

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Women Memory Forum

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Case Study: Women Memory Forum

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The Women and Memory Forum (WMF)¹ was founded in Cairo in 1995 by a group of feminist academics. The group aims to provide an alternative reading of Arab history and the social sciences through a feminist perspective to produce critical knowledge outputs. According to the World Humanities Report survey, the WMF makes their content available to raise awareness “and support women and feminist activists in their fight toward gender-based justice.”² Their dual focus on activism and critical knowledge production is strongly reflected in two of their published texts, *Women’s Time and Alternative Memory* (1998) and *Introduction to Women’s Issues* (2002).³ In addition, the WMF is committed to reshaping the cultural landscape of studying and understanding gender. This includes fostering discussions on Islam and the place of women in Shari’a law (see the WMF book *Questions and Answers about Gender and Feminism*, 2017); the oppressiveness of patriarchal structures in Egypt and the Arab world; the historical roots of feminist thought; and the rise of Egyptian feminist movements over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The WMF’s work can be framed as a revival project. They understand memory as a multifaceted concept that includes unpacking the past, excavating women’s stories that were rendered peripheral or silenced, and producing an accessible archive of these stories. They use memory of these underrepresented histories to chart paths for future solidarity and political action. According to cofounder Hoda Elsadda, the organization has republished texts authored by women between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; created “an

¹ See <https://www.wmf.org.eg/en/>.

² Hoda Elsadda, Women and Memory Forum, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

³ Hoda Elsadda, Somaia Ramadan, and Omaima Abu-Bakr, eds., *Women’s Time and Alternative Memory* [in Arabic] (Cairo: Women and Memory Forum, 1998), is a compilation of essays from a conference that brought together researchers of diverse disciplines from all over the Arab world to discuss the sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of gender and women’s changing roles in heterogeneous Arab societies (see <https://www.wmf.org.eg/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/12.pdf>). Hoda Elsadda, ed., *Introduction to Women’s Issues* [in Arabic] (Cairo: Women and Memory Forum, 2002), is an illustrated book that which unpacks gender-based stereotypes and elucidates important feminist concepts in a way that is accessible to the general public (see <https://www.wmf.org.eg/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/3neki.pdf>).

oral history archive of women’s voices”; rewritten “folk tales from a gender-sensitive perspective”; encouraged Arabic writing and publishing; and translated “seminal feminist texts in the social sciences and the humanities into Arabic.”⁴ By shedding light on women’s stories and making them available to the public, the WMF excavates histories that were otherwise silenced or overlooked, offering an alternative reading of Arab and Middle Eastern history.

Two of their most extensive critical undertakings are the e-library and the archive of women’s oral history. The digital library houses more than 180 publications, including books, periodicals, posters, brochures, children’s stories, and short stories. These texts are free and accessible resources to the public and have been used by universities as teaching tools, along with the original publications the WMF produces. This is one of the main ways the organization measures its impact.

The second significant research effort is the Archive of Women’s Oral History, which narrates stories by Egyptian feminists and women leader in their own words. The testimonies are one of the main ways the WMF attempts to reread and rewrite dominant historical narratives, illuminating threads that were otherwise forgotten or silenced. The practice of archiving oral histories is one way the emotional and affective dimensions of the past become integrated in understandings of the present, interweaving fragments of a larger history through a new light. Gyanendra Pandey argues that “part of the importance of the ‘fragmentary’ point of view lies in that it resists the drive for a shallow homogenization and struggles for other, potentially richer definitions of the ‘nation’ and the future political community.”⁵

The WMF’s documentation of feminist oral history can be read as an archive of hope, particularly in the context of Egypt after the Arab uprisings of 2011. The archive becomes an alternative space where memory is negotiated and refracted through a feminist lens, one that cuts across and through different generations and geographical regions. As Marianne Hirsch argues, oral history archives offer future feminists and activists ways to map out connections, diversions, and collaborations, thus creating the space for critical discourse that cuts across space and time.⁶ The WMF also plays a crucial pedagogical role. They offer workshops for university students and researchers on various aspects of gender research, such as gender-sensitive research methods or reading history from a gendered perspective. According to Elsadda, organizations like

⁴ Elsadda, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

⁵ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 28–29.

⁶ Marianne Hirsch, “Feminist Archives of Possibility,” *Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 29, no. 1 (2018): 173–88.

the WMF—which was established by feminist activists and researchers—helped chart the course for the institutionalization of women and gender studies (WGS) in the Arab world. She argues for keeping the field critical through continued networking with nongovernmental organizations that work in this field, which also allows for WGS to retain its activist tendencies.⁷

The WMF noted in a survey that although their work is available in Arabic, there is also a need for translating feminist concepts into Arabic, which requires “innovative and critical work in order to transport concepts and terms into the [Arabic] language, keeping in mind new trajectories that are taking shape within Arabic culture.”⁸ They point to Edward Said’s work on traveling theory, noting the importance of taking into consideration how concepts and theories travel from one culture to another. Hala Kamal argues that in Said’s framework, the WMF’s work falls under the heading of scholactivism, “combining specifically feminist scholarship and activism.” More important, Kamal notes that the WMF is “a site of knowledge production, and a space that as much as it introduces feminist thought to academic work also injects feminist activism with scholarship, traveling across scholarship and activism and beyond academia and civil society.”⁹

Elsadda highlights censorship as one of the biggest challenges faced by civil society organizations working on WGS in the Arab region. In a survey, the WMF noted that the 2017 Egyptian legislation limiting nongovernmental organizations in the country negatively affected their work, and even though the law was amended in 2019, its aftermath was still felt. The Arab uprisings are often framed in scholarly discourse in terms of success or failure. This interpretation tends to look at democratic transition as an indicator of the former and the lack of it regarding the latter. For some feminist activists, including those at the WMF, there was a feeling of disappointment following the uprisings and the crackdown on nongovernmental organizations. Even so, scholars like Nermin Allam have argued that regardless of the disappointment that some feminist activists in Egypt may have felt, the 2011 uprisings were transformative, making a return to the old status quo impossible.¹⁰ By centering affect, emotions, and activist experiences and stories, the WMF charts out hopeful trajectories for

⁷ Hoda Elsadda, *Gender Studies in the Arab World: An NGO Phenomenon* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023).

⁸ Elsadda, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

⁹ Hala Kamal, *Traveling Theory in Translation: An Arab Travelogue of Feminism and Gender* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 8.

¹⁰ Nermin Allam, *Women and the Egyptian Revolution: Engagement and Activism during the 2011 Arab Uprisings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

alternative social, cultural, and political imaginaries.

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