

Defiance and Compliance

New Directions in Anthropology

General Editor: **Jacqueline Waldren**, *Institute of Social Anthropology,
University of Oxford*

- Volume 1:** *Coping with Tourists: European Reactions to Mass Tourism*
Edited by Jeremy Boissevain
- Volume 2:** *A Sentimental Economy: Commodity and Community in Rural Ireland*
Carles Salazar
- Volume 3:** *Insiders and Outsiders: Paradise and Reality in Mallorca*
Jacqueline Waldren
- Volume 4:** *The Hegemonic Male: Masculinity in a Portuguese Town*
Miguel Vale de Almeida
- Volume 5:** *Communities of Faith: Sectarianism, Identity, and Social Change on a Danish Island*
Andrew S. Buckser
- Volume 6:** *After Socialism: Land Reform and Rural Social Change in Eastern Europe*
Edited by Ray Abrahams
- Volume 7:** *Immigrants and Bureaucrats: Ethiopians in an Israeli Absorption Center*
Esther Hertzog
- Volume 8:** *A Venetian Island: Environment, History and Change in Burano*
Lidia Sciamma
- Volume 9:** *Recalling the Belgian Congo: Conversations and Introspection*
Marie-Bénédicte Dembour
- Volume 10:** *Mastering Soldiers: Conflict, Emotions, and the Enemy in an Israeli Military Unit*
Eyal Ben-Ari
- Volume 11:** *The Great Immigration: Russian Jews in Israel*
Dina Siegel
- Volume 12:** *Morals of Legitimacy: Between Agency and System*
Italo Pardo
- Volume 13:** *Academic Anthropology and the Museum: Back to the Future*
Edited by Mary Bouquet
- Volume 14:** *Simulated Dreams: Israeli Youth and Virtual Zionism*
Haim Hazan
- Volume 15:** *Defiance and Compliance: Negotiating Gender in Low-Income Cairo*
Heba Aziz Morsi El-Kholy
- Volume 16:** *Troubles with Turtles: Cultural Understandings of the Environment on a Greek Island*
Dimitrios Theodossopoulos
- Volume 17:** *Rebordering the Mediterranean: Boundaries and Citizenship in Southern Europe*
Liliana Suarez-Navaz

DEFIANCE AND COMPLIANCE



Negotiating Gender in Low-Income Cairo

Heba Aziz El-Kholy



Berghahn Books
New York • Oxford

Published in 2002 by

Berghahn Books

www.berghahnbooks.com

Copyright © 2002 Heba Aziz El-Kholy

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

El-Kholy, Heba Aziz.

Defiance and compliance: negotiating gender in low-income Cairo / Heba Aziz El-Kholy.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57181-390-X (cloth : alk. paper) -- ISBN 1-57181-391-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Women--Egypt--Cairo--Social conditions. 2. Women--Egypt--Cairo--Economic conditions. 3. Cairo (Egypt)--Social life and customs. 4. Poor--Egypt--Cairo. 5. Sex role--Egypt--Cairo. 6. Social conflict--Egypt--Cairo. I. Title.

HQ1793.Z9 C353 2002

305.42'0962'16--dc21

2002018272

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper.

CONTENTS



Dedication	viii
Acknowledgement	ix
A Note on Transliteration	xi
Introduction: A Personal Trajectory	1
1. Rethinking Approaches to Resistance, Power and Gender Relations: Towards a Theoretical Framework	12
<i>The Emerging Concern: “Everyday Forms of Resistance”</i>	
<i>What Constitutes Everyday Forms of Resistance?</i>	
<i>Resistance and Power</i>	
<i>“Everyday Forms of Resistance” and Gender Relations</i>	
2. The Macrocontext: an Overview of Sociopolitical and Economic Transformations in Egypt	31
<i>Contextualizing Gender Relations</i>	
<i>Egypt: A Socioeconomic Profile</i>	
<i>Regional and Internal Migration</i>	
<i>Economic Liberalization and Structural Adjustment</i>	
<i>The Rise of Islamist Discourses</i>	
3. The Research Setting and Characteristics of the Study Community	46
<i>Cairo: A Mosaic of Lifestyles</i>	
<i>The Neighborhoods: An Overview</i>	
<i>The “Study Community”: Poverty, Gender, Religion and Regional Identities</i>	

4. Ethnography in One's Native City: Research Approach, Methods, and Fieldwork Encounters	62
<i>Insider/Outsider: Fieldwork Encounters</i> Multiple Roles, Multiple Identities Familiarity and Distance <i>Analytical Approach and Research Questions</i> <i>Tools and Methods</i> <i>Interpretation and Ethnographic Representation</i>	
5. Premarital Standards and Expectations	84
<i>When "Good," il kheir, Enters a Girl's Body: Menstruation</i> <i>"Purification," "Genital Mutilation," or "Gendering the Body"?:</i> <i>Female Circumcision</i> <i>Choice of Marriage Partner: "Choose a Spouse More Carefully</i> <i>for a Daughter than for a Son"</i>	
6. Marriage Transactions and Negotiations	101
<i>An Overview of Marriage Protocols</i> <i>Frictions in Marriage Negotiations: The "Materiality of</i> <i>Reputation"</i> <i>The Marriage Inventory: "The Ayma Handcuffs a Man"</i> The Ayma in Practice: A Damage Control Mechanism? Enforcing the Stipulations of the Ayma: A Legal Debate <i>A Tale of Two Contracts: Toward a Situated Understanding of</i> <i>Women's Interests</i> <i>The Trousseau: "A Decent Gihaaz Increases a Woman's Status,</i> <i>ma'amha"</i> <i>The Evolving Meaning of Marriage Practices</i>	
7. Defiance and Acquiescence in The Labor Market	131
<i>Acquiescence in The Labor Market: The Social Organization</i> <i>of Piecework</i> <i>The Alliance Between Kinship and Gender Ideology</i> <i>"Symbolic Power" in Action: The Euphemization of Piecework</i> <i>Contesting Working Conditions: "Workshop Girls"</i> <i>Managing the Risks of Wage Labor: "Strategic Trade-offs"</i> <i>Overt Protest: Namrada</i>	

8. Conjugal Arrangements and Sexuality	167
<i>Beyond Public Gender Ideologies: Spirit Possession as a “Subordinate Discourse”</i>	
Negotiating Sexual Relations:	
Sex, Power, and Economic Provision	
Responses to the “Islamization” of Everyday Life	
<i>The Potentials and Limitations of “Subordinate Discourses”</i>	
9. Intrahousehold Decisions and Extrahousehold Networks	192
<i>“I Would Sell My Clothes To Keep My Daughter in School”: Investing in The Future</i>	
Rural and Urban Differences: Some Hypotheses	
<i>Beyond the Household: Extrafamilial Networks</i>	
Women-centered Networks: Hadra(s), Bia’ala(s) and Gamiyya(s)	
Conclusion: Toward an “Organic Feminism”	217
Tables	
Table 1 Population of Egypt, 1937-1995	230
Table 2 An Example of an <i>Ayma</i>	230
Map	
Map 1 Map of Cairo	231
Appendices	
Appendix 1 Description of Study Population	232
Appendix 2 Guiding Research Questions	235
Bibliography	237
Index	259

This book is dedicated to

SEIF KABIL

and

to the memory of my soul mate

MAGDA AL- NOWAIHI

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This book would not have been possible without the intellectual, practical and emotional support of family, friends and colleagues in Cairo, London and, more recently, in New York. In Cairo, many people made important comments on drafts of papers that eventually became part of this book. I want to thank Soraya Al-Torki, Hoda El-Sadda, Nadia Farah, Nader Fergany, Farha Ghanem, Marlene Nasr, Cynthia Nelson, Malak Roushdy, Shahnaz Rouze, Hania Sholkamy, Malak Zaalouk and Huda Zurayek. Hani Hanna spent late nights formatting the manuscript. My research assistants, Salwa El Zeniny, Karima Said and Mona Ahmed, meticulously transcribed many tapes.

In London, my foremost gratitude goes to Deniz Kandiyoti, who generously shared with me her time and knowledge and always pushed me further intellectually. Peter Lozios and Anne Marie Goetz provided valuable comments. Nadia Taher read an early draft of the book and made incisive comments that improved it. Nadjie Al-Ali shared with me her friendship and many insights. My friendships with Nadia Taher, Caren Levy and Emma Playfair sustained me through many dreary winter months.

I am indebted to my parents, Nadia and Aziz, for instilling in me that un-abating desire to learn, to take up new challenges and to pursue my dreams. Without this foundation, this book would never have seen the light of day. I also want to thank my mother for carefully proofreading the manuscript.

A special note of appreciation is due to Amr and Seif Kabil who, without realizing it, taught me much about “negotiating gender”. Amr Kabil provided continuous encouragement and support. My son, Seif, has been a constant source of joy throughout our journey to many places in the course of writing this book; his smile always soothed me during periods of pressure.

I am blessed with an intimate network of friends whose love and unconditional support have enabled me to successfully juggle the competing demands of motherhood, a full-time job and the writing of this book. I want to thank Margo Zaki for all those times she picked up Seif from the nursery when I was away.

Acknowledgments

Sohier Adam spent time with me in London and was a source of comfort and inspiration during many late nights of writing. Magda Al-Nowaihi believed in me more than I dared believe in myself ; in many way it was her own awe-inspiring courage that gave me the strength to complete this book. Iman Bibars supported me throughout the entire process of research and writing in ways that only an intimate friend with whom one has shared a lifetime is capable of. My friendship with Pratibha Metha was critical for maintaining my sanity during difficult months in New York as I was finalizing the book.

I want to thank the British Council in Cairo for supporting part of this work through a Chevening scholarship from 1995-1998 and the Ford Foundation's regional office in Cairo for partly supporting the field work through a MERC award in 1996. My thanks to Carol Bloodworth, copy editor, for her meticulous editorial comments and to Vivian Berghahn, production manager, who has been a pleasure to work with.

Finally, to the courageous women in Cairo's neighborhoods who so generously opened up their homes and hearts to me, no words of thanks are enough. I only hope that I have managed to remain true to their own perspectives, experiences and agendas and that these will eventually find their way into broader debates about gender relations and strategies for advancing women's interests.

A NOTE ON transliteration



The system of transliteration used in this volume is a modified version of that recommended by the International Journal of Middle East Studies. The modifications are due to my desire to be faithful to colloquial Egyptian pronunciations and local dialects, rather than classical Arabic pronunciations. Some modifications have also been necessary for ease of printing and to facilitate reading for the non-specialist.

All transliterated words are in italics throughout the volume, except for those which are now part of the English vocabulary and found in standard English dictionaries, such as *sheikh* or *Quran*. Arabic names of persons and places are also not in Italics. Only Arabic singulars are used; plurals are denoted by the addition of an (s). The transliteration does not differentiate between emphatic and non-emphatic sounds.

All diacritical marks are deleted with the exception of the letter *ayn* and the glottal stop, the *hamza*, when it appears in the middle of a word. The *ayn* is denoted by the mark ʿ. The *hamza* is denoted by the mark ٱ. The long high back vowel is denoted by the uu. The long high front vowel is denoted by ii. The long low vowel is denoted by aa. The short high front vowel is (*kasra*) is denoted by the letter i; the short vowel (*fat-ha*) by the letter a; and the short high back vowel (*dama*) by the letter u. A dash is placed between two consonants, which are meant to be pronounced separately but could be confused for another sound if kept adjacent. For example, *fat-ha*, *nas-ha*.

The modifications made to accommodate the Egyptian dialect are noted below. Where there is more than one transliteration for a letter, this indicates a regional difference in dialect.

il =	آل
G =	ق ج
D or Z =	ظ ز
T or S =	ث ش

INTRODUCTION: A PERSONAL TRAJECTORY



How do low-income women in Cairo experience, perceive, respond to, and negotiate gender relations and hierarchies in their daily lives, both in the household and at the workplace? This is the main question with which this book is concerned. The reasons why I felt compelled to seek answers to this question in the first place, however, may be a story worth telling, as it chronicles a personal and intellectual journey of discovery which started over fifteen years ago.

In 1985, I returned to Cairo, the city where I was born and bred, from the United States of America, where I had lived for two years to pursue a master's degree in the sociology of development, eager to apply my recently acquired knowledge and skills. I was particularly interested in finding a job which would allow me to work on a daily basis in poor neighborhoods around Cairo, which I only had glimpses of as I was growing up.

I would not have defined myself as a feminist then. Although I was immersed in the women in development (WID) literature as a graduate student, gender issues were not central to my concerns. Nor was I particularly aware of how gender structures poverty and how poverty, in turn, may influence and shape gender relations, gender interests, and gender hierarchies. In fact, my master's thesis constituted an excellent example of a rather gender-blind approach to the analysis of the social organization of irrigation in an Egyptian village.

A few weeks after my return to Cairo, I was offered a unique opportunity to fulfill my desire to practice development and deepen my firsthand knowledge and understanding of poverty. Between 1985 and 1987, I worked in one of Egypt's poorest and most marginalized communities, the settlement of the traditional garbage collectors, or *zabbaliin*, in Muqattam which lies on the eastern fringes of the city of Cairo.¹ This is an experience I will always treasure as, much more than graduate studies, it has taught me what development is truly about, and what it could and should be about.²

I spent the first six months of my assignment participating in the daily lives of men and women in the *zabbaliin* community. This constituted an unstructured and informal research process, in the course of which I sought to understand power relations within the community and different people's concerns, priorities and needs so as to initiate an appropriate programmatic response. The *zabbaliin* had a strict and visible gendered division of labor. Men were responsible for collecting household garbage from around the city and bringing it back to the settlement in their donkey carts. Women were responsible for hand sorting the garbage into organic and inorganic waste. Organic waste was then fed to the pigs which the *zabbaliin* raise, and inorganic waste, such as plastic, glass, and tin, was recycled (Environmental Quality International report 1987).

As my relations with the community deepened, however, I began to realize that the community was also differentiated in more subtle and less visible ways, and that gender was a central axis of this differentiation. Men and women within the same household often had divergent concerns, priorities and expenditure patterns, voiced different needs and interests, and expressed their grievances and concerns through disparate means. Moreover, men's and women's relationships and access to some of the central institutions and networks in the community, such as the church, the community development association, local offices of the ministry of social affairs, informal employment and saving networks, and so forth, varied significantly.

My observations found confirmation in an emerging literature from a number of developing countries which suggested that women and men had differential access to, and control over, social, economic and political resources within their households and communities. Cross-cultural studies documenting how gender influences intrahousehold bargaining and access to resources has multiplied since the mid-eighties (Bruce and Dwyer 1988; Bryceson, 1995; Guyer and Peters 1987; Haddad et al. 1995; Hoodfar 1990; Jones 1986; Roldan 1988; Whitehead 1981; Young et al. 1981).

My attention soon focused on a particular category of *zabbaliin* households, those for whom women were the main breadwinners. My discussions and observations suggested that these households had particularly pressing problems, and constituted some of the poorest and most vulnerable in the settlement. According to local estimates, about 30 percent of all households in the settlement were solely or mainly economically maintained by women. These women were either widowed, married to disabled/sick men, deserted by their husbands, or married to husbands who were not fully providing for the family. Despite their numbers and relative disadvantage, women-headed households, however, were largely disregarded by the other development projects being implemented in the *zabbaliin* community at the time. As elsewhere in the early eighties, women-headed households in Egypt remained an "ignored factor in development planning" (Buvinic and Youssef 1978).

In an attempt to address this issue, I embarked on a participatory planning process³ in the *zabbaliin* settlement that culminated in the design and imple-

mentation of a credit and technical assistance project for women-headed households.⁴ The aim of the project was to enable this particular category of women to both improve their earning capacity, as well as enhance their self-confidence and life options. To alleviate some of the gender-specific constraints which poor women faced in accessing credit, the project required no collateral or guarantees, either in the form of the signature of a man, or the possession of an identity card, as was the case with practically all other credit programs in Egypt at that time.⁵

In the mid-eighties in Egypt, there were no national statistics or analyses of women who were financially supporting their households, and there was little public interest in the issue. In fact, I remember being met with skepticism by some researchers, activists and government officials when I tried to argue that women-headed households might indeed be an important issue to study and a potentially vulnerable group in Egyptian society at large. The major obstacle seemed to be a deeply entrenched view of the "traditional" Egyptian family which cast the man as breadwinner, and a prevailing gender ideology that closely linked maleness and masculinity with the ability to provide financial support (Hoodfar 1990; Nadim 1985; Rugh 1984). The existence of large numbers of women-headed households challenged this ideology in a radical way, and called into question a range of state policies and laws—from social security to personal status laws—which are largely based on the ideology of the male breadwinner.

Moreover, the suggestion that these women were particularly vulnerable, and not adequately supported by their wider kin group, threatened idealized images of the solidarity of the extended Egyptian family. This "public transcript" about the family is an item of national pride for many people, and a central feature assumed to distinguish Egyptians from the "West," whose weak familial relations are popularly invoked as the cause of its presumed moral decay. Surely this was an issue which might be of concern to black families in the United States, I was told by several researchers, but it was not a development priority for us in Egypt. I quickly learned, as Eickelman and Piscatori suggest in their discussion of the family in the Middle East, that "the idea of the family is so central that only with difficulties do societies alter its conventional images and public forms. ... Pressures to change the official and often legally endorsed view of family and familial roles is often regarded with great suspicion ... The family provides a powerful idiom for expressing core national and religious values" (1996:83-84).

I was too close to what was going on in the *zabbaliin* community, however, to be swayed by the skepticism that I was encountering. Despite the lack of statistics documenting the phenomenon of female headship at the time, my fieldwork among the *zabbaliin*, and subsequently in other slum areas in Cairo, strengthened my conviction of the existence of a significant number of households supported by women. I also became more aware of how gender relations and family roles may be rapidly changing in response to broader societal transformations. Although ignored in Egypt, recognition of the phenomenon of female supported households was gradually increasing within the international development com-

munity in the light of research in a number of developing countries. This provided me with important ammunition, although I was not then aware of all the literature on the subject (see for example, Bolak 1990; Buvinic and Youssef 1978; Chant 1991, 1997; Harris 1993; Merrick and Schmink 1983; Rosenhouse 1989; Shanthi 1996).⁶

Not only were women breadwinners in the communities I was involved in particularly vulnerable and thus deserving of specific development assistance, but exposing their reality also seemed to me an excellent opportunity to challenge patriarchal legal structures in Egypt more broadly, by questioning the basic assumptions on which they are based. For instance, inheritance laws stipulating that a man has the right to inherit twice the amount allowed for a woman, on the basis that men are the main breadwinners, can be seriously put into question by a socioeconomic reality where women may be increasingly becoming the main financial providers for their families.

The seeds of the central issues with which this book is concerned were sown during those early years of working with women-headed households at the *zabbaliin* settlement, and have matured and evolved over the decade that followed. When I left the *zabbaliin* community in 1987, I had become a self-defined feminist, had developed a keen appreciation of the extent to which poverty is gendered, and was skeptical about the conventional image of the Egyptian family that casts men as sole breadwinners. As a response, I became a founding member of the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW), an organization whose aim is to support households in Cairo where women are the main breadwinners. Founding ADEW in 1989 with a group of like-minded professional men and women in many ways provided me with the necessary institutional base and intellectual support to pursue the issues in which I was interested.⁷

As I continued my work as a professional involved in development programs with a number of international agencies in Egypt, I carried out extensive fieldwork and my experiences and knowledge of low-income neighborhoods in both rural and urban areas increased. So did my understanding and awareness of gender issues. As a volunteer board member of ADEW, I became much more involved in the debates among various women's groups in Egypt, and joined, both as an individual and as a representative of a women's nongovernmental organization (NGO), in the various organized activities and campaigns that aimed to challenge gender inequalities. These debates and campaigns had intensified significantly in the early 1990s partly in response to the International United Nations conferences on population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, and the United Nations conference on women held in China in 1995 (see Egyptian NGO platform of action reports, 1994, 1995).

As my involvement in the "women's movement" grew, so did my own awareness of broader issues and debates among feminists. This fuelled my willingness and ability to more radically challenge patriarchal structures and ideas both at a personal and public level. However, I also became increasingly uncomfortable

with the often significant discrepancies, that I began to detect between the types of issues, priorities and visions that were shaping the most vocal feminist agendas in Egypt, and the concerns, struggles and priorities of the poorer women that I was working in a variety of development programs. The issue of “political participation” was a particularly nagging one for me.

Increasing women’s “political participation” was identified as an important priority by feminists in Egypt (as elsewhere), and campaigns to raise less privileged women’s awareness about the importance of participation in formal elections at the parliamentary and local government levels were launched in the 1990’s. Registering women, and issuing voting cards for them was an important feminist tactic and a special organization was set up for that purpose in 1994.

For the many poor women I worked with in the *zabbaliin* community, as well as subsequently in other communities, however, politics was not about voting in the elections. Rather, it was partly about negotiating access to resources from a state bureaucracy that was biased against them both as women and as illiterates.⁸ The type of card many low-income women in the *zabbaliin* and other communities needed most, and which many were unsuccessfully struggling to obtain due to a host of complicated bureaucratic regulations and ideological constraints, was not a voting registration card, but a more basic personal identity card, *bitaqa shak-sia*. For many poor women, significantly more so than for poor men, possessing such a card was literally on the order of an unattainable dream.

Yet identity cards have an important symbolic value for women as a way of asserting their citizenship and identity as responsible and independent human beings. Moreover, an identity card also has a direct practical value for poor women as it provides an important avenue for participation in the politics of survival. An identity card is essential to enable a woman to access state subsidies and pensions, to register her children in schools, or register a complaint at a police station, if beaten up by her husband.⁹ The possession of an identity card thus appeared to me at its core to be an issue of equal citizenship between men and women, and represented both a political as well as a pragmatic concern. However, until recently, when ADEW took up the issue in its campaigns, the symbolic, strategic and practical importance of identity cards for low-income women had been completely ignored by activists. Voting cards were on the agenda, but identity cards were not. This clearly pointed to divergent priorities among different categories of women in Egypt.

The research interests behind this book thus partly stem from my dissatisfaction with our ability to formulate a feminist agenda broad and diverse enough to accommodate and reflect the interests and central concerns of women across class boundaries. I started to wonder whether our guiding agendas in the women’s movement were perhaps circumscribed by our own class circumstances as middle-class and upper-class educated women, and whether our strategies, visions and assumptions were dependent on our own social locations and lived realities, locations and realities quite different from those of the majority of women in the country.

I also became increasingly uncomfortable with the discourse and assumptions underlying the various policies and programs developed by governments, NGOs and international agencies to “empower” women. I began to realize that these were sometimes based on ahistorical and decontextualized assumptions about women’s and men’s lives, devoid of a class perspective and thus often not reflecting the lived realities of poor families. Some aspects of my concerns had to do specifically with the policy focus on an “ideal,” and I would venture to say quite middle-class, model of the household as one composed of a married couple with a male provider. My early experience in the *zabbaliin* settlement discussed earlier had already suggested that this was often a fallacy.

Other aspects of my concerns had to do with the assumptions underlying some of the more academic work on gender relations in the Middle East. I was dissatisfied with what I saw as the two polarities in academic writing on gender relations and women’s agency; some studies depicted women as utterly oppressed and devoid of agency, (see Tapper 1979; Ahmed 1982); while others celebrated their hidden or informal power, strength and solidarity (AlTorki 1986; Aswad 1978; Early 1993a,b). As is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, these studies seemed to offer polarized theoretical assumptions regarding power, subordination and women’s agency.

My years of experience at the grass roots suggested to me that women are often engaged in a complex process of negotiation at a microlevel in their daily lives. The low-income women I worked with seemed neither unqualifiably “passive” objects of oppression, nor were they powerful agents who exercised authority and agency, and who “have it all together” (Early 1993b), as they have been often depicted in those two extremes of the research spectrum. I thus felt compelled to find ways to maneuver between those two images of women. I wanted to contribute to a better understanding of what women’s daily struggles and conflicts were about, what they were saying about their lives and priorities, how they were saying it, and how their concerns and responses varied based on their life cycles. This seemed to me a way to better understand how gendered forms of power operate at a microlevel. My questions were multiple but interrelated: To what extent and in what ways were women trying to challenge aspects of their unequal relationships with men? Which aspects were they not contesting, and why?

I had a hunch, fuelled by my earlier observations, which suggested to me that women may indeed be discontented, speak about the desire for change, and challenge at least some aspects of gender relations and ideologies, but in a “coded” language. The only way to verify this hunch was to carry out in-depth and contextualized research using a methodology that would enable me to pay close attention to women’s narratives, expressed both in public and in private, and to local expressions and idioms through which they may express daily forms of discontent.

Focusing only on women’s narratives and experiences, however, carries the danger of “naturalizing” the concept of experience or taking it at face value,

assuming a one-to-one correspondence between words and things, and ignoring the constructed and discursive character of experience itself (Scott 1992). In addition to listening to women's narratives and experiences, I thus realized that I would need to examine closely the often conflicting realities and discourses which inform women's experiences and structure their visions and identities in specific physical, socioeconomic and historical contexts. Moreover, since ideas about gender and power relations are best revealed through concrete daily interactions and specific activities (see Agarwal 1994; Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991a), I would also need to carefully observe women and men's actual daily practices and social arrangements. This is precisely what I ended up doing over fifteen months between July 1995 and October 1996 in several low-income communities in Cairo. The outcome of this endeavor constitutes the backbone of this book.

The impetus behind the book thus comes from a long journey of discovery about poverty, gender, power, and the possibilities of social change. My general aim is to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of gender relations (as reflected in the daily interactions and concrete social arrangements between men and women) and gender ideologies (beliefs and values about masculinity and femininity) in a low-income "community" in Cairo, Egypt. My focus, however, is primarily on women, and specifically on the ways in which low-income women at different points in their life course experience, cope with, and respond to gender inequalities both in the family and at the workplace.

The specific objectives of the book are fourfold. The first is generating knowledge about the diversity of gender relations in the Egyptian family in the context of relative paucity of information. Despite some recent nuanced studies (Ghanem 1996; Singerman 1995), knowledge based on stereotypes inspired by orientalist notions of the family on the one hand, and ahistorical feminist notions of patriarchy, on the other, remains widespread. Tucker (1993) emphasizes the lack of ethnographic material on the family in the Arab world. "Although the importance of the family and the daily construction of gender roles and relations is not questioned, we actually know very little about the on-going evolution of the family in any specific context. There has been a tendency to assume the existence of a traditional family, a family defined and regulated by Islamic law that has remained unchanged" (Tucker 1993: 12).

Moreover, urban ethnographies in general, and those related to gender in particular, are scarce in Middle Eastern anthropology, in comparison to those dealing with nomadic or rural populations. In Egypt for example, although 50 percent of the population now lives in cities, no more than a handful of urban ethnographies exist addressing gender issues over the past decade; the majority of those have been carried out by American and European anthropologists. In an annotated bibliography of urbanization studies in Egypt produced by the National Centre for Sociological and Criminological Research in 1990, none of the 250 citations addressed gender issues (Fergany 1993). My study is thus set against a context of relative paucity of research.

The second objective is contributing to theoretical debates related to gender and resistance. More specifically, my research aims to inform debates, in both the anthropological and the broader feminist literature, regarding the ways in which women's gender interests are formed, and how their strategies for expressing discontent and negotiating gender-based power relations, are modified and inflected by their specific socioeconomic locations. Despite the growing literature on power relations and resistance strategies, few have specifically addressed gender issues (Abu-Lughod 1990a; Agarwal 1994; O'Hanlon 1991). Moreover, although several studies have carefully documented the life cycle changes in women's lives, and how these affect their relative power positions (Morsy 1978; Rassam 1980; Taylor 1984), unqualified and universal statements casting women as a group, as passive subjects unaware of their oppression, "continue to hold sway" (Agarwal 1994:422; see also Mohanty 1988).

The third objective is contributing to the formulation of a more comprehensive feminist agenda that is more sensitive to differences among women. This agenda should accommodate class differences and cultural diversity, without losing its basic philosophical commitment to human rights and social justice; an agenda that can "avoid the dual pitfalls of ethnocentrism and unprincipled relativism" (Kandiyoti 1995:29). And, I would also add, one that can avoid the pitfall of elitism and class bias as well. Although feminist scholarship in other parts of the world has taken on the issue of class on board (Ramazanglu 1989; Rowbotham 1981), attempting to look specifically at how poverty and patriarchy intersect (Greely 1983), and examining the "crossroads of class and gender" (Beneria and Roldan 1987), the relationships between poverty and gender concerns have not been central to the debates amongst women activists and researchers in Egypt. In the short run, this research thus aims at informing theoretical debates regarding women's rights, interests and demands in Egypt, as well as providing NGOs and women's activists with insights into the perceptions, practices, priorities and organizing mechanisms of low-income women.

The fourth objective is to generate policy-relevant data which may be used to challenge prevailing, unexamined assumptions about gender relations which currently inform policy and programmatic interventions. In Egypt, many such policies appear to have been based either on stereotypical assumptions about women's and men's roles, or on empirical realities uncritically transposed from very different regions or cultural contexts. In a review article on women, work and well-being in the Middle East, Papps (1992) concludes that "we are very far from having sufficient knowledge to implement effective policy or even to evaluate existing policies" (1992: 595).

The book is organized along topical themes. The first chapter discusses the theoretical framework that has guided the research. I critically review some of the debates on power, gender and resistance, and argue that a modified and gendered concept of "everyday forms of resistance" provides a way forward to a more nuanced and historically grounded analysis of gender relations. The second chap-

ter provides an overview of some of the macrolevel socioeconomic and political influences that Egypt has witnessed over the past two decades. My purpose in doing so is to contextualize the results of the fieldwork and thus enable the reader to better interpret and understand the more microlevel processes in the chapters that follow. The third chapter provides the Cairo-and community-level contexts of my research. I provide an overview of the historical development of the city of Cairo, followed by a general description of the research setting and a profile of the study community and research sample. The fourth chapter provides a situated and reflective account of fieldwork encounters. I also justify my methodological approach and discuss the specific research tools adopted.

The following five chapters present the results of the fieldwork and analysis of my data. Each chapter deals with a particular set of social arrangements where gender relations and ideologies are explored; some chapters refer to women as members of their families and households, while others deal with work relations and with women as paid workers. Chapter five is concerned with premarital expectations and standards. It explores how girls are prepared to assume their central roles as wives, mothers and sexual partners, and how decisions regarding choice of spouse are negotiated. The chapter highlights several gendering processes such as female circumcision and menstruation.

Chapter six discusses marriage negotiations and transactions. The focus is on specific practices, such as the accumulation of the *gihaaz*, marriage trousseau, and the insistence on writing an *ayma*, marriage inventory, through which women attempt to gain more secure entitlements in marital property and to mitigate their perceived vulnerability in marriage. Chapter seven discusses the role of gender in structuring earnings, conditions of work and women's options in the informal labor market, focusing on two types of female employment: piecework and waged work. The chapter highlights how the convergence of marital trajectories, the phase of a woman's life cycle, supply and demand factors, and the usage of kinship idioms result in different forms of acquiescence, accommodation and overt protest in work relations.

Chapter eight concentrates on negotiations within the conjugal union, and highlights women's responses to their husband's demands for sex. The chapter also illustrates how women voice their grievances and articulate their discontent, sometimes overtly, and sometimes covertly, through the idiom of spirit possession. Chapter nine discusses intrahousehold decision making and analyzes areas of dissent between husbands and wives, such as decisions related to the education of daughters, and how these are resolved. The chapter also discusses the role of extrahousehold networks in enabling women to gain more leverage within the conjugal union.

In their totality, the chapters of this book thus provide insights into the ways in which different groups of low-income Cairene women juggle the contradictions in their daily lives. Such insights aim at enriching theoretical debates regarding how gender inequalities are produced, reproduced and transformed. They also

seek to expand the knowledge base regarding low-income women's priorities, practices, and strategies with a view to informing both activist and policy agendas in Egypt. Finally, the insights generated raise a number of questions about poverty, gender, power and social change that merit further investigation.

NOTES

1. This was in the context of an integrated community development program, implemented by Environmental Quality International (EQI), an Egyptian nongovernmental consultancy organization. I remain indebted to EQI's director, Dr. Mounir Neamatalla, who encouraged my keen interest in learning about poverty and provided me with the intellectual support and flexibility to pursue my interests.
2. The concept of "development" has been the subject of increasing controversy and debate over the past decade. There has been an increasing recognition of the limitations of the early conceptualization of development as a linear process, as well as the overly technocratic, apolitical, top-down, and fragmented approaches to improving human welfare through the vehicle of "development project". For a critique of development discourse and practices, see Ferguson 1990; Hobart 1993; Hancock, 1989.
3. Participation, now a central concept in development discourse, was introduced in the late 1970s partly in reaction to the failure of many large-scale, top-down development projects. The emphasis on consultation with local community members, including women, throughout the design, implementation and monitoring of development programs constituted the backbone of this alternative approach to development. However, several studies have shown the huge gap between the rhetoric and the practice of participation, and the inherent tensions in such a concept. Participation is often used as a means to achieve project efficiency and pass on development costs to beneficiaries, rather than as an end in itself aimed at empowering communities to set the agenda and take control over their own lives. For a critique of the concept, highlighting the benefits and misuses of participatory processes in development see Mayoux (1995) and Nelson and Wright (1994). For a discussion of the history of the concept, see Cohen and Uphoff (1980).
4. The potential and limitations of credit as a development tool for alleviating poverty and "empowering" women has been the subject of much debate. For a recent critique see Goetz and Gupta (1996).
5. The project also organized women into "solidarity groups," inspired by the internationally acclaimed Grameen Bank model in Bangladesh, and building on the traditional informal credit and saving associations, *gam'iyya(s)*, which were common among women in the community. The project was funded by the Ford Foundation and OXFAM. For details see EQI (1987).
6. Several researchers in Egypt have recently addressed the issue of women-headed households, particularly as it relates to poverty. See for example, Fergany (1994b). Moreover, the issue has received some recent media attention (*El Wafd* newspaper, 15 October 1997; *Sabah el Kheir* magazine, July 1997).
7. ADEW's activities are modeled after the *zabbaliin* project mentioned earlier. ADEW was the first, and remains the only, private voluntary women's group whose sole concern is empowering women supporting their households, primarily through improving their access to financial

and legal services. For a discussion of ADEW's philosophy and activities, see "Women-headed Households in Egypt: a Panel discussion" (1994); El-Kholy (1996b).

8. I am not at all suggesting that political participation and attempts to register women for elections are not important areas of intervention and that efforts in this regard are laudable. My point is only to suggest that it reflects the legitimate priorities of only a certain group of women.
9. Boys are required by law to obtain an identity card at the age of sixteen. Girls, however, are not, and few are encouraged to do so. The underlying assumption is that women do not need a separate identity as theirs is tied to their fathers and later their husbands. Women face many obstacles in obtaining individual cards. The process, if successful, can take up to one year. To own an identity card, you need a birth certificate, which many women do not have and which is difficult to get. You also need access to two government officials who know you in person and who are willing to stamp your papers. You need to have access to a clinic to get a blood test. You need to have access to a police station. All of this requires time, energy, knowledge, and the ability to break through to the gatekeepers of these various bureaucracies, who are usually unsympathetic, and often intimidating, male officials who uphold prevalent gender ideologies regarding women's roles and identities. The process also requires money, in some cases up to two hundred pounds. As a result, in the worst case scenario, and there are many women in this situation, an identity card remains an unattainable dream (see El-Kholy 1996b).

1

RETHINKING APPROACHES TO RESISTANCE, POWER AND GENDER RELATIONS: TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



To understand how gender relations and inequalities are negotiated at a micro-level in the daily practices of low-income women and men in Cairo necessitated that I explore the relationship between two key concepts, power and gender. Despite the centrality of both concepts to feminist scholarship, “the precise nature of this relationship remains shadowy” (Oldersma and Davis 1991). I ventured to examine the connections between power and gender by focusing on a third concept, that of resistance, arguing that a focus on how women negotiate unequal power relations both in the family and in the work place offers a promising avenue for better understanding how gender inequalities are produced, reproduced, and transformed. I specifically argue that a modified and gendered version of Scott’s (1985, 1986, 1990) notion of “everyday forms of resistance” is a particularly useful tool for analyzing gender relations at the microlevel.

The concept of “everyday forms of resistance”, a term coined by Scott in 1985, captures a wide range of behavior and actions of subordinate groups, ranging between open, collective revolt and passive consent (such as foot dragging, evasion, avoidance protest, sabotage, gossip, slander, and feigned ignorance). Such an approach to resistance, which focuses on the daily, often covert, and noncoordinated practices of subordinate groups allows us to view resistance as a shifting continuum of practices, which must be empirically investigated in specific socio-economic and historical contexts. This approach also promises to significantly further our understanding of both the mechanisms of power as well as the potential agency of those in positions of relative disadvantage.

Women, particularly in the Middle East, have often been portrayed as either passive and unwary victims of oppression, or as strong and powerful actors. I term these two polarized depictions found in much of the anthropological literature on the Middle East the “oppression” and “strength” strands. On the one hand, there is a large body of research influenced by orientalist stereotypes that largely depict women in the Middle East as submissive, oppressed victims (Ahmed 1982; Tapper 1979). On the other hand, and partly in reaction to the former, there is a plethora of studies that present women as active, powerful and resourceful actors (AlTorki 1986; Aswad 1978; Early 1993a; Early 1993b).

The problems with the former approach, and orientalism more generally, have been well rehearsed elsewhere (see, for example, Ahmed, 1982). The problem with the latter type of approach is the common confusion between women’s activity and their power or authority (see Okely 1991). Being active is not the same as being of equal value. Women may be economically active and outspoken, and at the same time subordinate, and bound by many constraints which limit their choices. My concern is thus not to reveal women’s informal power as some of these latter studies have done so well. Rather, my aim is to render more visible some of their daily acts of resistance against perceived injustices in specific contexts, as well as to achieve a better understanding of their lack of contestation in other contexts. I argue that an approach to resistance based on covert and individual actions has the potential for providing a more complex and textured account of relations between men and women.

Focusing on women’s everyday acts of resistance promises to not only further our understanding of gendered forms of power, but is of potential value for developing policies and strategies for social change as well. An understanding of the potentially consequential acts of everyday resistance is an essential complement to the emerging scholarly focus on women’s formal organizations as a major site of protest against gender inequalities. Low-income, largely illiterate women, who constitute the majority of women, have neither the time nor the skills to engage with formal women’s organizations, and rarely do. Their voices of protest, their daily grievances, struggles and strategies, which should be the essential building blocks for the work of formal women’s groups, are thus rarely noticed or taken into account by activists. Low-income women’s voices even more rarely inform theories of power and resistance. Ethnographies guided by a theoretical approach that stresses the place of resistance in the construction of everyday gender relations would thus address an important theoretical and political gap.

In my attempt to understand how women experience, articulate, and respond to their relative disadvantage in both the household and the workplace, I emphasize a conceptualization of gender that focuses on the relationship between men and women as well as between masculinity and femininity. This socialrelations approach is the one implicit in much of the gender and development literature. It remains committed to an analysis of how the female/male distinction reproduces inequality in access to, and control over, resources at every institutional

level (Kandiyoti 1998; Moser 1993). Based on this conceptualization, the primary task of gender analysis and feminist activism is thus to interrogate the institutionalized inequalities between men and women (Moore 1988; Nicholson 1994). Following the proponents of this concept of gender, and in line with my own commitment to local understandings and priorities, I argue that social categories such as men and women are thus not homogenous, and emphasize in my research approach the multiple, contested and contradictory meanings associated with male/female identities and distinctions. (See Moore 1994b). This approach may not have the theoretically liberating potential of the post-structuralist (see for example Butler and Scott 1992), deconstructionist conceptualization of gender, and may occasionally result in the slippage between the concept of women and that of gender. Despite its possible limitations, however, I concur with others who have argued that dealing with the world as it is constituted by the categories of members of local communities themselves is more desirable than the analytical distortions and political impotence that could result from importing Western conceptual frameworks that are dismissive of local articulations and understandings (Kandiyoti 1998). Having specified how the term gender is used in the book, I now turn to a discussion of the relationship between the concept of gender and that of resistance and power.

The Emerging Concern: “Everyday Forms of Resistance”

Studies of resistance have traditionally been dominated by accounts of open confrontations in the form of largescale rebellions and revolutions, and have largely focused on class conflict as the major cause of struggle (Paige 1975; Wolf 1969 quoted in Abu-Lughod 1991a). Influenced largely by a narrow Marxist paradigm, resistance has been conceptualized mainly as an organized struggle by subordinate groups informed by a coherent oppositional ideology, focusing specifically on the working class, eventually leading to revolutionary confrontation. A critical assumption in Marxist theory regarding resistance is the relationship between positionality and consciousness, a relationship which emphasizes the split between “objective” conditions of oppression and “subjective” consciousness of this oppression, between ideology and behavior, between the economic and the political spheres. (McLellan 1973). This approach to resistance and consciousness is also implicit in the strategies adopted by early feminists in the West. The emphasis on “consciousness raising” as an essential feminist strategy in the 1960s and 1970s was partly based on the premise that a “collective” consciousness must precede agency.

However, I argue in this book that such approaches may be inadequate for a historically and culturally sensitive understanding of the dynamics of power underlying gender relations. The last decade has given way to a more nuanced usage of the concept of resistance largely as a reaction against the economic,

reductionist and gender blind versions, and interpretations, of Marxist theories of power (Abu-Lughod 1990a). The opening up of new possibilities for understanding power and resistance has been influenced by feminist theory and practice as well as by the post-structuralist/modernist critique, with Foucault's work assuming particular importance.¹ The debate regarding false consciousness predates the post-structuralist movement. However, with post-structuralism the boundaries between the objective and the subjective began to fade more rapidly and the concept of false consciousness lost much of its earlier force. Structures of dominance are no longer being viewed as independent and monolithic entities that are challenged only during dramatic instances of revolt, but rather, as more commonly a web of contradictory processes that are continuously being renegotiated and contested (Haynes and Prakash 1991).

Scott's notion of "everyday forms of resistance" captures this conceptual shift. He uses the term to describe a wide range of contestary actions of subordinate groups, from open, collective revolt to passive revolt, tracing his own interest in the concept to his disillusionment with the outcome of socialist revolutions (Scott 1985). Scott does not display a particular concern with gender relations or gender inequalities, and in fact overlooks the gender dimension. Only a limited number of scholars, such as Hart (1991), whose work I discuss in chapter seven, have explicitly attempted to subject Scott's framework to analysis using a gender perspective.

In his work, Scott is concerned primarily with the "peasantry" and focuses mainly on class domination. Within such relations, Scott argues forcefully for the inclusion of everyday resistance as an integral part of the history of agrarian relations and peasant politics. He notes that:

a history of the peasantry which only focused on uprisings would be much like a history of factory workers devoted entirely to major strikes and riots. Important and diagnostic though these exceptional events may be, they tell us little about the most durable arena of class conflict and resistance: the vital, day to day struggle on the factory floor over the pace of work, over leisure, wages, autonomy, privileges and respect. Resistance of this kind does not throw up the manifestos, demonstrations and pitched battles that normally compel attention, but vital territory is being won and lost here too. (Scott 1986: 6)

While these "weapons of the weak" Scott argues, consist largely of "routine resistance" and do not pose any major threats to agrarian inequalities, they nonetheless represent a continuous process of renegotiations and testing of social relations, and could have important, if unintended, consequences. Arguing along the same lines, Haynes and Prakash note that "the struggles of subordinated peoples need not be dramatic or informed by conscious ideologies of opposition to seriously affect relations of domination" (Haynes and Prakash 1991: 4). A broader definition of resistance, they argue, would allow a fuller understanding of the very processes through which subordinate groups test and undermine power and

the ways in which daily struggles can be transformed into large-scale and conscious challenges to sociopolitical structures. The concept of everyday resistance has since triggered much debate. (See the special issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1986.) The main arguments within this debate are summarized in the following section.

What Constitutes Everyday Forms of Resistance?

Despite widespread agreement on the need to explore the diverse forms of non-conventional, nonviolent acts of everyday resistance, a debate continues regarding how inclusive or exclusive such a concept should be. The debate seems to center on two related issues. The first question involves the issues of intentions and motivations of the actors: are they “subjective,” “self-indulgent,” and “self-interested,” or are they “objective,” “selfless,” and “principled”? The second related issue revolves around the consequences of these acts of resistance, with the central argument centering around an attempt to differentiate between acts of resistance and daily survival strategies. The key question seems to be: To what extent do acts of resistance challenge the forces of oppression? For example, could everyday survival strategies, often used interchangeably with “coping strategies,” that seek to maximize life options and in fact result in perpetuating the system of domination be considered forms of resistance?

Some scholars, following a narrow Marxist framework, thus emphasize a distinction between “resistance” and real resistance (White 1986). Real resistance is seen as organized and collective, with revolutionary consequences and embodying a form of consciousness that challenges the basis of domination. “Resistance” as elaborated by Scott and his followers, is seen by these scholars as no more than incidental acts that are individualistic, and opportunistic, with no revolutionary consequences, and embodying intentions to accommodate the structures of oppression rather than to challenge them. White argues that such acts of “resistance” are actually dangerous over the longer run because they may simply act as a safety valve for oppressed people, making them unable to see their oppression, and thus contributing to the emergence of false consciousness.

I disagree with attempts to make such clear-cut differentiation because I think they preclude an understanding of the diverse experiences and perceptions of subordinate groups in a given situation of power, and privilege an objectivist, *a priori*, interpretation. I also think that the term “coping strategies,” given the development and economic discourse in which it has evolved, often does not capture the political nature of some of the acts involved. In fact, the distinction between coping or survival strategies as individualist, economic tactics, and “everyday forms of resistance” as more political ones, may be misleading as it suggests too neat a separation between the sphere of economic and political behavior. Particularly in contexts of poverty, scarcity and deprivation, tactics to ensure

survival cannot be easily dismissed as apolitical behavior. As Scott elaborates when discussing peasant politics:

“Bread and butter” issues are the essence of lower-class politics and resistance. When a peasant hides part of his crop to avoid paying taxes, he is both filling his stomach and depriving the state of grain. (Scott 1985: 295-96)

Another criticism of Scott's work is his overemphasis on the “individual” nature of everyday resistance. By doing so, he seems to have favored one extreme end and thus loses sight of the “middle ground,” the various forms of resistance that social networks or informal groups may be involved in. Turton (1986) develops the concept of “patrolling the middle ground” to turn attention precisely to everyday forms of resistance that fall in the middle of the continuum between individual acts and organized collective actions. This criticism is I believe particularly pertinent when attempting to “gender” the concept of everyday forms of resistance and use it to specifically explore power relations between men and women. There are a number of studies which demonstrate the crucial role that women's informal networks play in enabling them to gain power within their marriages and communities (see for example March and Taqqu 1986).

The main critique of Scott, however, and one with which I concur, is that he does not fully appreciate the cultural and ideological aspects of domination and the structural constraints which limit the actions of subordinate groups, and lay down distinct “rules of the game.” These rules often determine what can be legitimately resisted and how effective such resistance can be. Scott's overemphasis on the ability of subordinate groups to always penetrate the hegemonic ideologies of the ruling classes, and to develop an unmystified discourse and consciousness, is most clearly captured in his concept of “the hidden transcripts.” He defines the hidden transcript as the “discourse that takes place offstage, beyond the direct observation of the dominant groups”(Scott 1990). However, as Prakash and Haynes (1991) have correctly argued, the ability of subordinate groups to break through the walls of hegemony may be constrained by the very nature of existing power structures; every-day acts of resistance take place in the field of power and thus are themselves affected by the nature of hegemony.

Timothy Mitchell (1990), in a detailed critique of Scott's work, takes particular issue with the “contextfree rationality” implicit in Scott's accounts, and his narrow definition of hegemony which does not allow him to appreciate how various forms of domination operate. As a result, Scott relabels and disguises the hegemonic relations evident in the village he studies by giving such relations titles such as “obstacles to resistance.” However, Mitchell argues, “kinship is not something ‘given’ that happens to work as an obstacle to resistance but another of those strategies of euphemization by means of which relations of dependence and exploitation disguise themselves, as they must, in this case in the form of family ties” (Mitchell 1990:557).