forms of gender inequality but to the poverty that is a result of local family histories and larger political economic transformations that for a century at least have concentrated wealth in the capital and the north of Egypt and that now, thanks to neoliberal reform, organise the distribution of property and welfare in even more unequal ways. Global inequalities that

have their own colonial and contemporary histories have positioned places like Egypt in certain ways too, condemned to endemic poverty.

Financial and social pressure had certainly made Khadija feel vulnerable and tense in the months before her wedding. She had confessed to me that she felt so much pressure because they were having trouble getting the bride's family's share of the marital goods purchased. Marriage is notoriously expensive and burdensome across Egypt since the groom's and bride's families must provide everything for the marriage at the beginning.<sup>43</sup> As is customary, she was expected to furnish the kitchen goods while the groom provided the house and furniture, as well as her gift of gold jewellery. If she didn't bring the expected contribution to the marital home, people would gossip, she said bitterly: 'People have nothing else to do here, no work, so all they do is talk about everyone else.'

The global, national, and local dynamics of inequality that have placed the poor under such pressure also have had a peculiar impact on Khadija's marriage because of how they have shaped her husband's life. Why does he drink in a community where most people do not and where religion specifically proscribes it? He and his brothers were among the first men in the village in this region of Egypt where Pharaonic sites have attracted Western tourists and archaeologists for a century to get involved in tourism in the period after feminism, women's employment, and other transformations in Europe and the United States had made independent women active participants in the global tourist industry.<sup>44</sup> As a youth he mixed with tourists, drank with the foreigners, and took up with European women. Like many of the young men in the area who have done this in the last twenty-five years or so, he became involved with an older European divorcee (Mitchell 1995; Van der Spek 2010). These men have found a new way to make a living without migrating. The European and American women build them houses; buy them taxis; partner with them to run hotels; and occasionally take them home with them.

Khadija's husband has had an Austrian 'friend' for twenty years. He goes to visit her in Europe in the summer and she comes to visit in the winter. Sometimes she brings her grown son, which shocks some village women, although everyone these days is having to come to terms with

<sup>43</sup>This has led to what is often called a 'marriage crisis' and has delayed marriage for many men and left many women unmarried. Khadija felt rushed into things; her aunt was helping out financially but they were having to buy most things on credit. For more on the marriage crisis, see Singerman (2007), Hasso (2010).

<sup>44</sup>Enloe (1989) has drawn our attention to the shifting gender dynamics produced from mass tourism by European and North American women.

such lucrative transnational arrangements. Like most local men, Khadija's husband had wanted to start a family. When he had saved up enough, he married this local girl. It was not surprising that Khadija's husband had chosen her, much younger, to start his own family. His mother seems to have been involved in arranging the match since she is always the one who intervenes to persuade Khadija to return. He built a house for Khadija in 2001 but didn't tell his Austrian friend. These kinds of situations can be difficult for all concerned. The tricky time for everyone seems to be when she comes to visit. Some people say that at first she didn't know the truth. Now that she knows, others say, she is jealous. Khadija's mother, though, six years into the marriage, insists that the Austrian 'wife' adores his children and walks proudly around the village hand in hand with his little boy. Everyone in the village notes with a certain respect that this woman, unlike many of those duped, had made sure that the house she built was legally in only her own name. Her relative wealth and European status confound norms of gendered power, perhaps compromising his masculine standing. Khadija's husband, everyone comments, is docile around this woman. Might he be compensating in this marriage to the much younger and more vulnerable Khadija? I can only speculate. What is apparent, and significant for my arguments, is that domestic violence in this case is anything but traditional: it is produced in the nexus of the global field of European/Third World tourism and inequality in which villagers have been involved for a long time, including the alcohol that is so taken for granted in the European circles in which men like Khadija's husband travel.

Intimate knowledge of Khadija's circumstances furthermore reveals that the 'domestic violence' Khadija suffers in her marriage must be understood in terms of something else, beyond the compulsions of poverty and the fallout of global inequalities I have outlined. There is also kinship. Because it turns out that Khadija's husband is a precariously well-off relative whose marriage to a troubled cousin from a broken home may also have been a way to help out these poor relations. Khadija had been engaged briefly to someone outside the extended family but that had fallen through. It could well be that this marriage had been arranged to protect his cousin from spinsterhood and give her a more comfortable life than she otherwise would have. Khadija was attractive, but this marriage may have been something of a protection and a gift—to Khadija and her family.

In this aspect of her life, there seems to be something of a repetition (with a more unfortunate outcome) of Khadija's own grandmother's history. Khadija's grandparents, who were cousins, had married for the same

reason—as a way to make sure her grandmother was cared for. She had been possessed by spirits at the age of twelve or thirteen and was a volatile young woman who ran off to saint's tombs and Sufi centres. Although many young men had wanted to marry this beautiful girl, their mothers and family would forbid them, knowing that she ran off to religious sanctuaries and was not normal. So finally her cousin had married her, taking on the life-long responsibility for caring for her. He got her treated at a psychiatric hospital. She got much better (after electric shock therapy) but he was warned that no one should upset her. She was stable for about ten years but then reverted to her religious practices, running off and leaving her family for periods of time. Khadija's father, who was her son, himself has had a history of abusive behaviour, much worse when he was married to Khadija's mother. He was not good to his children from this first marriage, though his second marriage has been smooth and his three children from that marriage are fine. The difference in the two stories is that Khadija's grandfather was kind to his wife and loving to his daughters. Khadija was not so fortunate in her husband but her relationship with him cannot be disentangled from the family bonds of attachment and dependency that help keep her in the marriage.

This story suggests that not only must we see Khadija's difficult marital situation as something that the language of violations of women's rights in traditional patriarchal culture cannot begin to describe, overdetermined as it is by global dynamics and more intimate family dynamics, but also that there might be a further complication—a sort of 'remainder'—outside the social, cultural, or economic. It may be that her husband's violence toward her, or her inability to extricate herself from the marriage, are not the main sources of her wretchedness. Long before she was married, she was subject to crises regularly covered up by her close kin in the face of village gossip, explained in various ways by different people close to her, and leading her to be subjected to various medical interventions, the Cairo psychiatrist being only the latest.

I will never forget the day I stopped in to see her family just a week before the first of what would become several planned wedding dates. I found a terrible situation. Khadija was lying on the couch. Her tongue was swollen and she couldn't speak. She was dazed and in pain. Her mother, worried sick about her again, had this time taken her to an irresponsible specialist, an expensive neurosurgeon who flew in from Cairo once a week. Allegedly, he had talked very briefly with Khadija and then prescribed medicines and administered an injection that knocked her out. Enmeshed, as all Egyptians are now, in a flawed medical system driven by

the politics of expertise, profit, and the pharmaceutical industry, this was not the first or last time Khadija would fail to be helped by medical intervention, just as she had not been helped by forms of religious healing her concerned mother had pursued earlier.

What then are we to make of Khadija's problem of 'domestic violence' given the complex bonds of protection and constraint that kinship introduces to her marriage, her husband's oddly international circumstances, the various aspects of globally regulated poverty that foreclose her options, the uneven reach of an inadequate medical system, and the demons she lives with, whether they are the result of childhood trauma, inherited mental illness, or parasites and anaemia, as the various interpretations circulating in and out of the family suggest? Can the framework of rights, even if expressed in the new more 'indigenous' initiatives to reform Muslim family law or to promote and publicise gender egalitarian interpretations of the Qur'an, capture the complexity of her life situation? Does a 'rights-based' approach enable us to disentangle the strands of her suffering or offer a solution to her complicated problems? Does it appreciate the everyday compulsions of 'social forms and moral norms' (Cowan 2009: 312)?

Women in the village used other frameworks for judging and analysing Khadija's unhappy situation. They had a variety of opinions about and levels of empathy with Khadija. When asked why Khadija didn't leave her husband, they might explain that she didn't want to end up like her mother, divorced and raising two kids on her own. Or that she didn't want her children to grow up, as she had, without the love of a father. Others mentioned that she had wanted to marry this particular man, knowing full well his situation and his drinking problem. It was her choice and therefore she had some responsibility to make it work. Some women put some blame on her for being overly sensitive, contrasting Khadija's flighty mother who had provoked violence to Khadija's father's calm second wife who had managed just fine to get along with her husband. Once I asked Khadija's aunt why, if she believed her brother was mentally ill and knew that he could be violent, she hadn't warned this woman's family. She said she had actually gone to see them, fully intending to. But then she saw how happy they were. They were extremely poor and the bride was no longer young; they had despaired of anyone coming to ask for her hand. So she hadn't had the heart to tell them. And everything had turned out fine, she added: he had three lovely children and was not violent with this wife.

The frameworks they used were drawn from local ways of understanding the many sorts of difficult situations in which women find themselves.

Some were religious, having to do with patience and fate. Others were based on intimate knowledge of what women value and a fuller recognition of the messiness of what is possible in life. They were quick to point out to me that Khadija had sought her third pregnancy. Did this suggest to them a comprehensible desire, even will, to stay in the marriage and to have a family life—a value that remains unquestioned in their social world, even if its realisation is so often fraught? Six months after Khadija's crisis and trip to Cairo, in fact she had delivered safely a lovely baby girl. Khadija's mother confided happily that from the moment of the birth of this child, Khadija's husband had stopped drinking completely. He had become pious, observing Ramadan for the first time in decades. Others told me that he had been very ill and the doctor had warned him that if he did not quit drinking, he would have complete liver failure. There was now marital harmony.

### III. Conclusion

Through juxtaposing a set of social and moral relations in one Egyptian village to another set of relations that constitute new and interesting forms of rights activism by Muslim women working explicitly within an Islamic framework, I have tried to use ethnography to reveal both the inadequacy of any kind of global rights discourse to assess or judge the lives of those it seeks to redeem and the necessity of being specific about the social and political locations of activists who work in the name of rights. It is not my intention to dismiss or denigrate individual efforts on behalf of women or any of the forms of activism organised in the name of improving women's (human or Islamic) rights. I see these new projects of Islamic feminism, for example, like the more secular women's rights projects before them, as having mobilised concerned, hard-working, creative, committed and in this case learned individuals. And I do not deny that they may indeed contribute to improving lives by making certain critiques of social inequality and social injustice possible—or provide some legal and moral remedies for intractable problems. Elsewhere I have described the ways that some village women now deploy multiple vocabularies of rights—drawn from the national political and legal sphere, from local familial and religious norms and practices, and from knowledge of Islamic law and texts—to make claims when they feel wronged (Abu-Lughod 2010).

However, I insist that in addition to being more attentive to the intersection of rights work with global and class inequalities, and being more

realistic about what rights work actually produces in the world (especially for those whose business it becomes) by way of careers, social distinctions, public discourse, new social and financial circuits, documents, legal debates, travel opportunities, intellectual excitement and even hope, we ought to be vigilant about the limits and locations of the vocabularies and hybrid imaginations of ‘rights’.

Some have argued that as anthropologists we should take the ‘social practice of rights as an object of ethnographic inquiry’ (Goodale 2006: 3; Wilson 1997). I have done some of that both in this lecture and elsewhere (Abu-Lughod 2009, 2010). But what I have tried to show in particular here is that anthropology can uncover, especially when it juxtaposes the discourses and social practices organised around rights with the everyday lives of some of the intended objects of rights efforts, the inadequacy of rights as a gloss for the lives of ‘others’ and the inevitability of its intellectual tools being inextricable from the socially located political projects of the people and groups who deploy them.

For me, as an anthropologist, reducing the poignant and complex lives of women to a question of rights—whether women’s or human—is unsatisfying. Partly this is because the lives of the unschooled or the poor or the rural seem to be more regularly rendered legible through the legalistic discourse of rights—or their violation—than the lives of the rest of us. Partly it is because their rights are usually represented as violated because of their cultures. Don’t Khadija and others in her village have complex feelings, tangled relations, and dreams even as they manoeuvre within their circumstances and constraints, and explore the creative possibilities open to them in this hamlet in Upper Egypt?<sup>45</sup> Aren’t they as much part of a complex modern global economy and culture as we are? Who has the power to reduce them to subjects known only by their deficits in rights, with the answers—in development, empowerment, women’s rights, human rights, or Islamic reform, known in advance by others?

<sup>45</sup>The short stories of the Canadian writer Alice Munro about the everyday lives of women are a model for me—the opposite of what a rights discourse can do to gloss the lives of women. She captures exquisitely their desperate searches for meaning or happiness in and out of marriage. She writes hauntingly about the compromises they make in life, the ambivalences they can’t escape, the desires and dreams that die. She quietly draws out the sudden strength of character or the impulsive transgression, the misunderstandings between those who love, the ties that strangle, the lies that poison, and the judgements and solaces of social convention and religion. As I have argued in *Writing Women’s Worlds* (Abu-Lughod 1992/2008) one problem is that we do not balance rights discourse or social science discourse with this humanising discourse when it comes to those who are culturally distant.



What social capital enables such projects of bringing rights to the Third World poor?<sup>46</sup>

This is not a matter for moral judgement but social analysis. Ethnography helps us uncover activities, relationships, cultural imaginations, and social locations in a world riven by patterned difference. I am aware of the ironies of a privileged scholar invoking the lives of poor rural women to comment on the gap between such lives and the visions put forth by other privileged educated cosmopolitans, in this case Muslim women activists who write sophisticated articles, take online surveys, arrange conference dates in New York and Kuala Lumpur on GoogleCalendar, discuss feminist strategies used by activists in Geneva and Iran, quote fluently from the Qur'an, invoke precedents from early Muslim history, seek training in Islamic jurisprudence, propose model marriage contracts and other reforms of personal status codes, and draw on a wide range of experiences of organising for change in their nations of origin and abroad. My excuse is that a devotion to observation rather than intervention in village lives has made me sensitive about the complexity and even the richness of the 'objects' of their concerns, and the global inequalities that make them vulnerable to intervention, imagined or actual.

The world in which I most want to intervene with my scholarship is the world of the privileged in which I participate as an equal. I began this lecture with Jean-Klein and Riles's compelling argument that the role of anthropologists is to do ethnography in the world of rights. They propose, beyond this, that our self-disciplined ethnography should be oriented toward anthropological knowledge production (Jean-Klein and Riles 2005: 174–5).<sup>47</sup> I would not want to forfeit ethnography's wider potential for intervening. But I believe that in light of the hegemony and global reach of rights work and right talk, this intervention should be into the worlds of power that authorise, shape, and naturalise rights work and the understandings of human social life to which it gives rise.

<sup>46</sup> I am not the first to suggest the inadequacy of 'women's rights' as a gloss or solution in Egypt. In her study of poor urban women in Cairo, another anthropologist, Heba El Kholy (2002: 25–6), also refuses this concept because of 'the subtle, elusive, overlapping, and diffuse nature of the constraints on women, the intermeshing of exploitation and reciprocity, the fluctuations of their power due to life cycle changes, and the lack of a clear person, group, or class to confront'.

<sup>47</sup> 'What', Jean-Klein and Riles (2005: 174) add, can 'anthropological encounters with human rights contribute to the development of our discipline?'

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