**Mobility of women and notions of public space in Upper Egypt:**

**Keywords:** mobility, space, womanhood, Egypt, anthropology

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This is an ethnographic study of the mobility of women in Upper Egypt. It is based on two months of fieldwork conducted in the governorate of Sohag. A central argument of this study is that the critical re-evaluation of spatial divisions is needed to come to grips with the complexity of ways in which space is actually understood. Upper Egypt or the Sa’id is a culturally specific region that is labelled as traditionalist, family-centred and patriarchal. Sa’idi women negotiate mobility in public space within the community with regard to such principles as the avoidance of shame and respect towards familial authorities. Despite the small size of the governorate the ideas and practices related to mobility are diverse. The aim of this study is to ethnographically illustrate the heterogeneity that is linked with spatial constructions. Using the theory of practice, I show that women, as active mobile agents, construct, negotiate, regulate, and finally give social meanings to space.

By means of participant observation and interviews I study two socially distinguishable groups. I concentrate on highly-educated middle class women living in urban surroundings. As a reference point, I have a group of rural non-educated women. With regard to the two mentioned groups the following themes are studied: how women, as active agents, negotiate their mobility in public space, how the question of women’s mobility is related to the morals of the patriarchally arranged community and how the different social classes regard spatial organisation.

Mobility is an embodied activity that is founded on the inseparable relationship between body and space. In feminist anthropology, the theoretical division between male-oriented public and female-oriented private space has evoked a lot of discussion. This study reveals that, not so much the concepts of public and private, but the spatial division between familiar and unfamiliar helps to understand on what basis the mobility of women is regulated and negotiated. Moreover, it is shown that the urban middle class and the rural lower class have very different kinds of spatial practices. The data displays that the ability to regulate privacy and to make spatial divisions requires resources. Finally, the results suggest that there is no single Egyptian understanding of space.

Spatial categorisations are renegotiated all the time, as is gender. As commonly shared ideas of womanhood change, spatial practices find new forms. This study is an attempt to understand contemporary spatial practices in the relatively little studied Sa’idi region and to provide a reconsideration of spatial divisions in the light of the ethnographic data.