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## Syrian women professionals' strategies for contesting patriarchal interpretations of their role in Islam

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# **Syrian Women Professionals' Strategies for Contesting Patriarchal Interpretations of their Role in Islam**

## **Abstract**

This study makes a theoretical contribution around classifying Muslim women's strategies to contest sexual role segregation and division of labour at work and in society. Syrian women accountants (SWAs) in this study employed "defensive", "offensive" and "authentic" strategies to contest patriarchal interpretations of Islam regarding their roles. Findings will also provide institutions and society with valuable insights for considering women's issues outside the Western context, especially linking issues of gender, work and religion.

**Key words:** gender equality, strategies, Islam, Syrian women.

# **Syrian Women Professionals' Strategies for Contesting Patriarchal Interpretations of their Role in Islam**

## **1. Introduction**

Arab societies are associated with greater gender inequality, including having the lowest levels of women's participation in the workforce globally (Rizzo et al., 2007; Korotayev et al., 2014). Proposed reasons for these inequalities include cultural and institutional barriers, social mores, patriarchy and legal structures (e.g. Jamali et al., 2005; Sidani, 2005; Hutchings et al., 2010; Karam and Afiouni, 2014). In the gender equality literature, the inequitable status of Arab women has often been specifically attributed to the cultural impact of Islam (Norris and Inglehart, 2002; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Coffe and Dilli, 2014). Still, better understanding of interrelationships between gender equality and religion/Islam requires more contributions focusing on everyday women's agency in specific locations (Casanova, 2009). This paper makes a theoretical contribution around classifying strategies used by Syrian women accountants (SWAs) to challenge and transform sexual roles' segregation and gender division of labour. The paper demonstrates how SWAs use "defensive", "offensive" and "authentic" strategies to contest patriarchal Islamic interpretations of their role(s). Specifically, it investigates SWAs' contestations of i) sexual role segregation between the private/public spheres that limit their access to paid employment, ii) forms that gender division of labour take in the workplace, as patriarchal interpretations of Islam related to sexual segregation result in that men and women integrate differently in the workplace.

Religion influences formation, negotiation, and transformation of gender relations at work and in society (Predolli, 2004). Still, little research classifies women's contestations through religion in everyday negotiation of their roles including at work (Fernando and Cohen, 2013). While cultural sociologists have acknowledged women's boundary-work within religion (Bartkowski and Read, 2003) and while in the gender and Islam literature, Muslim feminists' strategies contesting patriarchal text's interpretations are well documented (Ahmed, 1992, 2011; Mernissi, 2003), individual, everyday women's contestations/strategies (especially those of Muslim women) and their interrelationship with the workplace are not significantly researched or theorised (Ebaugh, 2002). Further, little is understood in the literature about differences between strategies adopted by women in different contexts, including between Muslim and Western women. Therefore, there are calls for the sociology of work literature to carry-out 'more careful empirical work' in specific locations on connections between 'class, gender, sexuality and religion' (McDowell, 2014, 833).

Consequently, this paper attempts to expand on the limited body of literature that investigates religion-based strategies related to work (e.g. Fernando and Cohen; 2013 on Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Predelli, 2004; Essers and Benschop, 2009 on Muslim women in the West). It does so through classifying forms of contestations focusing on Syrian/Arab/Muslim women's unique 'feminist consciousness'. SWAs, faced with contradictions and tensions related to their work in a 'classical patriarchal' context, employ strategies of contestation to adapt and subvert dominant discourses.

Syria is an Arab country with a Muslim majority. Like other Arab countries, it has a 'classical patriarchal' system (Kandyoti, 1998), justified within traditional interpretations of Islamic texts and consequent gender inequalities in laws and State's actions (Yamani, 1996). Classical patriarchy dictates 'the sanctity and privacy of family life', which is linked to the concept of family honor. The system encourages sexual 'segregation of females, in general, from males ... except for the closest of relatives'. It inhibits women from contributing to public life and closely associates them with domestic chores and the private household. The rationale of this system is often linked to Islamic persecution on sexual segregation and remains unchallenged in many Arab-Muslim States (Fluehr-Lobban, 1993, 93). Syria's modern politics, therefore, have always been intimately implicated with Islam, where conflicts between the "secular" regime and "Islamists" are closely intertwined with the politics of gender (Willingham, 2010) including in the workplace. Additionally, in the context of the war in Syria, women are facing growing conservatism, with many Islamist groups calling for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by 'Islamically sanctioned gender norms and values' (Cooke, 2000, p.91). Thus, despite that the empirical work in this study was carried-out prior to the violent events sweeping Syria, researching Syrian women's place in society and at work, and its relationship to religion and the State, is still relevant as any future for Syria will depend on the ability to include women and place them at the center of analysis for issues of socio-economic equality and development. Women's empowerment is a "force of history", vital for good governance, political stability and economic growth, beyond the gender equality project (Moghadam, 2013, 728). Employed

women in particular, as Walby (2013) and Moghadam (2013) argue, can become the champions of social democracies, especially in the context of the “Arab Spring”. Syrian women professionals, this study will reveal, have developed gender consciousness as a result of the necessity to constantly negotiate their roles in society in the midst of the rivalry between Islamists and the State. This consciousness will hopefully be mobilized in Syria’s transformation to more just and equitable society.

Section two explores links between religion and gender inequality, especially in relation to Islam in Arab countries; section three highlights women’s strategies, section four presents methodology, section five reports on interviews’ findings and section six concludes.

## **2. Religion and gender (in)equality: Islam in Arab countries**

Studies that examine religion’s influences on women’s labour-force participation often argue that all major monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) ‘decisively’ contribute to gender division of labour as they promote women’s familial duties (in the private sphere) over their public sphere activities (Gerami and Lehrer, 2001; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Fernando and Cohen, 2013). Unlike Western societies, where according to Inglehart and Norris (2003), increased secularization and modernization reduced traditional religious influence on women’s role, Muslim, especially Arab societies, retain traditional associations of women with the home/private sphere. Indeed, some research suggests that younger generations of Arabs are more ‘religious’ than their parents or grandparents and hold more traditional views about gender roles (Inglehart and Norris,

2003; Rezzo et al., 2007; Korotayev et al., 2014). Such views are, arguably, important contributors to lower rates of Arab women's participation in paid employment, as they build on "classical patriarchy" concepts of female seclusion and traditional texts' interpretation. In these traditional interpretations men are perceived as principle breadwinners in the family, have more rights to jobs than women and make better political/business leaders (Rizzo et al., 2007; Korotayev et al., 2014).

Such traditional understandings of women's role are embodied in Islamic family laws in Arab countries where women's role in the private space/home is emphasized on the basis of her biological and intellectual differences (Mernissi, 2003). Highly regarded Muslim clerics perpetuate the removal of women from public life as they prescribe that the family is the most important unit in society and that women's entry into public life is 'unnatural'. They often claim that the most serious threat facing society is for Muslim women to choose their career and material production over their family responsibilities; emulating Western societies, where material production is more valued than 'the development of human character' (Karam, 1998, p.179). Arab Governments, in the meantime, enforce Sharia as the source of legal authority in relation to family/women's issues, on the grounds of protecting Islamic/Arab identity.<sup>i</sup> As they are faced with unrest created from scarcity of jobs for men due to the dismantling of the public sector, Arab Governments resisted legal reforms to improve women's positions; fueling socio-economic gender inequalities (Mernissi, 2003).

Changes to market forces in many Arab societies made women's work outside their homes necessary, undermining classical patriarchy, but also trapping women 'between the Islamic ideology advocating women's place in the home and the practical reality of having to go out to work in order to feed their families' (Poya, 2010, 6). Here, a different form of sexual role segregation emerged, restricting women's work options (Kandiyoti, 1988). Patriarchal conditions meant that domestic/private responsibilities often moved from the home to the workplace, placing women at a disadvantaged position within the labour-market (Poya, 1999). A "neo-patriarchal" system arose where the older gender divisions were transformed and new gender and class divisions emerged. Here, female sexuality dominant in traditional interpretations of Islam laid the ground for various forms of discrimination related to access to work and gender division of labour in occupations (Poya, 1999; Casanova, 2009).

### **3. Work and Strategies within Islam**

Despite the overall "negative" association in the literature between religion and gender equality including at work, few studies have "positively" associated religion with women's ability to work outside their homes as it encourages their education, achievement; career commitment and give them strength to cope with challenges (Fernando and Cohen, 2013). Additionally, religious women often strategically mobilized religion to argue for equality, build networks with other women and foster a feminist consciousness. In the context of Islam, Predelli (2004) and Essers and Benschop (2009) revealed how Muslim women living

in the West (Norway and the Netherlands respectively) negotiated their identity and their participation in the labour market within the framework of Islam. These studies indicated that the interrelationship between gender and religion needs a more careful analysis into both how religion 'promotes the lower status of women compared to men and helps to empower women' (Ebaugh and Chafetz, 1999, 587).

Islam in particular is viewed as the prime example of a structurally patriarchal religion opposed to women's rights (Kirmani and Phillip, 2011). Thus, the insistence of many Muslim women to negotiate their equalities within an Islamic framework have puzzled many liberal and secular feminists in the East and West, calling such insistence as "false consciousness" or "self-imposed tutelage" (Casanova, 2009, 27). In Western contexts, secularisation displaced religion from social studies and public policy, including in relation to gender (Ebaugh, 2002). At least in Europe, protecting gender equality has become 'the most common normative justification of secularism' (Casanova, 2009, 16). For many Arab-Muslim women, alternatively, a response through an Islamic framework is justified as Arab States and clerics, responsible for drafting and maintaining family laws, often promote these inequalities in the name of Islam. Thus, a strategy embedded within Islam and text reinterpretation is 'imperative, even unavoidable' to projects of gender equality and liberation there (Barlas, 2009, 2). Here, Muslim women's responses within religion can be contrasted with Western women's strategies for equality, where religion is perceived negatively.

Many Muslim women, therefore, construct their contesting strategies within the Islamic framework, through engaging with ‘gender-sensitive analysis and interpretation of Islamic texts and teachings’ (Kirmani and Phillips, 2011, 90). A number of activist and Arab Feminists like Ahmed and Mernissi<sup>ii</sup> often question hermeneutical methods from which Islamic norms and practices are derived and legitimised. They seek to create alternative readings of religious texts that ‘build a discursive and spiritual basis for more equitable gender-based structures, systems, and practices’ (Zine, 2006, 19). This approach is “defensive” in that it attempts to defend the acceptability of women’s access to public life through providing alternative interpretations drawn upon theology (Yip, 2005). It counters accusations of critics who perceive gender-related advocacy as an attempt to ‘undermine religious percepts and practices by proving that the values of justice and equality are enshrined in the Quran itself’ (Kirmani and Phillips, 2011, 90). In an attempt to emphasize egalitarian Islam, these women often give examples from early Muslim women, like the prophet’s wives, to justify their activism in business and Islamic law (Yamani, 1996). Muslim women and feminists also employ an “offensive” approach (Yip, 2005), which incorporates a sense of resistance and renewal. They question the establishments that interpret Islamic texts, the intellectual standards informing these interpretations and the exclusion of women’s voices (Ahmed, 1992).

Muslim women contestations from within an Islamic framework are not exclusively framed as “offensive” or “defensive”, but also “authentic” in that they ‘spring from a genuine belief that Islam is an egalitarian and just religion’ (Kirmani and Phillips, 2011, 94). Many Muslim

women have a very different understanding of Sharia to both traditionalists and the Western media, and believe that Sharia can be associated with gender justice. Therefore, they often attempt to defend the authenticity of Islam, not only as a pragmatic exercise, but also as a concern to reform Islam and make it fit for the requirements of their personal lives and experiences (Jouili and Ami-Moazami, 2006). Their egalitarian understating offers an alternative view to gender roles based on equality as promotes 'equal access to salvation and to holiness to male and female' where 'there is no gender discrimination in the eyes of God' (Casanova, 2009, 18). The "authentic" approach attacks patriarchal interpretations from "within" and through evoking the strong link in Islamic tradition between faith and knowledge. Here, Muslim women demand pursuing knowledge, including through work, as a religious duty (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006).

Challenging patriarchy, therefore, generates various forms of responses. New bargaining strategies develop through personal and political struggles, which are often different and contradictory between different groups of women (Kandiyoti, 1988). Thus, when exploring women's resistance to patriarchy, 'it is important to not only look at known feminists discourses and organized resistance but also at individual women's contestations and agency in 'subverting' these conditions to their own advantage' (Gerami and Lehnerer, 2001, 556).

#### **4. Methods**

Constraints imposed on women shape their active or passive resistance and their ‘feminist consciousness’ (Kandiyoti, 1998). SWAs’ strategies and consciousness, therefore, arise from socio-economic and political contexts, the environment of women’s socialization, as well as the structure of the workplace (Chhachhi and Pittin, 1995). Thus, this study employs a methodology where theorization of SWAs’ activism moves beyond the reductive ‘religious paradigm’, which regards religion as the central cause of women’s subordination, and adopts an intersectional framework that connects religion to broader socio-economic and political factors that implicate the way religion ‘is taken up, interpreted and implemented’ by SWAs (Zine, 2006, 18; Casanova, 2009; Walby, 2013; 2014; Poya, 1999).

Syria’s recent history is signified by a struggle between the “secular” Government and Islamists. Both sides politicized the woman’s issue and used it as a bargaining tool for their political gains. Ostensibly, Syria’s Ba’thist Government’s philosophy<sup>iii</sup> stressed the importance of women’s contribution to public life, while Islamists perceived women as ‘important markers of cultural authenticity’, who’s main role is to be good mothers/wives (Willingham, 2010, p.7). However, in recent decades, due to economic difficulties, the State sought to gain legitimacy from its religious constituencies and shifted its discourse towards emphasising women’s familial roles, resembling Islamists’ discourses. Generally, the State made little efforts to support feminists’ causes, especially in relation to changing Sharia-based family laws, which contain discriminatory aspects to women’s access to public life (Willingham, 2010; AWE, 2009).<sup>iv</sup> Thus, despite that the gender gap at schools and

universities decreased, the economic contribution of men remained significantly higher than women's (Korolayev et al., 2015).<sup>v</sup>

Neo-liberal privatisation policies since the 1990s contributed to Syrian women's seclusion, as women faced increased contradictions arising from competition between tradition and new market ideologies. These changes were not accompanied by legislative or structural reforms that facilitated women's work and protection (Hutchings et al., 2010). This trend was reflected in the accounting profession, where neoliberal policies, with the replacement of welfare programmes and encouragement to participate in waged-work, meant that growing number of Syrian women have to work in less prestigious accounting jobs (like those of the clerical nature and in the public sector). The public sector in Syria is defined by lower wages and the scarcity of training and development opportunities. The private sector, especially international accounting firms, provides higher wages and better training. It, however, requires longer working-hours, networking and travel demands (Author A). Thus, many female accountants, who historically been disproportionately employed in the public sector, found it difficult in the newly liberalised economy to get and maintain jobs, especially in international accounting firms, contributing to the feminization of the public sector. Within this market segregation, a further segregation based on material circumstances between women emerged, where better-off women are more often employed in the private sector as they have better access to skills/training like English and western accounting certifications, and less well-off women were mostly confined to the public sector (Author A).

In such a context, the researcher attempted to “sample for diversity” (Bartkowski and Read, 2003, 76) within the accounting profession, through interviewing women from private and public sectors. The 22 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews carried-out in Syria between (December-January 2008-09) included 11 interviewees who worked in the public sector and 11 worked in the private sector (see Appendix 1). While all participants in this study could be considered privileged as they are employed, educated and ambitious (Fernando and Cohen, 2013), it was noticeable that women in the public sector spoke more about financial difficulties. Such differences make a distinction between women’s strategies in the private and public sectors insightful.

All women in this study identified themselves as Muslims. The researcher, who was educated and worked as an accountant in Syria, made contacts with female accountants she knew. Later on, the “snowballing” method was used. All interviews were conducted in Arabic; researcher and participants’ native language. The researcher transcribed and translated all interviews, making sure they do not lose their meaning. A non-literal translation, therefore, was inevitable (Ozbilgin et al., 2012). Interviewees were assured anonymity. Despite the sensitivity of some of the issues discussed about religion and the State, most interviewees offered open accounts and agreed for the interview to be recorded. Interviews lasted 60-120 minutes.

Initially, the researcher asked interviewees open-ended questions related to challenges facing them as professional women working in different organisations. It was striking how the majority of women related their struggles to 'incorrect' interpretations of Islam. Thus, they often articulated strategies within an Islamic framework. While, interviewees did not use the word "feminist" to describe their viewpoint, their ideas certainly resonated with those articulated by Muslim feminists. This apparent homogeneity of women's strategies does not mean that they shared similar 'notions of what liberation is and how to achieve it'. It, rather, indicates that despite variations, there is a 'certain trend among institutionally organized committed Muslim women' to address issues of gender inequality from within the Islamic framework (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006, 619).

Analyzing themes emerging from SWAs' expressions of agency allowed the researcher to classify these themes into three strategies: "defensive", "offensive" and "authentic". It is worth noting that interviewees' narratives did not always fit perfectly within one category. Participants' strategies overlapped and were contradictory in some instances. By classifying women's strategies, however, the paper sets the groundwork to explore Muslim women's strategies at work and society.

### **5. SWAs' strategies**

Interviewees' stories demonstrated how the politics and stereotypes of the private/public spaces are transferred/transformed to the workplace, informing their experiences. For

example they explained how managers are expected to be 'naturally male' and women accountants are often treated as secretaries in the workplace. Qamar, explained:

*Perceptions (of women's role at home) are sometimes translated to mean certain opinions about women's roles at work where some treat female accountants in their offices as secretaries.*

Interviewees gave various examples of how concepts of sexual segregation between the private/public shaped much of (male) employers' assumptions regarding women's work commitment and abilities. Taherah explained that women were perceived '*less qualified and less devoted to their work as accountants*'. Therefore, when women worked outside their homes, they often discovered that they were expected to replicate their private sphere roles in being 'caregivers, providing assistance, support, and extending service to others' (Al-Malki et al., 2012, p. 154). They discovered that their roles were segregated according to traditional interpretations of Islamic sexual stereotypical views of the appropriateness of certain traits to certain aspects of the job:

*Extreme religious views and misunderstandings of Islam are the reasons to exclude women from the profession, especially from networking and social events, on the grounds that Islam dictates that women should not mix with men and ... that women's place is at home. (Qamar)*

Here, religion and religious norms seemed to get fused and reproduced into secular public spaces (the workplace) to shape gender roles (Casanova, 2009). Sex segregation and honor demands are supposed to protect men and women from temptation and protect Islamic societies from surrendering to the 'western unisex form of society' (Sharify-Funk, 2008). For SWAs like Faten, who worked in the male-dominated private sector, this meant significant pressure to conform:

*In a male environment ... every mistake is magnified because she is a woman.*

*They try often to embarrass her and make her look inadequate ... The pressure goes to a level where you have to watch how you sit, talk or laugh in the office*

*(Faten)*

Therefore, while resistance to women's work outside their home decreased rapidly in Syria as economic conditions dictated the need for their work. It is resistance to the complete movement of women in the public sphere that remains strong because of concerns about women's honor. SWAs choosing to enter the public-space, therefore, can do so on condition of respecting the "the code of honor and modesty" (Offenhauer, 2005, p.58). As a result, some women, like Sana, came to the conclusion that working in the public sector is a better option for women as it does not require long-working hours:

*Work in public sector is more suitable ... The man can have more than one job at a time, can come back home at 11 or 12 at night, it is not a problem. For a*

*woman this is not possible ... So she sacrifices higher financial rewards for the sake of her security and perceived morality.*

Market liberalization meant that the private sector in Syria began to increasingly resemble Western work environments, where much of employees' free time, especially in international firms, is captured by the employer (cf. Grugulis et al., 2000). In the context of Syria, such an environment is specifically disadvantageous to women, as it challenges normative assumptions about 'family's honor' related to women's traveling on their own or returning home late at night. As 'family honor' is linked to the action of the female, many women, like Sana, chose not to work or to work in less demanding environments, like the public sector, as they did not want to offend their husbands, their family or their own honor.

The above quotes demonstrated that SWAs' gender construction within the workplace is intertwined with the sexual division of labour in the household, determining roles and sectors that women can occupy. Thus, SWAs' strategies to counter sexual division required the amalgamating of strategies between the private and the public, linking the household with political-religious structures and with the workplace, as gender relations get constituted and contested within each (Chhachhi and Pittin, 1995). Here, SWAs used "defensive", "offensive" and "authentic" strategies to contest both patriarchal Islamic interpretations related to access to paid-employment, and the shapes these patriarchal structures take in the workplace.

### **5.1 The “defensive” approach**

The majority of interviewees related their experiences of exclusion to the “incorrect” interpretations of Islamic texts and sexual roles segregation of men and women. Thus, for SWAs, defending their work was closely linked to engaging with Islamic texts and offering alternative understandings of the issue of “Islam and women”:

*As our society uses religion as an excuse for not allowing women to work, then we need to open this debate and have new and, in my opinion, more correct interpretations of Islam. (Jameelah)*

And,

*But in Islam and in the Quran there is nothing to indicate that a woman should not work or contribute to any job’s requirements (Hala)*

SWAs’, to defend their work, questioned literal interpretations of the texts arguing that contextual and cultural specifics of society must be emphasised. Interviewees like Qamar below demanded policy makers and those that interpret Islamic text to consider these influences on Islamic jurisprudence even in areas that these mores have become deeply rooted in Islam, like the issue of mixing between the sexes:

*For example, the perception that mixing between the sexes in public-spaces is frowned upon in Islam is not attainable ... With progress ... it is not possible to*

*segregate men from women anymore. You cannot avoid mixing with men in your day-to-day life and work. (Qamar)*

Islamic societies are generally uneasy about increased trends of women working closely to men (Neal et al., 2005). Neal et al., (2005, p. 479) explains that ‘a simple man-woman business handshake can be controversial in some circles, as it breaks through the historical/cultural norms of segregation, and the absolute proscription on being touched by a man other than one’s husband’. Within such a context, some SWAs defended their work that required “mixing” by providing an alternative understanding and distinguishing between necessary mixing at the workplace and “un-necessary” mixing:

*As long as the woman is respecting the limits of Sharia, Islam does not prohibit her work. This means that she wears the hijab, does not mix unnecessarily with men or work late at night (Salma)*

Salma defended her work through assurances that her conducts do not contradict Islamic morality related to modesty of dress and behavior. Meanwhile, she provided an alternative understanding to the type of mixing that is frowned upon in Islam (the un-necessary one that is mostly linked to social aspects rather work). Jameelah also justified her work arguing that her conduct in the workplace was within the limits of Sharia:

*I do not believe that women's work outside the home is forbidden or against Islam, as long as she dresses in respectable way and deals with people in good and respectable way. I do not think that this is against our religion. (Jameelah)*

Both Jameelah and Salma worked in the private sector (also Qamar and Faten who were quoted earlier). This category of women seemed more likely than those who worked in the public sector to attempt to defend their work through assurances that they are closely operating within an Islamic framework. This is because they are the most to be faced with contradictions and discomfort in a transitional society, where change to a social system is occurring while tradition is still alive. These women often defended their work through a vision based on economic equality, but with assurances that they are maintaining the dignity of themselves, their families and their societies.

## **5.2 The offensive approach**

Participants also used an “offensive” strategy against both the religious and regulatory structures, contesting the authoritative figures that do texts’ interpretation, the ineffective stance of the State and relocating interpretation to themselves. A number of interviewees explained that Muslim women should engage in reinterpreting Islamic texts to ensure that conservative/male-dominated views do not silence other views. In this, they attempted to discredit these male figures by highlighting their manipulative approaches to maintain patriarchal structures and male control over women:

*We do not have a problem with Islam. The problem is with the legislator. If you look at all legislators ... imams or governments, the legislator is always a man. A man, no matter how knowledgeable and educated he is, always favors restricting women's participation to public-life ... For male legislators, it is easier to preserve the status quo rather than being accused of contributing to vice and moral corruption in society. (Hala)*

Here, SWAs' approach is consistent with Muslim feminists' approaches where they challenge 'patriarchal hermeneutics of religious texts and the construction of sexist theology' (Yip, 2005, p.55). Notable from Hala's quote, she perceived the Government to be incorporated in enforcing patriarchal structures and inequality. Indeed, interviewees gave various examples of how the country's legal framework is hindering their empowerment. Seham also highlighted contradictions in Government's stance on women's issues, linking repressive laws related to the private space (marriage, divorce...) to issues related to the workplace/public space (maternity leave, women humiliation at work):

*Generally, you find that Syrian laws are not fair to women, whether in marriage, divorce, custody, maternity leave or inheritance ... Meanwhile, the Government claims to encourage women's work and holding managerial positions ... but laws have not developed in line with this apparent desire ... Talking about changing laws derived from Sharia is a red line you should not cross ... The society and its institutions are not helping working women ... We*

*need regulations and rules in Syria that do not allow for the humiliation of women at work ... or leave them under the mercy of their boss.*

Incorporating gender equality in the Syrian legal system, especially in the spheres of family laws, have been often hindered because of claims that these changes contradict national customs and Sharia (Willingham, 2010). In this context, participants attempted to weaken and challenge patriarchal structures by launching an “offensive” against religious and political establishments and figures that are not willing to reform their status, so as to discredit their credibility and moral authority (Yip, 2005). Here, some interviewees like Hala relocated text’s interpretation from male figures to women and themselves:

*We need to develop a trend where we can challenge some practices even if they appear to be supported by the Quran. We need to understand that Quran’s established interpretations are sometimes questionable ... We need more women scholars to interpret religious texts differently and allow women’s work and leadership rather than merely being a commodity ... As long as the legislator and religious leaders are men, we are going to keep living in a male dominated society.*

Women in the Arab world generally are not encouraged to take on the task of reinterpretation, especially if they have not gone through the established/traditional religious institutions (Sharify-Funk, 2008). Similar to Hala’s views, for Muslim feminists like Ahmed (2011, p.110) transforming society and expanding the understanding of religious

texts can only occur if the 'work of interpretation is democratized and women are able to enter and participate in the broad arenas of social and religious movements and of public life as activists, teachers, and leaders, and as people proactively engaged in defining the public good and the meaning of justice and the meanings also of sacred scriptures'.

Hala transferred her "offensive" strategy questioning authority of interpretation to the workplace, where she imposed her own personal experience and voice into the body of text's interpretations about her work and the issue of mixing:

*I do not actually care about what Imams and Muslim scholars say about women's work and mixing with men ... My understanding of the Quran is that there is nothing indicating that a woman cannot hold any responsibility or do any work, as long as it is with a limit of her dignity ... dignity does not mean isolating women in the workplace ... But to respect her mental abilities and see her as equal to the man.*

Hala, like Seeham previously, gave authority to herself in order to interpret the text regarding mixing at work, with her own definition of women's integrity (and honor). Again in the "offensive" approach women who worked in the private sector seemed the most outspoken. This could be due, as mentioned earlier, they face more contradiction between their work and their religion than those working in the public sector. It could also be due to that this group of women are often (not always) more financial privileged and have access to wider training requiring mixing and travel. They are also relatively a younger group than those working in the public sector.

### **5.3 The authentic approach:**

SWAs notably in their defensive and offensive approaches did not question the accuracy of the Quran or its sacredness. They questioned the conservative interpretations of Islam, which assume certain “unconflicted” gender roles and relations (Yip, 2005). They wondered why these interpretations paid little attention to Islam’s ethical teachings and spiritual equality of women and men in its injunctions. They repeated stories about how the Prophet shared housework with his wives and never raised a hand against them. How women in the early days of Islam were merchants, soldiers, teachers, poets, religious scholars and mothers. Hala elaborated clearly how she (and others) use the examples of these early Muslim women as guidance:

*We are using women’s stories from the early days of Islam as examples to challenge the opinion that Islam is repressive to women ... These women contributed to many significant aspects of running society and the community.*

Thus, for a number of interviewees aspects of bringing change included revisiting early Islamic periods and demonstrating their knowledge about how historically Muslim women played a dominant role in politics and public-spaces to argue against tradition. For Ahmed (2011) it is critical for Muslim women today to have knowledge and engage in understanding the dynamics of early Muslim societies as contemporary Islamists’ call for a return to early Islamic societies’ laws and practices and as Western politics and media are involving the merits or demerits of Islam in gender debates.

In provoking an “authentic” approach, SWAs also employed their knowledge to argue that women’s work is useful for Islamic societies, thus, countering Islamists’ claims to the contrary:

*I keep arguing that God did not create us to eat, sleep or consume only. He created us to be productive ... I should work and contribute to building the Muslim society ... When I wake up in the morning and read the Quran, I feel so much energy that day. This spiritual dimension is very important to me and to my work.*

(Suzan)

Similar to provoking authentic Islamic ethics to access work, interviewees also legitimized their work by linking their faith to their Islamic ethics:

*A Muslim woman should work with ethics and passion. I am honest in my work...*

*Because I am a Muslim, I will keep working in honesty... I am working to the hereafter in my mind and I try to make sure that my accountability is to God.*

(Jameelah)

Suzan and Jameelah used spirituality and religious knowledge to upgrade their positions in society (e.g. from a consumer to a productive citizen). They provoked Islamic teachings and ethics that promoted hard-work as a form of worship that absolves sins (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006). Indeed, in justifying their existence in the workplace, the “authentic”

approach was provoked by the majority of interviewees. They often linked their duty to gain religious knowledge to their duty to acquire secular knowledge, including at work. A number of interviewees like Hayat, Rawd and Summer used the very popular quote by Mohamed: 'seek knowledge even if you have to go to China' as an example of the importance of knowledge in Islam (and therefore, their ability to travel and leave their private space to seek this knowledge). Knowledge, therefore, is a 'central element in their life politics and is also the focal point around which transmitted forms of authority are potentially challenged or reestablished' (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006, 628). Here, education featured as the most important justification to becoming a better Mother (private space), but also a productive worker (public space) and to contribute to society more broadly. Yara, similarly, mobilised the education and knowledge discourse to argue for the necessity of work and "mixing" for women as a religious duty:

*Islam requires us to seek knowledge ... You do not get educated to sit home doing nothing, you need to mobilize your education for your society. You need to develop yourself and mix with society.*

The authentic approach was provoked by a wider range of women's categories, from those who worked in public and private sectors, revealing how dominant the "seeking knowledge" and education discourse in Arab societies like Syria. This discourse emerged in contemporary Arab societies in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century advocating women's education and knowledge to raise Muslim children to defend Arab/Islamic identity (Karam,

1988). SWAs provoked this role and duty to claim authenticity and knowledge allowing them to contest established traditional interpretations and demand access to the public space to serve their societies. Hala's quote below is a good example on employing the "politics of authenticity" (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006) in demanding public spaces in all aspects of society:

*Since we were kids we are persuaded that these things (re women) are in the Quran and you cannot question them or ask why. But with the expansion of women's education and horizons, women are now able to challenge such ideas and to interpret the Quran differently and demand their rights.*

## **6. Conclusion**

This study expands knowledge about the distinctive and diverse strategies women deploy to empower themselves at work and in society. It systemized SWAs' strategies within Islam and provided a revision to the gender equality literature, where religion, especially Islam, is perceived mainly as a cultural force contributing to the marginalization of women, especially their contribution to paid-employment. SWAs, in contrast, mostly understood the intersectionalities of their oppression and framed strategies within Islam to counter them.

SWAs mainly crafted their agency through religion, adopting 'internal critique' to normative traditional claims. They employed "defensive", "offensive" and "authentic" strategies to negotiate sexual role segregation between the private/public and the forms that gender division takes in the workplace. In the "defensive" approach, SWAs contested the accuracy of conservative/traditional interpretations of their roles and stressed egalitarian and spiritual perceptions of Islam instead. These strategies are "defensive", as they avoided accusations of operating outside the limits of Islamic morality (Yip, 2005), linking their work to early Muslim women role-models; giving themselves autonomy in the meantime. SWAs also employed "offensive" strategies to contest traditional interpretations by provoking a radical challenge to male-dominated, clerical Islam, undermining the infallibility of religious authorities and questioning their objectivity (Yip, 2005). By shifting the power of interpretations to themselves, SWAs provided alternative interpretations related to their work and mixing in the workplace. In the "authentic" approach, SWAs linked their professional jobs to Islamic ethics of hard-work, seeking knowledge and spirituality. They linked their faith to their "duty" to gain knowledge, including through work. They employed their religious commitment to knowledge and education as tools to contest, transform and challenge sexual division of labour.

This study demonstrated that challenging hegemony of patriarchal interpretations of Islam is not a task limited to feminists but reflected in everyday realities of many working Arab-Muslim women. One of the striking findings of this study is the evident 'feminist consciousness' that these women exhibited from all backgrounds. Contradictions in

Islamists and secular State's discourses seemed to lead to a 'process of conscientization' (Poya, 1999) where Syrian women learned to critique contradictions in the State's rhetoric and demand action against repressive regulations and laws. While the quotes selected represented sentiments expressed by the majority of women in this study regardless of age, job and sector, further analysis showed that the most outspoken women are those who worked in the private sector. Faced with possible accusations of operating outside their religion and customs of private/public segregation, provoked these women to employ religious strategies in order to justify their work and their position in a workplace environment that required travel, networking and mixing. Such a group of women seemed to lead contestations to patriarchy within a religious framework to demanded equal rights in public-spaces, reshaping the dynamics of feminism in Syria. Additionally, understanding these women's agency seemed to be closely linked to the status of these women as educated and somewhat privileged, allowing them space to provoke the politics of authenticity and argue that their education and knowledge should be mobilized in the private and public spaces.

The rich empirical insights presented in this study indicated the importance of contextual and localised understandings when dealing with issues of work, gender and inclusion. SWAs shared similar experiences to Western women accountants in relation to gender division of labour (cf. Anderson-Gouph et al., 2005). A point of difference between Western and Muslim female accountants was that Muslim women chose to engage with these issues within an Islamic framework, as this gave them opportunities to mobilise faith to

challenge discrimination. In a context where patriarchy is legitimized with reference to religion, SWAs, through their distinction between religion and tradition, claimed Islam 'as a source of reinterpreting certain elements' like "mixing between the sexes" to question the strict sexual division of their roles and labour. They attacked patriarchy with a strategy to 'defend Islam and work with it' (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2005, 627). This does not mean that the struggle is over for Muslim women in their societies, but indicates a need to change stereotypical views of these women as 'victimized, dependent and oppressed' (Essers and Benschop, 2009, p.404).

Many Arab and Muslim feminists warn against using religion as a strategy for gender equality, as religious strategies could become a hegemony that Muslim women cannot escape (Kirmani and Phillips, 2011). These observations are valid. However, this study showed that women did not only use Islam as a pragmatic and 'opportunistic' strategy, but their attempts to reform Islam were authentic. Therefore, there is a need to perceive women's agency beyond submission vs resistance. Their strategies and engagement with religion and authority are necessary conditions for not only change within their society but also to become more authentic, pious Muslims (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006). Meanwhile, there is a need for inclusivity to all identities and approaches (Kirmani and Phillips, 2011). Secular strategies are also desirable to accompany religious strategies like demands for implementing international laws and secular reform. Indeed, while SWAs mainly employed Islam as a legitimising force of their work, they acknowledged the importance of other secular institutions and forces in their struggle, like the Government,

in enacting equitable regulation and reform to family law. In the current context of political upheaval in Syria, where people are seeking a more democratic government, the issue of women's rights needs to gain more significance in debates and be linked to socio-economic developments and to broader society's demands (Al-Malki et al., 2012).

The paper is of interest to Western audiences in academia and beyond. While Islamic practices concern Muslims only, Islam and Muslims exist in the West and contribute to shaping it (Barlas, 2009). Additionally, global capitalism plays a significant role in harmonizing "Western" and "non-Western" women's experiences, especially at work (Author, A). Thus, challenging inequalities requires broader understandings of women's experiences and strategies globally. There is a need to expand sociology of work-studies to incorporate exploration of gender equality and culture, linking them with religion and faith. Such expansion contributes to interfaith dialogue related to women's empowerment and gender equality as a 'radical internal critique' (Bartkowski and Read, 2003) of all traditions, in East or West is necessary to address race, class and gender inequalities.

The empirical work in this study preceded the violent events in Syria. The war in Syria changed gender relations and altered dramatically women's conditions. Still, the findings showed how the Arab awakening period could motivate scholars to link women's issues to other socio-economic policies to enable change (Karam and Afiouni, 2014). This study showed how Syrian women are exerting tremendous resilience in contesting long-established traditional terrains and insisting on work and inclusion, despite through an

Islamic framework. It is hoped that by highlighting these localised struggles, Syrian women will be able to build on a “non-Eurocentric frameworks”, where they can gain economic and legal rights within their societies. SWAs developed a feminist consciousness that challenged the public/private ideology through perceiving Islam differently to patriarchal interpretations. They provided other ways of thinking about gender in Islam. These views will hopefully help Syria in building a more equitable, inclusive and just future.

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#### Appendix 1: Interviewees' profiles

Interviewee	Age range	Sector
Dunya	31-40	Public
Faten	31-40	Private
Hala	41-50	Private
Hayat	31-40	Public
Hazar	21-30	Public
Heba	31-40	Private
Jameelah	21-30	Private
Maysoon	41-50	Public
Nemat	51-60	Public

Qamar	31- 40	Private
Rehab	31-40	Public
Rasha	21-30	Private
Rawd	31-40	Private
Rula	41-50	Public
Salma	31-40	Private
Sana	31-40	Public
Seeham	31-40	Private
Summer	31-40	Public
Suzan	41-50	Public
Taherah	31-40	Public
Yara	31-40	Private

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<sup>i</sup> Despite removing Islam’s influence from civil, commercial and penal laws (Mernissi, 2003).

<sup>ii</sup> Ahmed and Mernissi are considered to have ‘opened new frontiers in the scholarship of women and Islam’ (Sharify-Funk, 2008, p. 12).

<sup>iii</sup> Since 1963, the pan-Arab, Ba’th Party governed Syria. The Party, theoretically, promoted socialist and secular policies.

<sup>iv</sup> For example, under the Syrian code, a wife needs to have permission from her husband to travel or work and her right to maintenance ceases when she works outside her home without her husband’s consent (UNDP, 2008).

<sup>v</sup> Women’s workforce participation in Syria does not exceed %13 of women between the ages of 15 and 64 (2011 statistics) (Korolayev et al., 2015). The Women Economic Participation Index ranked Syria 107 out of 130 countries (AWE, 2011).