'Islamic Feminism' in Lebanon:

Portraying a counter-discourse

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1. Introduction: Women's bodies as "discursive battlegrounds"

All women, whether or not they are living in religious societies exist in patriarchal realities. Patriarchy comes in various shapes and affects women as they grow up in varying degrees in every context (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 100). The same applies to women of color from countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) where multiple discourses have teamed up to restrict women. On the one hand there are oppressive discourses that stem from inside society and there are also others that originate in remote parts of the world.

Nayereh Tohidi argues that Muslim women mainly have to fight against two sets of pressures: "One stemming from the internal patriarchal system and the other emitted by those forces seen as external, threatening people's national and cultural boundaries", whereby she means the capitalist system (Tohidi 1998: 283). Others like Huma Ahmed-Ghosh emphasize the impact of orientalist discourse which has been making political use of women's bodies since European colonization (2008: 100). Picturing the "femme orientale" as enslaved by Islam and oppressed by the oriental man served the agenda of western states in discrediting Muslim societies as reactionary and creating a vision of a dark Other (Moghissi 1999: 14). The racist hypocrisy of this discourse becomes very obvious when looking at the patriarchal values prevailing in Europe that promoted female domesticity and sexual purity whereas the same values "were presented for Muslim women as 'evidence' of sexual slavery and signs of a peculiar moral and religious deficiency of the Other" (Moghissi 1999: 15).

This orientalist discourse fails women in many ways but it fails especially in representing the diversity of their realities. The women are portrayed to be equally oppressed with the attribute 'arabic' being equated with 'islamic' and thereby silencing not only the diversity within 'Islamic societies' but also Christian, Druze etc. women (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 113). Or as Haideh Moghissi puts it "The idea of Islam as a kind of meta-culture obscures the reality that […] there are as many Islams as the conditions that sustain them – as many 'Islamic cultures' as different geographical, social conditions, size of wealth and educational levels can produce" (Moghissi 2002: 17).

The colonial construction of the oriental woman is still very much present in international politics for example in the news coverage of sexual abuses by fighters of Daesh where the women are called sex-slaves living in harems or more obviously in the course of the war in Iraq where the liberation of the

Muslim woman was used to justify the military intervention (The Telegraph 2016; The Huffington Post 2015).

Of course one should not forget the internal oppressive discourses that women in the MENA region face and that differ depending on the historical negotiation processes that shaped the specific region, the political tradition and economics. But as different as the political circumstances in the MENA region are especially regarding women's legal rights Islamic societies "disclose greater similarities than differences in their rigidity in the treatment of women" (Moghissi 2002: 19). Moghissi goes on:

> *"The point is that colonial or home-grown, externally imposed or locally generated (...) [the] 'Muslim woman', her sexuality and her moral conduct, has remained a central preoccupation of Muslim men over many centuries. This preoccupation has been translated into institutions, policies, legal practices and personal status codes which determine women's life options and the extent of women's participation in public life" (Moghissi 2002: 19).*

What do we take away from this? Women in the Middle East and North Africa are squeezed in between multiple oppressive discourses. This layering of patriarchal discourses is a manifestation of the "contestation of global masculinities, and power games [that] are played out through control over women's bodies" (Ahmad-Ghosh 2008: 100). Of course these narratives are not left unanswered. Instead there are many women trying to make their own voices and agendas heard. To make women visible who do exactly that is the idea of this research paper.

I am therefore investigating the counter-discourse of 'Islamic Feminism' that has gained quite some fame in academic and activist circles over the past decades. It is important to note that empirically I am concentrating on the variant discourse of 'Islamic Feminism' as it develops in Lebanon. My aim is to make women visible who develop ideas on how to harmonize Islam with women's rights and to shape society. By showing their tools and strategies this paper is not only taking part in the visualization of the discourse but also the paper itself becomes a mean of discourse production. At this point my main goal is to let the women speak for themselves, open a space for their ideas and showcase their diverse positions towards Islam and society.

First of all I am going to provide an overview of the general ideas of 'Islamic Feminism', whereby I will present some authors, their concepts and ideas as well as the criticism they face. The core of the paper is the empirical research consisting of interviews with Lebanese women that I conducted in Beirut between May and July 2016. After explaining the developed research design I will focus on the spe-

cific context of Lebanon and present the content the women that I interviewed provide along four coordinates. The paper is completed with a conclusion.

2. Object of Research: Islamic Feminism

Feminism in the Middle East is not a new phenomenon, it is more than a century old. And like in all parts of the world it is a controversial and contested term that describes a rich spectrum of movements that fight patriarchy in their specific context. Next to Muslim women (Zain ed-Din 1982), Druze women struggled for their rights in their own communities (Weiner-Levy 2006), as did and do Christian, Jewish (Heschel 1995) and Bedouin women (Abu-Rabia-Queder 2007; Abu Lughod 1990). And one should also not forget the extensive literature on secular Feminism published throughout the MENA region, that itself includes a multiplicity of discourses from various sources such as human rights, pan-arabism and nationalism (Badran 2005: 7).

While acknowledging this diversity of backgrounds and social settings of women's movement in the MENA region I certainly do not want to engage in the paternalizing discussion of what Feminism is and how a feminist discourse should look like. In this chapter I rather want to focus on one of the movements, widely known as 'Islamic Feminism', and assess its shape and perspectives. For this reason I first am going to take a look at the history of 'Islamic Feminism' and after that review possible definitions of the term (Chapter 2.1). The following paragraph is then providing an introduction to the different schools of thought (Chapter 2.2) whereas the last part (Chapter 2.3) is addressing the criticism 'Islamic Feminism' is facing.

2.1 Context: Locating Islamic Feminism

As mentioned, 'Islamic Feminism' is one among the many Feminisms of the Middle East and a label that came up in the late 20th century. Other than secular Feminisms that enrooted in nationalist, Islamic modernist, human rights and democratic discourses of the late 19th century,' Islamic Feminism' emerged at a time when political Islam was on the rise (Badran 2005: 6). The failing of the ideas of pan-arabism, the painful humiliations by Israel and the ever present postcolonial influence of western states were followed by the attempts to establish an islamist discourse and thereby restore a nation state, that is not only watan (homeland, nation) but also umma (the Islamic community) (Ibid.: 9; Ey-

adat 2013: 366). These tendencies were particularly strong in Egypt and Iran and accompanied by gender-conservative readings of the Qur'an, that further institutionalized patriarchy (Badran 2010: 25) and enabled the marginalization of women from public life (Eyadat 2013: 359). On the other hand the emergence of information technology, local and global knowledge production and the education of women (in religious sciences) helped building the foundation of a feminist counter narrative that answered patriarchy with Islam as a basis. This political setting, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini states,

> *"[...] has helped to create a space, an arena, within which Muslim women can reconcile their faith and identity with their struggle for gender equality. This did not happen, I must stress, because the Islamists were offering an egalitarian vision of gender relations. Rather, their very project – 'return to the Shari'a' – and their attempt to translate the patriarchal notions inherent in orthodox interpretations of Islamic law into policy, provoked increasing criticism of these notions among many women, and became a spur to greater activism. (Mir-Hosseini 2004: 2)*

Activism with roots in Islamic language and scriptures was particularly strong in Egypt and Iran and surfaced first in the 1980s (Badran 2010: 33 f.; Ahmed Ghosh 2008: 108 f.). Known under the name 'Islamic Feminism' it later spread to other countries in the MENA region and since the 1990s has also spread to Nigeria, South-Africa, Europe and North America (Salah 2010: 47; Badran 2009: 244).

But what is the seemingly contradictory term 'Islamic Feminism' all about? How does this Feminism based on religion constitute itself? When speaking about the term it is first and foremost important to acknowledge that 'Islamic Feminism' is anything but a single and homogenous discourse. Instead the label serves as an umbrella term, invented by observers of the movement, for the multiplicity of discourses that center around the emancipation of women from within the framework of Islam (Salah 2010: 48; Badran 2005: 15). It is therefore important to realize that the term itself is strongly contested and criticized among the woman Muslim activists and academics, whom I am going to refer to at a later point. This setting complicates the establishment of an exact definition of the phenomenon. For the purpose of this introduction I present three different definitions provided by influential representatives of the subject:

One of the most comprehensive and general definitions of 'Islamic Feminism' derives from Margot Badran who states that the movement "seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence" and "derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an" (Badran 2009: 242). While she identifies Islam and its main scriptures as the key source for the movement, she acknowl-

edges and embraces the influences of secular discourse and methodology (Ibid.: 246). Others strictly rely on the Qur'an and other religious scriptures as origins of their Feminism (Salah 2010: 54). Amina Wadud, a Muslim scholar based in the US, defines her Feminism more precisely as a way of "transform[ing] Islam through its own egalitarian tendencies, principles, articulations, and implications into a dynamic system with practices that fulfill its goals of justice, by first admitting that concepts of Islam and concepts of justice have always been relative to actual historical and cultural situations." (Wadud 2006: 2) and as a tool to "wrestle the hegemony of male privilege in Islamic interpretation […], which continually leaves a mark on Islamic praxis and thought (Ibid.: 81). When talking about 'Islamic Feminism' it is very important to note that most of the women working for women's rights from within the Qur'an do strongly oppose the term 'Islamic Feminist'. One of those women is Asma Barlas who elaborates on her rejection of the term Feminism as simplistic from a post-colonial point of view. Through calling everyone who speaks up about women's issues Feminist she fears "the risk of flattening out important differences" (Barlas 2008: 19). She states:

> *"While the plurality of Feminism is said to be its strength, how useful is a big-tent pluralism that erases such fundamental epistemic differences between Feminists?" (Ibid.)*

> *"In a sense, then, it is the very inclusivity of Feminism—its attempt, as a meta and master narrative, to subsume and assimilate all conversations about equality—that I find both imperializing and reductive." (Ibid.: 22)*

These are some of the leading ideas that accompany 'Islamic Feminism'. But as mentioned earlier the great diversity of women engaged in the topic and the controversial nature of the term make it impossible to identify a static definition of the movement. Ziba Mir Hosseini therefore points out that „like other feminists, their positions are local, diverse, multiple and evolving". She further states that "they all seek gender justice and equality for women, though they do not always agree on what constitutes 'justice' or 'equality' or the best ways of attaining them (Mir-Hosseini 2004: 3).

As a researcher this diversity of definitions, self-conceptions and self-designations poses certain difficulties. Is the term 'Islamic Feminism' helpful as a comprehensive term or is its use already a paternalizing act, since a lot of the women that I want to include in the term reject the label vehemently? Lacking a way out of this contradiction I have decided to retain the term and put it in quotation marks while appealing to the reader to keep in mind that there is not one 'Islamic Feminism' but that the term serves as a placeholder for the multiplicity of discourses that fight for the rights of women from within Islam.

2.2 Feminism and Islam

In the following paragraph I want to give an overview of the principles and strategies of 'Islamic Feminism'. For this purpose I first want to locate the dividing lines that separate the different discourses within the movement. Secondly I am going to present the methods and tools used by 'Islamic Feminists' to promote their cause and finally evaluate their successes.

Within the diverse brand of 'Islamic Feminism' various differences between discourses can be observed: This is first due to their (geographic) origin and positioning and second to their agenda and belonging to a school of thought. Like all Feminisms, 'Islamic Feminism' is answering to specific local realities and also to class backgrounds and is therefore influenced by the context of knowledge production (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 103). Muslim women from the diaspora or the 'West' are facing different opponents and obstacles than women living in Islamic systems. Consequently each group is customizing their tools to its specific social context. Paradigmatic here is the struggle of women from Islamic countries to shed the veil that, on first sight, contradicts the efforts of Muslims in the 'West' to re-appropriate and keep the veil (Ibid.: 107).

Second, the schools of thought are incredibly diverse and it is difficult to get an overview of their agendas. Whereas some scholars emphasize the differences between Sunni and Shi'a approaches (Ibid.: 101) I find it much more helpful to view 'Islamic Feminism' as a continuum or a wide spectrum with conservative strategies on one end and radical feminist on the other (Salah 2010: 50 ff.). Characteristic of conservative approaches is a more conciliatory approach towards the Islamic establishment. In their attempt to promote women's right, conservative 'Islamic Feminists' emphasize the important role of motherhood and family in Islam (Eyadat 2013: 363). Paradigmatic for this tendency are what Valentine Moghadam calls "State Feminists" in Iran that engage in women's rights while being linked to government or parliament (Moghadam 2002: 1158).

On the other end of the spectrum rather radical discourses that are more threatening to hegemonic religious narratives can be observed. Representatives of this approach, like Amina Wadud or Farid Esack, emphasize the right to individual and sexual self-determination and support the queering of religious scriptures (Salah 2010: 58; Greifenhagen 2013). Their approach that is more oriented towards universal values with Islam as an ethical authority (Salah 2010: 57) explores the limits of theological exegesis and even goes beyond them. As Wadud states:

"What happens when the text actually states something unmeaningful from the perspective of current human developments and understandings? Two choices result: either acknowledge the statement in question as unacceptable regarding current levels of human competency and understanding, and therefore reconsider textual meaning in the light of further interpretive development; or reject it." (Wadud 2006: 191)

Depending on context and political stance a rich and diverse collection of agendas and strategies within 'Islamic Feminism' can be identified. The tools activists and scholars use to promote their cause on the other hand are rather similar and depend mainly on two elements: first the re-writing of the history of Islam and second a new reading of religious scriptures.

Feminists engaged in the re-writing of the history of Islam argue with the progressive and revolutionary nature of Islam, given the social situation of the Arab peninsular in the 7th century, that improved the status of women and for example prohibited female infanticide and guaranteed women and children their share of inheritance (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 103). Azizah Al-Hibri studied the early years of Islamic history and assessed how the "patriarchal takeover" in Islam proceeded and how women's narratives and contributions were made invisible (Al Hibri 1982). Others emphasize the stories of Khadija and Aisha, two of the wives of Mohammed, who reportedly strongly shaped early Islam and are examples of progressive womanhood (El Saadawi 1982: 196). Making women visible in Islamic history and fighting for spaces becomes a political act.[1]

Next to a re-writing of Islamic history also emerged a new reading and interpretation of the religious scriptures emerged. This is based on the idea of Ijtihad (independent inquiry), a practice deriving from Islamic jurisprudence (Moghadam 2002: 1144), that allows the independent reasoning and reading of the religious scriptures (Barazangi 2015: 1). Point of departure of this new Ijtihad is the claim that the Qur'an promotes equal rights to all human beings and that the text has been subverted by patriarchal practices and ideology that are now used to oppress women (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 103). This oppression becomes especially visible in the Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and the Hadith[2] which are used as tools to define women's lives (Barazangi 2015: 4; Badran 2009: 247) The principle of talaq, the unilateral right of men to divorce, for instance can be traced back to early Islamic society where it was not

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[1] Paradigmatic is Margot Badran's silsila ("chain of interpreting women") that celebrates and highlights the theological and political accomplishments of Muslim women since the 20th century (2005: 14).

[2] The text corpus of Hadith is a compilation of narratives of the Prophet reported by his companions, wives, and others during the 8th and 9th century which serve as points of reference for a Muslim life (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 103).

constructed by God but by male jurists who reproduced social norms from that time (Mir-Hosseini 2004: 3 f.). This feminist Ijtihad, done by muslim scholars, can be understood as an attempt to unread patriarchy in religious scriptures and to create a counter-corpus of religious interpretation. Until now it focuses mostly on the Qur'an although some exegetes have started to work on Hadith, Shari'a[3] and other scriptures (Badran 2009: 247; Barazangi 2015). The methodologies the exegetes use to unravel the language of the scriptures are diverse and often have multiple sources. It includes, next to the Islamic methodologies of Ijtihad and Tafsir (exegesis of the Qur'an), linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology and other sources (Badran 2009: 247).

Not only the methodology used to re-interpret the religious scriptures is multifaceted, also the general approach towards them is. Margot Badran notes three hermeneutic approaches: First the reassessment of verses of the Qur'an to counter common misconceptions such as the creation of the human in the Garden of Eden that are used to fortify male superiority. Secondly the highlighting of verses that promote equality and are women-positive (Ahmad-Ghosh 2008: 104) and third the dismantling of verses that "are attentive to male and female difference […] [and] have been commonly interpreted in ways that justify male domination" (Badran 2009: 248). Of course many more paths of interpretation like the possibility to reconsider textual meaning or reject passages, as proposed by Amina Wadud can be identified.

A dividing topic amongst exegetes is verse 34 of Surat an-Nisa (The women) in the fourth chapter of the Qur'an. Here the relationship and social positioning of men and women is addressed with the concept of 'qiwama'. The verse has for centuries been used to justify the patriarchal hierarchy in society with the superiority of men (WLUML 2004: 56).

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3 Shari'ah is the Islamic religious law developed out of the Qur'an and the Hadith during the 7th - 9th century (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 103).

Surah an-Nisa (4): Verse 34

Men are legally responsible for [qawwamuna 'ala] women, inasmuch as God has preferred [faddala] some over others in bounty, and because of what they spend from their wealth. Thus, virtuous women are obedient [qanitat] and preserve their trusts, such as God wishes them to be preserved. And those you fear may rebel [nushuz], admonish, and abandon them in their beds, and smack them [izribuhunna]. If they obey you, seek no other way against them. God is Highest and Mightiest.

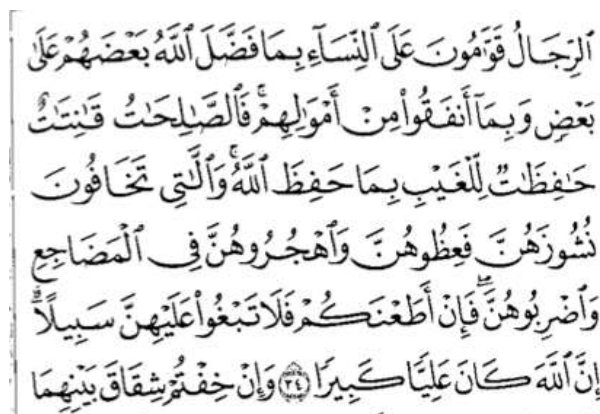(Khalidi 2008: 66 f.; Arabic in brackets added by myself)

Figure: Surat an-Nisa (4:34) in Arabic with written-out vowels (WLUML 2004: 57).

The multiple problematic, and prima facie misogynist, passages complicate the interpretation of the verse and posed quite a challenge to Muslim Feminists all over the world. Not only the question of hierarchy but also of domestic violence are subjects of extensive literature, that I can of course not re-narrate in their complexity but only point to it briefly. First of all different authors engaged in a new translation of the verse. There are for example about 30 meanings of the word 'qawamuun'. It can stand for 'protectors', 'rulers', 'managers' or even 'breadwinners' and does not, as argued by some, imply a hierarchy but more a division of functions and roles between men and women (WLUML 2004: 58 f.). Other scholars point to the particularity of the verse and that male authority is not unconditional but that the verse speaks about some [ba'zahum 'alaa ba'] men that are blessed more by god than some women but that it could also be the other way around (Badran 2009: 249). Also the word for beating [izribuhunna] can have many meanings (WLUML 2004: 61) and even if it is read as smacking it can also be understood as restriction to a single stroke and an appeal not to abuse women from a time when women were beaten regularly (Idib.: 72).[4]

These are examples of un-reading patriarchy in the scriptures with the help of extensive exegesis. Other scholars have found a different way to deal with problematic passages and that is to say no. Again I am referring to Amina Wadud who, after elaborating on different ways to approach the verse, finally states

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4 In fiqh for example this stroke is referred to as 'ghayr mubah' (without harm) and 'ramsiyun' (symbolic) (Wadud 2006: 203).

that "we finally come to a place where we acknowledge that we intervene with the text" since it is not possible to reconcile the text with the universal notion of human dignity (Wadud 2006: 204). She argues that in order to reach a social justice that is suitable for our time it is important to differentiate between the particular and universal elements of Islam (Idib.: 206). Abdolkarim Soroush, an Iranian reformist scholar, reasons similarly that there are what he calls essential and accidental aspects in Islam. He states,

> *"Some parts of religion are historically and culturally determined and no longer relevant today. That is the case, for instance, with the corporal punishments prescribed in the Koran. If the Prophet had lived in another cultural environment, those punishments would probably not have been part of his message. The task of Muslims today is to translate the essential message of the Koran over time. It is like translating a proverb from one language into another. You do not translate it literally. You find another proverb which has the same spirit, the same content but perhaps not the same wording. [...] If you insist on the idea that the Koran is the uncreated, eternal word of God that must be literally applied, you get yourself into an un-resolvable dilemma" (Soroush 2007).*

After assessing the spectrum of 'Islamic Feminism' in terms of definitions, schools of thought and methods I briefly want to evaluate the successes of the idea. Successful feminist politics come in different shapes and in this case become mostly visible as individual empowerment and through institutional changes.

Knowledge of the rights one's own religion offers enables women to see differences between customs and religion and gives them the tools to deal with problems in their relationships (Badran 2009: 250). Especially Muslim women in the diaspora, who are caught between different discourses of identity formation, particularly after 9/11, profit from their own, proper re-definition of their religion (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 114). Out of the need for spaces that enable the empowerment through Islam a lot of organizations such as Sisters in Islam, Women living under Muslim law, Musawah, WISE (Badran 2010: 14 ff.) or journals such as Zanan and Faranzeh (Moghadam 2002: 1143 f.) emerged and are not only spaces of counter-knowledge production but also creators of extensive transnational networks between women. These spaces are not only of practical use for individual women, for example through publications in the form of brochures (for example: "Is wife beating permissible in Islam?" by Sisters in Islam), but they can also have the potential to change institutions and society (Badran 2009: 250).

In Islamic contexts 'Islamic Feminism' has the advantage of being in a position to bargain and to renegotiate gender roles and social norms from within the religious context without being discredited as

western or foreign, as done by Suad Saleh from Egypt who struggled to become a Mufti (an expounder of Islamic law) (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 101 f.; Salah 2010: 51).[5] Feminists thereby can succeed in fighting against inequality in Islamic family codes where secular feminists could not succeed (Badran 2005: 13). This strategy was especially successful in Iran where 'Islamic Feminists' paved the way for a new school of jurisprudence and pressured the parliament and government to pass laws to support working mothers financially, to allow women to study abroad and to allow war widows to retain custody for their children and receive compensation (Moghadam 2002: 1146 ff.).

3.3 Criticism

The idea 'Islamic Feminism' has of course not only stimulated supportive voices but was and is subject to a lot of criticism on the part of the religious establishment and especially secular Feminists. This paragraph is going to provide a brief overview of the different arguments that are circulating, keeping in mind that not all positions and opinions can be portrayed.

Whereas some secular voices embrace 'Islamic Feminism' as a healthy, strategic appeal for the masses and a way to make feminist movements accessible for more women (Ahmad 2016: 6), most argue vehemently against it. Some, like Haideh Moghissi for example argue that the successes of 'Islamic Feminism' have been glorified and exaggerated and that the movement reinforces the legitimacy of Islamic systems and thereby undermines the struggle of secular women (Moghadam 2002: 1148; Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 108).

'Islamic Feminists' also have been criticized for being both apologetic of patriarchal structures inherent in Islamic societies and using the religious scriptures selectively by stressing mainly positive, women-friendly verses (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 104 f.). Until now 'Islamic Feminism' has also been a rather elite discourse with a focus on academia. Although an increasing number of women have started to participate, it is by no means a broad and inclusionary social movement (Badran 2005: 23). Intersectional categories like class, race and non-heteronormative aspects have been almost completely overlooked. Further, the majority of interpretations reinforces static gender categories by only allowing men and wom-

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5   Suah Saleh, professor at Al-Azhar university in Cairo, did not succeed but was allowed to deal with "women's issues" of jurisprudence (Salah 2010: 51).

en to appear as possible categories. Also capitalism as a system that creates structural inequality is not discussed (Riviera de la Fuente 2016).

It can certainly be stated that 'Islamic Feminism' has an advantage over secular Feminism in religious contexts, since it cannot be as easily labeled as western and foreign is therefore in a bargaining position (Ahmad 2016: 8). The movement, that seeks to change institutions from within, is nevertheless dependent on the prevailing power structures and limited in its scope. As Valentine Moghadam argues "it is […] very difficult to win theological arguments. There will always be competing interpretations of the religious texts, and the power of the social forces behind it determines the dominance of each interpretation" (2002: 1160). Even if women engaged in 'Islamic Feminism' tackle the mentioned problems, their successes in the institutional sphere can always be reversed, as long as the power structure remains unchanged.

3. 'Islamic Feminism' in Lebanon: Portraying a counter discourse

In the preceding chapter I have presented the general idea of 'Islamic Feminism' as a discourse that challenges oppressive narratives such as orientalist and patriarchal perceptions of Muslim womanhood. Step by step I am now going to turn to the specific context of Lebanon and try to capture the variant movement of 'Islamic Feminism' that had developed there. Before depicting the counter-discourse I want to take a look at the methodology I used.

3.1 Research Design

The paper exclusively relies on one-on-one interviews with seven Lebanese women. This is because there are no organizations working on the topic, nor are there any publications or statements from the Lebanese context are available. Lacking further material I decided to focus on the views of these women, putting my effort in making visible the content they provide.

From May to July 2016 I conducted one-on-one interviews with seven women between the age of 26 and 60. All of them work and live in Beirut, Lebanon. Everyone of them has studied at university and two of them (I1 and I2) are scholars in religious studies. Since all of the participants spoke very good English the interviews were conducted in English. Due to the fact that English is not their of my first

language minor misunderstandings occurred from time that influenced the conversations. Three of them have requested to remain anonymous.

Overview of the empirical material	
Seven one-on-one interviews	I1: Dr. Hosn Abboud
	I2: Dr. Nayla Tabbara
	I3: Tamara Qiblawi
	I4: Anonymous
	I5: Anonymous
	I6: Dr. Dima Dabbous
	I7: Anonymous

Originally I planned to design the interviews with narrative sequences (open questions) and semi-structured parts (Pfaffenbach/Reuber 2005: 131). Most of the time I managed to stick to this concept while in every interview the focal points turned out to be different. The interviews took between forty-one minutes and one hour and thirteen minutes, were taped and carefully transcribed. For the analytical process I referred to the qualitative content analysis as Gläser and Laudel (2009) present it. The analysis is structured by categories (Gläser/Laudel 2009: 201) that I call coordinates and developed beforehand out of theoretic considerations after reading extensively on the subject of 'Islamic Feminism'.

The concept of introducing coordinates is borrowed from the poststructural feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham that want to make visible ways of economic being besides capitalism. In order to do so they established coordinates of political practice that mark where the negotiation processes take place that could form an ethics of political practice (Gibson-Graham 2006: 88). With this idea, 'Islamic Feminist' literature and the research question (Gläser/Laudel 2009: 203) in mind I identified four suitable coordinates that would help making an inventory of the counter-discourse:

The four coordinates of 'Islamic Feminism' in Lebanon:

1. How do the women define themselves?

2. How do the women approach Islam and its scriptures?

3. Which tools do they use?

4. How do they position themselves in the face of western Feminism?

Central to the analysis is the process of extraction whereby I filtered the relevant information in the empirical material and, since qualitative content analysis focuses on an open research process, adjusted the coordinates inductively in the process (Gläser/Laudel 2009: 199). To extract the information I used the open source program TAMS Analyser. After that I edited the material arranged it within the coordinates by subjects, summarized double information and checked the contradictions (Ibid.: 203). To portray the discourse I finally interpreted and evaluated my findings.

At this point it is most important to note that the whole research process is not and cannot be objective. Everything from the collection of information to the conceptualizing of the questionnaire, the identification of coordinates, the extraction and the evaluation is influenced by my interpretation and position as a white, western educated woman (Ibid.: 201 ff.). This was especially evident in the interview situations where I selected what was relevant and navigated the interviewee through the discursive universe. To minimize this effect open questions where included in the questionnaire that showed more implicit positions of the interviewees (Cruickshank 2012: 43). This way the women were able to explicitly shape the direction the interview was going and transform the research from an attempt to analyze a discourse to a mean of discourse production.

3.2 Sketching the Lebanese Background

Part of portraying the counter-discourse of 'Islamic Feminism' is not only collecting the content that the women provide but also taking the surrounding forces into consideration that limit or criticize their efforts. During my analysis I found out that first the setting of Lebanon has to be taken into account and more specifically second the opposition the women experience in their work. This chapter helps to illustrate this background the counter-discourse emerges from.

All of the women talked about Lebanon as a very diverse country in which women can experience a variety of positions also regarding their senses of religious affiliationss (I3/78 ff.; I2/75). The complex realities women face in Lebanon are constantly shaped by external and internal pressures. The influences of political Islam in the shape of organisations like Hezbollah or the Muslim Brotherhood

for instance shaped women's dresscodes and legal situations (I1/90 ff.). Hosn Abboud (I1) described also the Civil War (1975-1990) to be influential:

> *"So after the Civil War in Lebanon people became more observant because you know many of your identities and if you are left with little and the religious identity you can always go back to it. Because it is about your relationship with God. Then you stick to it, it is the great Other that could be protecting you. Then you resort to religious identities. We lost many of our identities, arab nationalism, our own institutions in Lebanon stopped working, people started emigrating, we stood at the seashore waiting for the ships to take us to emigrate." (I1/117 ff.)*

Nevertheless Lebanon is widely characterized as a liberal country and democracy. The interviewees are very conscious about that and thankful for the freedoms Lebanon has to offer (I3/268). On the other hand some of them describe the feeling of growing up expecting to be an independent person and then having to realize that as a woman freedom in Lebanon is restricted:

> *„So the problem is, you think everything is fine, you think you can do whatever you want but then when you get married and if you are going to get divorced and fight for custody then you realize that the laws are very unfair. Because these are religious laws we don't have civil court for what we call Personal family laws, family laws or Personal status laws. [...] I realize I am discriminated against because I am a woman." (I6: 43 ff.)*

These narrative snippets are part of the social reality of the interviewed women, who themselves have diverse backgrounds, experience. A reality that was built through the consolidation of social norms over the course of history is a space of power execution. Of course this was not left unanswered, instead different forms of resistance formed. Next to radical, secular, socialist or queer Feminists also 'Islamic Feminists' found their voice and all of their ideas and practices now navigate in parallel through the social realities in which they, encounter each other, are changed, adapted or repulsed and criticized. Focusing on 'Islamic Feminism' I now want to take a look at the forces that oppose the movement in Lebanon right now, first the religious and then the secular oppositions, in which the experiences the women make are emphasized:

On the makro-level some of the women, especially those working as researchers, have experienced stiff headwind from the Islamic religious establishment. Dima Dabbous (I6) for example states that it is especially difficult for a non-veiled woman without formal education in religious studies to assert her authority (I6/480 ff.). She reports that one is easily branded as non-Muslim or

> *"pro-western which is a horrible charge because you are infiltrating the Muslim societies to try to undermine them from within" (I6/503)*

Hosn Abboud (I1) confirms this and argues that while the Christian establishment was very interested in her work on Mary, the mother of Christ, in the Qur'an not a single Islamic centre reached out to her (I1/444 ff.). She reasons that:

> *"Sorry, there is some ignorance about what is going on in all the world. Women are contributing a knowledge (...) And, and so they do not imagine that women come with their own epistemology, but now we are talking about feminist epistemology, feminist methodology, we are talking about Ilm al-Kalām, or theology, so..." (I1/ 456 ff.)*

Besides coming from the religious elite opposition to the activism the women do can also be found on the micro-level among families and friends who question if one is still a real muslim (I4/342). Even more critics of ‚Islamic Feminism' can be located in secular factions in different parts of society.

One of the women (I5) explains how she encountered opposition at the American University of Beirut which she visited as a student, where religious women who raise their voices were perceived as "brainwashed". She criticized the westernized university system in Lebanon where, in her experience, stereotypes made in the west are reproduced (I5/32 f.). With the exception of the university system the women mostly met criticism from secular factions outside of institutions for example in feminist activist groups. Tamara Qiblawi (I3) mentioned that as a religious woman one is likely to be labeled as reactionary or not radical enough which keeps devout women out of the scene and leads to rather homogenuous feminist bubbles (I3/147 f.). The former of the two (I5) speaks about her experience working in the sciences and being a religious woman at the same time:

> *"I always get this question: ‚How can you be so academic and scientific and believe in religion?' Once someone told me, you look too smart to be Muslim." (I5/130 ff.)*

On the other hand she does not feel at home in very religious circles where she is not fully accepted as a believing woman either (I5/71 ff.). Nayla Tabbara (I2) has similar stories to tell about campaigns by the Adyan foundation that she co-founded, which some people misunderstand thinking that the organisations wants to bring religion back to the public sphere whereas the goal of the foundation is to promote diversity and a positive management of this diversity in public life (I2/375).

Women's realities in Lebanon are very complex and due to historic negotiation processes difficult to compare to other countries. The listing of oppositional forces also shows the uniqueness of each

women's situation and the particularity of evey feminist struggle. The aim of this paper is therefore not to claim representativeness in displaying the situation Lebanese women live in but wants to make particular realities visible.

3.3 Outlining 'Islamic Feminism' in Lebanon

After taking a look at the surrounding forces that shape the counter-discourse from the 'outside'. The following chapter aims to trace the discourse of 'Islamic Feminism' in Lebanon and to find out how it constitutes itself and in which phase the discourse finds itself in currently. The previously identified coordinates serve as structures.

3.3.1 Coordinate I: How do the women define themselves?

I want to start by highlighting the variety of ways the women label and define themselves. I quickly found out that none of the women use the label 'Islamic Feminism' as a self-designation and some of them even distanced themselves from it to some extent.

Hosn Abboud (I1) was the only one who stated that she „started to call it [her work] 'Islamic Feminism' (I1/190) but at the same time emphasized that she understands herself more as a "Muslim scholar and thinker" (I1/178) that does feminist writing. Nayla Tabbara (I2) does not call herself an 'Islamic Feminist' but prefers the term Muslim woman theologian because her work goes beyond women's issues and is centered on theology of religious diversity. She is nevertheless aware that her work is part of the narrative of 'Islamic Feminism', she states:

> *"Yet while promoting my reflections and promoting my work, I am also promoting 'Islamic Feminism' in a way or I am gaining something for 'Islamic Feminism' because I amadvancing a Muslim woman's voice on issues related to Islamic theology or religion in public life, [...] so it adds up to the feminist movement but it is not feminist. Because it is not concernced with feminist issues, or not directly concerned with feminist issue." (I2/177 ff.)*

Two of the women (I5) expressed their scepticism towards the term Feminism for different reasons.

> *"I don't know, sometimes I am confused about what Feminist means. What is it exactly, but do I believe in equality? Yes! And do I believe that my religion promotes equality? Yes, I do! (...) But I don't believe it just between men and women, I believe it between everyone. So I don't know what Feminist means anymore, given that some people (...) whom I have met here in Lebanon and claim to be Feminist are on a very extreme side that I cannot relate to,*

you know? I would be like, ah, ok, if this is Feminism I would be like maybe I am not, I don't know." (I5/140 ff.)

Whereas the first of the two is of the opinion that no explicit Feminism but a reform of Islam is needed to secure justice and equal rights the second woman expressed the disappointment she experienced as a Muslim woman in Lebanese feminist circles. The two remaining women, Tamara Qiblawi (I3) and Dima Dabbous (I6), claim the term Feminist for themselves (I3/98; I6/93 ff.) but emphasize both that the primary source of their Feminism is not Islam.

"I get my Feminism from all sorts of sources, which include my religion, but also include among many, many other things, western teachings, things I've read about, queer theory, you know?" (I3/106 ff.)

Tamara Qiblawi would therefore rather call herself a Muslim Feminist (I3/96 ff.) One of the women (I7) would also refrain from calling herself an'Islamic Feminist' out of similar reasons:

"See, the problem if I say I am an 'Islamic Feminist' this means that my Feminism can only come out of the Qur'an. There is nothing wrong with that, except that my approach to the Qur'an is very unorthodox (...) because I question the Qur'an." (I7/93 ff.)

And as Dima Dabbous adds (I6):

" I prefer my Feminism to be grounded in just the idea that human beings are different but they have equal rights." (I6/131 f.)

At the same time they insist on 'Islamic Feminism' as a strategic tool (I6/174; I3/132) in a religious society like Lebanon where laws are enacted on the individual depending on the persons confession.[6] Whereas secular Feminists advocate to stop confessionalism and turn Lebanon into a society with a civil law system Dima Dabbous worries that there is still a long way to go until this is happening. Using 'Islamic Feminism' as a strategy is, even though she admits it to be unsatisfying, in her opinion

"the best and fastest way to change things. If you want to wait until religion is out of the state I don't know how long this is going to take." (I6/193)

" So meanwhile what do I do? Do I just suffer?" (I6/178 ff.)

As mixed as the self-designations of the women turned out to be the one common ground between all of them is their relation to the concept of secularism. All of them described themselves as seculars and

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6 In Lebanon personal status issues such as marriage, divorce and property rights are not covered by a civil code but by sectarian courts. (see Musawah (2015) Thematic Report on Muslim Family Law: Lebanon, Online: http://www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/MusawahThematicReportLebanon62_0.pdf [last accessed: 01.10.2016]).

believers at the same time (I1/271; I2/379; I3/113; I4/113 ff.; I5/165 f.; I6/93 ff.), whereas some of the women claim that Islam strengthened and confirmed their belief in universal human rights[7] (I5/164; I6/144). To the question on how they realize this logic they all responded differently. Tamara Qiblawi (I3) for example promotes the separation of the private and the political. She argues:

> ''I really, really think that our political lives should be secular lives and I don't think that that contradicts my relationship with my religion.'' (I3/118 f.)

In summary it needs to be noted that every woman found a different name for her relation towards Islam and Feminism. This does not only show the diversity of the women but also hints at a certain instability of the counter-discourse itself. Whereas some perceive Islam as an ethic guideline, others find confirmation in it for opinions deriving from other discourses and for some 'Islamic Feminism' has strategic connotations. With this diverse spectrum of opinions in mind it is most interesting to see that they all agree on secularism as a foundation for the organisation of society.

3.3.2 Coordinate II: How do the women approach Islam and its scriptures?

All the women I interviewed share the perspective that the Qur'an is a dynamic piece that can be interpreted differently and allows various approaches. Three of the women state that it is important to understand the verses in the context they are appearing in and also to translate them to a modern context (I5/241 f.; I4/209 ff.). Tamara Qiblawi (I3) emphasizes also the fact that this awareness of the dynamic nature of texts is nothing new but for example was utilized in the Tanzimat period of the Ottoman Empire where a lot of social reforms were made possible (I3/199 ff.). She is also refering to the revolutionary quality of early Islam and states:

> „So how can this force, this gender equalizing force now be one that takes women's rights, for me that doesn't make sense. (...) It is impossible that suddenly this intention, this message of the book is suddenly one of protecting male rights. So, so the context I think is really important, that's number one.'' (I3/177 ff.)

Hosn Abboud (I1) and Nayla Tabbara (I2) elaborate further and support the thesis of differentiating between two layers: the universal and the political (social and legal contexts). For Nayla Tabbara (I2) it is important not to be selective and only look at the positive verses but to take the Qur'an holistically. Through her theological work on the scripture's attitude towards the (Christian or Jewish) Other she

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7 The term Human Rights will not be problematized here but is understood as a placeholder for a concept that still has to be negotiated (Hutchings 2007: 85).

learned that there are Suwars that echo the changing political situation in seventh century Mecca and Medina and others that can be classified as universal (I2/207 ff.). As part of her exegetical technique she is putting the Suwars in chronological order to analyse the two layers in combination with the political situation (I2/279ff.). For Hosn Abboud (I1) it is equally important to "understand the Qur'an and its history as scripture" (I1/327) and to accept the text as a communication process and as a document that reflects the „political and social changes in the position they [the prophet and the community] took" (I1/346). She too differentiates between contextual values that helped organizing the early Islamic community and universal values that shape the ethics of Islam.

> *"And the main principles are guaranteed, everything, if you tell me veil, if you tell me inheritance, this is all social and political and organizational, it has to do with the details of the legal aspect and this has to be changing all the time. And this did not happen in Islam (...). They should have been looking at them and according to that make principles, this is why it makes sense to do Feminism" (I1/297 ff.)*

Hosn Abboud (I1) also identifies Surat-an-Nisa and its concept of qiwama (as presented in Chapter 3.2) not as a principle of Islam but as a legal matter that has to be adjusted to modernity (I1/366). This Surah in particular is a divisive issue and one of the women who wish to remain anonymous (I7) goes further, critizing the exegete Asma Barlas' attempt to re-interpret the word „izribuhunna"[8] as apologetic (I7/109 ff.). She rather states that the Qur'an has contradictions that cannot be solved because it is put together by humans (I7/96 ff). In her critique of ‚Islamic Feminism' she argues:

> *"If men are finding evidence for discrimination in the Qur'an, women can also find evidence for equality in the Qur'an. It's there but the Qur'an is a contradictory document, it has contradictions, I wanna say it has contradictions. But they want to tell me, no, (...) and they will try to find justification so that the Qur'an can stays perfect – it's not. So, this position, I have not yet read anybody from within „Islamic Feminism" that can satisfy my intellectual curiosity, I may say." (I7/466 ff.)*

Excursus on gender inclusiveness: Can anybody make Islam their own?

All of the women shared the opinion that Islamic culture can and has to be reformed with exegesis as a tool. But how inclusive is their vision of Islam, or more specifically, do the women

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8   Khalidi (2008: 66f.) "izribuhunna" translated the word as "smack them", see Chapter 3.2.

embrace attempts of the queer Muslim community to make use of the same tools?

Among the women I talked to I encountered a rather inclusive tendency (I4/769 f.). Only Hosn Abboud (I1) followed a conservative line by saying.

> *„But I am against any attack on them [the LGBTIQ-community], I respect their rights but I will not myself promote them as a community. I will not pomote them, because they are not the community that protects the family unit, that you will be paying taxes for and trying to organize pedagogically and socially."* *(I1/411 ff.)*

All of the other women argued in favour of the LGBTIQ-community (I2/353), emphasized for example the long history of homosexuality in Islam (I5/332 f.) and even presented me a reinterpretation of the story of Lot (I3/212 ff.). When talking about the hegemonic heteronormativity that the qur'anic scriptures provide one woman (I7) renewed her concerns with the limits of the text but still emphasized the right of every oppressed group to reinterpret the Qur'an (I7/379):

> *„first, if the dominant Muslim groups are doing it then the (…), oppressed groups, have the right to do it. What I don't like and I've seen this done in Christianity also. If you are a Christian homosexual or a Muslim homosexual what you are going to do is, try to dig in the text to try to find evidence to the fact that God actually did not really hate you (…) they want to reconcile their religion, their belief with their sexual practice. And sometimes it is not reconcileable, just like other things as well."* *(I7/356 ff.)*

3.3.3 Coordinate III: Which tools do they use?

I encountered the women in different phases of their ‚Islamic Feminist' activism. Some claim to still be in the phase of studying the scriptures, gaining knowledge and working on their own political stance (I5/316; I4/148 f.). Others locate themselves either in explicitly political and activist contexts or speak up in academic circles (I3/138, I2/104, I1/458, I6/278, I7/290). This chapter is dedicated to the tools the women use in their contexts to advance the discourse.

For two of the women (I4; I5) studying the Qur'an and engaging in feminist exegesis is still about personal fulfillment and the process of getting to know their own religion (I4/234; I5/179 ff.). One of those women describes her political evolution as a battle with her own beliefs after encountering atheism and sees potential following the path of silent changes in society through providing knowledge

and supporting women scholars (I5/314 ff.). She has tried to be part of a secular feminist scene but did not feel at home (I5/97).

Tamara Qiblawi (I3) currently sees her role in engaging in internal discussions within secular circles where religious positions are viewed with scepticism and vehement rejection. She finds this to be counterproductive in integrating religious women in the struggle against patriarchy (I3/131 ff.).

> *„I am not exaggerating (...) you alienate them, you create divisions in your society where actually you should be reaching over and integrate them in your struggle [...], this is a point that I really, really resist on. Just don't hate on religion and there is not point in this crusade against religion." (I3/135 ff.)*

> *„You have to be in touch with those [religious] sentiments so that you can engage with those sentiments, you know? And you should integrate it in your strategy, you should integrate it in the way you think, I am not saying you should be totally accommodating. (I3/155 ff.)*

Not only activist spaces but also social media are platforms of her ‚policing‘ (I3/258 f.). One of the women who chose to remain anonymous (I4) emphasizes that she tries actively to be a role model for other women in her very religious environment and tries to show what being a Muslim woman can be like (I4/153 ff.).

Dima Dabbous (I6) was involved in more immediate action in 2011 when she petitioned at Dar-al-Fatwa[9] together with numorous other women to raise the custody age for Sunni children. Up until then mothers who filed for divorce lost their daughters at the age of nine and sons at the age of seven to their husband (I6/199 ff.). Herself affected by this Sunni ruling Dima Dabbous was part of the group of women who negotiated with the religious Sunni leaders, presenting religious-based arguments, and was able to raise the custody age to twelve years (I6/199 ff.). Next to this on the ground activism she is editor-in-chief of the bi-annual English and Arabic Journal Al-Raida, published by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, where Dima Dabbous works as an assistant professor of media and gender studies.[10] The journal serves as a platform for Arab women, their political debates and also features articles on women and religion.

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9 A government organisation, established in 1922, entrusted with the task to issue legal regulations for the Sunni community of Lebanon. Seat of the Sunni Grand Mufti. (For more information see: Lefèvre, Raphaël (2015) Lebanon's Dar al-Fatwa and the Search for Moderation, 05.01.2015, Online: http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/01/05/lebanon-s-dar-al-fatwa-and-search-for-moderation-pub-57627 [last access: 01.10.2016].)
10 For more information see: http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/publications/al-raida/ [last accessed: 01.10.2016].

In the Spring of 2009 for example Hosn Abboud (I1) was featured as a guest-editor in the issue „Women and Scriptures in the Arab World" to which she contributed an article dealing with her main area of work: an analysis of Mary, mother of Christ, in the Qur'an. There, as well as in other publications, she discussed the possibility of Mary being a prophet and went into extensive literary analysis and exegesis (I1/313 f.). When talking about tools it becomes clear that Hosn Abboud's activism takes place in academic spheres through her teaching (at the American University of Beirut and Haigazian University), the publication of articles and books for which she is cited by renowned „Islamic Feminists" (Badran 2009: 247). She is furthermore in contact with ‚Islamic Feminists' in the Maghreb region and Egypt (I1/185 ff.) – and member of Bahithat (The Lebanese Association of Woman Researchers). Apart from academia Hosn Abboud coordinates a bookclub at the The Mohammad Dimashkieh Cultural Center in Beirut where she encourages the participants in reading feminist literature and, in accordance to her academic work, she co-founded the group Darb Maryam (Path of Mary) that does religious sightseeing and tries to strengthen bonds between Christians and Muslims in Post-Civil War Lebanon (I1/421 ff.). Hosn Abboud is part of an all-women Sufi community where the ceremony (dhikr) is conducted by a female sheikha. The gatherings she describes as empowering and as acts of „community solidarity" where she comes together with women from middle and lower income class (I1/155 ff.).

Nayla Tabbara (I2) is the co-founder of Adyan a Lebanese foundation for interreligious studies that tries to make a shift in the religious discourse towards promoting human dignity, solidarity, the acceptance of diversity and justice (I2/154 ff.). The strategy she is pursuing is to include Muslim women more in the religious sphere and the production of knowledge:

> *„The work in dialogue and the presence in dialogue circles has put some women back into the religious spheres but it is something that was achieved gradually because generally interreligious meetings in the Arab world or in Lebanon would be mainly men, so bit by bit they have started to include first sisters and then veiled women and then started to include women who are not veiled and who are not sisters but who are academics or religious studies (...) I really forsee much more of women's presence in these settings in the future. This has not happened on the paradigm of violent change, but on that of silent revolutions, where the scene has been transformed without any conflict but through a gradual process involving both men opening up to women's presence in religious circles and women's gaining self-confidence in these circles" (I2/107 ff.)*

She herself has been referred to as a religious leader and is in contact with women from different religious denominations that are considering building a platform (I2/358 ff.).

Among the women I could identify three spheres of action. There are first women (I4; I5) who study Islam for their personal fulfillment and only start to make it political, whereas the second group of women does ‚policing' defending her Islam either in their daily or activist lives (I3; I4). The third group, consisting of scholars (I1; I2; I6; I7), is involved in academia and the representation of women there but often re-connects with problems on-the-ground. At this point of the research one can observe that there is a lack of connectivity between the women: even though the three scholars work in the same sphere of action there is no Lebanese platform where they can connect and exchange ideas. Beyond academia there is even less cooperation, the women do not enlarge their sphere of action or join together but engage with the topic on a more immediate level in daily life.

3.3.4 Coordinate IV: How do the women position themselves towards white feminism?

Being a target for criticism from both secular and religious circles 'Islamic Feminism' has at least accomplished one thing: it gave women space in academia that before was largely occupied by White, western Feminists. How do the women position themselves in the face of the power potential that White Feminists still claim?

The voices of the women were very mixed on this topic: One woman (I4) stated that she does not see Western and Middle Eastern, Muslim women working together as long as being a veiled Muslim woman is connected to so many stereotypes (I4/432). Tamara Qiblawi (I3) stated that she has often experienced a certain dominancy of western women in Lebanese activist circles who think they know better and silence the voices of local women (I3/333 f.). At the same time she stresses how important it is to break down binaries and to acknowledge that both groups of women are fighting the same system:

> *„you know we are both struggling and the stereotypes are counter-productive, it doesn't matter if we are fighting Muslim tradition or if we are fighting like darwinian tradition, it doesn't matter, it is patriarchy, you know." (I3/88 ff.)*

> *„I think it becomes, you know, it becomes a matter of like working together, working with each other, understanding specific contexts. (…) Let's say, if I were to come to Germany I can't like jump on like a feminist cause in Germany because I don't know anything about Germany. But I can express some kind of solidarity and I can learn." (I3/322 ff.)*

Dima Dabbous (I6) joined in her appeal to Western Feminists to take a step back, show solidarity and accept that it is in the end important to do activism that works within the contexts (I6/538 ff.). Nayla

Tabbara (I2) is more enthusiastic about Muslim women working with White Feminists and stresses the importance of the movements working together and helping each other under one condition:

> *"Show the West that the reality on the ground is a multi-facetted one. That women in the arab world and arab countries are not those poor creatures that have no voice, […] there are places where women are really without voice. But in most spaces, no, you have, I mean women are fighting, fighting for their rights in society, they are promoting change, they are change-makers themselves on so many different levels, whether economic or political or religious. And to showcase that, that is very important for us."* (I2/429 ff.)

4. Conclusion

In the preceding chapter the contours of the counter-discourse ‚Islamic Feminism' in Lebanon became clear and the portray or at least rough sketch of the movement is now completed. After arranging it along the coordinates one can look at the discourse's shape and size in total.

‚Islamic Feminism' in Lebanon is not a sedimented and strong but rather a niche-discourse with loose ends that are not yet connected. As in the international sphere ‚Islamic Feminism' is only an umbrella term and an ascription made by myself, standing for women struggling for women's rights from within Islam. Even though most of the women I interviewed mentioned the same ‚Islamic Feminist' literature that is well known transnationally the women up to this point are not forming feminist circles or organisations. They mostly do not know of each other even though all of them expressed a wish to find individuals with similar approaches to the Qur'an (I5/401; I1/794 f.; I6/458 ff.). Lacking a platform they either confine themselves to or, like Hosn Abboud (I1), connect with ‚Islamic Feminist' circles abroad in Egypt and the Maghreb region (I1/510 f.). While the women's self-designations vary immensly their unanimous vote on the subject of secularism which they do not see clashing with religious values is striking. This leaves a common ground with radical secularists and makes shaping progressive policies possible. All of the women are conscious of the dynamic powers of the scriptures that they all turned to at some point, though they do not go equally far in their interpretations.

Though the women might be very diverse when it comes to the details of their religious-political stances, still there is more that unites them than divides them. This leaves the question why they are scattered, unconnected and few. A certain incongruency in self-designations is the case in secular Feminist settings also but still groups and collectives are formed. Two reasons come into mind. The first is that feminist exegesis is viewed as a means to confirm one's personal actions, and does not

necessarily translate into ‚Islamic Feminist' activism. The women rather see a necessity to do ‚policing' and advance pluralism in their closed contexts than to start a new homogenous ‚Islamic Feminist' group. The sectarian surrounding of Lebanon might be the second reason why not more women engage in a feminist discourse from within religion. Politically active people want to overcome the religious categories and structures rather than engage with them and work with what is there.

But no matter how diverse the self-designations of the women are and how small and un-sedimented the discourse of ‚Islamic Feminism' in Lebanon, it is part of a resistance and negotiation process that is happening right now in different parts of the world. Used as a strategy the discourse can be part of the struggle against orientalist stereotypes on one hand and to some extent is able to counter patriarchal religious rulings. Still the risk of supporting masculine institutions and strengthening existing patriarchal and heteronormative social norms prevails and has to be considered by the parties involved. Like every discourse ‚Islamic Feminism' is subjugated to change, it can either vanish from the political sphere or can grow once more people see the necessity to contribute to the counter-discourse. The future will show if it can further improve the situation of women in Lebanon and not only serve as a tool of individual empowerment but as a driving force in renegotiating power structures.

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