"Like Us, but Not Quite Us": Researching Gender Politics in Autocratic Contexts

Nermin Allam

What challenges do researchers encounter in authentically engaging with the field site and academia when certain aspects of their true identities diverge from the established norms within those domains? Using the case of female political scientists who conduct research on gender politics in the Middle East and North Africa, I highlight the ethical, logistical, and epistemological challenges of carrying out research in a politically and socially closed context. Few studies have investigated how the research process and the knowledge it produces are affected by the intertwinement of authoritarianism and patriarchy, and by the researcher's positionality within this context. This study fills this gap by drawing upon interviews with feminist political scientists who were born and raised in the region but are based in Western academic institutions to examine the impact of authoritarianism, patriarchy, and the researchers' insider/outsider positionality on the research process. The analysis shows three key findings. First, researching gender politics is a contentious topic that places researchers on the radar of the state. For scholars who are originally from the region, the issue is compounded by the fact that they are sometimes viewed as traitors by the regime in their country of origin, which accuses them of tarnishing the image of the government and scrutinizing its gender policies. Second, within the wider society, the politics of representation also impose certain limitations and expectations on female scholars. Such limitations include gendered restrictions on their access and mobility in the field. Finally, feminist researchers share how the knowledge they produce, which centers social justice demands, is not always valued in the discipline of political science. The article contributes to this discipline by expanding our understanding of the interplay between identity politics, fieldwork practices, and knowledge production in complex political and social settings.

Keywords: Fieldwork, gender politics, authoritarianism, patriarchy, Middle East and North Africa

During my interview with a director at one of Egypt's official research institutions in 2014, the director dismissed the existence of sexual harassment as a problem in Egypt. The interview was part of my doctoral dissertation project documenting the experiences of women during the 2011 Egyptian Uprising, which has since been turned into a book (Allam 2017). The director's statement sharply contradicted the findings of the then recent 2013 UN Women study, which reported that over 99% of the Egyptian girls and women surveyed had experienced some form of sexual harassment (UN Women 2013). The director claimed that the number of sexual harassment incidents were insignificant and blamed women who dressed liberally, or who were, like me, "young and present in the public space." I was initially confused by the official's response and did not know how to situate her answer. I could not help but feel during the interview that notwithstanding my Egyptian origin, my status as a researcher studying in North America marked me out as an outsider. Thus, the director might have felt that it was her duty to conceal and deny the phenomenon in the presence of a perceived outsider like myself. After all, my interviews were carried out following the election in June 2014 of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the former defense minister who had toppled the previous president

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Muhammed Mursī. It was a time of heightened securitization and rising hypernationalism among citizens. During this period, the ruling regime was repeatedly warning citizens of a "conspiracy" to bring down Egypt. State security forces began cracking down on independent feminist organizations—among other rights groups—and the public, desperate for stability, had given its support to a police state. My fieldwork experience left me asking questions about how a patriarchal autocratic regime and the researcher's positionality within it influence the research process and the knowledge produced in various complex ways. In this context, what does it mean to authentically engage in the field site and with academia when certain aspects of our true being deviate from the established norms in both areas?[1]

Scholars have examined the challenges faced by researchers in various autocratic contexts. Their work sheds light on the ethical considerations, methodological complexities, and power dynamics inherent in such environments (Ahram and Goode 2016; Bellin et al. 2019; Janenova 2019). They have emphasized the importance of navigating restrictions on academic freedom, managing potential risks to personal safety, and adapting research methods to account for state control and censorship. Studies on conducting research in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) show how the prevalence of authoritarianism in the region influences the researchers' choice of research topics, countries to study, and data collection (Benstead 2018; Clark 2006; Clark and Cavatorta 2018; Parkinson 2022; Tripp 2018). However, few studies have investigated how the research process and the knowledge it produces are affected by the intertwinement of authoritarianism and patriarchy, and by the researcher's positionality within this context (Abu-Lughod 1988; Altorki and El-Solh 1988; Joseph, Meari, and Zaatari 2022; Okruhlik 2018; Rivetti and Saeidi 2018). In MENA, patriarchy intersects with authoritarianism within the region's regimes, which embody a hypermasculinized father-figure image to consolidate their powers and reinforce traditional gender roles. Such regimes actively suppress women's rights, repress feminist movements, and impose constraints on conducting research on gender politics. In such a landscape, feminist researchers carrying out fieldwork face ethical dilemmas, logistical challenges, and tough epistemological questions. This article aims to identify these challenges and explore their impact on the dynamics of fieldwork and knowledge production.

This article specifically focuses on the experiences of female political scientists who are currently based in Western institutions but were born and raised in MENA countries. Building on seven semistructured interviews with female researchers from this group, I show the challenges and opportunities that they face in carrying out research on gender politics in the MENA region. I am interested in the experiences of this group given their insider/outsider positionality. Their connection to the region through citizenship, family upbringing, or ongoing advocacy work makes them subjects of the autocratic and patriarchal structures that the researchers themselves study. Meanwhile their outsider status, given their Western professional affiliations, affects interview dynamics as well as the knowledge produced about women and gender politics in MENA societies. Scholars within this group have to tread lightly to avoid being dismissed as "Western apologists" and/or "native informants" supporting the "save the Muslim women" narrative, while ensuring that the knowledge they produce is meaningful to the communities they are studying and not merely oriented toward an external—in this case Western—audience.

This reflection is organized as follows. First, I survey the literature on the challenges of carrying out fieldwork in autocratic and patriarchal settings, with special focus on the MENA region. The survey shows how the autocratic and patriarchal context of many MENA countries raises important ethical dilemmas and epistemological challenges for female researchers studying gender politics in the region. Second, I present the crux of the analysis. I organize data from interviews around three themes: (1) the intertwinement of authoritarianism and patriarchy and its effects on the researchers' subjectivities and their fieldwork experiences; (2) the positionality of the researchers within this context, and how it mediates the process of data collection and their interactions with their research subjects; and (3) the implications this positionality has for how the discipline of political science perceives the knowledge produced. The themes cover the research process from data collection to data presentation. Finally, the conclusion suggests ways to mitigate the challenges faced when conducting fieldwork in authoritarian patriarchal contexts and when presenting feminist research findings to the discipline of political science.

The article contributes to studies on fieldwork in complex political and social contexts. It adds to our stock of knowledge on the challenges of studying gender politics within the autocratic patriarchal context prevalent in many MENA countries. The analysis presented also illuminates how identity politics affect fieldwork and knowledge production in political science.

Gender, Politics, and Fieldwork

A growing body of studies in political science has extensively examined the challenges associated with conducting research in nondemocratic contexts. These studies emphasize the need to understand and navigate complex power dynamics (Barros 2016), manage security considerations (Bellin et al. 2019), negotiate access to research sites and participants (Janenova 2019), and employ innovative methodological approaches (Ahram and Goode 2016). Scholars conducting field research in MENA further show the ways in which the prevalence of authoritarianism in the region influences the research process and data collection

(Benstead 2018; Clark 2006; Clark and Cavatorta 2018; Grimm et al. 2020; Parkinson 2022; Tripp 2018). While many of the challenges around field research in the MENA region could occur even within democracies, the degree and intensity of these challenges in the autocratic context of many MENA countries expose researchers and participants to significant threats and impose various forms of censorship. The murder in 2016 of Giulio Regeni—an Italian researcher and PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, allegedly by the security apparatus in Egypt—is a stark example of the risks and challenges of conducting research in an autocratic regime.[2]

Given the threats associated with fieldwork within the autocratic context of the MENA region, researchers note how state censorship and self-censorship shape their decisions on what issues to study there and how they study them. Researchers sometimes face significant ethical dilemmas related to their safety and security as well as to that of their participants, which makes researching certain topics impossible and even unethical. Warning against mosquitos—in reference to security officials (Okruhlik 2018) in Saudi Arabia—or reminding us that the walls have ears in Egypt, researchers highlight the challenges of studying political issues under extraordinarily repressive security apparatuses (Clark and Cavatorta 2018). Furthermore, Janine Clark (2006) found in her 2004–5 survey on conducting field research in MENA societies that the authoritarian political conditions in the region pose great challenges to conducting qualitative research. In the absence of qualitative research, researchers are unable to provide rich and thick analysis of the region, which could consequently skew research findings and general knowledge in the discipline.

Under these conditions, the institutional ethical criteria set by Western institutional review boards (IRBs) are often inapt to protect participants (Tripp 2018). For example, securing a research clearance from the oppressive security apparatus in a MENA country might allow the state to track down the research participants and harass them.[3]

In addition to these challenges, women carrying out research in the MENA region face additional obstacles. In Clark's 2004–5 survey, 38% of female respondents stated that they confronted difficulties in conducting fieldwork as a result of their gender and the local gender norms (Clark 2006, 421). These manifold challenges help to explain why gender politics in authoritarian MENA contexts remains an understudied area (Abu-Lughod 1988; Altorki and El-Solh 1988; Joseph, Meari, and Zaatari 2022; Okruhlik 2018; Rivetti and Saeidi 2018). Nevertheless, the scant body of scholarship on the topic makes two important contributions to the literature on conducting feminist research in complex political and social contexts broadly and in the MENA region more specifically.

First, the literature on gender and fieldwork in political science shows that female researchers face a range of unique challenges when conducting fieldwork, including gender-based discrimination, limited access to research networks and resources, and patriarchal power structures within research contexts (Hanson and Richards 2017; Schacht 1997; Warren 1988). Female researchers conducting fieldwork in the MENA region emphasize some of these broader challenges discussed in the literature. For example, Emanuela Dalmasso (2018, 146) describes how some of her respondents assumed that since she is a Western woman, she must be "anti-Islamist," and even "an Islamophobic feminist." In addition to these challenges, researchers also show the mixed effects of the restrictive social and gendered norms in many MENA countries. For example, Gwenn Okruhlik (2018) notes that she needed to be accompanied by her husband as her *mahram* while conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, the male guardianship system required women to have a *mahram* to provide protection and supervision.[4] A *mahram* can be a husband or a male relative whom a woman cannot marry such as a father, son, uncle, or brother. Commenting on their field research in Iran, Paola Rivetti and Shirin Saeidi (2018) also emphasize that women face more forms of harassment than men do in the field. They describe how they had to carefully abide by additional gender and social norms such as the compulsory hijab—norms that might sharply contradict their worldviews. Notwithstanding these challenges, female researchers also describe the opportunities afforded to them as a result of their gender in gender-segregated contexts. For example, Okruhlik (2018, 52) explains how she was able to interview Saudi women in person without the need to secure the consent of their guardians because of her gender; a male researcher would not have had the same access.

Second, the experiences of female researchers conducting field research in MENA underscore the effects of positionality on the research process. At the most basic level, positionality reflects how the researchers' worldviews, beliefs, and identities affect their assumptions about the nature of knowledge, human agency, and social reality. Their status in social and political contexts shapes their interactions with their research subjects and the power dynamics in their fieldwork. Much of the literature on positionality focuses on the insider versus the outsider status of researchers and how it shapes the researchers' interactions in the field and with their subjects. Feminist scholars, however, have criticized this binary classification (Bolak 1996; Brown 2018). They argue that the distinction between insiders and outsiders is often blurred and fluid, constantly shifting based on the nature of the interactions, the stage of research, and the broader sociopolitical context. This recognition challenges the simplistic understanding of positionality and underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the researcher's relationship with their subjects and the complex dynamics that emerge during the research process.

For example, Soraya Altorki and Camillia Fawzi El-Solh (1988) have gathered the first—and until very recently the only—collection documenting the field experiences of women of Arab descent studying Arab societies. Their work illustrates that the role of gender and the effect of the researcher's insider status are neither uniform nor stagnant. Depending on the situational context within which researchers carry out their work, the gender and insider status of researchers can sometimes offer relative advantages in accessing data, while at other times they can force researchers to reorient their inquiry and even their behavior in the field. Reflecting on her experience studying Bedouin society, Lila Abu-Lughod (1988) shows how her partial insider status and the community's perception of her as a "dutiful daughter" imposed certain limitations and restrictions on her mobility. While presenting herself at the research site as the daughter of a non-Egyptian Arab Muslim father facilitated her access to participants, it also led to a loss of flexibility and consequently pushed her to reorient her inquiry toward studying women's issues rather than community issues more broadly (Altorki and El-Solh 1988, 12). Contrary to Abu-Lughod's experience, Jillian Schwedler (2006) notes how her outsider status as a Western female scholar accorded her a "third gender" whereby transgressing gender norms and codes was tolerated and justified as ignorance of the norms in Middle Eastern societies. In their edited volume, Suad Joseph, Lena Meari, and Zeina Zaatari (2022) further unpack the question of positionality and its differential effects on the experiences of Arab female scholars studying their own societies.

My work builds upon and expands this scant body of scholarship in several ways. First, unlike the current scholarship, I focus on female researchers who are born and raised in the Middle East and North Africa, and not just those from the Arab world. My sample does not include scholars who are descendants of migrants from the Middle East and were born and raised outside that region. In so doing, I provide a rich analysis of the experience of a different group of researchers who have traditionally not been studied in the literature. Second, by limiting my scope to female researchers who are currently based in the political science departments of Western academic institutions, I complicate our understanding of the dynamics of fieldwork and knowledge production. The work of feminist researchers often carries and is frequently motivated by a social justice component. The study of gender and the study of gender from a feminist perspective, Aili Tripp (2010, 191) rightly explains, are not "one and the same." For example, the study of gender and international relations does not often center the same normative social justice concerns that animate the scholarship in comparative gender studies (191). My interviewees belonged to the latter camp; they applied a feminist perspective to the study of gender politics. The positionality of researchers as feminist—read activist—academics based in the West has implications for how they are perceived by authorities, by interviewees, and in academia. In the context of the patriarchal autocratic regimes of the Middle East, I show how studying women's rights and gender politics squarely positions researchers as dissenters to, and adversaries of, the regime, regardless of how vaguely they try to frame their research question. The research on gender equality challenges existing power structures and societal norms that are often perpetuated and enforced by the ruling authorities. Researchers investigating these topics are inevitably seen as questioning or opposing the established order. Furthermore, the positionality of feminist political scientists studying MENA societies engages with the ongoing debate about whether one is an activist or a researcher. Within the Western canon of political science, scholars are not always receptive to the knowledge produced by activist academics.

Feminist Fieldwork in MENA Countries and in the Discipline of Political Science

To highlight the effects of authoritarianism, patriarchy, and subjectivity on researchers, this study draws upon seven interviews with feminist female political scientists who are currently based in Western academic institutions but are originally from MENA countries. Feminist political scientists are scholars who analyze political systems, institutions, and processes through a feminist lens, focusing on issues of gender equality, power relations, and social justice. In recruiting my participants, I utilized a purposeful sampling research technique: I circulated recruitment materials among female political science academics who study gender politics in MENA and are originally from the region. The selection of interviewees was also purposeful, involving scholars with expertise and experiences relevant to the intersection of patriarchy, authoritarianism, and feminist scholarship in the Middle East. While the sample size is limited, my aim is not to generalize findings but to gain in-depth insights into the challenges faced by feminist scholars in this specific context.

There are several reasons why the native status of the scholars is integral to understanding the specific challenges they encounter during fieldwork and how their positionality informs the knowledge their fieldwork produces. First, as women who are originally from the Middle East and are currently based in Western institutions, these scholars navigate a complex intersection of identities that significantly shapes their experiences in conducting research on gender politics in authoritarian patriarchal contexts. For example, regimes often view them as potential traitors for critically scrutinizing gender policies and raising questions about women's rights, which introduces a layer of risk and complexity that might not be as pronounced for non-native scholars. Second, gendered morality structures in home societies also impose gender-specific limitations and expectations on the mobility, perceived morality, and public behavior of native scholars, which may differ from the expectations placed on their non-native counterparts. Third, the status of these scholars informs the knowledge produced by offering a nuanced insider perspective. It also affects how the knowledge they produce might be perceived with suspicion in the discipline of political science due to their close connection to the topic of study.

Interviews with scholars were carried out between May and June 2022 over Zoom. Five of my interviewees were based in US academic institutions, one was based in Canada, and another scholar was based in a European university. Their academic rankings ranged from early career to senior scholars: I interviewed three postdoctoral students, two assistant professors, and two associate professors. To protect the privacy of my participants, I use pseudonyms in place of their real names. Since the subfield of gender politics and Middle East studies is quite small, I have also opted to remove references to their institutional affiliation, academic rank, and country of research. Although I had not initially planned to exclude this information, I now believe that including it would make my participants easily identifiable.

The interview guide included questions on the following themes: the researcher's positionality, challenges by the regime, and support/challenges in academia. The analysis in this article presents the researchers' accounts and experiences and puts them in conversation with the literature on gender, authoritarianism, and fieldwork. I organized data from interviews around three overlapping themes: the intertwinement of authoritarianism and patriarchy and its effects on the researchers' subjectivities, the positionality of the researchers and how it impacts the process of data collection and their interactions with their research subjects, and the implications this positionality has for how the discipline of political science perceives the knowledge produced.

The coding process involved a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. Initially, I identified these themes inductively to allow for the emergence of patterns and insights directly from the data. Subsequently, I applied deductive coding to ensure alignment with the research question and theoretical framework. The three identified themes provide a framework to organize the discussions. I do not claim that they cover the full range of subjects discussed in the interviews; these themes, however, represent key aspects of the conversation and the scholars' experiences. Below I discuss these dominant themes in detail.

The Intertwinement of Patriarchy and Authoritarianism

> Patriarchy is a unit of analysis that in itself helps us understand all aspects of politics in new lights. It is an important methodological and theoretical lens.[5]

The statement above, made by an early career faculty member, eloquently captures how a patriarchal context affects not just the researchers' fieldwork but also the researchers' line of inquiry, epistemology, and methodology. When asked about the challenges of researching gender politics in an autocratic setting, she emphasized that the patriarchal and not just the authoritarian nature of the regimes she studies have a compound effect on her work. Patriarchy, like authoritarianism, affects and shapes the questions that researchers ask, their approach to studying research topics, and the data collected.

In line with feminist scholarship, I define patriarchy as a pervasive and deeply ingrained social system that manifests through male dominance and the institutionalization of gender-based power imbalances. Patriarchy operates not only as a set of individual attitudes or behaviors but as an overarching system ingrained in social, political, and economic structures and institutions. Political structures influence women's representation, the agenda of women's rights, and gender policies. For example, in authoritarian settings, regimes in power may maintain and produce patriarchal hierarchies since they align with their authoritative control mechanisms and reinforce the broader status quo. Similarly, unequal economic systems reflect and contribute to gender-based discrimination in the public workplace and benefit from women's unpaid care work in the private space. In addition to political and economic structures, religious doctrines are often cited as the most common structures that perpetuate gender hierarchies and shape societal norms. But even within ostensibly secular frameworks, patriarchal norms persist, influencing laws and societal attitudes.

Existing literature highlights the challenges faced by female researchers in patriarchal contexts, including gender-based harassment, implicit biases, and restrictive gender norms. While these challenges may be faced by female researchers globally, the intersection of patriarchy and authoritarianism intensifies these difficulties. In MENA, patriarchy intersects with authoritarianism in regimes that assume the role of hypermasculinized paternal figures. Within this framework, the regime's viewpoints are positioned beyond scrutiny, and individuals who express dissenting perspectives are subject to moral condemnation and marginalization. Women who dissent against the regime are particularly targeted, their rights are undermined, and their voices are suppressed. Among the implications of this patriarchal authoritarianism is that researchers studying gender under such regimes find themselves on the radar of the security services and are questioned about the purpose of their research agenda. Researchers note how there is a misguided assumption that gender is a safe topic to study under autocratic regimes. My interviewees, however, explained that studying gender politics subjects researchers to scrutiny and suspicion from both authorities and certain groups in society.

This skeptical view of the research agenda of feminist scholars and the study of gender politics is a function of the autocratic character of the regimes in the region as well as of mixed historical legacies and current political bargains. Studies highlight the different ways in which the agenda of women's rights and gender equality have played edificatory roles in projects of colonialism, modernization, nationalism, Islamization, and later imperialism across the Middle East and North Africa (Abu-Lughod 1990; Ahmed 2011; Charrad 2001; El Guindi 1999; Lazreg 1990; Macleod 1991; Zuhur 1992). Postcolonial feminist scholars show how orientalist colonial discourses have presented the status of women in the wake of colonialism as a signifier of the inferiority of Muslim societies. Following independence, nationalist postcolonial regimes selectively promoted women's rights to burnish their image in front of Western audiences and appease Western donors while simultaneously suppressing independent civil society organizations and opposition. The US and its allies used the advancement of women's rights, among other reasons, to justify their invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. Amid these complex histories, researchers who study the status of gender equality in MENA societies encounter suspicion from regimes in the region and even from some segments of society.

The issue is compounded for female scholars who are originally from the region. I asked my interviewees whether the fact that they are from the region facilitates their efforts to maneuver around the restrictions and misconceptions of the regime, or whether it makes them an easy target. In response, one scholar explained how a foreign researcher and/or a male researcher might not face the same degree of suspicion. Another interviewee described how

> being a woman, a native from the country studying gender equality, automatically places you as a feminist, as critical of the regime, critical of social norms, you have no place to hide your identity, or to hide your personal investment in the topic.[6]

While male researchers or foreign female researchers might be viewed as simply seeking knowledge or enlightenment, there is no room for feminist researchers who are originally from the region to maneuver around their identity or claim a different one. State officials view native feminist researchers with increased suspicion and perceive them as too radical, as troublemakers, as rogue feminists who scrutinize the regimes' self-proclaimed feminist credentials, challenge their own societies, and even disrespect social traditions. For example, one interviewee described how border officers at the airport questioned her for hours upon learning about her research topic and accused her of plotting to tarnish the regime's image.[7] Her positionality as someone originally from the region exposed her to further critique: she was described as a traitor and scolded by the officers who expressed their "disappointment in her."

Female political scientists who are originally from the region are also often "subjects of the patriarchy itself,"[8] and this also has implications for researchers. An interviewee explained that they are a subject of these patriarchal structures since they share a gender identity as well as societal ties with the communities under study. One researcher further explained how, as subjects within patriarchal structures, certain research topics, such as gender-based violence, can evoke personal traumas for them, rendering the topics "too intimate and too painful."[9] Recounting her experience studying gender-based violence, the researcher explained how the state is not always a fair arbitrator but rather the perpetrator of gender-based violence in many cases. Indeed, the experience of gender-based violence is often an experience of state violence. In some cases, the state directly inflicts the violence to intimidate feminist opposition, but in others it indirectly inflicts the violence by failing to provide the legal framework necessary to protect women. The researcher explained how she often felt a strong identification with the victims, as she understood that she could have been the one directly affected by such violence. The researcher's personal resonance with the subject matter evoked a profound sense of vulnerability. Female political scientists must navigate through this complex entanglement of trauma, authoritarianism, and patriarchy in the field site and during the research process.

The experiences of feminist researchers studying MENA societies thus overlap with the general phenomena experienced by feminist researchers globally: both encounter gender-based harassment, implicit biases, and restrictive gender norms. The social and political contexts of the MENA region, however, add layers of complexity and challenges. Researchers studying gender politics in autocratic settings face challenges shaped by both authoritarianism and patriarchy, which affect the questions they ask and the data they collect. These challenges include intense scrutiny that reflects broader political and societal attitudes toward gender issues and dissent; the risk of being branded as traitors for challenging the regime's narrative given their identification as feminists who are native to the region; and personal traumas when researching themes such as gender-based violence, which force scholars to negotiate the boundaries between academic inquiry and lived experiences.

"You Are One of Us"

Feminist studies show how the intersection of gender with the researchers' insider/outsider status imposes limitations on their practices in the field. Furthermore, female researchers conducting fieldwork in MENA further emphasize how gender norms and expectations ascribed by society vary depending on the status of the researchers (Abu-Lughod 1988; Altorki and El-Solh 1988; Bouziane 2018; Schwedler 2006). Scholars demonstrate that female researchers who are originally from the region frequently encounter challenges in navigating gender norms and societal codes. Meanwhile, if foreign female researchers transgress gender norms and codes, their transgression might be tolerated and justified as ignorance of the norms in society.

When asked how they would describe their positionality and its effects on their fieldwork, one interviewee eloquently captured the complex status of being "one of us."[10] As "one of us," she explains, you are often welcomed and celebrated in the field site. Her insider status facilitated her access to data and provided her with an inner understanding of the research context. However, being "one of us," she adds, imposed certain gender expectations and limitations. For example, another interviewee explained how ignoring gender norms or codes of attire or demeanor would have been viewed by her participants as an indication that she is "unauthentic" and that she has "internalized imperialist agendas."[11]

Compliance with these gender norms and codes, interviewees further confirmed, often left them with mixed emotions. Indeed, Janine Clark (2006, 421) found in her survey that some researchers who had to alter their clothing styles for specific interviews felt a degree of "hypocrisy" and that they were not being entirely truthful about their personal and social lives. The question of whether to comply with these gender norms and expectations often leaves female researchers asking questions about which of their "identities" they should—or more accurately could—bring to the field: the identity that appeals to some of their participants and to their family back home, or the one that they spent years trying to explore and express while living in a society different from their home. Can they bring the person they are becoming, which they try and sometimes personally struggle to accept with all its contradictions and flaws, to the field? I personally do not know. The "one of us" status is a complex position and positionality that my participants negotiated and navigated in the field. It offered some opportunities in terms of access for the researchers while also imposing certain restrictions and limitations.

When asking my interviewees about the kind of opportunities that their positionality opened up, one interviewed scholar described how her interviewees would refer to her as "our girl."[12] Participants trusted her and believed she would understand their narratives and stories. They would introduce her as "our girl" and demand that other participants "talk to the girl." While problematic, the "our girl" label helped her to gain access to interviewees and participants and encouraged them to open up to her. The naïveté assumed in this label also made it almost an obligation for some interviewees to help "the girl." The "girl" label thus draws attention to the dynamics of ageism and sexism in fieldwork and how they influence the politics of presentation in the societies we study. Participants hold specific assumptions about the researcher's beliefs and motives given not just her nationality but also her age and even her name and family.

For example, one interviewee described how participants would ask about her last name and family ties. Family names in some Arab societies carry substantial cultural and social significance, as they can reveal networks of kinship, social standing, and affiliation, thereby providing valuable insights into an individual's background and societal connections. The interviewee acknowledged that her last name opened access for her among some groups, but she also described how she had to use her mother's last name in certain contexts since her family name would have closed off access to other groups. Her insider status gave her "personal visibility" (Ablon 1977, 70), and while some aspects of her insider status—revealed by her family name—allowed her to access certain groups, it closed off access to others.

A common theme raised in the interviews is how the insider status of female researchers exposed them to more invasive personal questions. The literature shows that female researchers often need to demarcate the professional boundaries of interactions with participants who often view them solely as women and not as scholars (Bolak 1996; Joseph, Meari, and Zaatari 2022; Warren 1988). For scholars originally from the region, it becomes more complicated. When I asked my interviewees about the challenges they face due to their positionality, one interviewee described how she was asked "more personal and more invasive questions" since "you look like us, but not quite us."[13] That is, while the researcher was originally from the region and thus might share a similar background with her participants, she lives abroad and thus does not share their lived reality. This status, she explained, contributed to her participants' curiosity and personal questions.

In my own fieldwork in Egypt, I was often the subject of such curiosity as some participants showed great interest in my marital status, gender views, and how my family felt about the fact that I was single and living on my own. I personally did not always feel that their questions were intrusive since some of the women I interviewed were also considering moving out of their family homes and even relocating outside the country. I often felt that their questions, rather than being invasive, reflected their own anxiety about how to mitigate traditional family relations and gender structures that might limit women's mobility. Our exchanges made me think about what we bring to the interview and how our encounters with participants might draw their attention and ours to new possibilities and maybe different life choices.

One further complication, which I had not considered before I carried out the interviews, is how family dynamics can affect the fieldwork. Studies show how the regime can use connections to family and friends to pressure and silence scholars studying politically sensitive topics (Clark and Cavatorta 2018; Said 2018). However, another aspect—and a more gendered one—is how the family's gender expectations can affect female researchers and interfere with their research. For example, an interviewee described how she had to refuse to put up with her in-laws' expectations of her.[14] They criticized her for spending an extended period of time in the field rather than visiting them. Female scholars thus face additional limitations as they navigate the gender roles and social norms commonly ascribed to them in their home societies, by their interviewees, and even within their families.

The experiences of feminist researchers studying MENA societies therefore overlap with those of other feminist researchers in another way: both face challenges related to mitigating gender norms and expectations and demarcating professional boundaries. The unique insider/outsider status of female MENA researchers studying their societies, however, adds additional complexities and challenges as it influences their interactions with participants and affects their access to different groups. Some of the challenges they face include heightened expectations to conform to gender norms due to their local origins and/or pressures from family members and in-laws; more invasive questioning from participants that reflects both similarities and differences in lived experiences; tension between their professional identity as scholars and their personal backgrounds shaped by societal norms and familial expectations; and restricted access, as even minor details such as their last name can close off access to some groups.

"You Are Just Telling a Story"

The analysis so far has focused on the challenges that face feminist political scientists while carrying out fieldwork in the MENA region. In this last section, I move to interrogate some of the challenges that feminist political scientists face as they share their findings with the discipline of political science.

Notwithstanding the rising prominence of the study of gender politics and the expansion of gender and women's studies programs across Western academic institutions, studies emphasize that research on gender politics continues to be marginalized in political science (Ackelsberg 2005; Anlar and Phillips 2023; Carroll 2005; Han and Heldman 2019; Tripp 2010). Furthermore, as Aili Tripp (2010, 191) eloquently puts it, scholars researching gender politics are frequently encouraged to prioritize the fundamental inquiries of political science in order to establish the legitimacy of the subfield, which can sometimes lead them to distance their studies from feminist social justice considerations. This trend has significant implications, as it undermines the value of feminist research in political science that prioritizes normative social justice concerns as its focal point.

Against this background, feminist political scientists studying their own societies—and especially those who adopt qualitative, ethnographic, and/or interpretive methodologies—face challenges as they present their knowledge and findings to their discipline. For example, when asking participants how they situated themselves and their work within political science, an interviewee described how she has often felt like a "maverick" and "misfit" in her discipline.[15] Feminist researchers studying their own societies, she added, are deeply invested in the issues they study as, among other things, the researchers themselves are subjects of patriarchal structures. Another interviewee explained how such research "shakes you from the inside."[16] However, scholars within political science often did not feel that such investment and commitment are positively perceived by some of the flagship journals in the discipline, or at some mainstream conferences and meetings. One interviewee explained how in certain circles and for certain journals, scholars almost need to perform like an outsider researcher who is distanced from the field site and solely engaged in, and animated by, the objective of advancing scholarly knowledge and developing their theorical contribution.[17] It is often hard to push back against these expectations since they affect the researcher's prospects for hiring, tenure, and promotion in Western academic institutions.

For example, when I asked participants if they experienced a pushback in the discipline, or if their positionality made it easier for them to claim expert status, several interviewees described how some senior scholars in political science panels and conferences often questioned their ability to contribute to political science. This was a common theme especially among scholars conducting qualitative work and interpretive political science. Interviewees emphasized how feminist researchers in political science, and especially native feminist researchers, are viewed as too embedded in the research and unable to create the distance needed to reflect and gaze out. One participant described how she would always get the "you are just telling a story" comment.[18] This comment, and variations of it, was among the common themes raised in the interviews. It was often directed as a critique of the perceived inability of feminist scholars to step out of the subject they are studying and connect the data from their fieldwork to broader analysis.

Refocusing our analysis using a broader analytical lens is an important exercise, as it indeed allows us to contribute to scholarship, build theories, and add to existing knowledge. However, it becomes problematic when "you have to force it, to provide these generalizable outcomes," as one scholar described.[19] It runs the risk of producing "extraverted" knowledge; knowledge that is only directed toward Western academia and irrelevant to the societies we are studying (Jackson and Kelly 2019, 5–6). Such knowledge further runs the risk of positioning scholars, regardless of whether they adopt qualitative or quantitative approaches, as "native informants" and/or "Western apologists" whose knowledge lacks authenticity and instead reproduces essentialist narratives and discourses on women in the region. That is, when researchers only prioritize aspects of their work that align with prevailing disciplinary expectations, this may potentially impact the authenticity and comprehensiveness of their scholarship on women and gender politics in MENA societies.

Notwithstanding these challenges that feminist researchers face in the discipline of political science, several interviewees highlighted their rewarding classroom experience. Students are often excited to learn from "these stories." It pushes students to reflect critically on their own misconceptions and to scrutinize common stereotypes about the MENA region and gender relations in it. Several interviewees found that this kind of research is especially inspiring for students of color—and women of color in particular. That is not to say that all teachers of gender politics enjoy such a rewarding classroom experience. Studies have shown that students are not always ready to interrogate and challenge their own gender misconceptions, especially amid the current global backlash against gender studies (Allam, Shalaby, and Zaki 2023; Çavdar, Yasar, and Fisk 2019). Thus, while feminist researchers in political science face challenges, the transformative impact of their work on students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, underscores the enduring significance of their contributions to the reshaping of perceptions and the fostering of critical thinking.

There is, then, a third way in which the experiences of feminist researchers studying MENA societies overlap with those of other feminist researchers: both face challenges related to the marginalization of the study of gender politics within political science and pressures to prioritize traditional inquiries over social justice considerations. Once again, however, their connection to the region causes them to face additional complexities and challenges. These challenges include skepticism and pushback from mainstream political scientists—when presenting findings that are deeply embedded in personal experiences and qualitative methodologies—and pressures to conform to disciplinary expectations, which might potentially affect the authenticity of their scholarship and cause them to be labeled as "native informants" or "Western apologists."

Conclusion

Political science scholars conducting fieldwork in the MENA region illustrate the ways in which authoritarianism influences the research process and mediates the researchers' experiences in field sites (Benstead 2018; Clark 2006; Clark and Cavatorta 2018; Parkinson 2022; Tripp 2018). Notwithstanding this important body of literature, we know less about how the intertwinement of authoritarianism and patriarchy and the researchers' positionality within it affects the research process, the researchers' experience in the field, and the knowledge produced. This article contributes to this body of literature by specifically focusing on the experiences of female political scientists who are currently based in Western institutions but are originally from MENA countries.

Recounting their experiences conducting fieldwork, the interviewees show that researching gender politics is a contentious topic that places researchers on the radar of the state and its security apparatus. For native scholars who are based in Western institutions, the issue is compounded by the fact that they are sometimes viewed as traitors by regimes that claim they are tarnishing the image of the government by scrutinizing its gender policies and raising questions about the status of women's rights. Within the wider society, the politics of representation also impose certain limitations and expectations on these scholars. While all female researchers are subject to gender norms and expectations in the field site, researchers who are originally from the MENA region must comply with further strict social expectations, and deviations from them are not always tolerated. Finally, scholars reveal how the discipline of political science does not always appreciate knowledge that centers feminist social justice demands. Notwithstanding these challenges, participants also highlight how their positionality opened opportunities for them to connect with their subjects, gain inner understanding of the context, and engage with questions that matter in the real world.

Against this background, how can feminist scholars mitigate the challenges of conducting fieldwork in authoritarian patriarchal contexts and when presenting their findings in the Western discipline of political science? Toward the end of my interviews, I decided to expand my pool of interviewees to include scholars outside the discipline. This article does not include data from this cohort of interviewees; the expanded study will be the subject of a future project. During the preliminary round of interviews with these scholars, I noticed that their experiences in the field site converge with those of their political science counterparts, but their experiences within their disciplines are different. Disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, as well as interdisciplinary programs, seem to be more receptive to feminist researchers' knowledge and analysis of societies. One of the most profound pieces of advice I received from an interviewee in an interdisciplinary international studies program, regarding how to address the challenges of fieldwork and academia, was to "figure a place where you are comfortable."[20] I could write a list of practical advice on what one should and should not do in a patriarchal authoritarian field site in the MENA region and when presenting analysis to a less sympathetic academic audience in Western political science. However, I believe that the issue feminist scholars face is much deeper and more far-reaching and cannot be adequately addressed by a laundry list of practical advice. The issue seems to be one that is intimately related to our identity at the field site and in the discipline of political science—that is, who do we want to be and what do we want to bring forward in these spaces.

There are no easy answers to these questions, but the above statement by my interviewee provides some guidance: figure out a place where one is comfortable. What does it take and what is lost by finding a place where one is comfortable? It takes understanding the systems that limit us—as well as those that help us—in academia, identifying our allies within those systems, and acknowledging our limitations in field sites. Most importantly, it takes coming to terms with the inevitable trade-offs that we have to make to find that place. I am not sure if we will ever be comfortable, since research and curiosity are motivated by discomfort and by an eagerness to learn and change the status quo. I believe that we might rather find clarity about how to mitigate and negotiate these challenges and to what ends. Such clarity will help us to make choices about what risks we are willing to accept at our research sites and in our professional spaces and what trade-offs we are willing to live with in both.

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Notes

1 I am indebted to one of the article's anonymous reviewers for helping me better articulate this question.

2 Giulio Regeni was an Italian doctoral student who disappeared in Cairo, Egypt, on January 25, 2016. His body was found on February 3, 2016, showing signs of severe torture. Regeni was conducting research on independent labor unions in Egypt, and his disappearance and death raised suspicions of foul play and concerns that he may have been targeted by the security apparatus in Egypt for his academic work. The circumstances surrounding his death remain a subject of investigation and controversy.

3 In addition to academic research, some scholars within the discipline of political science have been engaged in designing practical guidelines for conducting responsible, ethical, and constructive social research in the Arab world. Notably, the Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa (REMENA) project has undertaken the task of addressing these inquiries. One of the project's focal points is to explore how to employ an interdisciplinary approach to understand complex issues like how gender dynamics affect research design, process, and outcomes in the region.

4 King Salman relaxed the male guardianship system in 2017.

5 Interviewee 4. May 30, 2022. Online interview.

6 Interviewee 5. May 30, 2022. Online interview.

7 Interviewee 2. May 27, 2022. Online interview.

8 Interviewee 4. May 30, 2022. Online interview.

9 Interviewee 2. May 27, 2022. Online interview.

10 Interviewee 1. May 26, 2022. Online interview.

11 Interviewee 6. June 1, 2022. Online interview.

12 Interviewee 5. May 30, 2022. Online interview.

13 Interviewee 4. May 30, 2022. Online interview.

14 Interviewee 2. May 27, 2022. Online interview.

15 Interviewee 4. May 30, 2022. Online interview.

16 Interviewee 7. June 11, 2022. Online interview.

17 Interviewee 6. June 1, 2022. Online interview.

18 Interviewee 1. May 26, 2022. Online interview.

19 Interviewee 1. May 26, 2022. Online interview.

20 Interviewee 7. June 11, 2022. Online interview.

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