Gendered Workplace Segregation and Organizational Capacities: Women’s Activism In the 2006-2008 Mahalla Textile Strikes

Between 2006 and 2008, female organizing in the state-owned textile factory in Mahalla (an industrial city west of Cairo) was unprecedented. In contrast to what dominant gender and labor scholarship would have predicted, women played the lead role in strikes relative to earlier strike waves in the 1980s, despite the fact that the factory had become more gender segregated, the union committees were not feminized, and the women subscribed to traditional gender roles. This research builds on in-depth interviews with female and male workers during my stay in Mahalla in 2009 and 2010. I found that structural, organizational, and union-level institutional changes influenced women’s propensity to organize. First, the rising importance of clothing in international markets since the 1990s led to female labor segregation in the clothing departments. Working in valued sections of the factory empowered women and induced men to support women’s activism. Second, working in all-female spaces engendered women’s organizational capacities and increased men’s dependency on women’s organizing. Third, obstructed opportunities for achieving influence inside the official union encouraged male organizers to build horizontal solidarity with female workers.

Key Words: gendered work, women’s organizing, strikes, female textile workers, Egyptian textile industry.

Introduction

Leading gender and labor scholars associate gender segregation and the predominance of a conservative culture with a “docile” female labor force, but this was not the case in one recent labor uprising in Egypt. Between 2006 and 2008, workers in the public Misr Weaving and Spinning Company of Mahalla (an industrial city west of Cairo) organized a wildcat strike involving around 24,000 workers, including 5,000 women. One of the notable features of the Misr Mahalla strikes is that, in contrast to earlier strike waves of the 1980s, women were integral to organizing the strikes and taking leadership roles within them. This is especially surprising

1 In Egypt there are a number of state sectors: government, public, and business public. Misr is

2 I will refer to the company as Misr Mahalla.
because the factory had become more gender segregated since the 1990s, and the women subscribed to traditional gender roles. In the 1980s, some women participated in strikes, one played a leading role, and some organized a go-slow to support their arrested husbands. In the 2000s, although women accounted for a similar proportion of the labor force, they played distinctly different roles. Women organized the segregated clothing departments, encouraged men to join the strikes, participated in large numbers, and assumed leadership positions. In 2007 women participated in a week-long sit-in, remaining alongside men during both days and nights in the factory in an action involving the whole community of Mahalla. The traditional barrier between men and women was thus transcended and women challenged not only abusive employers and trade union officials but also societal traditions. Significantly, male workers in Mahalla integrated with women strikers and supported female organizing. Male–female solidarity was apparent throughout the strikes.

My goal is to explain the involvement of women in the Misr Mahalla strikes: Why have women, in contrast to the 1980 strike wave, became organizers and played leading roles; and why did men encourage women’s activism?

Women’s role in Mahalla confounds dominant gender and labor theories indicating that women would remain inactive there. Scholars often associate gender segregation with an especially exploited and inactive female labor force. Others have argued that the key to women’s participation lies in shifts in gender discourse. My findings demonstrate that there were no changes in the gender discourses capable of explaining why women organized, and simultaneously, there were prevalent gender discourses presupposing compliance. Others have shown that feminizing unions—the creation of women’s committees, the integration of female staffers or feminist leaders—has facilitated women’s participation in organizing. In Mahalla,
however, organizing took place in informal and culturally conservative union committees that had not been feminized.

My findings support structural, organizational, and institutional explanations. I argue that three main factors explain women’s leading role in the 2006–08 strikes: First, as the markets for clothing boomed in the 1990s and cheap and “docile” female labor was available, employers in Mahalla segregated women in clothing departments. Segregation empowered women by creating a consciousness of their significance within the economy. Second, all-female spaces empowered women by elevating their status and fostering close networks and prominent female leadership. These structural and organizational factors also influenced the men: they also understood that location in valued sections of the factory necessitated women’s activism; and made women’s organizing in the locked and segregated clothing department essential. Third, with the onset of a new wave of neoliberal restructuring in the 2000s, official unions became increasingly unrepresentative, and possibilities for achieving influence within them became obstructed. This also prompted militant male workers to form horizontal solidarities with female workers in the factory. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Female Organizing and Class Solidarity in Mahalla
I will start by reviewing dominant theories of women’s organizing, highlight their inadequacies, and present my thesis. Then I will describe the strikes of the 1980s and the 2000s, and present factors and mechanisms explaining women’s organizational capacities, and men’s interest in female activism. Finally, I highlight the inadequacies of dominant theories in explaining women’s organizing in Mahalla. I conclude that while employers use gendered practices to increase profits, women’s consciousness and ability to resist and organize are shaped by the structure of the industry and the organization of work, not by gender discourses and feminist union restructuring.

**Gender discourses, feminizing unions, and industrial structures: women’s organizing and class solidarity**

Three explanatory frameworks have dominated the study of women’s organizing: gender discourses, feminizing unions, and industrial characteristics.

*Gender discourses, union strategies, and women’s organizing*

Scholars often find that women become “docile” and are precluded from challenging employers when they are segregated in low-wage, unskilled, or semi-skilled jobs with high turnover, in which they lack both opportunities for advancement and other job options (Safa 1995). Though these factors accurately describe labor conditions for many women, they cannot tell us when women are or aren’t likely to mobilize. By assuming that the segregation of women in low skilled jobs is likely to undermine women’s capacities, irrespective of specific industrial characteristics, scholars have looked elsewhere to explain shop floor politics: at discourses and the feminization of union institutions.

Leading gender scholars have argued that properly understanding shop floor politics involves examining employers’ gender discourses. Lee (1993), for example, found that managers exploited
women’s dexterity and femininity to encourage hard work, and women used the familial discourses to gain concessions from employers. Familial discourses, Lee explains, propagated an individualistic culture and hindered women from developing solidarity on the shop floor. This is because women considered work only as a means to an end and refrained from meeting outside the factory. The primacy of motherhood, notes Lee, led to transient work relations and experiences. In addition, Lee found that female workers accepted what she called “consent to generalized laboring”: they did not problematize the nature of work, and they accepted as fact these were the only kinds of jobs available to them. Their only hope was that their children would have better education and be able to attain better jobs. These discourses, then, produced the mechanism for the reproduction of class relations on the shop floor.

Salzinger (2003) is more cautious, stressing that gender is not fixed. Yet, managers, she explains, address workers from specific perspectives, and insofar as these rhetorics and discourses resonate with workers, they shape shop floor subjectivities. Thus, like Lee, Slazinger concludes that discourses essentially shape shop floor politics. In one of her case studies, femininity is emphasized and used for labor control by the manager through the visibility of sexuality. In this particular factory, women were mostly concerned with their sexual appeal and appearance, and managers used this as a means of control on the shop floor. In another case study, managers indirectly emphasized the masculinity of male operatives on the shop floor, leading to male-female competition, which, in turn, contributed to engendering shop floor autonomy and even resistance. Accordingly, employers assert their power and control primarily through dominant discourses and workers internalize employer values. I will show that, in the case I examine, although employers used gender to maximize profits through segregation, consciousness is based
on actions and organizational capabilities closely related to the point of production (Fantasia 1988), rather than being formed by cultural attitudes and gender discourses.

Another group of scholars has focused on union structures and strategies to explain when women are more likely to organize. I have called this perspective feminizing unions. Scholars argue that, as a result of the policies of economic restructuring there was a need to activate union members; and some unions managed to get large numbers of women involved in organizing. These unions often mutated from servicing to organizing, and created separate structures and committees for women that raised gender based demands (Nolan and Ryan 2003; Briskin 1999). Others found that women’s participation did not necessitate separate structures, but the unions had to integrate women staffers in leadership positions and emphasize reproductive responsibilities and caregiving (Cranford 2007b; Cranford 2007a). Finally, some found that the predominance of feminist consciousness among women and especially, female leaders explained women’s organizing (Milkman and Teriquez 2012).

Women, then, are more likely to organize when there are institutional changes at the union level and when union strategies focus on challenges facing women, especially as mothers, and when these coincide with a transformation in women’s consciousness. Workers in Mahalla organized through informal union committees, but although women took on leadership positions, the union was not restructured to facilitate this process and did not use strategies specifically appealing to women. Also, there were no separate union committees for women in Mahalla, and neither female workers nor leaders showed particular feminist consciousness and many, in fact, subscribed to traditional gender roles. However, working in segregated female spaces helped women in Mahalla organize, but for class-based demands; and the weakening of the institutional union apparatuses in Egypt contributed to make-female solidarity.
In the case I will describe below, we cannot explain women’s activism by looking at gender discourses or values alone; and though women were better able to organize in all-female spaces, feminizing union structures was not necessary. Women’s empowerment and organizing in Mahalla were preceded by changes in the industry and in its organization of work. What does the literature tell us about the industrial conditions under which women are most likely to mobilize and form class solidarities?

*Industrial characteristics and all-female spaces: women’s organizing and class solidarity*

As the work of Silver (2003) and Murray and Schwarz (2015), has already shown, structural changes in the industry and the organization of work shape workers’ opportunities for organizing. Gender scholars have long demonstrated that once industries employing women, such as textiles, became concentrated in large-scale factories with more advanced technology and become more directly subjected to market pressures, conditions became more suitable for women’s organizing. Waldinger (1985) shows that an industry’s increasing competitiveness and the consequent reorganization of work transformed organizing opportunities for women.

Nevertheless, Waldinger has explained, women faced a lot of challenges in organizing, especially from men. Fear of competition from low-paid female workers induced men to block women from union organizing and leadership positions. Prominent feminist scholars have proposed that understanding women’s workplace segregation and exclusion from organizing requires examining how patriarchal male workers exclude women from taking on ‘male’ jobs, reinforce sex segregation, and exclude women from meetings and union organizing (Alice Kessler-Harris 1975; Hartman 1976). Milkman (1987), writing about the women working during World War II in the U.S., when they were brought into “male” jobs because men were at war, found that the structure of the industry and employment patterns shaped male workers’ willingness to form solidarities
with women. The industry’s dependence on low wages, and the employment of large numbers of women alongside men facilitated joint struggles for equality in pay, and undercut employer attempts to reduce wages.

Consistent with structural arguments, I will show that the concentration and segregation of women in Mahalla since the 1990s into the competitive clothing departments, increased women’s opportunities for organizing. I add that women were empowered by the ability to form cohesive networks (Dixon and Roscigno 2003) in all-female spaces, and by controlling the productive process. Finally, I will show that segregation induced the men to form solidarities with the women around common class-based demands. It was, thus, men’s workplace interest, not patriarchal values, that explained their attitudes towards women organizing.

**Method and case selection**

Research for this paper was conducted over three visits to Egypt between 2009 and 2010. On my third visit to Mahalla in the summer of 2010 I spent two months hosted by a retired Misr company worker and a leader of 1980s strikes, who ran a socialist center in the city called Afaq Ishtirakeya (Socialist Horizon). Using the snowball method, I interviewed 30 Mahalla workers, 15 female and 15 male (including one official committee union associated with the regime). The company includes 38 factories: 13 in spinning, 15 in textiles, 8 in clothing, 1 for medical cotton and 1 for spinning and weaving silk textiles. My interview sample represented the three largest and most active departments, and included prominent male and female figures that were also active in the 1980s. Finally, I interviewed 10 researchers and civil society activists.

I selected the Misr Mahalla company because it has a history of labor militancy, and an historically equivalent proportion of women employees in the 1980s and the 2000s, which allows for comparison between the role of women in the current strike wave and in earlier strikes.
Currently, the company employs 24,000 personnel, including 5,000 women; in comparison to 33,000, including 7,000 women in the 1980s. Mahalla is also an ideal case for examining the conditions under which men and women can form solidarities; the other cases of pronounced female organizing in Egypt in the 2000s took place in factories with majority female labor, such as the Mansora Espania textile factory.

In addition, the Mahalla strikes are considered the most significant of the labor protests that led to an unprecedented cycle of labor unrest (Beinin 2010). In addition, the Mahalla workers’ planned strike on 6 April 2008 resulted in the mini uprising of 2008, when workers and residents in the town center tore down pictures of Mubarak for the first time in Egyptian history. These events can be seen as the first seeds of the Egyptian uprising.

The interviews revealed shop floor politics and changes in the production process since the 1980s: employer strategies, organization of work, and co-worker relations. I also collected macro-level data about changes in the Egyptian textile industry. These revealed that clothing trade had grown in importance since the 1990s, and this corresponded with interviewee testimony about the importance of clothing and the segregation of women in clothing production.

I then probed workers about the details of the 1980s and 2000s strikes: who organized, participated, and led. I also supplemented the interview material with leaflets distributed during the strike periods. Significantly, workers were asked to explain their motivation for their roles in the two periods. These questions illuminated the changes in women’s consciousness brought about by workplace segregation, explaining their empowerment since the 1980s. For example, women proudly explained that, in contrast to the 1980s, in the 2000s they controlled the production process in clothing and worked on all skilled machines. As for men, segregation

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3 These numbers are based on an interview with the previous head of the official union at the Misr Company (Ahmad). Interviewee names are substituted with pseudonyms.
increased their dependency on women, which explained their rationale for forming solidarities in the 2000s. The men repeatedly explained that the participation of women in the segregated clothing departments was crucial to the success of the strike.

I will now turn to the first empirical section of the paper that compares women’s roles in the 1980s and 2000s.

**Women in the 1984-8 and the 2006-8 strike waves**

The 1980s and the 2000s strikes both started in response to spikes in food prices.⁴ Workers primarily demanded wage supplements⁵ and organized through informal committees in opposition to the official union. However, women played distinctly different roles in the two strike periods. In the 2000s, their organizational capacities were greater, and they produced prominent female leaders.

*The 1984-8 strikes:*

Starting in 1984 workers organized marches, demanded wage supplements, and objected to the employment of women on night shifts. In 1986 workers organized a strike and requested a paid day off and other wage supplements. In 1988 protests erupted when Mubarak revoked the school grant supplement.

In the 1980s, workers often marched outside the factory, and sometimes occupied it, to which the state responded with substantial force. The women I interviewed did not take part in any organizing during the 1980s: “In ‘86 I did not know anything. Security told us: there is a strike, go down. And the factory was closed. I went home. I do not remember the strike of 1988.” (Mai). Others, however, participated. A woman who worked in spinning production at the time recalled: “In the 1986 strike, workers chanted ‘Mubarak what did you do? A kilo of rice is one pound,

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⁵ Public sector wages comprise a modest basic salary and a number of wage supplements.
Mubarak what did you do? A kilo of meat is at 10 pounds.’ I participated and chanted.” (Ahlam).
The women I interviewed worked in various departments in the 1980s. It is noteworthy, that the women discussed participating in the 1980s protest on an individual level not as part of a women’s group.

Even in the 1980s, women working in sections that made clothing played a much more significant role than women who worked in “traditional male” departments, like spinning. A retired communist male strike leader from the 1980s explained that: “after the arrest of the strike leaders in 1986, the wives of the arrested workers organized a go-slow and chanted ‘release before production’ in the clothing department” (Halim). The women, he said, were contacted through a female Communist Party member. She organized the go-slow, leafleted, and helped form a ‘relief committee’ to collect money for the families of the arrested workers. The women did not leave their work stations, but maintained a go-slow until their husbands were released. Some women, Halim recalled, were duped by managers and the men tried to shame them into rejecting their paychecks (a protest strategy used by Egyptian workers). This indicates that many women were not on board with the strike.

In the second round of strikes in 1988, the women played an even smaller role. Many of the women I interviewed did not even remember the 1988 strike. But even in the 1980s, the relative concentration of women in closed departments allowed them to play a bigger role than women who were integrated in “traditional” male departments. Interestingly, after ten workers were transferred following the 1988 strikes, the board of the Spinning and Textile syndicate demanded that the Trade Union Federation intervene to stop the persecution of Mahalla workers (Mahalla Community, leaflet February 1989).

*The 2006-8 strikes:*
Interviews with workers revealed that the 2006 strike had been instigated by a document signed by the prime minister and circulated among workers, which stated that workers had the right to profits equivalent to two months wages. Around 30 male workers in different groups and factories started discussing the possibility of a strike. Detecting a high level of receptivity to the idea, they distributed leaflets about the two-month profit share, urged workers to gather on the morning of 7 December to march towards the company headquarters, and to reject their paychecks. Only a few men organized for this day and participation was largely spontaneous. Women were not involved in prior organizing but had planned to join: “When we heard about the strikes we were thrilled. We know that strikes start from the men’s spinning department and we started asking about the strike leaders in order to make contact with them” (Ahlam). As soon as they heard the first chants, the women immediately joined in great numbers and incited men to join:

I do not know where I got the strength from. I took out the women from my factory and we went down and Ahlam was supposed to bring other women. As we left the gates we saw the men confused, standing by, unsure whether to join. We chanted: Here are the women! Where are the men? I then appealed to them by opening my hands and signaling to them to come closer and I started chanting

God is great, and everybody repeated it after me (Wardi).

“Here are the women! Where are the men?” was one of the most popular slogans that gave female Mahalla workers their reputation for bravery across Egypt. In the 2000s strikes, leading women had planned to participate in advance, women were the first to join in large numbers, and incited the men to join.

The strike continued for three days before management conceded and gave workers their two months profits. Workers accepted, but they had made other demands for incentives, increases in
the basic salary, food stamps, transportation, housing, and health-related facilities. Workers also started lobbying for the creation of an independent union, and female leaders collected signatures from women endorsing the idea (Shaker). In September 2007, as the Muslim Holiday season of Ramadan approached and workers demands had not been met, workers were ready for another round of confrontation.

In contrast to the 1980s, female organizing and leadership grew following the success of the first strike. The weeklong sit-in that started 23 September 2007 was more organized than the first strike in December, and women were central to making it happen. Only the women had access to the clothing departments, and they organized them by “leafleting in the cafeteria and explaining to the women why they should strike” (Hanan). The organizers not only made sure that women in clothing were on-board with the strike, they also approached the men in their departments:

We would go to the preparation departments [the few remaining mixed departments that women had access to], and explain to the men why and when there will be a strike. On the day of the strike in 2007 we went to the men’s departments and asked them to stop their machines, we made sure the strike was taking place (Ahlam).

In 2007, women showed higher levels of organizing than in earlier strikes. While in the 1980s women participated because they heard or were told about the strike, in the 2000s, women took the initiative, mobilized their female co-workers, and incited the men to join. A male strike leader recalled that women would even approach the men and say: “Why don’t you participate? Are you not a man?” (Essam). Male strike leaders were more dominant, but prominent women leaders participated in the informal committees, conducted meeting at their homes, and traveled to Cairo for union meetings and negotiations. One of the notable aspects of this strike is that female
workers brought their families to the factory and around 120 women stayed there overnight with the men (Tamer). In the context of Mahalla this was revolutionary and some of the women paid a social price as rumors spread about misbehavior. The striking women, however, also took on traditional roles of cooking and providing food for the striking workers. The factory was “occupied” by the families of workers, and, as is often the case when women get involved, the whole community became involved in the strike (Kaplan 1982).6

The state did not use repression at the outset of the 2006 strikes as it had in 1980s, but the strike details revealed that women played a leading role from day one, before it was clear that the state would not immediately use force. In contrast to the 1980s, women organized the clothing departments, most women took part in protest, participated in workers committees, and they encouraged male workers to join. The state, however, eventually managed to split the workers’ informal committee, co-opt some of the strike leaders, and then use repression against workers and the population of the city on 6 April 2008. One strike leader was dismissed and five others, including two prominent female leaders were transferred, suffering huge wage reductions. It is telling that, in contrast to the 1980s, women were punished and the official union did nothing to aid the transferred workers.

**Structural and organizational factors: the importance of clothing and all-female spaces**

In this section I will show that as Egyptian industry faced harsher international competition in the yarn and textile sectors, there was a turn to clothing, and to the employment of larger numbers of women in its production. At Misr Mahalla, the employers started segregating women in the clothing departments; and though they benefited from exploiting “docile” and cheaper female labor, when strikes erupted in the 2000s, the unexpected happened. Segregation had changed

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6 But contrary to Kaplan’s arguments, women do not have a different kind of consciousness and they do not participate only to defend their social roles. Like the men, they participated to defend their rights as workers.
women’s consciousness and empowered them; increasing men’s dependency, and inducing them to support women’s organizing. Table 1 describes the changes since the 1980s that helped women organize.

*The growing importance of clothing and gender segregation*

Employers in the public sector in Mahalla started segregating women—by transferring women who worked in other sections to clothing, and by hiring new women only into the clothing departments—to take advantage of growing markets and compete with the private sector. The Egyptian textile industry had become less competitive and the turn to clothing, along with low labor costs, gave Egypt an advantage in international markets. The state sector was especially keen on becoming more competitive in clothing after the private sector had taken the lead. By employing only women in the clothing departments, employers in Mahalla were able to take advantage of cheap labor and coerce constant increases in productivity.

As a result of the politics of economic restructuring, the Egyptian textile industry has been in decline both in terms of employment, wages, and export levels relative to other industries. Most significant have been changes in the textile trade regime since the mid-90s, which have gradually eliminated the secured quota for Egyptian textiles in the American market. Simultaneously, the industry has been facing harsh competition, especially from China, but also from India and Turkey (Rajaa’i 2008).

To become more competitive, the Egyptian textile industry turned to the production of finished clothing for export. Based on data from World Trade Organization figures for the ratio of clothing exports to textiles, I calculated that exports grew from around 1 percent in the 1980s to 56 percent in 1997, and 86 percent in 2006 (see graph 1). This indicates that there has been a general

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7 Beinin (2010) also argues that the segregation of women in clothing empowered them (71).
transformation in the kind of textiles produced. Importantly, female labor participation in the textile industry increased and the proportion of male employment decreased during this same period. Women’s employment in textile and clothing production, as a share of non-government and waged employment levels, increased from less than 10 percent in 1988 to 16 percent in 2006 (Assad and El Hamidi 2009). The private sector has been leading in the export of textiles. While the state sector accounted for around 90 percent of textile and clothing production in the 1970s, this declined to 35 percent in 2003. The state sector lagged particularly behind in the production of clothing: 14.4 percent in comparison to 85.5 percent in the private sector in 2003 (Rajaa’i 2008). Interestingly, the state sector invested in clothing production equipment to a greater degree than other equipment (Magder 2005). The state sector was, therefore, striving to catch up with the private sector in producing and exporting clothing.

Since the 1990s, employers in Mahalla have segregated women in clothing departments. In the 1980s there were 7000 women, 1500 of which worked in the clothing departments along many other men. In the 2000, the overwhelming majority of the 5000 women worked in clothing with a tiny minority of male engineers and mechanics. The history of employment segregation in Misr Mahalla during the 1990s demonstrates that employers segregated women in response to the upsurge in the expanding market for clothing to utilize the availability of cheap and “docile” female labor. In the 1980s Egyptian male workers started migrating to Iraq in search of better job opportunities, and women in Mahalla replaced men in the factory, taking on “traditional” male jobs in the spinning and weaving sections, and working the night shifts. As described earlier, the men objected and demanded the transfer of women out of these sections: “we (informal workers

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8 Recently there has also been a decrease in the export of clothing and ready wear possibly leading to an increase in unemployment among female workers. See Beinin (2010).
9 Specific data from Misr Mahalla is not available.
committee) used to raise this in all of our marches in the 1980s, but the employers and the official union did nothing about it” (Halim). The men explained that: by law women were not allowed to work night shifts; it was not suitable for married women, and caused social problems, such as female infidelity. The women, on the other hand, neither mobilized for the transfer nor resisted it. They proudly recalled that they used to achieve higher productivity levels (this was also confirmed by male workers), but said that it is difficult for married women to do shift work.

It is plausible that male workers felt threatened by the influx of female labor into their “traditional” departments in the 1980s, probably because employers were able to enforce higher levels of productivity from the women. Significantly, employers slowly started to transfer the women to clothing only in the 1990s, after Egyptian men began returning from Iraq; they also discovered their own advantages in segregating women in the growing clothing sections. The fact that employers also transferred men out of the clothing departments reinforces this interpretation. One female worker recalled: “In 1984 half of the people working on the machines as production workers in clothing were men and half were women. In the 1990s there were no more men working as production workers. Most of them had either retired or been moved to other sections (Wardi). Like Milkman (1987), I found that employers’ placement decisions were not made in response to male workers’ interest in removing women from “male” jobs, but unlike Milkman, I found that employer decisions were not based on ‘foregone conclusions about sex typing,’ but rather on market considerations and perceived opportunities offered by cheap female labor.

Importantly, the segregation of women in the clothing departments paid off. One woman said:

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Unfortunately, it would have been practically impossible to interview employers in Mahalla because of Egyptian authoritarianism.
All the women produce more than they have to per day. We are supposed to produce 500 in 8 hours we produce amounts for ten hours. Women also incur the highest penalties in wage reductions. Most women do not know how to read their check and so might be taking a hit. Employers do not dare do that with the men because they are responsible for their families, but women are with broken wings (Wardi).

Employers thus benefited from women’s employment in clothing, but when the strikes of the 2000s happened, women showed unprecedented levels of organizing. How did the segregation of women in extremely despotic departments of the factory result in female organizing, and in prominent female leaders?

Women’s organizational capacities: valued sectors, workplace status, close networks, and prominent leaders

Segregation led to changes in women’s consciousness, empowering them. First, segregated women became aware that they had higher disruptive capacities in occupying crucial export sectors. Second, segregation in all-female spaces translated into a higher workplace status for individual women, closer networks, and the emergence of prominent female leaders, all of which further increased women’s organizational capacities.

Though women’s participation in the formal labor force\textsuperscript{11} and in clothing production has increased since the 1980s; because of layoffs in the state sector, the actual number of women working in Misr Mahalla has decreased. Yet, in line with Waldinger’s (1985) findings, women’s employment in the growing and competitive clothing departments had an impact on activism.

First, when describing their work, women repeatedly said that “now we are many” (in comparison

\textsuperscript{11} Female labor participation rose from 10.9% percent in 1981 to 21.8% in 2002 and 22.34% in 2006 (Beinin 2010).
to the 1980s), indicating that women are important and account for a large percentage of the labor force. Second, the women’s voluntary emphasis on exports indicates that they were aware of the importance of their sections: “My section is for shirts that are exported to foreign countries like the US and Europe, high quality shirts” (Wardi). Another woman said: “We are the best department, we export our products. Very clean work. We are known for our good quality.” (Sameera); Or “We produce and send to export directly from our department” (Doa’a). Women proudly described the importance of their sections in the factory.

The burgeoning market for clothing also translated into very strong employer demands for increased productivity, which I argue also contributed to women’s motivation to join the strikes:

It was really painful, the pressure was very high and they were always increasing the targets for productivity. We accepted the reality as it is, and agreed to everything they said. We did not pray we did not eat we did not leave the machines at all. We had no awareness, no courage, and we were afraid to talk. It is completely different than after the strike. After the strike we learned the culture of defiance (Ahlam).

Women were, thus, aware of the importance of the clothing departments for exports; and were keen on gaining power to resist the constant demands for higher productivity. The ability to resist productivity demands and punishments after the strikes were mentioned by most women.

Significantly, women’s involvement was crucial for the success of the strike. Women account for a quarter of the labor force; and they work in important and productive sections, and though the company was vertically integrated, there were large quantities of stored fabric in the factory (Halim 2016). The clothing departments could continue working, then, even if the spinning and textile workers struck. In the 1980s’ the clothing departments were smaller and less strategically
well-placed within the economy, and therefore, as a group, women were not able to undermine the strikes.

In addition, working in all-female spaces empowered the women by elevating their workplace status. First it meant that, in contrast to the 1980s, women controlled all the production positions, and did the skilled jobs formerly occupied by men, such as the seize.r.s. The women proudly explained that:

We do all the work. In Mahalla there are 13 clothing factories. In each factory there are maybe 20 men, the rest are females. And none of the 20 work as production workers. There used to be men on the heavy iron and seizure machines. This changed since the 1990s, and it is all women who work on the iron (Zainab).

Occupying all production and skilled machines translated into a higher workplace status and into power and organizational capacities. Women were aware that occupying the majority of production machines gave them disruptive power.

Second, gender segregation allowed for the development of close networks between the women based on grievance-sharing, similar identities, and work status. These prior networks have been found important in explaining strike participation (Dixon and Roscigno 2003). Prior to the strikes, women supported each other by creating informal funds (Jama’ia) to support the women in need. They also formed solidarities to confront abuse by managers, and helped each other with productivity targets to avoid penalties:

We have something called a friendship fund. We help each other in times of need.

If one of us has a baby or is getting married we support her. If someone is going on retirement we bring a present. We spent most of the time together. If one of the
women refused to participate in the strike she would be reprehended by her co-workers. The strike is in the benefit of everyone (Doa’a).

In the 1980s workers in Mahalla created these funds throughout the factory, but the concentration of women in clothing helped women form a group identity. This group identity translated into solidarity that aided women in secretly leafleting and disseminating information with strike details and encouraged women to join the strikes as a bloc. Women in the 1980s, on the other hand, discussed their participation on an individual level.

The all-female spaces and the lack of competition from dominant male leaders also fostered the development of female leadership. In contrast to the 1980s, in the recent strike, activism in clothing was not primarily led by married couples. One of the older women in the factory explained that there were 6 female leaders and around 30 women who played significant roles (Zainab). One woman described the leaders:

There are female leaders who speak in negotiations. In factory number 1 everyone listened to Ahlam and followed her. She had a group of women that followed her, around 50 women, and the 50 brought in another 50. She knew things we did not know and explained things to us. We loved her, she is a courageous woman (Mai).

As the older male leaders explained, only one woman, a Communist Party member, played a leading role in the 1980s. This time, just like the men, there were women leaders who were followed by large numbers of other women.

*Men’s interest in women organizing: organizational dependency*

Men’s interest in women’s organizing was also based on structural and organizational considerations that increased men’s dependency on women. First, like the women, the men also
understood that women worked in important and productive sections of the factory. One of the male strike leaders explained:

Clothing and spinning are the most productive departments in the factory. I did not expect the women to participate. A friend of mine called me and said clothing went down, and they are touring other departments to get workers out. When I heard that they participated I went down. This move by the women was explosive (Fathi).

This is especially important because, the men explained, the factory is not working at full capacity and many machines stand idle (Mohammad). Because women occupy one of the most productive departments in the factory, the men understood that the success of the strike depended on the participation of the women. The men also expressed interest in women’s activism by explaining that the women’s participation “inhibited security forces from attacking us.” Or “The women are a source of motivation for the men; “Shame on me if I am a man and leave the women to protest alone.” (Moreed).

Second, all men explained that the clothing sections operated behind locked doors and they had no access to them. This was similar to the 1980s, but in the 2000s the clothing departments were bigger, and none of the men worked there, making organizing a bigger challenge and increasing men’s dependency on women’s organizing. This was mainly expressed by the interest in encouraging female leadership: “I wanted Ahlam and Wardi (two leading female workers) to appear on the media and participate in negotiations” (Moreed). Interviews with women also revealed that the men were keen on getting the women involved in organizing:

The men used to tell us that you have to be present with us and support us. A woman is the backbone of the man. The focus is on the women. In fact the men
said that the strike will not succeed without you, and that women in the factory are braver than men, they are the men. During the first strike they asked us not go home (Zainab).

Clearly, men were keen on motivating the women and making sure they participated. The men understood that women’s participation and leadership worked to their benefit. In sum, structural and organizational factors contributed to women’s organizing and to men’s support for female activism. In comparison to the 1980s, segregation changed women’s consciousness and empowered them because they now worked in valued sectors, enjoyed elevated work status, and developed close networks and prominent leaders. The men also understood the importance of the clothing departments and needed the support of the women to organize the strike.

In addition, there were external factors related to changes in state–labor relations that also influenced the men and contributed to class solidarity.

**The decline in official unionism: male interest in women’s organizing and class solidarity**

Unions in Egypt have been corporatist and state led since their establishment, but they have been significantly undermined since the 2000s, encouraging male workers to search for solidarities with their lower status female co-workers overriding their traditionally conservative and patriarchal values. See table 1.

Under Nasser, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was established in 1961 and labor was incorporated into the regime’s apparatus. Official unionism, however, has gone through serial transformations in Egypt since the *Infitah* (opening-up) liberalization policies of Anwar El-Sadat in the 1970s, which intensified with the acceleration of neoliberal policies in the 2000s. The official trade union structure is pyramidal in Egypt, with a general ETUF board of directors, 23
boards of directors for the different industries, and 1,850 local trade union committees. Both Posusney (1997) and Paczynska (2009) have shown that in spite of being a corporatist trade union, the ETUF played a role in forestalling the advance of neo-liberal policies during the 90s. The turning point came in 2003, when the state drafted a new United Labor code giving employers complete freedom, such as reducing protection against summary dismissal. This new labor law negated the little leverage official unions had left *vis-à-vis* employers and the state. The new law, researcher and human rights activist Intisar Bader explained, also transformed the structure of the labor force. Currently, there are large numbers of workers in Misr Mahalla on temporary contracts or with no contract at all. These workers are not union members (Intisar Bader 2010), further undermining the power of the official union.

These changes were reflected in the 2005 union elections, an additional factor triggering the strike in Mahalla. One worker explained: “In earlier periods one could find a couple of representatives on the union committee that supported workers’ interests, but in the recent election they did not allow any to be on the board.” (Fathi). The elections also exposed the state’s biases: “since 2005 it was clear to me that the state is biased towards the business class.” (Essam).

Male workers, thus, understood that while previously they could mount struggles within the state corporatist official union, this was no longer an option. Most workers testified that the union elections had “a huge impact” in triggering the 2006 strike. In fact, a significant number of the 2006 strike leaders had been candidates in the 2005 elections who were either obstructed from running or lost.

The men then resorted to other forms of solidarity to gain leverage — solidarity with the female workers in the factory. In his work on cultures of solidarity Fantasia writes that they “tend to emerge only when workers or employers circumvent routine channels and workers seek, or are

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12 See Khalid Ali (2006) for information on the new law.
forced, to rely on their mutual solidarity as the basis for their power.” (Fantasia 1988, 19). In Mahalla, solidarity took the form of male–female co-organizing, and as one male worker explained, “it was this solidarity during the sit-in, and the media attention it attracted that “terrified employers”” (Essam).

Significantly, the men developed solidarity and sympathy for the women workers in spite of their own conservative and patriarchal values: “Women are tired at work and their husbands also do not have mercy.” (Fathi). Solidarity and organizing with the women, however, was not always straightforward, and the men at times grudgingly accepted things that contradicted their entrenched worldviews. This same worker noted that:

I would not have allowed my wife to stay with us in the factory and sit in the street. I participated in meetings with the women but I did not feel comfortable conducting informal committee meetings at the women leaders’ homes, I would not have allowed my wife to invite men over to the house (Fathi).

The decline in union representativeness and in the institutional role of official unions in Egypt helped foster male and female solidarity in Mahalla. Workers’ interests, especially the men’s, overrode their conservative values. Yet, there remain questions that the literature on gender and labor raises: Was the informal committee restructured to help incorporate the women? And did gender discourses change in the factory to explain women’s resistance in the 2000s?

Lack of union restructuring and contradictory gender discourses

Women’s organizing in Mahalla, contrary to what past theory on feminizing unions suggests, was not preceded by the formation of special committees for women, or by union strategies focusing, for example, on reproductive rights. Though women organized in separate departments, they did not form independent committees nor did they raise specifically female demands. Some scholars
argue that separate organizing “implies that women identify their gender status as significant, recognize their links with other women, and act, as part of a collectivity, on their own behalf” (Briskin 1999, 544). Organizing in all-female spaces did indeed facilitate the development of women’s organizing in Mahalla; but it empowered them because it gave them organizational leverage that helped them fight for class-based demands. Though there is equal pay for equal work in Mahalla, based on job classifications, women earn less than men: 450 pounds ($50) in comparison to around 600 pounds ($67) per month. The women understood that there is wage discrimination, because even the men who used to work in clothing received higher wages. Women also faced discrimination in the provision of company housing. But the women I spoke with explained that there was also considerable variation between and within the genders, especially based on age. These women consciously united around class-based demands that benefited everyone equally. Given the size and diversity of the worker population in Mahalla, and the difficulty in gaining concessions, it is understandable that workers lobby for demands that unite them (Offe and Wiesenthal 1980).

Interestingly, I did not find a clear pattern linking gender discourses with shop floor politics and women’s ability to resist. The management regime in the Mahalla factory could be characterized as despotic, especially for women. Women labored under a harsh system of penalization in the form of wage reductions, and some of the female departments were rife with sexual harassment and favoritism. Managers, the women said, often wanted to be “treated like gods, and to be loved” (Sameera). Women could have their wages docked for not standing up when managers entered the room, or for being even one minute late to work. This despotism, however, is not new, and one worker even said that she saw a woman being beaten by a manger in the 1980s (Wardi).
At the same time, familial discourses, such as the emphasis on motherhood, and what Lee (1993) calls “consent to generalized laboring” were present in Mahalla. Women explained that their main motive was to provide for their children, with motherhood being a dominant theme among the women. This is confirmed by a survey conducted by the New Women Foundation. Women did not question the kind of jobs they were given; their main concern was to provide and insure a future for their children. They also did not feel exploited at their jobs. In my interviews, women often said things that appeared contradictory. They described exploitation while expressing love for their job. The women also emphasized the centrality of providing for their children. These expressions are not signs of consent, as Lee (1993) suggested. It is completely plausible that women have contradictory feelings about their jobs. Additionally, their love for their jobs might be a survival strategy by which women rationalize their daily life in order to make it through the day, especially in the absence of other options. Evidently, despotic practices existed along with consensual familial discourses, but neither precluded women in Mahalla from resisting and taking part in collective action.

The women also subscribed to very traditional gender roles; expressed deference towards their husbands; and accepted sole responsibly for household chores and childrearing. It follows, then, that we cannot necessarily infer women’s willingness to take part in collective actions from their stated attitudes about their jobs and gender roles. As my findings demonstrate, and as Fantasia’s (1988) work on class consciousness has eloquently shown, workers’ consciousness is closely tied to the production process and the organization of work, not to their attitudes. The fact that female leaders did not display distinct feminist consciousness, and accepted traditional gender roles

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^{13} See Intisar Bader (2007). This survey includes large numbers of female workers from Misr Mahalla.
further supports this claim. The strike itself, however, had a very positive impact on women. The women repeated that, in addition to the significant wage increases it won, “the strike empowered us and we speak up more.” (Doa’a). Clearly, women in Mahalla still endure a repressive factory regime, but after the strike the women were better able to negotiate penalization and resist productivity demands.

Finally, some scholars argue that we have to look at race, state polices, women’s familial background, and labor market opportunities to understand when and how women develop capacities for resistance (Monuz 2008, Lee 1995). I did not find evidence that any of these factors influenced women’s organizing capacities in the 2000s. Based on workers testimonies, in both the 1980s and the 2000s, large numbers of women in the Misr Mahalla factory were married, recruited based on family ties, and important providers for their families. Also, women did not take more risks in the 2000s because, for example, better job opportunists. Women in Egypt prefer to work in the state sector because it offers better hours and benefits, and even with the growth of the private sector in the 2000s, Egyptian women have shown limited interest in private sector jobs (Assad and Arntz 2005). Thus, also in the 2000s women did not find private sector jobs appealing and they clung to state sector jobs. In spite of the relatively higher level of job security in the public sector, these jobs presented risks to both men and women participating in strikes. This is especially true after the 2003 United Labor code that allowed employers to dismiss workers and encourage early retirement to reduce the labor force. Like men, women took the risk because their conditions were very difficult, making the cost of participation low (Dixon and Roscigno 2003), not because of better job options.
Conclusion

In contrast to findings by scholars who emphasize the feminization of unions, I found that women’s organizing in Mahalla was not preceded by changes in the structure and strategies of unions, such as the integration of women staffers or an emphasis on reproductive rights. In addition, Women in Mahalla organized for the strike and took leadership positions in spite of their own conservative and patriarchal values. Similarly, men’s patriarchal values did not stop them from encouraging women to organize, and supporting their leadership. The men had a clear interest in women’s participation.

Significantly, gender discourses used by employers and women, such as the emphasis on femininity, sexuality, and motherhood did not correspond to the literature’s predictions about women’s behavior. Mahalla was a despotic factory in both the 1980s and the 2000s, and women suffered from harsh treatment; but at the same time, discourses that scholars deem to signify consent, such as the predominance of discourses about motherhood were present in Mahalla. My findings call for a re-examination of the concept of consent and raise questions about workers’ need to rationalize their work especially when they have to make it through difficult workdays.

My case suggests that understanding women’s organizing means examining structural and organizational factors. In contrast to the situation in the 1980s, in Mahalla women organized once they were located in competitive industries. In addition, women’s leverage over the production processes empowered them, and all-female spaces helped women in Mahalla develop close ties and networks crucial for organizing. Finally, the all female spaces and the lack of male competition also allowed for the development of female leadership. Separate organizing in Mahalla, however, did not translate into separate structures, and women mobilized for class-based demands, rather than gender-specific that other scholars have predicted.
My findings demonstrate that though gender is used by employers to maximize profit by taking advantage of women’s weaker social status, women’s ability to resist capital is not shaped by gender discourses, such as motherhood or other attitudinal factors. Women’s consciousness and power is structured by their class position in the industry, and by organizational advantages they acquire from organizing without male competition. As for male–female solidarity, men’s support for women’s organizing and leadership stems from workplace interests that override their patriarchal values. Simultaneously, the decline in institutional union arrangements also engendered solidarity between both the women and men.

It is important to note that the women in Mahalla played these leading roles in spite of exceptionally difficult challenges. Though the women explained that they enjoy high levels of independence relative to stay-at-home moms, they still had to navigate an extremely conservative society and enormous domestic responsibilities. Women in Mahalla do not enjoy equal freedoms in public spaces and this obstructed them from meeting in cafes with men. The women had to get permission and negotiate with their husbands to participate in meetings, invite strike leaders to their homes, or travel to Cairo. Also, having to fulfill all their domestic responsibilities and organize for the strikes left the women extremely tired. These challenges partly explain why men were more dominant in the leadership positions.

Finally, the Mahalla labor strikes offer insights into contemporary changes in Egypt caused by economic neoliberalization and political transformation. These changes mobilized all segments of society, including the most socially marginalized. Because of women’s larger labor force participation and work in strategic sectors like clothing, women were at the center of labor contestation building up to the uprising. In addition, the decline in the institutions of union corporatism mobilized the state and government sectors in which women account for large
sections of the labor force. These changes partly explain the unprecedented social unrest that eventually culminated in the 2011 revolution, and the large role Egyptian women played in these events.

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Table 1: Structural, Organizational, and Institutional Changes at Misr Mahalla and Women’s Organizing, 1980-2000.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industrial Changes</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Textile and yarn are leading in exports in international markets. Textile and spinning departments at Mahalla worked on full capacity. The strike could succeed without the participation of clothing departments.</td>
<td>Rise in clothing exports in international markets. Spinning and clothing are the most productive departments and the factory does not work at full-capacity. The participation of clothing departments is essential for the success of the strike.</td>
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<th>Level of Gender Segregation</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
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<td>Around 1,500 women were concentrated in clothing alongside male production workers. The remaining 5,500 women were spread across the factory. Some women mobilized in support of their arrested husband.</td>
<td>The majority of 5,000 women were segregated in the locked clothing departments. Working in the valued sections, developing close networks, and prominent leaders helped women organize as a group. Men were also keen on getting women involved in organizing.</td>
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<th>Women’s Work Position</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
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<tr>
<td>Women worked as production workers in spinning and textile departments. Men worked on skilled and heavy machines in clothing.</td>
<td>Women work as production workers and occupied all skilled and heavy machinery jobs in clothing. Men are only the inspectors and engineers in the clothing departments. Controlling all production positions in clothing, translated into higher work place status that empowered the women.</td>
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<th>Representativeness of Official Union</th>
<th>1980s</th>
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<td>Co-opted by the state but allowed worker representatives onto the union committees and boards. Male workers could influence the union from within.</td>
<td>The election of worker representatives to the union was obstructed. Men were keen on building solidarity with the women because influence from within the union was blocked. This empowered the women and resulted in class solidarity.</td>
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Source: The information was collected from workers and other data sources
Graph 1: Ratio of Clothing Exports to Textile Exports, 1980-2014.

Source: calculated by author from World Trade Organization data (Time Series) using US dollars in current price.

- Textiles: textile yarn, fabric, made up articles, n.e.s, and related products.
- Clothing: articles of apparel and clothing accessories.