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Caught in the Crossfire: Women Finding Political Influence in the Ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood

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Declaration

I, Stine Lise Wannebo, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature……………………………….

Date…………………………………….

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Abstract

To find out about experiences, perspectives and assumptions other than your own, you need to ask questions to people different than yourself. It is not enough to look at them from afar or to generalise based on the knowledge you already hold. You need to ask. Academia has long registered that there is a rise in the number of women represented in Islamist parties following the Arab Spring. In countries such as Tunisia and Yemen, women were protesting alongside men in the streets as their equals, advocating for change in their thousands and believing they were experiencing an irreversible shift in attitudes towards the role of the Islamic woman in society. However, the transformation from participation to representation has yet to take hold. Political parties affiliated with the conservative but still moderate Islamist movement the Muslim Brotherhood have women within their ranks who have reached positions of political influence. In an ideological framework that denounces feminism as a Western secular import and sees women as the symbol of a cultural heritage that needs to be protected, how do female Islamists find a way to assert their influence? Much like the Muslim Brotherhood, these women are caught in the crossfire where tradition meets modernity. Through qualitative research based on three in-depth case studies, this study has found that Islamist women are not afraid to make their voices heard while also navigating a set of expectations and assumptions that is out of secular feminism reach. The data provided by the case studies have been analysed through the lens of Feminist International Relations, using feminist research methods to keep an eye out for any inherent liberal or secular assumptions. The result is a different outlook not only on Islamism but on the women who choose to exercise their freedoms within it.

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1. Introduction

There is a duality in the term *female Islamist* that is hard to put your finger on. It implies a political position for women in a movement that at its core appears to be opposed to the social and political freedoms of anyone but men. The two words thus seem contradictory and that only a misunderstanding can have led to them being placed side by side. Yet, these terms together form the subject of this Master's Thesis which will explore the perspectives and experiences of three women who all have prominent positions among Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in the Middle East and North Africa. The aim is that by the end of this research paper, the meaning of *female Islamist* will have become much clearer.

While *female* usually is a relatively easy word to comprehend, *Islamist* is much harder to grasp. There is little doubt that the word *Islamist* is linked to *Islamism* and to *Islam*, but what implications these connections have for the meaning of the term seem not to concern everyone who chooses to employ it. One tragic incident that made this abundantly clear is the news coverage surrounding the murder of Samuel Paty in October of this year. The French schoolteacher was beheaded near his school in the Parisian suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine after showing cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in his class the day before. It was not the first time the 47-year-old used the images in his lessons about free speech. President Emmanuel Macron referred to the incident as an 'Islamist terrorist attack' (BBC 2020), "an Islamist activist" was arrested in connection with the killing (Carlsen 2020) and news outlets spoke of the murderer's jihadist contacts (Henly 2020). Activists are interviewed about the importance of fighting Islamism (Stokke 2020) while French Muslims reportedly fear that Islamophobia is on the rise (Rosman 2020). This comes amidst an already tense situation where French Muslims already feel targeted by state policies aiming to fight what they call 'Islamist separatism' (Rosman 2020). There is no attempt to explain the meanings of, and the distinctions between, Islamist, jihadist, Islamism and Islam in any of these media reports. Terms such as radical Muslim, violent Islamist and Islamic extremist, and sometimes just Islamist, are used interchangeably.

1.1. The meaning of 'Islamist'

It was not possible to find any mention of political Islam in any of these articles. Yet, it is perhaps the easiest way to make sense of the world Islamism, making an Islamist someone who believes in a political application of the Muslim faith, Islam. Ergo, Islamist could have had just as few negative connotations as the term *Christian Democrat* but that is not the case. There is a distinct lack of nuance when talking about Islamism. In response to the brutal murder of Samuel Paty, president Macron is reported to have told his ministers: "Fear is about to change sides. Islamists must not be allowed to sleep soundly in our country" (Henly 2020). The statement triggered a public reaction from Turkish president Recep Erdogan, who himself could be considered an Islamist. There were other reactions as well. The renowned French scholar on the subject of Islamic terrorism, Olivier Roy, did interviews in the international press where he argued that the murder had not been radicalised by Islam, he had found an ideological framework to pin his violence. He directed sharp criticism against president Macron who he argues have taken hold of the wrong end of the stick (Åm 2020). Others, however, agreed with the French approach. After appearing on the front page of Le Figaro Magazine spearheading "the fight against Islamism", Dana Manouchehri told *Aftenposten* that Islamists undermine democracy and are a threat to everyone, also Muslims (Stokke 2020). As the leader of LIM, a Norwegian non-governmental organisation working towards integration, diversity and equality, Manouchehri is particularly concerned with the consequences that negative social control can have on women and girls within a religious setting.

Whether or not Manouchehri would be surprised to know that there are women within the Islamist movement who are also working secure women's rights, as this research will show, is hard to say. Not many stop to consider that it is possible to fight for equality outside a secular framework (Fox, Alzwawi & Refki 2016). There is no denying that there is more than one type of Islamist but the assumptions seems more often than not that an Islamist is the same as a violent religious extremist. Lamia Rastum Shehadeh says there are two trends within Islamic fundamentalism, namely the gradualist and the radicalist (Shehadeh 1999, p. 65). The Norwegian scholar Bjørn Olav Utvik argues that there is much diversity in the way that Islamists understand the message of Islam, yet they all agree that Islam contains the guiding principles for building a good society (Utvik 2019, p. 22). While this work centres round female Islamists, it is not a thesis about terrorists or militants but

about political actors. The three women who agreed to participate in this study come from different countries and different movements but are all involved in politics through political Islam. While Islamist have a long history of involving women at the grass-roots level there are considerably fewer that have been able to climb to a position of influence based off of their political work within the movement. The sheer number of women participating in the Arab spring uprisings show that Islamism does encourage participation but not necessarily representation. These women have all reached prominent positions within their party. One has even won a Nobel Peace Prize, thereby extending her political influence even beyond her own country's borders.

Through their own experiences these three women have been able to develop a unique perspective on Islamism and their own role within it. Perhaps they are the only ones who can see the Islamic movement and its approach to the rights and freedoms of women for what it truly is. They alone are able to tell what liberal views within such a conservative ideological network is actually like when push comes to shove. Yet, it is a group of women whose experiences have seldom been studied and even less so by using their own personal accounts as data (Tajali 2017 p. 178).

1.2 Research Questions

This research focuses on one Islamist movement in particular, namely that of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is one of the oldest and most controversial organisations within Islamism, at the same time as it is one of the most influential with affiliated parties in parliaments and governments across the Middle East and North Africa. As the academic research will show, it is an organisation drawn between Islamic tradition and the expectations of a modern political reality. There are women who have gained crucial positions of influence a movement that on the whole is exceptionally conservative and hostile towards women's place in politics. Their positions raise questions about their experiences, their motivation and their autonomy given the ideological framework the women surround themselves with.

The study is founded in the academic discipline of International Relations (IR) but like IR itself it will also stretch across into other fields for relevant and necessary contributions. The research questions that this project aims to answer are:

- What motivated these women to become politically active through the Islamist movement?
- How do these women define political influence and in what way do they see themselves as politically influential?
- How do they view their party's position on women's rights and how does it correlate with their own stance?

At their core, the research questions evolve around the opportunities and progress of women within Islamism and the question of whether or not it is possible for an Islamist to be truly moderate. When researching the topic of women and Islam, and women and political Islam, it quickly came apparent through an array of sources that the rights and liberties of women in Muslim society stand to represent something larger. Women, as mothers and wives, are central to the family unit that is considered to be the very core of society. At the same time, the role of women is one of the focal points when it comes to Western critiques against the way Islam is practiced amongst Arab nations. The 'woman question' thus lies at the ideological heart of the Muslim movement and combines the two common positions that all Islamist movements agree on; the protection of Muslim culture and values, and the opposition against the West (Utvik 2019, p. 333).

This thesis is not an in-depth study of Islamist and Muslim ideas around gender, women's social position and women's place in politics. That subject is too vast for any one piece of work, let alone a Master's Thesis. The focus of this research project is the voices of three women and the rest derives from that. Mona Tajali (2017) points out that while women in Islamic parties might have been studied before, it is as a phenomenon. During the Arab Spring women took to the streets in their thousands and in many places women and girls participated in the political revolution to the same extent as men. Their participation has interested many but women's political representation has not received the same amount of attention. Tajali calls it an understudied topic. She also makes the argument that when the political roles of women within Islamic parties are studied, their position is "(…) often unjustly credited to their male party leaders for their willingness to recruit and nominate women" (Tajali 2017, p. 178). Women are not simply placed in a position. It is the result of the choices that she has made for herself. By placing the women's own experiences at

the centre, as opposed to the policies and ideas created for them by men, this study aims to explore the topic from within. By assuming that all women share the same experiences because they share the same gender, is called gender essentialism (Kinsella 2017, p. 198). This research project has a few, in-depth case studies in order to be able to study each participant as an individual. In line with a feminist academic perspective, the goal is to start with the smallest components, the individual and to work outwards from there and contributing to the larger picture formed by accumulative knowledge in International Relations.

1.3 Thesis outline

This thesis will be separated into six chapters, not including the appendices. A chapter outlining the theoretical approach will follow this introduction. That is where the discussion about the term Islamist will be taken a step further but the *Theoretical Background* chapter will also take a closer look at relevant concepts such as feminism, gender and influence. Next follows a background chapter, *the Muslim Brothers*, that briefly sets the backdrop for the remaining part of the thesis, with the historical and ideological foundations of the Muslim Brotherhood. Then comes the literature review entitled *Muslim Brotherhood and Women*. Theis chapter will place this research within the relevant academic discourse relating to Islamism, the Muslim Brotherhood and the political autonomy of women within this framework. The fifth chapter is the *Methodological Approach* where the specifics of the research study will be laid out, from challenges related to access to a discussion about anonymity. The seventh chapter is a vital one, namely *Findings and Discussion*. It is on those pages that the data finally comes to the fore and where the experiences told by the participants will be analysed with the help of the context set out in the chapters that came before. The final chapter will be the *Conclusion* but to find out what this last section contains, one will have to read this research paper to the very end.

2. Theoretical Background

The purpose of this chapter is to further the understanding of how the findings of this research project came about. The theoretical context focuses on the theories, concepts and assumptions that form the foundation for the discussions that follow. By contemplating, discussing and explaining key concepts and ideas, the framework for this thesis will become clearer. The aim is that the conclusions drawn can be traced back through the thesis, making it apparent how one understanding has been built on the other.

In this the following pages, it is the theories and concepts relating to Islamism and feminism that will be considered, starting with a discussion about Islamism in an effort to define the scope and focus of this thesis. Next is a discussion about feminism in the field of International Relations, before ending the chapter by looking at how these two understandings together form the theoretical context of this research project.

2.1 Islamism

"Despite the unity of faith and common concerns, the character and interpretations of different fundamentalist groups have varied significantly, reflecting each country's specific history, social conditions, and politics, as well as the interpretations of the Quran, Sunna and early Islamic history" (Shehadeh 1999, p. 65).

Even if Bjørn Olav Utvik (2019) disagrees with the use of the term *fundamentalist*, it is no denying that Lamia Rastum Shehadeh neatly sums up the essence of what is modern Islamism. According to Professor Bjørn Olav Utvik, who has recently released a book on this particular subject, it is the conviction that Islam has a social and political message that provides guidance the successful building of society that joins Islamists together (Utvik 2019, p. 19). Anne Sofie Roald has also provided a definition for the word Islamism in her book *Islam:* "By Islamist, I mean a Muslim who regards Islam as a body of ideas, values, beliefs and practices encompassing all spheres of life, including personal and social relationships, economics and politics" (Roald 2001, p. xxi). In an Islamists understanding, religion is not just limited to the private sphere but a belief that stretches into all aspects of society. Utvik goes on to explain that the way Islamists perceive the social and political message of Islam varies greatly. While some view that the religious texts should be

observed to the letter, others see wider Islamic principles, such as compassion and social equality, as the foundation on which a society should rest (Utvik 2019, p. 22). While Salafists are examples of the first, the Muslim Brotherhood is considerably closer to the other end of the spectrum (Utvik 2019, pp. 54-55).

As previously mentioned, Islamists are often divided into radical and moderate, or graduate, trends (Shehadeh 1999, p. 65). However, not everyone agrees to this division and among them is Gilles Kepel (Utvik 2019, p. 28).

One cannot talk about Islam in this academic field without mentioning the discussion between the French scholars Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy. They debate the relationship between Islam and radicalism from opposite sides and their ideas have been an important contribution to the work of shaping French policy when it comes to Islamism and its link to radical religious behaviour (Nossiter 2016). While Kepel argues that Islam has been radicalised by extremists, Roy is of the opinion that extremist groups have Islamised radicalism (Smith 2016). While Kepel says that the leftist academic community in France fails to see the threat posed by "Islamist provocateurs" inside its borders, Roy insists that the French need for cultural conformity is what causes such radicalism (Worth 2017). There is no consensus within International Relations as to which one of the two is right and it may be argued that the discussion is more important than its conclusion. Yet, the arguments presented have had implications. Gilles Kepel was a member of the commission that decided to forbid Islamic headscarves and other religious symbols from French public schools in 2004 (Worth 2017).

This research project does not aim to tackle Islamism, or political Islam, as a whole. Neither does it focus on the radicals who dwell in terrorism or violent extremism and the relevance of Kepel and Roy's debate will therefore be limited. In an attempt to narrow the scope of this thesis, and because the main focus is Islamism in its political form, the focus has been set on organisations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The ideology and history of the brand of Islamism represented by the Muslim Brotherhood will be discussed in the next chapter. In the meantime, there is one concept that only recently started receiving adequate attention within the study of IR and that needs to be discussed within the framework of this thesis. Namely religion.

2.1.2 Religion

It is no secret that religion was not a subject of focus in International Relations for a very long time. Some have even called it "an anti-religious bias" (Sheikh 2012, p. 369) and it was not unique to the field of IR. Deneulin & Rakodi writes that there also was an attitude within development studies that religion was irrelevant to modern society (2011, p. 45). It was not until the end of the Cold War that International Relations scholars came to and started examining and challenging their own positivist foundations and expanded their area of interest. And when one begins to look for sources of power that is not states or international organisations, religion soon comes to the fore.

The discipline has failed to take religious belief into account when studying world affairs. It is not an uncommon assumption that a secular stance is somehow more objective. It is tempting to refer to the feminist mantra of politics of the everyday, yet, as seen with the example of Islamism, religion is not constricted only to the private sphere. Mavelli and Petito calls it radical theorising when they present the idea that freedom and democracy can be pursued outside a secular society structure (Mavelli & Petito 2012, p. 931). The two scholars go on to problematise the notion of secular, presenting postsecularity as a challenge to the inherent assumptions within the discipline of IR. It can be argued that the discipline is not sufficiently examining its own point of reference. While religion can easily be defined as an ideology, a set of assumptions about the world, not everyone recognises that the same can be said about secularism. Some even go as far as calling the two, religion and secularisation, political competitors with secularisation attempting to be the guiding light of society in a way that only religion could be (Fox 2014, p. 21). Bettiza & Dionigi says that constructivists tend to only study norm diffusion with liberal, Western secular norms in mind (2015, p. 624).

There are many theories about the role and influence of religion in political life. Hansen, Mesøy and Kardas present three approaches to religion in their book *The Borders of Islam* (2009). One can either have a primordialist, instrumentalist of constructivist view of religion (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas 2009, p. 10). While the first sees politics as something given, directed by higher forces, the second see religion as nothing but a tool to be used to gain influence or political power. The third, constructivist view, is the most modern

approach to the role of religion. Much like social constructivism, constructivists see religion as a shared understanding, something that is created through a common perception. Religion is therefore subject to change and not a given (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas 2009, p. 11). By trying to manipulate it, thereby joining the religious discourse, one is also influenced by it. Which one of these three approaches leaders prescribe to, either through tradition, culture or personal belief, has a great impact on what legitimate place religion is allowed in a society. Yet, there is so much more to the role of religion in relation to politics than whether it predates politics itself or whether it simply constitutes a useful tool.

When religion is used to build trust between strangers (Hansen & Mesøy 2009, p. 7) or to help different communities work towards a common goal, one does not stop to ask whether religion is really there. This side of religion is what has brought many to discussions around post-secularity, the return and resilience of religious traditions in the modern era (Marvelli & Petito 2012, p. 931). Identity politics has become a way of religion to remain clearly visible in society: "Religion has and continues to be an important source of identity to people – especially outside the more 'globalized world'" (Ellingsen 2005, p. 319).

2.2 Feminist International Relations

We are now jumping from a discussion around the definition of Islamism and religion's role in international politics to feminism within International Relations. It may seem like quite a leap. While tying these themes and discussions together can prove challenging, it is also what makes the topic of this thesis so interesting.

"By starting thought from women's lives, feminists claim they are actually broadening the base from which knowledge is constructed" (Tickner 1997, p. 629). This quote can be said to embody the starting point the feminist frame of mind. As a part of the critical tradition of International Relations, this approach to the discipline of IR seeks to challenge the narrative and ontology of the realist and liberalist approaches that had dominated the field up until the 1970s. This was the same time that some scholars started to consider religion as a source of power in world politics. According to Ann J. Tickner and Jacqui True, feminism did not come late to IR – it was IR that came late to feminism (2018, p. 2). Despite

the fifty years that have passed since the feminists entered the discipline, they remain critical in every sense of the word. Through feminism, the individuals of the everyday are connected to the workings of international political institutions (Tickner & True 2018, p. 9).

The critical mind-set is also at the core of this thesis work, as it sets out to include voices of those that might not necessarily be the first to come to mind when talking about politics or, as in this particular case, Islamists. In the same way the critical traditions came to challenge the truths of the IR discipline, this thesis aims to challenge the narrative around women and political Islam. To set the focus on these women alone might for some be unexpected but it is undoubtedly in line with the feminist focus on inter-sectionality. As Gal Gerson puts it: "The public personal envisioned by political theory is masculine" (2002, p. 796). This touches upon the premise at the heart of this thesis that we will get to in time.

2.2.1 Liberal and critical feminism

Feminism is the longest revolution, said the well-known British feminist author Juliet Mitchell back in 1966 (Tickner & True 2018, p. 11). The feminist movement had already lasted for over half a century by then. The academic tradition was born out of activism and first wave feminism and second wave feminism are common reference points used when talking about the evolution of feminist thought. While the face of feminism has changed though the years, it is also critical to acknowledge that there has never been one feminism. There are several, which by chance make it somewhat similar to Islamism. To make this work as transparent and clear as possible, it is therefore necessary to define what feminism will be used to create a theoretical framework for this thesis. The decision to choose a critical rather than liberal approach to feminism does set both the literature discussed and the research findings in a different light. It will soon become apparent that this choice will move the discussion from women's mere representation in politics to women's participation in politics.

2.2.2 Gender

Gender has long been one of the most important concepts in feminist theory, along with power. Critical feminists criticise how liberal feminists often assume a difference between

genders, which they then use as a starting point for analysis (Kinsella 2017, p. 197). As this is a study looking at women alone, it is therefore important to ask the right questions in order to make sure that gender essentialism (Kinsella 2017, p. 198) cannot be used as a valid critique. In research methods, this means being careful not to expect certain answers and not forming codes prior to analysis. But it is also necessary to consider the concept of gender from a theoretical viewpoint.

An example of gender essentialism comes from Francis Fukuyama, who, according to Ann Tickner, has made the assumption that women are more peaceful than men (Tickner 2001, p. 60). The claim is based in biology, thereby assuming that women's and men's natures are different. The opposing side would say that this is incorrect, because gender is performed and taught rather than naturally given. The New Oxford American Dictionary states that gender is "the state of being male or female (typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones)" (Stevenson & Lindberg 2010). By saying that women are more peaceful than men, does Fukuyama refer to what he believes is an intrinsic quality in women that men to not possess or is he simply saying that women are subjected to an expectation that men are not held up to in the same way? As it happens, neither Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi or Joanne Kirkpatrick were bound by their peaceful natures as they were all great sources of international violence, despite being female (Enloe 2000, p. 5). An essentialist view on gender does not only serve to differentiate between men and women but it also contributes to a belief that men and women are complementary. It is not an uncommon belief, from a religious point of view, that men and women are contrastive and therefore complete each other. An attribute, a skill, a task or arena by this logic is either masculine or feminine. The political arena is just one of many spheres that have been, and as this study will show, is still seen as male. This way of thinking makes way for a perspective on gender relations that has significant political implications.

"(…) when a women is let in by the men who control the political elite it usually is because that women has learned the lessons of masculinized political behaviour well enough not to threaten male political privilege" (Enloe 2000, pp. 6-7). Many have heard the stories about how the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had a vocal coach teach her how to deepen her voice in order to sound more like a man and therefore gain more

authority when she spoke. However, in her book *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, the English scholar Mary Beard points out that there is no neurological reason for us to understand deeper voices as more authoritarian (Beard 2018, p. 48). She also puts forward an observation, namely that there is no standard as to what a powerful women should look like – apart from being very similar to a man (Beard 2018, p. 71).

3. The Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Beyond

The Muslim Brotherhood is arguably the most resilient and influential Islamist organisation in the world. It was first founded in Egypt in 1928, yet the organisation is still a topic of discussion today, nearly a century later. Alison Pargeter calls it "(…) one of the longest surviving and most controversial of all political Islamist movements (…)" (2013, p. 7). It is hard to see how a hundred years can go by without a bit of controversy, especially within an organisation that struggles to marry two at times very conflicting concepts. The tug-of-war between religion and politics, or perhaps between tradition and modernity, might be the most defining feature of the network of organisations that is the Muslim Brotherhood. This conflict comes expressively to the fore when talking about women's participation in politics, in Muslim countries in general and among the Muslim Brothers in particular. That is one of the reasons that the Muslim Brotherhood was chosen as the context in which to study female Islamists. The other, is the necessity to narrow the scope of the research study in order to make it possible to complete. A study of Islamism in its entirety would simply be too great a feat and the research process would lack the focus and direction that the Ikhwan now provides. While the topic of the Muslim Brotherhood and women will be saved for the next chapter, the past and present of the Brotherhood movement is something that we will dive into straight away.

This chapter is devoted to the Muslim Brotherhood, which history, make-up and ideology forms the backdrop for the case studies that have been invited to share their expereinces, perspectives and beliefs in order to shed light on the ambitions and challenges of an Islamist woman in politics in 2020. While none of the interviewees are members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, they are all members of political parties that have strong bonds to the original Ikhwan. Its history and development is thus part of what forms the political and ideological platform that these women stand on today.

3.1 The Egyptian Ikhwan
The Islamist movement known as *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, or the Muslim Brotherhood, is hard to pin down. Not just because the organisation has changed over time but also

because it means something different to different people, both inside and outside its ranks. The simple slogan 'Islam is the solution' (Pargeter 2013, p. 9; Filieu 2011, p. 92) hides a much more complex ideology, its *fikra*, that has been set and reset ever since the day of the Ikhwan's founder, Hassan Al-Banna. The schoolteacher himself was known as a pragmatist who kept Muslim unity, education and criticism of the West at the core of his work. He founded the organisation in Egypt in 1928 as a movement opposing the colonial rule. The MB was nationalistic, as many Islamic movements are and have been (Utvik 2019, p. 315) and aimed to bring Egyptians together over a shared identity. They focused on religious and cultural tradition, while the brothers themselves were part of the educated elite. They were dealing in identity politics. Much suggests that the first successes of the movement rested on the charismatic Al-Banna, prompting Alison Pargeter to refer to it as a "personality cult" (2013, p. 17). The leader was criticised for being too moderate and accommodating by the more radical members (Pargeter 2013, p. 25). He played by the rules and sought change from within the state, which meant that he was reluctant to do anything that could jeopardise his valuable connections to those in high places (Ismael, Ismael & Perry 2016, p. 77). This was perhaps the start of what Pargeter refers to as "(…) the Ikwan's never-ending conundrum over how to place themselves vis-à-vis the rulers of the day" (2013, p. 36). It would take eight decades for the Muslim Brotherhood to move from opposition to high office, much due to the continuous conflict within. The more conservative members of the movement always thought that the Ikhwan's power lay in challenging power. In government they could not possibly satisfy everyone. They would have to compromise, something that is rarely necessary when one is opposing power but without being *the* opposing party. Jean-Pierre Filieu describes this position well:

"The Ikhwan's shadow has been looming over the calculations of the Arab regimes and their foreign allies, who have considered them the strongest, and often the unique, contender. The Islamists somehow benefited from this aggressive focus, since they could pose as the true alternative, building on the rejection of the status quo, without elaborating what was their true alternative" (Filieu 2011, p. 91).

It was not until 1984 that the organisation decided to take part in an election as an ally to the al-Wafd party (Pargeter 2013, p. 46). Its place within the political structure had long been, and has continued to be, a dividing topic that has seen a generational conflict within Brotherhood ranks. It comes down to the very nature of the organisation and its role in society. Ever since its beginning, the Ikhwan was political without necessarily being a part of the political system. Through charitable work, members helped those less fortunate and promoted education and stability. They filled the gaps that the state did not. This extended beyond the Brotherhood in Egypt. At the core of *fikra*, the loose but common ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, is that all Muslims are equal and that social justice is an inadmissible part of economics (Hansen & Mesøy 2009, p. 22).

There is a wider debate about the amalgamation of Islamism and democracy that extends beyond the original Ikhwan in Egypt and its affiliates abroad. Are Islam and democracy compatible or is there an alternative? Azzam S. Tamimi raises this topic in his book about the contemporary thinker and politician Rachid Ghannouchi who sees democracy as a tool not an ideology (Tamimi 2013, p. xii-xv). Yet, the biographer refers to Ghannouchi as a democrat throughout the book – beginning with the title; *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islam*. The Tunisian affiliate, under Ghannouchi's lead, has taken a step away from Islamism and now prefers to refer to themselves as Muslim Democrats. To take a step away from the network that long has struggled in its relation to democracy is undoubtedly a way of eliminating doubts about Ennahda's intentions in the political system (Wolf 2017, p. 155). Yet, the deep-rooted scepticism among the seculars in Tunisia still prevails.

The conflict between democratic and religious values causes many to question the Brotherhood's true intentions when standing for election. It is not uncommon to find forecasts that say that if an Islamist party wins an election it will be the end of free elections and a multi-party system. One man, one vote, one time, Utvik says (2019, p. 349). Jean-Pierre Filieu calls it a "one-shot prediction" (2011, p. 96), meaning that one shot is all Islamists need to hold on to power. The argument is that Islamists are becoming a part of the democratic process in order to gain a position in which they can discontinue democracy altogether, pulling up the ladder behind them (Utvik 2019, p. 349). Recent

history clearly shows that this is not true. The Muslim Brotherhood of the modern day is committed to democracy and party pluralism, even if exceptions can be found. Sudan is one of them.

It was not until 2011 that the chance to seize power in Egypt really presented itself and the Muslim Brotherhood took it. The Freedom and Justice Party was able to secure a democratic victory off the back of the Arab Spring but the success would not last. When Mohammed Morsi was overthrown in Egypt in 2013, it led to a clamp down on affiliates across the Arab world (Wolf 2017, p. 3). The military's coup in Cairo provided the necessary rationale to make the democratically elected Ennahda in Tunisia step out of the government after two years (Utvik 2019, p. 229). It was hardly the first difficulty the Ikhwan had been in. In 1954 it was banned and members were arrested (Filieu 2011, p. 93). Today, many members of the Freedom and Justice Party are in hiding abroad.

The Brotherhood is accused of being two-faced, adapting its outlook dependent on who is listening (Hansen & Mesøy 2009, p. 6). Some also calls it pragmatism, or even popularism. The above section is a brief look at the Muslim Brotherhood's route into the democratic structures of state, while taking note that this is not the only way it has extended its influence into politics. We will continue to explore the ideology, history and position of the Muslim Brotherhood in the next section but with a focus on its international network and affiliates abroad.

3.2 The al-Tanzeem al-Dawli

It is no secret that Al-Banna sent members of the movement abroad in order to expand the movement beyond Egypt (Pargeter 2013, p. 106) but many also left for other reasons, bringing the *fikra* with them. Since then there have been movements across the world that have, to a smaller or larger degree, been referred to as affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood. Today they count about 80 in total. Who they are and to what extent they are subject to the authority and direction of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a hot topic of discussion until this day.

In the narrative of Lorenzo Vidino, the director of the Program on Extremism at the George Washington University and the author of *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West*, the original Egyptian Brotherhood had long sought to create an international organisation. However, it did not go as planned. According to Vidino, an international body was established in 1982 but failed to create "a fully functioning, all-overseeing Muslim command center" like the one that was first envisioned (Vidino 2010, p. 39).

Vidino's argument is controversial, as there are other prominent writers that assert that there most definitely is an international network created by the Ikhwan. Alison Pargeter is among these writers. The freelance expert and senior research associate at RUSI argues not only that such a formal network has existed but that it still does. In her book *The Muslim Brotherhood from opposition to power* she recounts the history of the movement and the founding and development of *al-Tanzeem al-Dawli*, the international organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood, in the 1970s (Pargeter 2013, p. 103). It makes for a convincing read, placing the progress of the international Tanzeem in relation to the Muslim Brotherhood's international aspirations dating back to its founder Hassan al-Banna (Pargeter 2013, p. 106). In her study of political Islam in Tunisia, Anne Wolf speaks about the connection between the Egyptian Ikhwan and Tunisia's Ennahda party. A continuous stream of Brotherhood literature made its way into Tunisia at the end of the 1970s, influencing young Muslims in the country and, perhaps more importantly, students involved with the movement (Wolf 2017, p. 40-43). She says that many Islamist movements, including Ennahda, chose to distance themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood after Mohammed Morsi was removed from power in Egypt (Wolf 2017, p. 154).

Luckily for this study, the link between the Egyptian Ikhwan and the National Islamic Front in Sudan is much more clear-cut as it derives directly from the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood and was led by one of Ikhwan's most prominent thinkers, Hassan al-Turabi. The Brothers in Sudan thereby retained a very different role in their country than other similar movements in the region (Utvik 2019, p. 241).

4. The Muslim Brotherhood and Women

What implications do the traits of the Muslim Brotherhood presented in the previous chapter impact on the role and influence of the women involved in the movement? The answer to this question is the key to contextualising the experiences of the women who have risen to influential positions within the Brotherhood movements.

Matters concerning women's rights in Islam and in society are at the core of the struggle within the Muslim Brotherhood movement. In fact, these issues serve as the perfect example to illustrate the recurring tug-of-war between the liberal and conservative fractions among its ranks.

There is one particular hadith, from Sahih al-Bukhari 7099, that has been used by Islamists and Muslims alike to justify the exclusion of women from the highest office but also from politics in general. Translated, this story of the Prophets deeds and words as experienced by others reads: "When the news reached the Prophet Muhammad that the people of Persia had put the daughter of Kisrā to reign over them, he said: 'No people will ever be successful if they have entrusted the governing of their affairs to a woman'" (Awde 2000, p. 91). There is a long tradition of finding proof in the Quran and in other holy texts as to why women cannot participate in stately affairs. Along with the aforementioned hadith, there is also a reference in the Quran to how women should not lead prayers in gatherings where both sexes are present (Roald 2001, p. 190). Another argument that often comes up is that all the prophets were men (Roald 2001, p. 199). Both of these proverbs are interpreted in a way that lends itself to situations beyond what is plainly stated. That women cannot lead prayers must mean that they cannot lead a country. That all the prophets were men must mean that Allah would not leave such responsibilities to a woman.

All Muslim Brotherhood affiliates prohibit women from being heads of state, apart from two. That is Ennahda in Tunisia and NIF in Sudan (Hansen & Gaas 2017, p. 18). Ghannouchi is known to have said: "So if a woman supersedes all men in knowledge and political capacity, she can be a leader" (Roald 2001, p. 193).

4.1 Do what I do

While the Turkish Justice and Development Party might not be defined as an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, its ideology is not too different from organisations within the movement. Jenny B. White writes about what she dubs "the New Islamic Women in Turkey". The title she chooses could very well be a nod towards the term "The New Islamists" that is used when discussing the newest generation of Islamists, those who are trying to find a place for themselves between historical Islam and modernity (Ismael, Ismael & Perry 2016, p. 89). "The New Islamic Women in Turkey" challenges the status quo in Turkish society while at the same time being restraint by the platform they use to do so (White 2005, p. 125). These women, White argues, have been essential to the political efforts in prior decades that led to the victory of the Recep Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party in 2002 (White 2005, p. 123). The Islamist activist women are holding two views at the same time. They are fighting for their right to be educated, working and politically active while still supporting that women's role should primarily be as mothers and wives. Contradictory, Jenny S. White says (2005, p. 128-129). The reasoning behind the Islamist women in Turkey is not immediately apparent yet it is not an uncommon stance in the Islamic world. Hassan al-Turabi is one of the most prominent thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and his ideas are considered among the most moderate, especially when it comes to the opportunities for women in society (Shehadeh 1999, p. 65). According to Shehadeh, Turabi bases his arguments on the Quran when he theorises, claiming that: "The Shari'ah considers women the sisters of men and are their equal except in some minor matters relating to their physical nature" (Shehadeh 1999, p. 69). Yet, the same double standard that could once be found in Hassan al-Banna's approach to the rights and freedoms of women (Bary 2017, p. 41) also became prevalent in Turabi's (Shehadeh 1999, p. 68). Ida Bary eloquently calls al-Banna's recognition of women's rights as "role-based empowerment of women" (2017, p. 41). In Turabi's Sudan, the term is "complementarity" (Tønnessen 2018) and is based on notions that within feminism is known as gender essentialism. Yet, some knew how to work around these expectations. Zaynab al-Ghazali is perhaps known as the most prominent women of the early Muslim Brotherhood movement and a fierce promoter of Islamic feminism (Bary 2017, p. 42).

Zaynab al-Ghazali managed the Association of Muslim Ladies, an Egyptian organisation that she saw as equal to, but still entirely independent of, the Muslim Brotherhood (Cooke 1994, p. 2). An alliance, Mariam Cook says in her article entitled "Zaynab al-Ghazālī: saint or subversive", would reduce any equality between the two organisations to "complementarity at best, subordination at worst" (1994, p. 2). Yet, al-Ghazali spent many years imprisoned for her suspected involvement with the Muslim Brothers. Her status as an Islamic feminist is a contested one, as the title of Cooke's article alludes to. The way she spoke and the way she acted were sometimes directly contradictory. According to Cooke, al-Ghazali found a loophole that she used to support women's activism: "She continues to use patriarchal discourse because like all women advocating radical reform in power relations, she must hone her language as to be heard" (Cooke 1994, p. 20). Zaynab al-Ghazali's argument was that until the Islamic State was finally realised, every Muslim had an overriding obligation to wage *jihad* – in the rightful sense of the word (Cook 1994, p. 19). It was a matter of priorities, and women's role as mothers and wives simply had to wait.

Only a short time before Hassan al-Banna's death did she agreed to let her association be connected to the Muslim Brotherhood (Cook 1994, p. 2). Today there is a section of the Ikhwan that is exclusively for women. The women belong to an organisation within the organisation, and are not permitted to vote in the leading Brotherhood institutions. According to Utvik, this is a precaution to make sure that the female section cannot be held responsible for the actions of the Brotherhood as a whole (Utvik 2019, p. 338) thereby avoiding that women within the organisation suffer the same torturous consequences as Zaynab al-Ghazali. While it much likely is truth to this reasoning, it is just as likely that the security argument also serves the purpose of covering up the existing scepticism against women's full participation in the Ikhwan's decision-making (Utvik 2019, p. 345).

4.2 The family

If one is to take away one lesson from the way women's role in society is viewed by the Muslim Brotherhood, it is this one: women's role in society is not necessarily about the women themselves but what they represent. Much like women has been known to symbolise countries, or earth itself, women from the perspective of the Muslim

Brotherhood are seen to represent Islamic life itself. This rings true, at least among the most conservative members of the movement. Bjørn Olav Utvik writes that in the Islamist discourse there is a tense co-existence between two conflicting attitudes about women and Islam. There are those who recognise women as equal political actors and those who to adhere to the traditional Islamic point of view, namely that the man is the head of the family (Utvik 2019, p. 333) and in charge of everyone in it.

Just as in so many other aspects of the Brotherhood's efforts to agree on common principles within the organisation, it ends up as a struggle between tradition and modernity. However, the position of women also plays in to a larger discussion about Muslim society and how it is believed to be fundamentally different from that of the West. The hostility towards the secularised societies in the West is one of the founding stones of the Ikhwan, an organisation that came together as a force against the Egyptian colonial rule in the late 1920s.

The way that Muslim women have become the embodiment of the entire community is through their family responsibilities. In his book about Islamism, Utvik explains the vital position of the family as a sacred institution at the heart of Muslim society (Utvik 2019, p. 335). To change the role of women away from that of mother and wife towards something akin to Western liberal capitalism would be to undermine the family unit – and Muslim society by extent (Utvik 2019, p. 344). Yet, there are and have been forces that pull in a different direction and for that reason there are Islamist women in politics.

The connection between Islamic values and women's rights can be hard to make sense of, at least from a secular perspective. Feminism, the way it was presented in the theoretical background is not a good fit for Zaynab al-Ghazali or 'The New Islamic Women in Turkey'. They are not looking to break free of the framework in which they exist. While radical, secular feminists believe that the patriarchal system needs to be destroyed so that a new system of power can be built from the ground up, Islamist feminists' aims are different.

4.3 Islamist and Reformist Feminism

Ashley Fox, Sana Alzwawi and Dina Refki (2016) wrote an article where they had a closer look at the attitudes towards women's rights in countries impacted by the Arab Spring,

during and directly following the uprisings. Using the Arab Barometer, they compared their results to majority-Muslim countries that did not have their own political revolutions. Their findings distinctly show the support for women's rights in these countries, just not the way it is usually presented in academia or in the secular West.

"*In this view, to embrace Western rhetoric about women's rights is to subjugate the mind to mental colonization, or to serve as agents of Western imperialism*" (Fox, Alzwawi & Refki 2016, p. 41).

5. Methodological Approach

This far the focus has been on the context needed in order to make sense of the data that has been collected as part of this research process. In this chapter, however, it is time to explore the methodological approach. The aim of this research project is to lift the voices and stories of women. More specifically, it sets out to explore the experiences of women who have achieved political influence through Islamist movements. To that end, the study has a qualitative research design. By using semi-structured interviews, along with a thematic analysis, the research achieves the depth and nuance needed to address the themes set out in the research questions.

- What motivated these women to become politically active through the Islamist movement?
- How do these women define political influence and in what way do they see themselves as politically influential?
- How do they view their party's position on women's rights and how does it correlate with their own stance?

The study has been conducted using feminist research methods. What this entails, as well as the process of sampling, data collection and analysis, is fully detailed below.

5.1 Employing feminist research methods

To combine a feminist theoretical approach with its methodological counterpart is not entirely unheard of. In fact, it is rather common. It makes little sense to restrict the feminist emphasis on those previously overlooked, power structures and the every day solely to those parts of the research that deals with the theoretical framework without considering how the same set of concerns are applicable to the way the research is conducted. Arguably, a feminist point of departure will provide clarity and consistency that will benefit not only the research process but also the narrative of this thesis project.

"How do our subjectivities, research subjects, and the power relations between us affect the research process? (Ackerly & True 2008, p. 694). This is one of the central questions when it comes to using a feminist methodology. It means inquiring about one's own

constraints and underlying preconceptions, as a researcher always does, but with a particular attentiveness to the power relations within the research process.

Rethinking the relationship between the researcher and the research subject is a guiding principle when thinking of feminist methodology (Ackerly & True 2008, p. 704). A feminist researcher pays particular attention to the asymmetrical relationship that naturally arises between the researcher and the research subject, knowing that nothing is ever just natural. This is explained by one of the most acclaimed feminists within the field of IR, namely Cynthia Enloe: "As one learns to look at this world through feminist eyes, one learns to ask whether anything that passes for inevitable, inherent, 'traditional' or biological has in fact been made" (Enloe 2000, p. 3). In order to pursue a feminist approach to the research process, it is important to stop to think why is this done the way it is, and who benefits from it.

Some of the principles central to feminist research methods have developed out of feminist critique of the way that research is usually conducted. Bryman (2016, p. 488) refers to Ann Oakley (1981) when discussing the subject. A non-hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the participant is one of the suggested approvements, which would allow a different dynamic to develop between the two. Oakley uses an example from her own research to illustrate the discomfort a researcher might feel when the interviewee ask questions directed at the interviewer, either about the study or the topic at hand. In her study on motherhood, Oakley felt obliged to answer (Oakley 1981, p. 45). One could say that she stepped out of the role as a researcher and an interviewer, and instead choose to engage in a conversation with the interviewee. But by doing so, she also achieved a higher degree of reciprocity, which is another point in the feminist framework set out in Bryman (2016, p. 488). By making efforts to make the researcher and the respondent stand on an equal footing in the interview situation, the interview becomes more conversational. While widely employed among feminists, they are far from being the only researchers who have found a conversational interview style to be beneficial to their research (Aberbach & Rockman 2002).

This study meets the central aim of feminist research, as it sets out to validate "(...) women's subjective experiences as women and as people" (Oakley 1981, p. 30). The idea

for this study, which later were to form the research questions, came from a curiosity about these women's own understanding of the place they were in. There is a distinct lack of women in the narrative around Islamist movements, yet there are a great number of females represented within these organisations. Who are they and what is their experience? There is only one set of individuals able to answer that question.

5.2 Sampling and data collection

5.2.1 The process of sampling

As this is a qualitative study, not quantitative, the objective has been to gather a diversity of accounts rather than a representative sample of politically influential women associated with Muslim Brotherhood affiliates. The project subscribes to a so-called inductive approach as the aim is not to test theory but to generate it based on the findings (Bryman 2016, p. 21). The study has therefore relied on a non-probability, generic purposive sampling strategy, with the criteria formed a priori. This means that the participants have been selected based on certain criteria that are set out in advance. Yet, this strategy also has the inherent flexibility so that it is possible to modify the sampling technique along the way (Bryman 2016, p. 412-415). The main concern of the sampling process is to select samples relevant to the research questions. That is why the set criteria are so important.

Throughout the research process, it has been necessary to remain open to the fact that it might become necessary to rely on convenience and/or opportunistic sampling dependent on the access that one might get. The participants that one first approaches are unlikely to be the ones who agree to take part and that was certainly the case with this study. However, the same criteria do apply to all individuals chosen to participate in the research project. For one, they have all had to be women in a position of political influence, connected to a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate. These are all criteria that need to be clearly defined, in order for them to be operationalised. That is easier said than done, as concepts such as influence might need to be discussed on a case-by-case basis. While some of these concepts are best discussed theoretically, such as the definition of a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, some could just as well be defined in this chapter. Political influence might be one of these, although the deliberation will have to be revisited in other chapters. The key is to define a concept as a criterion in a way that secures a sample that can be used to answer

the research questions. It is a matter of interpretation and scope. The time restraints, as well as the availability of resources, needs to be taken into account when deciding how to operationalize the concepts as criteria.

Influence is a hairy concept and not easy to pin down. A position of political influence, on the other hand, is more manageable. The formulation in the research question is: *How do these women define political influence and in what way do they see themselves as politically influential?* The emphasis is on position, a position to exercise influence, rather than on influence in itself. The participants are in a role in which they can be expected to reflect on their own influence, as they, from an outsider's perspective, are in a place that one could assume comes with such sway. Such positions could be, but are not limited to, parliamentarians, political positions in government and persons clearly present the public debate. While these conceivable examples might be starting points when it comes to the search for participants that fit the sampling criteria, the sample is not limited to these positions. As new names surface through research as possible cases to include, they too will be evaluated to see if their position fit the mark. The three participants all met this criteria and were a lot closer to the examples set out above than one might expect to be able to secure.

Another sampling criterion is that the participants all have to be women. Today, being gendered a women is not exclusive to being born one. However, in this study the definition of a woman have had to be limited to those whose biological sex is female. This should not be interpreted as anything but a way to define the scope of this thesis, as the inclusion of members of LGBTQ+ would raise very different questions than the ones we seek to answer in this research project. That does not mean that these questions are not worthwhile and anyone who wants to conduct research on this and similar topics should be highly encouraged to do so.

The participants have been limited to women who are active in organisations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The research project includes three cases. Despite the necessity of achieving sufficient variety and triangulation, the initial sample has not been increased at the expense of the

depth of the research. Prior to the research being conducted, the researcher remained open to conducting more than one interview with each case study if possible and/or advantageous, in order to get a deeper understanding of their experiences, thoughts and aspirations. As it turned out, this was not possible. This is linked to issues of access. The interviews have been semi-structured and individual rather than in groups. Apart from being nearly impossible to organise logistically, group interviews would not have allowed for the autonomy and trust needed to conduct this research.

Even when using the full reach of the researcher's extended network, it was difficult to get access to women who fit the sampling criteria. With the help of the supervisor, and with a lot of perseverance, three cases were secured in the end. All three fit the sampling criteria. The three case studies are Mehrezia Labidi, who was the vice-president of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly from 2011 to 2014 (Wolf 2017, p. xviii); Tawakkol Karman, former member of Islah in Yemen and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and Khadija Karar, a prominent female member of the National Islamic Front in Sudan who has held the position of vice-president of the Sudanese parliament (Tønnessen & Roald 2007, p. 4).

5.2.2 Data collection

According to Bryman, the feminist method of choice is often the in-depth face-to-face interview (2016, p. 488). That was also the favoured way of collecting data in this study. However, as the three case studies all live and work in the Middle East and North Africa, time and resource restraints did not allow for the interviewer and the interviewee to meet in person. From the offset, video calls were preferred, while telephone was the second-best option. Yet, due to the difficulty in reaching and securing time with the interviews were not conducted as initially planned. While Mehrezia Labidi was able to set aside time for a phone call, Tawakkol Karman were only able to accept questions by email. Khadija Karar's interview had to be done on a messaging app and the conversation back and forth lasted for several weeks. It is hard to say how much data is lost when opting for these modes of communication rather than a face-to-face interview. It is safe to assume that some of the gestures and other forms of non-verbal communication are lost, especially when the off-the-cut answers disappear when words need to be spelled rather than spoken. With telephone interviews anything but verbal communication becomes completely invisible to the researcher. This means that it is in no way ideal but it is still a

lot better than having to pose all the questions in writing. While gestures and facial expressions are lost, one can still gather a lot a data based on the tone in which something is said. How fast the answer comes to mind, for example, is also one of many components that contribute to a richer data set even when the interviewee's face is hidden from view. Using WhatsApp, however, can be deemed questionable and email even so. To have to turn to such methods of data collection was disappoint but necessary. There are some defences, however, such as the fact that these data collection methods can still be considered an interview rather than a questionnaire.

To conduct an interview using WhatsApp and the benefits and issues related to it became the subject of much consideration. While the messaging app initially was a way of contacting the participant to ask her whether she would be willing to be interviewed via video called, she avoided answering any such request. Instead, she initiated a conversation about political participation among women in her country. Rather than dismiss the information, it was better to engage with what she was writing. By asking questions and she replying, it developed into a conversation where questions from the interview guide was posed as a response to themes in her answers. The interview lasted for approximately two weeks and covered all the questions in the interview guide, as well as a few more. Much like in a spoken interview, the answers became more personal as time went by. While conducting the interview in writing was far from ideal, the messaging back and forth still allowed for the dynamic of a conversation. As she ignored any request to switch to video call or telephone, it was the best possible option if she were to participate in the project. The messages, that often lack both punctuation and correct spelling, appear to have been written and sent off, rather than pondered over and meticulously edited. Still, there is much more room to modify answers when the answers are written rather than spoken. How much time is spent on scrutinising the responses before they are sent is impossible to say. The choice to accept this method of data collection needs to be understood in the context of the sampling process, as gaining access to participants who fit the sampling criteria proved to be extremely challenging.

The thinking process came to good use and eased the process considerably when it became apparent that Tawakkol Karman could only be reached through email. Yet another challenge arose - the need for the answers to be translated. It was not an issue

that had not been thought of in advance but in the end, it was solved much smoother than anticipated because she had an interpreter at her end. Unfortunately, it This made it difficult to establish a conversation, as the questions were merely sent, answered and sent back. The presence of a translator also meant that the answers collected might not be exactly as they were first written. Yet, the fact that the translator was likely to be someone who the Nobel Peace Prize Laurate before, meant that it was more likely that he or she managed to capture the meaning of Kaman's words and the way they were meant to be read.

There were also other issues that needed to be considered in regards to data collection. Is it truly possible to overcome the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched? (Bryman 2016, p. 404). The power structures inherent in the research process is, as previously discussed, a central concern to feminists conducting research both within and outside the social sciences. This dynamic particularly comes to the fore during an interview situation. As a woman interviewing other women, the aim should be to flatten the power structure that exists in this relationship. According to feminist research methods, the researcher should not simply collect the information from its participants but involve them in the process of data collection. It should be a collaborative effort, where neither one has authority over the other.

These were issues that were thoroughly considered before the start of the data collection in order to find a way to engage with the participant on an equal standing but without compromising the validity of the data collected. It was decided that if any questions were to come up, perhaps on the researcher's interest in the subject matter or the university at which this thesis is written, much like Oakley (1981), it was felt that these questions needed to be addressed. There were also made plans to try to make the interview feel more like a conversation and less like a formal survey, thereby allowing more of the researcher's presence and personality seep into the exchange but always with a thought to not steer or lead the interviewee in her answers. While there are undoubtedly benefits to employing feminist research methods when studying the experiences and perspectives of women, there are also aspects that might prove problematic. More of a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee might increase the chances of the researcher influencing the participant, and by extension, the data. The standard textbook

advice in an interview setting is to be careful not to become too familiar with the participant (Bryman 2016, p. 217). Yet, it is also possible to imagine that a balanced conversation might encourage a greater degree of trust, which again could result in the interviewee imparting with information they otherwise might not have shared.

While the researchers authority over the research process is a common feminist critique that important to consider when using this methodology, there is another aspect to the this power relation that is also well-worth considering. It is called elite interviewing and is particularly applicable to this research project. When looking at the power dynamics in an interview situation, it should come as no surprise that the relationship can go both ways. There is extensive literature about elite interviewing, yet it is hard to find any that is written from the perspective of a feminist researcher. The reality might be that one can do little to even out the power imbalance, if one finds oneself as the one with less power. Yet, there are way to adapt one's research methods to take the 'elite' aspects of the respondents into account. Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman discusses the benefits of a conversational flow when interviewing elites and the way this can be used as a way to maximise response validity (Aberbach & Rockman 2002, p. 674). There seem to be little discussion when it comes to the authority in an interview situation. One of the pioneers in elite interviewing, Anthony Lewis Dexter, advised against inexperienced researchers conducting studies among elites as he believed they were not adequately prepared (Harvey 2010, p. 5). His advice has not put a stop to this research process. However, it is worth noting that while the interviews ran smoothly, it was never any question of who were taking up whose time. This initial assumption was quickly diffused during the interview and only resurfaced at the end, when the researcher expressed her gratitude for the time taken to participate in the study.

5.3 Analysing the data

A thematic qualitative content analysis has been conducted on the transcribed interviews, exploring themes and patterns that might compare or set the cases apart. Before settling on this more general approach to qualitative data analysis, questions were raised about what kind of information should be lifted from the data in order to answer the research questions. It was decided that the findings should be based on the interviews with the case studies, while written sources should be used to contextualise the data that that the

women provide. A thematic analysis is, as Bryman phrases it, is "not an identifiable approach" (Bryman 2017, p. 584). Rather than a certain set of techniques, it is a way of managing and analysing the data with an emphasis on recognising themes and patterns.

While more established analytical methods such as discourse analysis and narrative analysis were reflected upon, they did not quite fit. The focus of this study is not on the language used to depict or form the reality of female activists in political Islam, even if the way these women talk about their experience is a part of the data that is collected. Also, it does not seem appropriate to talk about a discourse using data from only three sources. Discourse analysis was therefore ruled out. Narrative analysis is a qualitative approach that is particularly sensitive to the perspective of those being studied, asking questions about how individuals make sense of what happened rather than what happened. This is an approach to thinking about analysis that is applicable to this research project. Yet, narrative analysis tends to focus on specific events and occurrences, not on a more general experience such as the case is here (Bryman 2017, pp. 589-590). The benefit of choosing the more flexible thematic analysis is that it is possible to incorporate elements of other qualitative approaches to analysis. However, it also means that one needs to be particularly transparent about every step of the analysis. The indistinct nature of thematic analysis as an approach, means that the way themes and patterns emerge from the data is not a given (Bryman 2017, p. 586).

Using thematic analysis does make it easier to compare and contrast the themes and issues that the three women choose to talk about in their interviews. While this might be valuable, it is not necessarily the aim of the data analysis. The main purpose of the analysis is to organise the data, so that it can be used to answer the research questions. Identifying themes, individual or common among the cases, makes it possible to apprehend and discuss those parts of the transcripts that can be deemed most prominent. The way to do this was through indexing, also known as coding. This means going through the transcripts several times, grouping text into different codes, where some might develop into categories, which then are developed into larger themes. When going through the data it is important to keep the research questions in mind, especially later in the process when the themes start to take shape. The qualitative interviews, which were semi-structured with open-ended questions, produce extensive and varied data that can be

challenging to code. This was also the experience of Aberbach and Rockman (2002, p. 674). This makes the process of organising the data, setting out what is relevant and what is not, even more important.

Coding is a process of reading, rereading and reading again. While the themes are taken out of the transcript in order to be organised, it was important to both label the extracts correctly to know where they came from but also to keep the original transcript safe so that it is always possible to go back and see the data in context. This process was adopted for all three interviews consecutively. When all three interviews were done, it was tempting to go back to the original transcripts to see whether there was anything else that stood out now when all the themes were developed. However, the decision was made not to do so. The themes were what they were and going through the transcripts again hoping to find something based on what one of the other interviewees said did not feel right. As previously stated, finding patterns were not the aim of the study. The significance of each women's story was what was important.

The themes and categories are what formed the basis for the chapter containing the findings and discussion. The findings alone cannot answer the research questions but together with the literature it together forms an answer. As Bryman so eloquently stated, "(…) your findings acquire significance only when you have reflected on, interpreted, and theorized your data. You are not there as a mere mouthpiece" (Bryman 2017, p. 584). This study aims to lift the voice of women in political Islam but that does not mean that their voices can go uncommented. It takes nothing away from their word but it sets their experiences in a context that allows for a more thorough understanding for the circumstances in which they were spoken.

5.4 Ethical considerations and limitations

There have been limitations on both time and resources, which has impacted the sampling and the scope of this study. These restraints are the reasons why the sample was limited to three case studies and that the interviews were conducted from afar rather than face-to-face. The preferred way of conducting qualitative interviews is to do them in person but do to budgetary limitations this was not possible.

There have been many ethical considerations to take into account in this project, as it is when conducting any research. One of the issues that needed to be considered carefully was confidentiality. The decision not to make the case studies anonymous were not taken lightly and The National Committee for Research Ethics in Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH) was invited to weigh in on the matter. NESH is a part of the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees that draw up guidelines for research ethics across a range of different fields. If asked to do so, they might also give advice to researchers about their projects or issues they are faced with (Torp 2015). With the advice from NESH, the decision was made that the women would not be made anonymous in this research but on certain terms. Firstly, the women all needed to give their consent to wave aside their anonymity so that their name, as well as other information that could identify them, could form part of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality are both crucial parts of the informed consent, meaning that the participants should be informed of what they are taking part in and understand the consequences of their participation in the study. All the women agreed to set aside their right to anonymity. The second element that informed the decision to forgo anonymity was that the nature of the research is not such that they would have to be anonymous. To protect vulnerable persons in their surroundings could be an example of such a reason. There is a discussion to be had about the vulnerability of members of the Islamist movement in general, and women in particular. For decades, one of the arguments for having separate women's branches has been to protect female members from the repercussions of the movement's political work. In Egypt, this was a way of shielding women from being arrested or worse, which could often be the consequence of a membership in an organisation repressed by or opposing the regime (Utvik 2019, p. 338). While the argument sometimes has been used to keep women away from influence, Bjørn Olav Utvik argues that there is a real threat to women's security that the Muslim Brotherhood did have to address (Utvik 2019, p. 345). Despite knowing this, the women have not been considered especially vulnerable in the context of this research. As well as the reach and impact of this thesis being relatively small, the information that the women part with is neither controversial or reveals any association with movements or organisations that are not already publically known.

There is one element of the NESH guideline article eight that can be said to particularly resonate with the feminist approach to this research methodology and further

strengthens the decision to forego anonymity. It emphasises the matter of self-determination, which does not only include the right to decide not to take part in the study or to be made anonymous. It also extends to the decision to participate and the decision to wave anonymity. When the researcher has performed his or her obligation to inform the participant to the best of his or her ability, it is up to the participant to make up her own mind on the matter. Unless there are any particular circumstances to override her decision, the choice to reject the offer of confidentiality is her autonomous choice that should be respected as that.

While consent was given freely, without pressure or constraint, it did also benefit the research project. To make the women anonymous would entail not being able to identify the country or the organisation they are a part of. Their roles and positions within the movement could not have been disclosed.

During the interviews, all three women were informed about the project and their role within it. They were told they could withdraw at any time and that they did not have to state any reason for doing so. They consented to taking part, they waved their anonymity and they agreed to being recorded for the purpose of the research project. By recording the interview that was conducted by phone, the researcher was able to focus her attention on the conversation with little risk of any data being lost. All participants were informed that the recordings and were only going to be used as part of this study and once the project was over the recordings would be deleted. The same goes for transcipts, as well as the messages included in the conversation conducted on WhatsApp and by email.

Among the ethical considerations of this study, there should also be a discussion about reliability and validity in qualitative research. What it is that determines the quality of a qualitative study is a much-contested subject within social research (Bryman 2016, pp. 387) and it is no secret that the concepts of reliability and validity are better suited to quantitative research. There have been efforts to adapt these standards to qualitative social research and these criteria have been kept in mind throughout this research project. Among these criteria are Guba and Lincoln's definition of trustworthiness and authenticity, as included in Bryman (2016, pp. 384-386). In addition, there has been put considerable thought into securing triangulation in this research project. Triangulation in

the context of social research, means using more than one method or source of data (Bryman 2016, p. 386) The emphasis in this study has been on the individual experiences and understandings of three Islamist women. The significance of the data is that it cannot be sourced from anywhere but these women. However, there are still ways of securing triangulation and that is through other materials that may touch upon the themes that these women talk about. This is the academic literature and the news coverage, which is included in the literature review.

Other elements related to ethical considerations that might come under the heading of research criteria did have to be thought through in advance. The interviewer was conscious of the ability to steer or limit the interviewee. By staying conscious of assumptions, as a feminist, an academic and someone who has spent their entire life in Europe, the aim is to keep any interference to a minimum in both the interview setting and in the process of data analysis. In the interview situation, asking open-ended questions and adopting an attitude of curiosity were an important part of limiting the influence of the researcher's assumptions. Questions such as 'Why do you say that?' or 'What do you mean by that?' was asked in order to deepen the understanding of the answers given and to give the interviewee a chance to explain further.

One of the largest challenges of this project was to gain access to the kind of women that fitted the sampling criteria and that were willing to discuss their experiences. It was difficult to the point that it could possibly be counted among the limitations of this study, because a lot of time and effort had to be spent securing the three case studies. As Aberbach and Rockman states: "It can be a major undertaking in time and effort to secure the interview, but success there is only the beginning" (2002, p. 647). Sampling could have been only a small part of the research process but ended up as quite a momentous one, which did take much-needed time away from other parts of the project. The same authors mention at the top of their article that polite persistency and a respected research house might go along way when contacting hard to reach potential subjects. Unfortunately, in this particular case, this only amounted to a limited amount of success, yet it was enough for the scope of the project.

6. Findings and Discussions

This research project is based around three case studies. It was no easy feat securing access to these three women and the research methods had to be adapted along the way in order to include all three of them in the study. What did not change, however, was the aim to write about the case studies without having to make them anonymous so that they could be presented in this chapter.

The first of the three case studies is Mehrezia Labidi who agreed to be interviewed by telephone from Tunis. She is 57 years old and despite many of her family members being active in the party, she did not join Ennahda until 2011. Shortly thereafter she was elected to the Tunisian Constitute Assembly and became the vice-president that same year. Today she is among the most established and well-known figures of the party (Wolf 2017, p. xviii).

The second woman interviewed for this thesis was Dr. Khadija Karar. She is 66 years old, an associate professor at Khartoum university and a member of the National Islamic Front in Sudan. She was a member of parliament in Sudan for two terms and vice-president of parliament during Hassan al-Turabi's reign (Tønnessen & Roald 2007, p. 4). After the coalition government with Sadiq al-Mahdi, Turabi seized power after a military coup in 1989 (Shehadeh 1999, p. 67). It has been very difficult to find information about Karar in English. Luckily her name was provided by a trusted source and throughout the research process little pieces of information has been uncovered through other sources. When asked directly, she diminished her role and chose not to list many of her public engagements, despite alluding to the fact that there were several of them.

The last case study is Tawakkol Karman, the now 41-year-old whose name became known to the whole world when she became a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 2011. She accepted the prize together with two other women for her "non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work" (Nobel Media AB 2020). In 2005, she co-founded Journalists Without Chains, an organisation promoting freedom of speech and democratic rights in Yemen, where such freedoms are restricted still to this day. Karman is no longer a member of Islah, the Yemeni branch of the Muslim

Brotherhood, and is currently engaging in political activism directed at her home country from her residence in Istanbul, Turkey.

The following findings are a result of a qualitative content analysis conducted by indexing the data from each interview, focusing on categories and themes arising in each transcript. Subsequently, the themes are aligned to make it possible compare the three's experiences, thoughts and opinions. This chapter will be organised into three themes shared between the three interviewees and correlate with the research questions. There will be no separate discussion as the findings will be presented and reflected upon throughout this chapter.

The first theme is *influence*, where the participants' answers relating to their own and other's political influence will be examined, as well as their thoughts about political representation and participation. Especially in light of the Arab Spring, there has been a discussion about the difference between participation and representation and what truly constitutes political influence. The second theme is *motivation*, where the participants' reasons for entering into politics, as well as their goals and ambitions will come to the fore. The subtext of this theme is political convictions as well as their individual understanding of politics as an arena for societal change. The third and last theme is *obstacles*, where relevant answers about the challenges related to women's role in politics will be presented. Through the struggles that in their experience may serve to keep women out of politics, one can get a sense of the expectations and assumptions related to being a woman in their position. Together, these three themes will help present the relevant findings and provide an adequate discussion so that the final results can be summarised neatly in the next, and last, chapter.

6.1 Political influence

The interviewees were all asked questions about the meaning of political influence and whether they considered themselves to be politically influential. The aim was for the participants to reveal their thoughts about the role as a politician, how to wield power in the political system and how they saw themselves fitting into this system. All three answered modestly, Karman and Labidi saying that others might consider them influential while Karar said she did not see herself as much a political figure at all. The

latter did not seem to want to dive deeper into the meaning of political influence. However, the two others used different words but still seemed to end up at the same conclusion when asked to describe someone influential. Male or female, what decides whether a person is influential is his or her own capabilities. While Karman lists public speaking, clarity of vision and social status, Labidi talks about visibility and taking charge. They both automatically assume influence as something positive, something that can be used as a mean to achieve positive change. At the same time political influence is the product of a struggle and project that others can relate to. Influence has to be earned. While Tawakkol Karman says she believes anyone has the potential to become influential, she does not make it out as an easy feat.

"The recent rise of women to political office on behalf of Islamic political movements and parties has been puzzling for many, except perhaps for the women who devoted years of activism and organizing to these parties, and today consider themselves equally qualified to reach decision-making positions (Tajali 2017, p. 192).

From their personal experience of influence, there was a natural progression onto the subject of the influence of women in politics, particularly in the countries and parties closest to the three case studies. The above quote from Mona Tajali illustrates quite well the position of these women in their individual careers and something that they all would recognise to some extent. Both Tunisia and Yemen are what today can be referred to as Arab Spring countries and in both nations women participated in the uprisings alongside and on equal terms as men (Fox, Alzwawi & Refki 2016, p. 41; Khalil 2014, p. 188). Yet, it did not result in the change many had hoped for once the uprisings were over. In Yemen, Karman says, women are generally active in public affairs but their presence at the leadership level is low, if not non-existent. She notes that: "Regarding women's status within political Islam parties and groups, the problem arguably lies in the fact that these parties and groups often take advantage of women in demonstrations and voter mobilization during election time, with clear absence of women as electoral candidates." This sentiment is recognisable from academic papers describing many branches of the Muslim Brotherhood. It also rings true in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, where women have been active at a grass-root level ever since the days of Zaynab al-Ghazali and the Association of Muslim Ladies (Cooke 1994). Women were participating in

the da'wa movement in Egypt but were never allowed responsibilities beyond that of other women (Herr 2018, p. 200). In Turkey, Islamist parties were able to eventually take public office because of women's activism (White 2005, p. 123).

When it comes to the status of women, Yemen is considered the worst in the region, Fox, Alzwawi and Refki writes. While women were on the barricades fighting for change during the Arab spring uprising, very little changed when it came to the attitudes around women's rights and liberties (Fox, Alzwawi and Refki 2016, p. 48). As, Karman says, their participation did not translate into representation. The situation is very different in Karar's Sudan and Labidi's Tunisia, something that their answers reflect. When Liv Tønnessen presents the number of women represented in national legislatures in the Middle East and North Africa, Tunisa has 31,3 % and Sudan 30,5 %. That is well-above the global average of 22 %. "I am of the opinion that one can be more influential through constituency representation," Khadija Karar says, which suggests that participation in her view might not be enough to gain political influence. Yet, a position in parliament may not always be either. Power and public prestige is not necessarily the same (Beard 2018, p. 102). As Labidi points out, it is possible to have a seat without being listened to. She says:

"(One needs to be) Asking for one's place, asking for one's say and one's voice, because if we want to speak for our people, to speak for their rights, we have to be capable of getting our own rights.

This is why, in Ennahda, I am one of the women who can raise her voice and say 'hey!' - 'hey, we are members of the party, we have a right to be in the leadership, we have the right to give our opinion about our choices'" (Labidi 2020).

This serves to illustrate that while the discussion about the participation and representation is important when it comes to the political influence of women in these countries, it does not reflect the whole picture. In her book about women and power, the renowned English scholar Mary Beard makes a thought-provoking observation. Some places, she says, a large number of women in parliament merely suggests that power might lie somewhere else entirely (Beard 2018, p. 104). The experiences of Mehrezia Labidi show that representation by itself can be worth very little if one does not have the

capacity or opportunity to assume the influence that the position offers. There is a difference between gender balancing and gender mainstreaming, which Paul Kirby and Laura Shepherd adequately points out. It is not the presence of women but what they do that results in gender equality (Kirby & Shepherd 2016, pp. 375-376). Khadija Karar speaks of the "dreaded quota" as the way that she as a woman first gained access to parliament in Sudan before choosing to join Hassan al-Turabi newly formed Congress party. Rather than having a separate committee for women, which according to Karar looked similar the party itself, a resolution was passed to represent women at all levels (Karar 2020) of government. The words chosen gives the impression that this was a step in the right direction. According to Tønnesen (2018), however, there is more to Sudanese politics and its number of female representatives than meets the eye.

There have been questions women in Islamist parties and what their true purpose as politicians and representatives. Do the women have true political influence or are they simply put in certain positions so that the country looks modern in the context of liberal Western democracies? The later can be easily assumed, at least to a varying degree, when reading research papers on the issue. There is the underlying perception that religion, democracy and women's rights do not mix (Fox, Alzwawi & Refki 2016, p. 41) but also that women's leading positions in Islamist parties often are credited to their male party leaders (Tajali 2017, p. 178). The women's own effort, as illustrated in Mona Tajali's earlier quote, is ignored or explained away. To treat women as a passive, undifferentiated mass is a grave mistake (Hale 1992, p. 28) both in politics and in academia. Yet, this very notion is used to promote women's place in politics. Tønnessen (2018) explains this well, the notion of complementarity within Islamism with Sudanese politics as the leading example. With both Tawakkol Karman and Mehrezia Labidi it is hard to detect anything in their words that could suggest a gender essentialist viewpoint. The impression that comes across is quite the opposite. At one point during the interview, Labidi says that a woman in political position has no obligation to help other women find their place in politics. She thinks they should, but they do not have to. Based on these words, it appears that Labidi does not see a women's presence in politics as something that is there to fill a specific purpose.

With Khadija Karar it is more difficult to tell. In the interview, she shares a story about how every year in the 1990s a list of 100 top students entering into university was read out on Sudanese television, along with the names of their mothers. She hopes that the tradition of also praising the mothers can continue under the current regime. The views behind this sentiment points to an understanding of women and mothers as the one responsible for a child's education. This is assumption is further strengthened by her initial intention to help her kids adjust to a life in Sudan, before she felt compelled to go back to politics (Karar 2020). If these words really reflect her convictions, it does point to an essentialist view of gender, one that is very much in line with Hassan al-Turabi's approach to women in politics as an extension of their domestic roles (Hale 1992).

6.2 Motivation

All three case studies were asked about their reasons for entering into politics and for joining the Muslim Brotherhood branch in their country. Out of the three, Khadija Karar had the most clear-cut explanation about how she became a member of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate while in university: "Being member of an influential Sufi family, l dreaded communism and their anti-religious sentiment (…). The Islamic Front offered an organised platform for enlightening students about Islam versus what the communism represents," (Karar 2020). She moved abroad but returned to Sudan in 1986 and quickly decided to dive back into political life because of what she describes as "political turmoil" during the reign of al-Mahdi (Karar 2020). Karar adds that her interests are educational rather than political and during the interview she avoids answering direct questions about her political positions and responsibilities. Why she chooses to circumvent these questions is hard to say and any suggestions of modesty in line with NIF patriarchal codes would only be circumstantial guesswork (Hale 1992, Tønnessen 2018). While the word democracy is not mentioned once in the interview with Karar, the other two state that democracy and human rights are central to their political ambitions. This could serve as evidence against the opposition between Islam and democracy in Islamist parties that is frequently asserted by academia and popular opinion alike (Fox, Alzwawi & Refki 2016, p. 41). There is a secular bias supposing that religion and human rights can never go hand in hand, and this is particularly prominent when it comes to the rights and freedoms of women. Allaine Cerwonka says scholars should be aware of what she calls "latent liberal

assumptions (2011, p. 61). Yet, studies do show that women themselves see no contradiction between their faith and positions of leadership (Tajali 2017, p. 179). Karman and Labidi makes no secret of the fact that they entered politics in order to provoke change.

Mehredia Labidi says she comes from a family where brothers and sisters were given the same opportunities to education and university. She credits her upbringing to her father, who according to her was an imam and a very enlightened man, and who made her reconciled with her Islamic belonging (Labidi 2020). Labidi says she found the same ideas and values in Ennahda, which prompted her to join the party in 2011 when Ghannouchi returned from his exile abroad. She argues that Ennaha's identity as a party of Muslim democrats sets it apart from other Islamist parties in Tunisia in the way that it focuses on something other than Islam. Labidi says that: "Bridging the gaps between religions, ideologies, families, persons – to have a national project of building a democracy for all, the rule of law for the benefit of everybody. This is really my goal," (Labidi 2020). She sees herself as a woman of faith but a modern woman of faith, she says. This is also her political identity, one that, according to Lamia Estum Shehadeh, might only be possible within the gradualist camp of the fundamentalist, Islamist movement. This branch of the movement emphasises *ijtihad,* the willingness to adapt to modern circumstances despite relying on the Quran and hadith for guidance (Shehadeh 1999, p. 70). Out of the many affiliates that are a part of the Muslim Brotherhood, the ideas and policies of Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi might be the most liberal (Shehadeh 1999, pp. 72-79). This is especially prevalent when it comes to women's position in society. And his commitment to democracy. Labidi's words in the interview thus supports the party lines and builds up under the image of Ghannouchi as "A democrat within Islamism" (Tamimi 2013). It is probably not a coincidence.

Both Labidi and Tawakkol Karman have received international recognition for their outspokenness in favour of women's place in politics. The Nobel Peace Prize was an acknowledgement of her achievements but also undoubtedly a springboard for Karman, who since 2011 has been able to take her activism far beyond her native Yemen. In June 2012, she spoke to the UN Security Council but it was not until 2018 she formally left Islah

(Utvik 2019, p. 227). According to Bjørn Olav Utvik, Karman was excluded over a disagreement but in the interview, Tawakkol Karman gives the impression that leaving the party was her plan all along. When asked what made her join the party in the first place, she answered: "I thought change would be easy through political parties. I still think that party life is essential to any political reform, although sometimes parties are weak, and the political system does not help them develop." She adds: "What I am proud of is that I have not lost my independence, whether within or outside the party" (Karman 2020). These words give the impression that Karman, rather than being taken advantage of, she chose to join Islah in order to access the political opportunities that came with the membership. When this political platform no longer served her needs, she decided to move on.

6.3 Obstacles

"Regarding women's status within political Islam parties and groups, the problem arguably lies in the fact that these parties and groups often take advantage of women in demonstrations and voter mobilization during election time, with clear absence of women as electoral candidates" (Karman 2020).

The words of Tawakkol Karman points to an experience that perfectly illustrates the discussion around participation and representation in Islamist parties. In Islah in Yemen, National Islamic Front in Sudan and Ennahda in Tunisia, there are policies in place to include women in the political process on an equal footing as men. "While women may not have achieved parity with men, according to al-Turabi, there are no further barriers facing that achievement," Shehadeh (1999, p. 72) writes. Yet, the accounts given by the participants of this study suggests that there are still major obstacles preventing women from taking on leadership positions in Islamist parties. Their descriptions point to problems that are not necessarily political but cultural.

Challenges related to politics as a male arena is something that came up in all three interviews separately but Mehrezia Labidi was the one who articulated the issues in the most comprehensive way.

"Let's first of all be frank – political affairs are usually manly affairs. Political parties are dominated by a male mentality – everywhere. To be a member of a political party as a woman, we have to be conscious that it is not being in an association or a club of friends. We are in a structure which aim is power," (Labidi 2020).

Change, she says, comes though recruiting more women to powerful positions in the political system. Through her role as vice-president of the Constituent Assembly Labidi argues that she contributed to a positive image of women and encouraged the representation of others of the same gender. Such change is needed for parliament to become a "real democratic institution", she argues (Labidi 2020). However, she is aware that some women in leadership positions chose not to challenge the established gender norms. They behave like men, Labidi says. This observation is not unique to Islamism or Tunisian politics. Beard illustrates this common phenomenon with the example of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who received help to lower the tone of her voice to gain more authority when she spoke (Beard 2018, p. 55). She also adds that there is no neurological reason for humans to experience low voices as more authoritarian. This is learnt behaviour (Beard 2018, p. 48). This raises a question than none of the respondents asked, yet it is a question that radical feminists have long since come to as the next step in the conversation; How are women meant to truly fit in if the structure they are entering is moulded on a male political persona?

Tawakkol Karman see perceptions and assumptions as a result of cultural and religious legacies are a serious impediment to women's political participation. However, she argues that the Arab Spring revolutions prove that change is underway and that attitudes can be shift. Karman does not doubt that progressive Islamists will detect which way the winds blow; "I think that Islamists will keep abreast of such developments and many women will be pushed towards parliamentary and governmental work. However, the problem- whether for Islamists or others lies in how they are really willing to accept women's

access party leadership" (Karman 2020). Mona Tajali writes that men are often the main gatekeepers in political processes across the globe (2017, p. 186) and underlines the importance of high-profile Islamic women with leverage and legitimacy to champion the cause for other women (2017, p. 190). Both Labidi and Karman fit this description. "Advancing together is better for all of us," Mehrezia Labidi says.

The focus of Khadija Karar's responses stand out in the same way that her focus has done throughout this discussion. She also draws on traditions and customs in society as obstacles for women to fully participate in political life while emphasising that these challenges exist across party lines. Yet, she points out something that neither Karman nor Labidi has done, namely that there are certain responsibilities outside of one's professional life that a woman has and a does not. She explains: "One has a meeting but there is a family event, for example a wedding or death, and there is no way you can miss that. Customs are challenging but also most essential for the unity of the community" (Karar 2020). She follows up on this statement by saying that the level of education a woman has can make it easier for a woman to be politically active but that does not mean that she can push her social or family responsibilities to the side. Again, her views reflect the ideas of al-Turabi as set out by Shehadeh (1999) but also that of Utvik (2019) that while women may be equal, they are also different than men. The idea that women have a softer nature and thus are created to take of the family is the very definition of gender essentialism (Kinsella 2017). It is also women's constitutive role in the family that brings gender relations into the heart of the Islamist cause.

As explained at length by a number of scholars, among them Utvik (2019) Cooke (1994) and Fox, Alzwawi & Refki (2016), women's rights are caught in the crossfire between Islamism's anti-Western sentiments and secular feminism. Muslim Mernissi advocates a kind of feminism based on *isnad*, a traditional way of evaluating the reliability of hadith verses (Roald 2001, pp. 186-187). Yet, she was often critisised for taking her feminism too far in the direction of secularism (Utvik 2019, p. 337). From the very beginning, Hassan al-Banna's Ikhwan was a movement against colonialism and the imperial forces that were threatening to dismantle Islamic culture and traditions. To embrace Western rhetoric

about women's rights today would therefore be a to give in to a new form of moral imperialism (Fox, Alzwawi & Refki 2016, p. 41). Kadija Karar lists foreign influence, as well as foreign money, as one of the obstacles in obtaining political independence for women. From the perspective of someone who is working towards women's political representation within the framework of Islamic ideas, it makes sense that secular feminism, which is based on a very different set of values and assumptions, muddle the waters. Karar argues that Islamic parties are the sanctioned by Western nations, even when their objective is securing democracy and human rights (Karar 2020). The 'one-shot' prediction, as explained by Jean Pierre Filieu (2011, p. 96) does support this argument.

6.4 Comments on the data

Despite only interviewing three case studies for this thesis work, the amount of data that came out of these three interviews were not only vast but also rich in descriptions, experiences and opinions. Yet, there is a sense of distance created by the geographical and cultural disparity between the respondents and the researcher. It is difficult creating an environment of academic credibility and trust when one cannot speak face to face. Difficulties related to access meant that the extent of the interview, as well as the format, had to be adjusted so that the participants had the opportunity to take part in the study. The possibility of unearthing whether someone is telling you what you want to hear, omitting parts of the story, weighing their words or is purposefully avoiding the question becomes significantly larger if one is able to read someone's body language or listen as the words come out of their mouth. That was not always the case with these interviews. One must not forget, however, that there is also value in knowing how these women chooses to present themselves as long as one remembers that that is what the data to a large part reflects.

Tawakkol Karman, Mehrezia Labidi and Khadija Karar all choses a point of view that is outside their own party belonging, at least to some extent. They present themselves as women in politics, not as women in the Islamist movement. The challenges they choose to focus on, they say are traditional and/or cultural and therefore applies to all women in

the political system in their country. By choosing such a perspective, they are moving the spotlight away from them as individuals to be able to talk about something larger than themselves. The role of the interviewer is therefore to keep coming back to the personal in order to get the lived experiences of these women, as well as reading between the lines to be able to interpret the convictions, assumptions and opinions that still exist within the data.

The words of Karman and Labidi points to an ideological framework that is quite similar and that could be firmly placed at the moderate side of the Islamist spectrum. Karar, however, differs from the other two interviewees in more ways than one. Fortunately, it is possible to extend a hand into the academic literature to contextualise it all.

7. Conclusion

This Master's Thesis has set out to explore and examine the experiences, perspectives and assumptions of three women in position of influence within the Islamist movements. The duality of *female Islamist* mentioned in the very first sentence should now appear much clearer through the presentation and discussion around the Muslim Brotherhood and the role of women within its ranks. The review of the existing literature provided a foundation for the data collected in this research. While the sampling process required grit and patience, flexibility was key when it came to the data collection. Three women agreed to take part in the study; Mehrezia Labidi, who has been recognised world-wide for her role as former vice-president of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly (Wolf 2017, p. xviii); Tawakkol Karman, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate from Yemen who decided to leave Islah in 2018 and Khadija Karar, former vice-president of the Sudanese parliament and prominent member of National Islamic Front (Tønnessen & Roald 2007, p. 4). Together they provided answers that may contribute to a better understanding of an understudied topic (Tajali 2017 p. 178), at least to date. More and more women have risen to influential positions though Islamist parties affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and while the trend has been noted by scholars on the subject, few have taken steps to speak to the individuals in question.

Through a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews, this research project included three case studies who spoke about their motivations and ambitions, their understanding of political influence and their perspective on women's rights, both in their country and in their party. All three women were motivated by the possibilities of change and entered into politics because they wanted to do. One might argue that this is what drew them to the Islamist movement in the first place, a political ideology that favours active agency over passivity (Shehadeh 1999, p. 62). The answers given also suggested that gaining political influence had been a reason to join the Muslim Brothers. The impression remaining is not one of political actors that are happy to simply participate but women who want to see their political engagement to translate into power and representation. Yet, there were some who were further up this scale than others and this seemed to

correlate with an awareness of women's rights and the obstacles that might stand in the way.

When asked to reflect on their own party's positions on women's rights, the three case studies defaulted into taking about challenges that they meant were universal and based on culture and tradition, rather than party politics. It comes as no surprise that apart from Karman, who has left Islah in favour of political independence, were careful not to say anything that could damage the image of NIF and Ennahda as anything other than moderately Islamist. Yet, women within the Islamist movement use their hard-earned influence to change the party from within by raising their voices. As the symbol of Islamic society, women have been caught in the crossfire of a conflict that goes far beyond that of women's rights.

Perhaps by following the example of Zaynab al-Ghazali, supporting the dominant ideology in speech while demonstrating an alternative with their actions (Cooke 1994, p. 18), Islamist women in influential positions might make room for more women to follow.

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Appendix I

Interview guide

(Personal information: name, age, place of origin, current and past political roles, and number of years in politics)

What does it take to be considered politically influential?

Would you say that you are or have been politically influential? Why or why not?

How would you describe your role in politics?

What are your aspirations and ambitions in terms of your political career?

What principles and values are important to you?

What made you become a member of your political party?

What values and policies would you say is fundamental to your party's politics?

What is your experience of being a woman in your party?

Can you share your thoughts on women's participation in political Islam?

What are the challenges when it comes to women's participation in political Islam in general and your party in particular?

Are these challenges similar to those facing other women in politics, those who are members of other parties?