

On Transnational Feminist Solidarity: The Case of Angela Davis in Egypt

Sara Salem
Politics and International Studies
University of Warwick
s.salem@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract:

In the early 1970s, Angela Davis visited Egypt, a trip she wrote about in her book *Women, Culture, and Politics*. This article uses Davis's trip as a lens through which to approach the question of transnational feminist solidarity through the eyes of multiple generations of Egyptian feminists. It argues that the particular conditions in Egypt in the 1950s through to 1970s allowed for new international forms of solidarity focused on material conditions. This enabled Egyptian feminists to forge solidarity with women across the globe, Angela Davis included, who located gender oppression within the same structures, namely capitalism and imperialism. This type of solidarity was made possible by the particular political and economic context of the 1950s–1970s, which differed radically from the eras preceding and following it, as well as the analysis that came out of this context, including a strong focus on capitalism and imperialism. Indeed the decline of this type of analysis can be located in the changes that occurred in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s—following the shift to an open-market economy—that led to a decline in material analysis. This shift has had major effects on the ways in which Egyptian feminists imagined and put into practice forms of transnational feminist solidarity. By looking at Davis's encounter with Egyptian feminists, this article demonstrates how practices that were built on a material analysis of gender allowed for solidarity to be created by making differences productive rather than merely divisive.

In the early 1970s Angela Davis, one of the most visible faces in US Marxist and feminist activism, visited Egypt. The result of the trip was not only a fascinating account of her experiences, published as a chapter in her book *Women, Culture & Politics* (1990), but it also marked the formation of new transnational connections of solidarity between Davis and numerous Egyptian feminists. This visit and her account of it shed light on the 1950s through to the 1970s as a particular moment in global feminist organizing, one influenced not only by the wave of decolonization across the third world but also by the radical movements of the global North. It was a moment of a new form of solidarity for many, including feminists, and this solidarity was forged on the basis of analysis and activism against the material realities of capitalist expansion and emerging forms of imperialism. For Egyptian feminists, this solidarity was distinct from previous forms and was articulated through the lens of nationalist anticolonialism.

I want to use Davis's visit as a framework through which to raise several questions that in turn can shed light on the subject of transnational feminist solidarity. The first question focuses on the shared experiences between Egyptian and African American women based on the ways in which white Western feminists have represented them. By pointing to this form of oppression, Davis is already preventing us from imagining that there is some type of automatic solidarity among women on the basis of womanhood. By calling attention to the misconceptions and stereotypes harbored by many white Western feminists, both toward women of color in the West and women in the third world, Davis shows that there are hierarchies within "universal sisterhood" and suggests why transnational feminism based on shared womanhood is a myth. She also pushes further to point to the shared solidarity that exists *as a result of* the exclusion of women of color and third-world women from Western feminist movements and theorizing. This mirrors the realization by Egyptian feminists, following troubled attempts at engaging with Western feminists in the 1920s and 1930s, that women's organizations focused on the third world were needed.

The second question focuses on the possibility of forging transnational solidarity based on shared material oppression. Angela Davis's position as an African American communist means

that her reflections are consistently inclusive of race and class analysis as well as gender analysis. This focus on class in particular has declined somewhat in feminist studies, as well as other academic disciplines that previously centred capitalism as a key explanatory variable such as postcolonial studies, since the waning of the radical movements and theoretical trends of the 1970s across the globe, including Marxism. In this text, however, Davis clearly points to the role of the global capitalist system in creating the conditions for gender relations in Egypt, an argument she has made in other work in relation to African Americans in the United States, prominently in her book *Women, Race and Class*, as well as articles such as *Radical Perspectives on the empowerment of Afro-American Women* (1981, 1988). These types of connections—made through understanding the oppressions brought about by a particular economic system—served to create a type of transnational feminist solidarity between Davis and her Egyptian counterparts that reflected the conditions of that moment. I argue that it was not on the basis of culture that Davis sought to understand the experiences of Egyptian women; rather, it was because she relied on a material and global understanding of gender oppression. This is key in light of critiques of how Egyptian women are often orientalized by focusing on them through the lens of culture (Abu Lughod 2001). Davis instead looked to contextualize gender oppression within multiple structures, including globalized capitalism, and for this reason she was able to make connections with the experiences of women in other parts of the world. This coincided with the focus of many Egyptian feminists throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s: on questions of imperial capitalism and national independence.

The final question revolves around the feminist practice of self-reflexivity. Throughout the text, Davis questions her assumptions and knowledge on Egypt and Egyptian gender relations. She does this, however, in a productive way that does not create distance between her and the people with whom she interacts but rather brings them closer. This raises interesting questions about the role of difference in feminist organizing. I suggest that the 1950s through the 1970s saw difference as a productive site within third-world organizing, and that this notion of difference has been replaced by notions of diversity in our contemporary moment.

By addressing these three questions I aim to recapture Davis's visit as a moment within which feminists could imagine solidarities in new ways, and to suggest that by contextualizing gender relations within the dynamics of capitalist modernity and class, these connections fostered solidarity. This meant a shift away from creating solidarity based on the notion that we are all women (and therefore we are all oppressed by men) but rather basing solidarity on the notion that we as women are dominated in a variety of different ways, but that at the global level it is the experience of capitalism—which is always gendered and racialized—that creates divisions among women. I argue that in order to understand the uniqueness of this visit and locate it within its temporal context, we must trace the Egyptian feminist movement back to its inception and understand what happened to this movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

Theorizing solidarity: Transnational feminism and the Egyptian feminist movement through time

Transnational feminism can be seen as a paradigm that aims to understand the ways in which capitalist modernity affects gender relations. The concept emerged in the 1970s, which should come as no surprise given the dominance of radical movements and the lingering excitement and energy of the decolonization period. Transnational feminism provided a means through which feminists could come together in solidarity without assuming that the differences among them did not exist or that they were not potentially divisive. Audre Lorde has been central in framing difference as powerful, writing: “Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic,” (1984, 99). Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has referred to this type of coming together as creating *coalitions* rather than *unity*. In their book *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander write:

Feminist Genealogies drew attention to three important elements in our definition of the transnational: 1) a way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in different geographical spaces, rather than as all women across the world; 2) an understanding of a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples, rather than as a set of traits embodied in all non-U.S. citizens (particularly because U.S. citizenship continues to be premised within a white, Eurocentric, masculinist, heretosexual regime); and 3) a consideration of the term international in relation to an analysis of economic, political, and ideological processes that would therefore require taking critical antiracist, anticapitalist positions that would make feminist solidarity work possible (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xix).

However it is important to note that transnational connections between feminist movements had been occurring for decades prior to the emergence of the concept in the 1970s, including in Egypt. Egypt had and continues to have a vibrant and active feminist movement. Starting in the late 1800s and accelerating with the spread of literacy and the printing press, Egyptian women and men began to articulate visions of womanhood that tied modernity and progress to the achievement of certain rights for women. Huda Sha‘rawi, Nabawiya Moussa, Malak Hifni Nassef, and Saiza Nabrawi are only a few of the pioneering women who fought for gender equality, focusing on women’s right to work and be educated, the issue of seclusion and veiling, and the question of marriage and divorce. Indeed, these were the issues that collectively became known as the “woman question” (Baron 2005, 31). Most of the pioneering feminists came from the upper or upper middle classes, spoke foreign languages, and travelled extensively, which could explain the ease with which they forged connections with Western feminists. Nevertheless, these connections with US and Europe-based feminists would ultimately suffer due to disagreements over the question of imperialism.

Egyptian modernists, who often felt the need to represent Egypt positively, keenly felt the European gaze toward the Orient—and feminists were no exception. Sha’rawi’s organization, the Egyptian Feminist Union—the first feminist organization in Egypt—published a periodical titled *L’Egyptienne* in French. Sha’rawi argued that this language choice was needed to show Europeans what Egyptian women are really like, and what Egyptian feminists are fighting for—as a means of fighting orientalist stereotypes. Primarily her aim was to show that Egyptian women were actively engaged in fighting for equal rights, and were not passive victims of Oriental male domination. This fight centred mainly around legal barriers such as the right to vote and the right to divorce. Nonetheless, this choice ultimately meant that most Arab women could not read a periodical that was supposedly about them and their plight.

These interactions must be placed within the context in which they occurred: Egypt was occupied by the British, and a modern state and expanding capitalism were becoming an undeniable reality. As Margot Badran has written: “In the second half of the nineteenth century Egypt experienced growing encroachment by the West in its economic life. British colonial rule interrupted the process of economic and social development begun under the direction of the previously autonomous Egyptian state. The political economy was redirected to serve British needs” (1996, 11). Many feminists saw Egyptian independence and progress as tied to gender equality. This is unsurprising, given the colonial situation these men and women were in. It also led to important confrontations between Egyptian feminists and Western feminists over the question of imperialism, a question not all Western feminists were comfortable confronting (Badran 1996, 13).

It is precisely this contradiction that led Egyptian feminists to look elsewhere for solidarity. This had already begun in the 1940s, as Egyptian feminists began to shift their focus from solidarity with European feminists to solidarity with Arab feminists and—later—other third-world feminists. International feminists were accused of not upholding the democratic and equal principles they constantly spoke of (Badran 1996, 223).¹ Egyptian feminists noted that democratic countries such

as Britain were never criticized for colonial rule or the treatment of Arabs in Palestine, whereas totalitarian countries were consistently criticized. At the International Association for Women (IAW) congress in 1939 in Copenhagen the discussions revealed to Egyptian feminists the myth of a global sisterhood. Badran writes: “This double standard made Huda Sha’rawi feel that “it had become necessary to create an Eastern feminist union as a structure within which to consolidate our forces and help us to have an impact upon the women of the world.” Indeed, as early as 1930 Nabarawi had asserted that the path toward liberation of Eastern women was different from that of Western women, suggesting that Eastern women should unite. Meanwhile a move toward Arab unity had been growing among women and men in Egypt and other Arab countries” (1996, 238).

Badran traces the shift toward what she calls “Arab feminism” to the emergence of the Palestinian cause (1996, 223). She credits this turn to the limits of international feminist solidarity. The first sign of this shift was the 1944 congress for Arab women in Cairo, based on the themes of nationalism and feminism. The 1950s-1970s saw the mushrooming of other third-world organizations as well, also based on notions of anticolonialism and independence. The Bandung Conference was the pinnacle of this era, and demonstrates that transnational third-world connections among women were already developing in the 1950s. The Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization is another prominent example of a forum Egyptian feminists turned to in order to connect with other third-world women. Laura Bier writes, “As new alliances were forged in the international arena, groups of women activists, writers, students, and politicians circulated within the milieu of international conferences, visiting delegations, summits, and committee meetings. The resulting exchanges and networks were part of what made possible the sorts of imaginings that overflowed the boundaries of the nation state” (2011, 159). I have shown that transnational solidarity was not new to Egyptian feminists and predated the emergence of the term in the 1970s. Tracing the shifts in this form of solidarity shows that by the 1940s Egyptian feminists were moving away from solidarity with Western feminists and toward connections with other third-world women. This shift makes it particularly interesting to focus on Davis’s encounter. Not only

does her work as a whole represent an important example of transnational feminism, but her trip to Egypt and her recounting of it provide an overview of some of the questions transnational feminism aims to answer.

Visiting Egypt and drawing parallels

Davis remains one of the most significant scholars and activists within the fields of feminism, antiracism, and class struggle.² She was a member of both the US Communist Party and the Black Panthers, and has published extensively on the topics of race, gender, class, and capitalism. Her prominence within these radical circles renders her visit to Egypt even more salient, given the dramatic changes Egypt was undergoing in the years following independence. This article is based on a text Davis wrote for a book on global feminism during the UN decade for women (1975-1985).³ Prominent feminists, among them Davis, Maya Angelou, Nawal el Saadawi, and Germaine Greer—were invited to write on the situation of women in a country not their own. The description of the book states: “Ten writers - five from poor countries, five from rich countries - visited distant lands and brought back rich insights into women's lives around the world. The Third World women reported on industrialized nations and vice versa and the result is a fascinating set of cross-cultural viewpoints” (Taylor 1985). This problematic framing of the book suggests why Davis at first resisted contributing. Davis was initially approached to write a chapter on “Egyptian women and sex,” while Nawal el Saadawi was asked to write on women and politics in England. Indeed, this was brought up by one of the Egyptian feminists whom Davis met, who pointed out the problematic decision to focus on women and sex in Egypt as opposed to women and politics in England. Davis writes:

When I initially agreed to travel to Egypt for the purpose of documenting my experiences with women there, I did not yet know that the sponsors of this project expected me to focus specifically on issues relating to the sexual dimension of women's

pursuit of equality. I was not aware, for example, that the practice of clitoridectomy was among the issues I would be asked to discuss. Since I was very much aware of the passionate debate still raging within international women's circles around the efforts of some Western feminists to lead a crusade against female circumcision in African and Arab countries, once I was informed about the particular emphasis of my visit, I seriously reconsidered proceeding with the project... Before departing to Egypt I realized that I could not in good conscience write about genital mutilation and other examples of sexual oppression in Egypt without acknowledging the manipulation of these problems by those who fail to consider the importance of the larger economic-political context of male supremacy (1990, 117).

This correlation between Egyptian women and sex is striking. It is precisely this naturalized assumption – that gender in Arab contexts should be discussed through the lens of sexual rights and autonomy – that Davis is critiquing. While gender oppression in other places, such as England, was seen as more complex and as consisting of primarily political oppression, in Egypt it was different. Davis thus sets the scene of her visit by contextualizing the dynamics between Egyptian and Western feminists within the crusade against circumcision, which is made to be the be-all end-all of gender oppression in places like Egypt. She does not stop here, however, and connects her decision to refuse the invitation to write about Egyptian women's sexual lives to her own experiences as an African American woman:

As an Afro-American woman familiar with the sometimes hidden dynamics of racism, I had previously questioned the myopic concentration on female circumcision in US feminist literature on African women. This insinuation seems frequently to be made that the women in the twenty or so countries where this outmoded and dangerous practice occurs would magically ascend to a state of equality once they managed to

throw off the fetters of genital mutilation—or rather, once white Western feminists (whose appeals often suggest that this is the contemporary “white women’s burden”) accomplished this for them. The dynamics here are not entirely dissimilar from those characterizing the historical campaign waged by US feminists for the right to birth control (Davis 1990, 129).

Davis goes on to note that throughout her career of teaching at various US universities, most students did not know anything about women in Egypt other than that they were victims of genital mutilation. In this way we see how well-meaning feminist crusades serve to construct women in the third world in ways that focus on sexual oppression and an overall lack of autonomy, just as they have with African American women in the United States. Drawing this type of parallel is not simply part of telling a story; it points to a type of solidarity that emerges from the ways in which some groups of women have been framed and represented by other groups of women. In other words, drawing parallels acts as a means of bringing to the fore power dynamics within feminist theorizing and activism. These types of parallels also serve to deconstruct the myth of a universal sisterhood based on gender or sex, and instead point to the possibilities of sisterhood based on shared experiences. Imperialism, racism, and capitalism represent just three examples of these, and by drawing these types of parallels, Davis is suggesting that the Western feminists responsible for the crusade against circumcision are in fact part of these structures rather than fighting against them.

Here we see similarities with the experiences that Egyptian feminists of the 1930s and 1940s had with Western feminism, particularly on the question of Palestine. Nabarawi, one of the most prominent feminists of the preindependence era, wrote this following the IAW congress in Copenhagen: “The congress, far from representing global views of women, was too often the echo of the political or racial preoccupations of the so-called democratic states and Zionist groups. When one waited to hear women protest energetically against injustices and condemn war, their

voices were raised only to condemn certain regimes in accordance with the political interests of their governments” (1939,3). Nabarawi, too, is raising questions about the myth of a universal sisterhood, and demonstrating that certain structures were making transnational feminist solidarity impossible. Indeed, it was following the IAW congress that Nabarawi, Sha‘rawi, and others decided to reach out to Arab feminists, seeing similarities in their positions on key issues such as Palestine, and thus a greater chance for solidarity.

At the same time, Davis is explicitly centring solidarity as a concept. She is in no way suggesting that the dividing lines between women should prevent forms of solidarity that may produce avenues of emancipation. Rather, she is redrawing the lines along which solidarity can and should be fostered. In this way, the material conditions that situate women on different sides of the international division of labor can provide women with a basis for solidarity.

In addition to generating solidarity, Davis’s tendency to draw parallels allows her to de-exoticize Egypt and render it as a place that has gender inequality just like everywhere else. For example in her discussion on rape in Egypt, she was told that when Egyptian women are raped, the men are often let off because the women are framed as being sexually promiscuous. Davis notes: “This problem, of course, is hardly peculiar to Egypt or to the Arab world. The dualistic representation of women as virgins and whores is an integral element of the ideology of womanhood associated with the Judaeo-Christian tradition” (1990, 149). Indeed the virgin/whore dichotomy is found in many contexts across the globe, and it can be not only explained with reference to patriarchy; it must also be contextualized within racialized dynamics. As Davis notes, white womanhood is implicated in the production of this dichotomy. In the US context, whiteness is associated with virginity and innocence, and blackness with promiscuity, oversexualization, and lack of morality. This recalls processes of European colonization in Africa, where the same dichotomy was central to the colonial project itself: white European women were to be protected from oversexualized African men and to be distinguished from oversexualized African women.

This played out slightly differently in the Middle East, where women have been portrayed as simultaneously oversexualized *and* sexually oppressed.

Davis's parallels serve to prevent the reader from seeing gender inequality as being *especially* pronounced in Egypt. At the same time, they do not allow the reader to see women of color—Egyptian or African American—as exceptionally affected by gender inequality. Instead, Davis skilfully connects the demonization of women of color to racialized notions such as the virgin/whore dichotomy or movements such as the crusade against female circumcision, both of which betray the position of Western feminists vis-à-vis those they claim to embrace as “sisters.” Indeed we see that by the 1940s, Egyptian feminists had already begun to raise questions about the myth of universal sisterhood, something that was to accelerate in the decades to follow.

Gender and class: Neoliberalism and Egyptian gender relations

Davis's positionality as a communist feminist means that her work is always carefully attuned to the workings of global capitalism and its production of class-based hierarchies. Thus, during her trip to Egypt her analysis did not rely on culturalist interpretations but rather tried to uncover the particular relations between class dynamics—local and international—and gender relations. On her trip from the Cairo airport to her hotel, Davis notes seeing the sprawling cemeteries in which hundreds of thousands of people lived. She writes: “I was immediately sensitized to the fact that the issue of adequate housing was high on the list of priorities for women in Egypt” (1990, 128). The next day, as she was taking a walk along the Nile, she again noted scenes of poverty. Her response to this, however, betrays a materialist understanding of political and economic realities: “This was the legacy of Sadat's open-door economic policy: the transnational corporations that had greedily rushed into Egypt under the guise of promoting economic development into Egypt had created more unemployment, more poverty, and more homelessness” (1990, 132).

Egyptian feminists of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were very sensitive to questions of class, nationalism, and economic independence. In 1952 a popular revolution led to Egyptian independence from British colonial rule. Gamal Abdel Nasser was Egypt's first postindependence leader, and his project of Arab socialism, industrialization, nationalization, and anti-imperialism provided a way out of the colonial predicament faced by most third-world nations. The Nasser era is particularly notable for the welfare state that led to free education and other social services for all Egyptians.

Many feminists, most of whom had been active in the anticolonial movement, supported Nasser to some extent. Indeed the new generation of feminists were to experience the highs of independence, which ultimately affected them greatly. During the 1950s we see the emergence of state feminism, an extensive project that must be contextualized within the broader changes happening under the Nasser regime. For Egyptian women, the new welfare state offered explicit commitment to public equality for women. It contributed to the development of state feminism as a legal, economic, and ideological strategy to introduce changes to Egyptian society and its gender relations" (Hatem 1992, 231). The key paradox of feminism under this regime was that it simultaneously gave women access to spaces in society they had long fought for—including work and education—while also closing down space for democratic politics and extending control over independent organizations. In effect, state feminism represented a contradictory project that encapsulated the goals of the new regime and suffered from the authoritarianism that resulted from the 1952 revolution. Just two decades after this revolution, the 1967 war with Israel and the declining economic situation led to a political crisis that brought about the rise of a new regime, headed by Anwar el Sadat.

By the time of Davis's visit, the shift toward a new economic system was well underway. Sadat's decision to open Egypt's markets marked the beginning of the neoliberal era. Davis makes reference to this at several points throughout the text. At one point she notes that one of her hosts, Dr. Shehida Elbaz, convincingly argued that the situation of women in Egypt had significantly

worsened after Sadat's economic policies (1990, 134). Later in the text, Davis recalls that Latifa al Zayyat told her she would be doing Egyptian women a great service if she told people [in the United States] that Egyptian women want to be liberated and equal but from an economic point of view, not a sexual one (1990, 137). This raises important questions about the meanings of terms such as liberation and equality that have become so dominant within feminism. Al Zayyat's statement empties these words of their presumed meanings and instead shows that in different contexts they mean different things. As Davis notes, a focus on sexual issues alone would not solve the problem of women's exclusion from the political and economic realms, let alone the problems both men and women faced such as economic inequality and political disenfranchisement.

The multiple critiques that Egyptian feminists in this text launched against Sadat's open-door economic policy betray a specific political positioning. Although the Nasser period (1954-1971) is rarely mentioned, a noted previously many Egyptian feminists saw the Nasser years as a time of great promise for Egyptian society, a time when many feminist gains were made—gains that were not merely handed to women by a paternalistic state but were gained by women themselves.⁴ After fourteen years of state socialism under Nasser, Sadat, elected in 1970, ushered in a neoliberal “open-door” policy, opening the Egyptian economy to international investment and curtailing or eliminating state support that had been accessible to all Egyptians. Sadat's presidency, on the other hand, brought about a complete change, starting with Egypt's economic liberalization and an emphasis on foreign investment, and with it an influx of foreign norms and values and the establishment of a native capitalist class that reproduced itself by relying on speculation, real estate, and import/export. Hatem has argued that these changes—primary among them the retreat of the state from social services—undermined the prospects of lower-middle-class and working-class women: “They benefitted a small group of bourgeois and upper-middle-class women. The overall effect of these changes was to introduce pronounced economic, social and ideological divisions among Egyptian women” (1992, 231). Many of these middle- and working-class women had strongly supported the Nasser project. These dramatic economic changes are referred to more than

once in Davis' text, with feminists decrying the social changes brought about by economic liberalization. This type of critique has become less dominant in current scholarly writing on Egyptian gender relations, with some key exceptions.⁵ This can be connected to the rise in postmodernist writing that is less focused on the structural, as well as the end of the decolonization era and the radical movements it created. This shift is precisely what has made transnational feminist solidarity based on anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist critique less likely, because capitalism and imperialism are often no longer central to feminist analysis in the region.

Despite the awareness of class on the part of the Egyptian feminists Davis met, she does observe that most of these women were urban and educated, even though some had come from a poor and rural background. She notes that their lifestyles were very different from the majority of Egyptian women. This type of class awareness is again on display when Davis discusses the veil. Davis attempts to connect the rise of the veil with the urban middle classes, and cites writings that point to the lack of veiling and seclusion among peasant women (1990, 150). At one point, during a trip to Mansoura, a city about 120 km from Cairo, Davis noticed that many women were not only unveiled but also not fully covered. She writes:

The road followed the tortuous route of the Nile, where unending groups of colourfully dressed women were at work on the riverbank. Not only were they unveiled, but their dresses were frequently pulled up above their knees as they waded in the ancient waters. These images flew aggressively in the face of the notion that women's bodies are always to be camouflaged so as not to provoke sexual desire in men. I also saw numerous women working alongside men, picking cotton in the fields and working in the brick-making plants on the side of the road, transporting and stacking the heavy bricks no less efficiently than the men with whom they labored. (Davis 1990, 153).

These observations bring to light the heavy influence of class dynamics on women's movements in the third world. As I note above, the first debates about women's rights and feminism in Egypt took place in the early 1890s, when Egypt was under British colonial rule and when modernism and European values were seen as progressive. Many of the arguments for women's emancipation were therefore made within a framework that took the Enlightenment as its point of departure, such as Qāsim Amīn's famous book *The New Woman* ([1900] 2000). The "woman question" therefore emerged at a particular time when upper-class men and women—educated in Western institutions and using European epistemologies—dominated definitions of feminism and emancipation. Most of the pioneering feminists came from the upper or upper-middle classes, spoke foreign languages, travelled extensively, and focused on social welfare as a means of helping other Egyptian women out of poverty. The issues they focused on, such as the veil or the harem, revealed this class bias: the veil was something worn mainly by women of a certain class, and women of the lower classes were not confined to harems because of the economic need for their labor (Badran 1996, 4). This shifted somewhat in the 1950s, with the emergence of Nasserism and a strong state-feminist movement focused on class mobility. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, with the emergence of gender NGOs and what Islah Jad (2004) calls the "NGO-ization" of the Arab women's movement, we see a return to the framing of women's rights according to global liberal discourses.

It is thus useful to pause and interrogate the positionality of the feminists Davis met and included in her text. As she notes, they too came from the upper or upper-middle classes, even if they focused heavily on the need for redistributive economic justice and class equality. Another division characterizing the feminist movement of that era was the supposed division between secular and Islamist feminists. Some scholars, such as Laura Bier, have argued that the Nasser era was marked by a clear division between secular and Islamist visions of feminism (2011, 43). This can be seen in the memoirs of activists such as Latifa al Zayyat and Zeinab al Ghazali. Following this, it would appear that the feminists Davis met were representative of the secular strand. I would

question, however, whether the secular-religious divide was as strong as the leftist/nonleftist divide, in which Islamists would be included in the latter. Indeed, it appears as though many of the feminists who are identified as “secular” were in effect staunch leftists. The women Davis met were representative of the leftist strand, which sheds light on the positions they held during her visit.

Sexualizing Egyptian women and the practice of self-reflexivity

Davis describes the first reactions when the women she met with learned of the project that she was supposedly there to complete:

As I had expected, the response to the description of the project I had undertaken was instantaneous and incisive. The most outspoken of the group, Dr. Shehida Elbaz, hastened to point out that the campaign against circumcision underway in the West had created the utterly false impression that this genial mutilation is the main feature of Muslim women’s oppression. “Women in the West should know,” she asserted, “that we have a stand in relation to them concerning our issues and our problems. We reject their patronizing attitude. It is connected with built-in mechanisms of colonialism and their sense of superiority. Maybe some of them don’t do it consciously, but it is there. They decide what problems we have, how we should face them, without even possessing the tools to know our problems.” (Davis 1990, 133).

At another event, when Davis explained to the thirty women in attendance that she had come to conduct research for a project on “women and sex,” the room exploded before she had a chance to explain that she had declined to be part of the project:

Pandemonium erupted. The obvious hostility arising from every corner of the room made me regret not formulating my ideas in such a way as to avoid the spontaneous outrage that was apparently elicited by the very mention of the word *sex*. When I was finally able to get a word in, I reacted rather defensively. However, it soon became clear that the very idea that sex might be the focus of an article on Egyptian women was so objectionable that I could not stem the waters of anger simply by qualifying my own position on the subject. (Davis 1990, 136).

Al Zayyat, meanwhile, had the following to say: “If you were simply an American research worker, I wouldn’t have come to see you. I would have even boycotted this meeting, because I know that through this research we are being turned into animals, into guinea pigs. I would boycott any American who is doing research on Arab women because I know that we are being tested, we are being listed in catalogues, we are being defined in terms of sexuality for reasons which are not in our own interests” (in Davis 1990, 137).

Finally, Elbaz noted:

I am outraged by the assignment of these topics. Although you have defended yourself very well, it raises in my mind another question: the role of the revolutionary woman in the West. Because it is so obvious from this assignment that it reflects the international division of labour imposed on the Third World by the Western capitalist countries. To make the topic of England “Women and Politics,” and in Egypt “Women and Sex,” shows that they assume that women’s participation in politics in England is more important than in Egypt. Whereas although women may be more involved in politics in England, in prospect and destination it is much less radical,

much less revolutionary, and it does not threaten the international capitalist system (in Davis 1990, 138).

I have quoted these responses at length because they raise several interesting and interrelated points. One is the particular positionality of Western researchers vis-à-vis Egyptian women.⁶ Al Zayyat points to the dynamics that are created during such research projects, dynamics that serve to construct and represent Egyptian women in particular ways—as objects—and that also serve to judge Egyptian women depending on characteristics based on external assumptions. This brings to mind the many indexes and rankings today that measure how gender-progressive or regressive different countries are, with the third world invariably at the bottom. Such rankings reify certain assumptions about what gender equality signifies, and how it can be measured, in ways that are Eurocentric. Moreover, they function as though women exist in a vacuum by ignoring national economic and political contexts. Indeed Al Zayyat hints at the fact that these types of rankings—exercises of power—depend on measurements that are biased and that serve to consolidate an already established racialized hierarchy. These rankings act as a “test,” as al Zayyat notes in Davis’ chapter. Similarly, Elbaz points again to the difference in Western assumptions regarding gender in the West versus in the Arab world, noting that in England the discussion centers on the role of women in politics, whereas in Egypt it is always about women and sex. Interestingly, she adds that the work of English feminists is less revolutionary because it does not threaten the international capitalist system.

And yet this is the point where we see the productive result of anger, and Davis’ decision to be self-reflexive even as she was being attacked: “After all, was I not in Egypt to learn about the way Egyptian women themselves interpreted the role of sexuality in their lives and struggles? And was I not especially interested in their various responses to the unfortunate chauvinism characterizing attitudes in the capitalist countries toward the sexual dimension of Arab women’s

lives? I tried to persuade myself that even within these attacks, which seemed clearly directed at me, there was a significant lesson to be learned” (1990, 136).

Davis thus reflects on her initial feelings of defensiveness and interrogates them; she notes that she was not given the space to defend herself over what was ultimately a misunderstanding, and then goes on to contextualize the strong reactions coming from all over the room. This exercise of self-reflexivity is interesting in light of our current context of political correctness. It is during such moments—when mistakes are made, limits are pushed, lines are crossed, and feelings are hurt—that we see the productive uses of difference. These differences can only be addressed productively, however, because of both Davis’s self-reflexivity and the solidarity the women feel toward one another because of shared circumstances. Here al Zayyat’s characterization of Davis as different from an American researcher is interesting: it suggests that it is precisely Davis’s positionality as someone fighting a similar struggle that makes these women reach out to her and explain their grievances. Indeed, at one point Davis mentions meeting Inji Aflatoun, a particularly famous Egyptian feminist, and recalls that Aflatoun handed her a portrait of herself that she had painted during the time when Davis was in jail⁷ (1990, 134). This brings to the surface the fact that Davis’s struggle in the United States were known and respected among the Egyptian feminists she met. Similarly, al Zayyat noted that Davis was known in Egypt because of her struggle (Davis 1990, 136). This is what gave Davis her particular positionality, and this is what allowed these women to engage with her and to form bonds of solidarity across national borders, across race, and across class.

The subject of race is one that does not appear in the chapter on Davis’s visit to Egypt. This is in spite of the fact that the role of race and racism in the production of societal relations is a particularly contentious issue in the Arab world, due to debates about the lineage of racism in the region and the historical legacy of the Arab slave trade. At the same time, there is always the dangerous risk of imposing US-centric notions of race and racism onto contexts outside of the United States, even those that may appear to be similar, such as Europe.⁸ Discussions of race in

Egypt must take into account complicated processes of colonization that date back centuries (Egypt, after all, has been occupied by a multitude of different ruling forces) as well as the conflation between nationalism, racism, and ethnicity. Similarly, the categories of race and class are not seamless or easily separable: one argument is that the formation of a native colonized class through the imposition of colonial rule shifted the racialized boundaries of societies so that this class adopted racialized views of nonelites that applied to both Egyptians and non-Egyptians. Just as in Europe where the working class was understood as racially different from the elite, working class Egyptians were similarly seen as racially inferior, or biologically different. Here the elitist and stereotypical views of rural Egyptians, for example, can be seen as motivated not only by class but also by processes of racialization.

Despite the silence on race in Davis's text—a silence that is important to note—I want to suggest that questions of racism in contexts such as Egypt represent an important division that has yet to be adequately explored. If the aim of transnational feminism is to bring divisions and differences to the forefront in order to engage with them productively, the racialization of women in colonized contexts such as Egypt (and North Africa broadly) is an important arena for such an engagement. The lack of scholarly work on legacies of race and racism in Egypt and the silence on the subject in Davis's text may point to something interesting: whereas today feminists have taken to exploring the intersections of race, gender, and class in postcolonial contexts, this may not have been the case in the 1970s, when notions of solidarity between women of color in the West and women in postcolonial countries served to hide the divisions among women in postcolonial countries.

A further social divide that becomes apparent is that between the cosmopolitan “urban” women and the rest of Egyptian women in the countryside. This divide becomes tangible during a visit Davis makes to a village near the city of Mansoura, a city of half a million 120 km from Cairo: “This was one of the most difficult moments of my visit. The masses of women in Egypt are peasants, yet I had only a few hours to spend attempting to communicate with these women, whose

language was completely unfamiliar to me. How could I honestly view these as anything more than token encounters?” (1990, 142). The particular position of the peasant woman in Egyptian feminist activism is important to touch on. Many feminists used the motif of the peasant woman as a symbol of freedom (Badran 1996, 92) without deeply interrogating the ways in which their own economic advantage was dependent upon the poverty of these very women. As Beth Baron has noted, “Many nationalisms celebrate male and female peasants as ‘culturally authentic,’ in opposition to urbanites, who are somewhat suspect in cultural terms, because they tend to be more cosmopolitan or westernized. Peasants have a concrete tie to the land, which is, after all, central to the claims of territorial nationalists” (2005, 68). Similarly, many feminists looked at peasants as women who were not tied down by urban restrictions such as seclusion or veiling. Nawal el Saadawi has made a clear class critique by pointing to the ways in which history remembers the actions of upper-class feminists, and ignores those of peasant women: “Little has been said about the masses of poor women who rushed into the national struggle without counting the cost, and who lost their lives, whereas the lesser contributions of aristocratic women leaders have been noisily acclaimed and brought to the forefront,” (1980, 176). Additionally, Baron has argued that it was middle-class Egyptian women who pushed for political rights, since they did not have the same access to power as upper-class women (187). These nuances show how complicated the picture of the Egyptian feminist movement becomes when we take intersections of identity into consideration.

It is precisely these types of questions that highlight Davis’s knowledge of power dynamics within gender relations. Not all Egyptian women are the same, and indeed the majority of women are very different from the women who organized her tour in Egypt. Moreover, she could not communicate with most Egyptian women, and it is for this reason that she does not claim to speak for them or their realities. Indeed, there seems to be an implicit critique of the women who organized her tour. Because of the limited time spent in Mansoura, her encounters with peasant women could not be more than token encounters, encounters that could be used to show that Davis *did* meet different types of women but not deep enough to allow Davis to get to know the

realities of these women, realities that were no doubt very different from those of the feminists she was visiting.

Contextualizing gender solidarity: 1950-1970

In an article on transnational feminisms, Breny Mendoza argues that transnational feminism has failed to do what it set out to do: “Deliver the bases for political solidarity between women across class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and national borders” (2002, 310). What texts like Davis’s and the experiences of Egyptian feminists suggest is that the conditions for creating a truly transnational form of feminist solidarity based on anti-imperialism and anticapitalism existed from the 1950s to the 1970s, even if our contemporary moment does not seem to hold the same potential. The waning of these types of solidarity can be attributed to multiple factors. Within Egypt, the changes following Sadat’s open-market shift as well as the shift toward civil society as a space of contestation were key. Globally, broader changes in feminist organizing and within the academy suggest why the decline in this form of transnational feminist solidarity occurred. I argue that these two developments are tied to the neoliberalization that has been under way for several decades and will be the subject of this section.

The effects of Sadat’s open-door policy were far-reaching. This era saw the decline of Nasserist state feminism and the rise of civil society, which became the key site for feminist organizing. Some scholars have spoken of the “NGO-ization” of the Arab women’s movement (Jad 2004), suggesting that this has resulted in Arab women framing gender equality in ways that match the global liberal common sense of major donor institutions. There is little doubt that there is a power dynamic between donors and local NGOs and that this has material and ideological effects on the ways in which projects are conceptualized and implemented. At the same time, the demise of state feminism and of an Egyptian regime interested in national development along gendered lines left little space for feminist organizing outside of civil society. Moreover, the 1990s

and 2000s saw the creation of local NGOs that contested these power dynamics, even if they remained enmeshed within them.

The types of theorizing found in the academy often mirror changes happening within the multiple political and economic contexts within which scholars find themselves. This was particularly noticeable during the 1950s to the 1970s, a period in which radical movements around the globe were being fought relentlessly, after which neoliberalism firmly set in. At the global level changes both within the academy and feminist organizing began to materialize in the 1980s. The rise of neoliberalism has been suggested as a prime reason for the decline in structural analysis, which has in turn influenced gender analysis (Fraser 1997; Mohanty 2013). Some scholars have pointed to postmodernism as connected to this process. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013, 971) asks: “What happens to the key feminist construct of ‘the personal is political’ when the political (the collective public domain of politics) is reduced to the personal?” Mohanty brings in a materialist analysis when she points out that the representational politics of gender, class, race, and so on are detached from their materialist underpinnings and difference is thereby flattened (972). The role of experience in particular went from being central to understanding how structures create subjectivities to being something too fluid and subjective to be a useful category of analysis. It is necessary, however, to note that postmodernism is not unitary and there are numerous postmodern scholars, or scholars who use postmodernism, who do look at power structurally. At the same time, calls for fluidity can have the effect of decentering the structural.

The shift away from the structural has particular effects on countries in the global South, where structures of imperialism and capitalism continue to determine life and death reality for millions of people. Calls for fluidity and nuance become meaningless in a context where the very real and material effects of neoliberalism hit people the hardest. It is in these spaces that a materialist analysis that looks to the systemic is crucial if we want, as feminists, to unpack the multiple structures producing and reproducing gender relations. The point here is not to engage in a full-fledged critique of postmodernism and its many variants but rather to point to its dominance

within feminist theorizing today. Sara Ahmed has pointed to the need for feminists to “speak back to postmodernism” following postmodernism’s increasing tendency to dictate feminist priorities (1998). This speaking back to must include a revisiting of structural forms of critique, which seems to me an important way to bring the global South into the picture.

What appears to have happened is a shift from material analysis to recognition as a framework for understanding oppression, as well as a shift from difference to diversity (Fraser 1997; Ahmed 2007, 2012). The division between the material (often assumed to mean the economic) and the nonmaterial is at the heart of this shift, and it is this division that is problematic. Throughout Davis’s text, we see the process of locating identity within the material: what it means to be an Egyptian woman is connected to imperialism, to the rise of neoliberalism in Sadat’s Egypt, to the position of Egypt globally, and so on. It is never a given that being an Egyptian woman means being oppressed; it is always contextualized. This work of contextualization is precisely what makes the solidarity between these women and Davis possible. By contextualizing identity within material structures that affect both Egyptian women and African American women, the text uses identity as a political means of forging solidarity rather than as a division that prevents solidarity.

Conclusion

The idea that differences among women can be engaged productively is one of the main arguments of this paper. Tracing the way different generations of Egyptian feminists have engaged with transnational feminism shows that by locating identity within the material, they were often able to make difference productive. The neoliberal era has seen the shift from difference to diversity, as has been discussed extensively by Ahmed (2007, 2012). In their book on feminist genealogies, Alexander and Mohanty write about how difference has otherwise been approached:

Earlier formulations of a global sisterhood have taken root in the academy in the 1990s through discussions about international feminism. Beyond the fact that these claims

about an international feminism almost always originate in the West, there are some common themes which unite them. Drawing from an often unspecified liberal episteme, they tend to invoke a difference-as-pluralism model in which women in the Third World bear the disproportionate burden of difference.... To a large extent, underlying the conception of the international is a notion of universal patriarchy operating in a transhistorical way to subordinate all women. (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xvii)

The idea of a universal patriarchy was the defining assumption underlying notions of global sisterhood. Egyptian feminists of the 1920s and 1930s first engaged with a network of European and American feminists, primarily middle class, assuming that their differences could be overcome. Once this proved impossible, due to the lack of interest Western feminists had in the colonial question, they began to turn to third-world feminists. Transnational feminism allowed feminists to counter the simplistic notion of a universal sisterhood by pointing to the multiple divisions that separate women from one another while at the same time not seeing these divisions as barriers to solidarity.

Engaging difference productively may sound achievable, but what does this look like on the ground? I have argued that Angela Davis's trip to Egypt highlighted three avenues through which difference can be engaged productively in order to foster transnational feminist solidarity. The first is the practice of drawing parallels that do not rest on an idea of universal patriarchy but that instead draw attention to the ways in which other structures such as capitalism, imperialism, racism, and so on intersect with patriarchy to create a multitude of social realities across the globe. The second is making the particular material forms of oppression suffered by people in the third world part of the analysis. This is necessary because the economic context has very concrete effects on women's organizing, as can be seen not only throughout the text in question but in Davis's work in general. The final avenue is through the work of self-reflexivity. It is precisely during

moments of anger, hurt, and defensiveness that differences are made central to solidarity—dealing with these moments through self-reflexivity and mutual understanding provides a concrete means through which differences can be addressed productively. These three processes mirror changes the Egyptian feminist movement went through, beginning with its engagement with Western feminists in the 1920s, to their engagement with third-world feminists through to the 1970s, and to the eventual turn to civil society following the opening of Egypt's economy.

Writing about a moment of transnational feminist solidarity from the 1970s was a process of self-reflexivity itself, as it drove me to ask what why capitalism and imperialism have become de-centered explanatory variables in Egyptian feminist analysis. I have argued that this can be connected to two processes that began in the early 1980s and that have increasingly had dramatic effects on the ways in which feminist resistance is understood, represented, and engaged in. On the one hand, the neoliberalization of the academy has meant that the ways in which feminism is discussed and analyzed have changed. On the other hand, the shift toward neoliberalism in countries such as Egypt have made civil society the home of feminist organizing and have affected the type of discourse used to speak about gender justice.

The argument that transnational feminist solidarity was possible at a certain moment in time under certain conditions is itself an indication that structural analysis is important. Throughout this article I have pointed to the 1970s as a time when radical movements and decolonization processes were challenging old forms of imperialism. On the other hand, the 1980s was a time of backlash: the rise of neoliberalism and conservatism, as well as the spread of structural adjustment and austerity meant that the hope and resistance of the 1950s–1970s was destroyed. The effects of this continue today, even as new forms of resistance have emerged. As Alexander and Mohanty write, global processes require global alliances. It is only by looking at the transnational level that feminists can make sense of what divides us and what unites us in order to create solidarity.

Department of Politics and International Studies

University of Warwick

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¹ Interestingly, one exception to this came when Irish feminists expressed their support for Egypt's struggle against the British in a letter to Safiyyah Zaghoul, a prominent feminist activist who campaigned extensively for Egyptian independence after her husband – Prime Minister Saad Zaghoul – was exiled to Malta by the British for demanding Egyptian autonomy. She was the leader of the women's branch of the Wafd Party (Baron 2005, 148).

² Davis's most prominent work—*Women, Race & Class* (1981)—remains a classic that marks her as one of the most important figures in the fields of postcolonial, black, and third-world feminism.

³ The report was published as a book. See Taylor (1985).

⁴ See Rached (1997).

⁵ See Hoodfar (1997), Ghannam (2002), and Elyachar (2005).

⁶ This raises an interesting question about Davis's own positionality as a US citizen, which on the one hand gave her certain privileges over the Egyptian feminists she was meeting but on the other hand located her in a particular racial hierarchy that complicates the notion that she was privileged compared to the women she encountered.

⁷ Davis was arrested in the US after a judge accused her of having contact with Jonathan Jackson, a member of the Black Panther Party, who held a courtroom at gunpoint in 1970. The gun he used had been purchased by Davis. She was found not guilty after her trial in 1972.

⁸ See Salem and Eileen-Thomas (2016).