



## The notion of Habermas' 'public sphere' and its relevance to interrogations of women's empowerment and leadership in Muslim contexts

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### Abstract

In the light of J. Habermas' notion of the 'public sphere', this paper explores how a western concept of the 'public sphere' can be applied to the women empowerment notion of a 'Muslim context' (WEMC). The following questions are asked and discussed in this paper: Can Habermas' concept be confined only to a secular way of life? How is a public space to be transformed into a 'safe space' given the WEMC approaches to communication, resource and alliance building? If public space is the outcome of WEMC/Alliance work with religious/government officials and community leaders, does this create a 'safe space' for women? How does communication take place in a controlled 'political space' and who is in control? The concept of a 'public sphere' acquired philosophical and sociological meanings as a notion of the social order in which there is room for societal debate, and accessible to citizens. Does the nature of authority and leadership in China translate meaningfully into the 'public sphere'? Conclusion: it is still not easy to define a public sphere within a WEMC context since only with the government sanction does the public space become a safe space. Given the nature of authority and leadership in China, it is difficult to see whether a 'public sphere' can be seen as a space in which we negotiate our differences with one another and mobilize around a common purpose; the issue becomes very complex.

**Keywords:** Habermas, political space, public sphere, safe space, societal debate, women empowerment

### The notion of Habermas' 'public sphere'

*Where does the concept of a public sphere come from?*

In Habermas' view, Marxism tries to put together two different understandings of communication. Marxism, on the whole, confuses communication that aims to manipulate and control with communication that also aims at emancipation and reflection. This conclusion is evident in the idea of the false consciousness that fails to recognise members of subordinate classes and groups as equal partners in dialogue and discussion. Marxism, then, has historically failed to develop a theory of democracy.

For instance, Stevenson (2002) outlines Habermas' theory in the following way:

For Habermas, the fact that we are language users means that we are communicatively able to reach an understanding of one another. Habermas argues that in every act of speech we are capable of immanently raising three validity claims in connection with what is said. These three validity claims, he adds, constitute a background consensus of normal everyday language in Western society. The three claims - that are used by agents to test the validity of speech - could be characterised as propositional truth claims, normative claims related to appropriateness, and the claims connected to sincerity.

(2002:52)

Habermas does appreciate some of Marx's theory, as demonstrated by his earlier involvement with the Frankfurt school (Eriken & Weigard, 2003). However, Habermas does not think Marx's

way of dealing with this is revolutionary; he also thinks that Marx's ideology on commodity is to preserve a certain kind of freedom. In his view, all citizens need a place that is not fully dominated by capitalism; this place should be able to encourage the public to have a kind of critical reflection. Eriken and Weigard (2003) reinterpret Habermas's point as follows:

Habermas' break with early critical theory is expressed among other things in his wish to revise Marx's old substructure—superstructure model completely, and assign independent meaning to 'superstructure phenomena' such as argument, norms and scientific truths.

(Eriken & Weigard, 2003:5)

By debating Marx's ideology of a social system, Habermas is trying to bring together the idea of traditional and liberal freedom and critical ideas from Marxism. He thinks that Marxist theory has not taken liberalism or liberal ideas seriously enough. For instance, Habermas' interrogation of this debate has important points of reference; he emphasises that "it should be clear that the democratic constitutional state on the one hand requires, in a functional sense, civic virtues and a population that values freedom" (Habermas, 1996:130). On the other hand, Foucault criticises Marxist theory because it considers that society is organised on a single front line (that is, the struggle between capital and labour); this is the most significant struggle and it has been going on for a long time.

According to the Marxist understanding of power, there is no alternative to an economic analysis of power; for instance, Smart says (1985), "Foucault expressed the view that the cultivation of a non-economic analysis of power is necessary if an unprejudiced understanding of the complex interconnection between politics and the economy is to be achieved; an alternative non-economic approach to the analysis of power already exists, for example, in the respective works of Reich (power equals) and Nietzsche (power is in relation of force)" (Smart, 1985:77). Hence, Foucault is critical of the 'one dimension' focus on economics offered by Marxism.

#### *Habermas' main theory on communicative action and historical materialism*

In Habermas' work on reconstructing historical materialism, he laid out his primary differences from Marx's account of historical materialism. Habermas believes that historical materialism needs revision or reconstruction in some respects, especially because it has ignored the significance of communicative action and liberty in modern society. His difficulty with Marxism account is that he believes Marxism fails to consider the scope of this lack of freedom. In Habermas' opinion, Marxism has not paid enough attention to the capacity of human-beings to enter into communicative social relations and to learn from each other. He explains this by claiming that Marx's assessment of human evolution is just an economic progression that Habermas' thinks is too narrow. Habermas' analysis of Marx and Marxism reflects the changes in his position from an enthusiasm for historical materialism to a critical discussion of the fundamental problems within Marxist theory. During the process of finding answers for his problems with Marxist theory, he gradually builds up his own theory of communicative action (Best, 1996).

Habermas' view of communication theory focuses mainly on his belief in communicative rationality; he considers this kind of rationality to be important to maintain society as a social fabric by using institutions and conventions (Eriken and Weigard, 2003). He also thinks citizens need a protected public space in which knowledge can be transformed and developed. Habermas also claims that the issues in relation to how to concentrate on criticisms of modern society regarding the public's ability to use language rather than economic exploitation need to be refocused. In his view, communicative action will offer us a notion of symbolic agreement on our daily cultural and language activities; the result of such action is that this kind of symbol system will help to coordinate social action for human survival. Habermas' theoretical analysis of communicative action encourages us to understand our language and helps us use it to generate effective rational choices in terms of achieving democratic forms of interaction.

Habermas' notion of system in the context of historical materialism offers a more complex interpretation of Marx's understanding of the basic components of the social system and its human elements; his theory of communicative action together with his interpretation of reconstructing

historical materialism reproduces the Marxian understanding of human beings' freedom in modern society (Holub, 1991).

*Habermas' historical effect of the public sphere*

The concept of a public sphere acquires philosophical and sociological meaning as a concept of a social order with room for a societal debate, which is accessible to citizens. Habermas' work is concerned with how we make sense in public, especially how we negotiate our differences with one another and decide upon our common purposes. In Habermas' early work, he demonstrates how the literary public sphere is converted into a political public sphere. The development of the coffee house in eighteenth century Europe was gradually replaced by newspapers and more commercial concerns. In this respect, the public sphere ended, as it was eventually displaced by a capitalist-dominated media. Later, in his book *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas (1996) states:

The public sphere cannot be conceived of as an institution and certainly not as an organisation; it is not even a framework of norms. The public sphere can best be described as a network of communicating information and points of view (i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in process, filtered in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinion.

(1996:360)

In this book, Habermas (1996) also tries to explain the relationship between a notion of the public sphere and his theory of communicative action. According to his understanding, the public sphere is also governed by law; therefore, in this respect, the public sphere carries an instrumental rationality together with communicative reason. It is not hard to see that Habermas encourages us to think of the democratic possibility of building a liberal public sphere. For instance, Douglas Kellner argues (2004), Habermas introduced a concept of the public sphere to us by drawing our attention to an idea of mediation between the private opinions of all individuals in their economic and social life in contrast to the demands of social and public life. According to Habermas, the idea of the public sphere involves the process of overcoming private thoughts and interests to discover common interests and to reach a societal consensus (Douglas Kellner, 2004).

Moreover, Habermas' notion of the public sphere also discusses a sphere that will encourage a kind of exercise between the private opinions of all individuals' everyday life in society and the exercise of power by the state. Habermas' notion of a "bourgeois public sphere" also means a social sphere where individuals are gathering together to somehow express their opinions and to act against the unreasonable and domineering form of social power.

Accordingly, Douglas Kellner reinterpreted Habermas' understanding of the public sphere in following way:

The principles of the public sphere involved an open discussion of all issues of general concern in which discursive argumentation was employed to ascertain general interests and the public good. The public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making.

(Kellner, 2004:5)

Yet, it is not hard to see that the notion of a bourgeois public sphere in Habermas' terms also guaranteed various forms of political rights that will be exercised between individuals, groups and the state. Furthermore, according to Kellner, "the public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making" (Kellner, 2004:5).

Kellner also points out,

Despite the limitations of his analysis, Habermas is right that in the era of the democratic revolutions a public sphere emerged in which for the first time in history ordinary citizens could participate in political discussion and debate, organize, and struggle against unjust authority, while militating for social change, and that this sphere was institutionalized, however imperfectly, in later developments of Western societies.

(Kellner, 2004:5).

In Habermas' (1989) analysis, he demonstrates the value of the public sphere as it progresses through the physical battle of culture with the pre-modern authorities.

Today, however, the public sphere is shrinking rather than expanding, and this has much to do with the resurgence of economic liberalism. The development of communication conglomerates, spin doctors and the increasing variety of forms of media manipulation all point to the decline of the public sphere. However, the possibility of democratic communication remains an inherent possibility in societies based upon liberal democratic procedures, and the increasing complexity of communication is evident in the development of new media, such as the internet. Democratic communication, therefore, remains a possibility if not an actuality.

Habermas hopes to create a dialogue that will occur outside the realm of government and the economy, but his public sphere model attempts to focus on Enlightenment values of reason and freedom in a modern discourse that aims too much at pragmatic consensus. Habermas (1992) highlights how, within the public sphere, discourse becomes democratic by unifying all participants, thus enabling them to overcome their first subjectively biased views in favour of a rationally motivated agreement. Therefore, within this debate, he attempts to introduce democratic judgements that can have a universal application while remaining anchored within the practical realm of discourse among all individuals (Habermas, 1992). Habermas also (1990) posits that the participants in a political sphere share assumptions about communicative practice. These assumptions are produced by an Enlightenment notion of reason that is characteristic of democracy. It is this rationality that makes the decisions formulated in the discourse binding (Habermas, 1990).

The democratic public sphere is activated by social movement, pressure groups and critical intellectuals. By addressing questions of key public controversy, these individuals and groups seem to highlight a number of critical problems and questions. Thus, a public sphere can say it is effective according to the extent to which it is able to connect with wider public norms.

In addition to the above views, Habermas lists certain criteria of freedom and equality that are necessary for an "ideal speech situation" to occur in a democratic society. He also offers another theoretical justification of the public sphere by pointing out that social movement and campaigning organisations that force issues onto the public agenda are also closely associated with democratic values.

Habermas' theory of the public sphere demonstrates that the public sphere refers both to practices and to normative ideals (Habermas, 1989). In his view, it was also during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that a liberal form of the public sphere was transformed into a realm in which the formulation of public opinion is superseded by mass consumption and publicity (Habermas, 1989).

### **A concept of the public sphere's relevance to interrogations of women's empowerment in Muslim contexts**

In the previous sections, the historical effect and theoretical analysis of Habermas' notion of the public sphere have been discussed in conjunction with democratic values, instrumental rationality and governmentality. However, the question here is how a western concept of the 'public sphere' can be applied to the WEMC notion of a 'Muslim context'. The following questions will be asked in this paper: Can Habermas' concept be confined only to a secular way of life? How can a public space be transformed into a 'safe space' given WEMC approaches to communication, resource- and alliance-building? If public space is the outcome of WEMC/Alliance work with religious/government officials and with community leaders, does this create a 'safe space' for women? How does communication take place in a controlled 'political space' and who is in control? The concept of a 'public sphere' acquired philosophical and sociological meaning as a notion of the social order in which there is room for societal debate, and which is accessible to the citizen. Does the nature of authority and leadership in China translate meaningfully into the 'public sphere' as a space in which we negotiate our differences with one another and mobilize around a common purpose?

Yet, as has often been discussed, in Muslim contexts of modernity, public corporal visibility and citizenship rights constitute the political stakes around which the public sphere is defined. In particular, the issues around how to study the intricate nature of connections between gender, politics, and the public sphere have become increasingly important. The centrality of the question of gender in shaping political debates, social transformations, and definitions of public and private spheres somehow is extended to other Muslim contexts of modernity. For instance, Nilüfer Göle (1997) points out, “Women’s visibility, women’s mobility, and women’s voices” are central in shaping the boundaries of the public sphere.

*Can the concept of the public sphere be seen as a safe space?*

Creating a safe space – communication, resources and alliance building

How does WEMC define a public sphere and a private sphere? According to Xu Lili’s explanation (2009), the family is private space, and the areas around the big tree at the gates of villages, the mouths of wells, courts, markets in towns, temple fairs, streets and lanes, teahouses and wine shops are public spaces. The difference between a public and a private space stems from the difference between human beings’ production and development. The question here is whether the nature of authority and leadership in China translates meaningfully into the ‘public sphere’ as a space in which we negotiate our differences with one another and mobilize around a common purpose.

According to Habermas, the notion of a public sphere also includes a sphere that will encourage a kind of exercise between the private opinion of all individuals’ everyday life in society and the exercise of power by the state. Further, as was discussed earlier on, it includes a public and social sphere where individuals gather together to express their opinions and to act against the unreasonable and domineering form of social power. However, the question for us is whether a particular form of power structure has encouraged us to re-think the relationship between the governmental structure and individual agencies within the local sphere. To some extent, the governmental political structure determined the related local agencies’ movement, but rather than a negative relationship between the governmental structure and individual agencies within a Muslim context in the local sphere, a positive relationship is urgently needed. In other words, a more effective strategy needs to be devised in terms of transferring individual action into collective efforts and then becoming more organised. The diagram in the later section may indicate how a detailed strategy can be devised for the purpose of transferring individual action to collective efforts and then becoming more organised.

Yet, it is clear that public space is important to the development of Muslim women and their identities. However, can we also see a public sphere as a safe space for Muslim women’s development? As Xu Lili argues (2009), any empowerment above development and identities should be based on security; the security is not individual security, but collective security especially women’s security; thus, creating a safe and public space for women is the crucial factor in the process of empowerment irrespective of whether it is from outside to inside or from inside to outside. Nonetheless, how is it possible to transform a public sphere into a ‘safe space’ given WEMC approaches to communication, resource- and alliance- building? Can the local community be seen as a public safe space for Muslim women?

*Can the community be seen as a public space for women*

Williams (1996:19) states,

The process of creating or strengthening communities and developing social capital frequently generates the desire for social change; so, the community group to some degree could benefit from creative action and social achievement.

Yet, referring back to Habermas’s explanation, on the one hand, all citizens need a place where all forms of knowledge can be transformed and developed, and the individuals within this kind of place could be socialised and thus form a well-developed personality. On the other hand, as Habermas (1991) argues, a liberal model of a public sphere needs to be made accessible to all citizens, so the public sphere is the place for all citizens to redevelop their personality. To apply this model to the empowerment of women in the Muslim context, a liberal model of a public sphere would mean a place that is accessible to all women at a local sphere. The cultural public

sphere would mean not only reversing the cuts in arts funding, but would also mean empowering different groups, agencies and performers in a democratic process.

For instance, Xu Lili (2009) points out that families are the most secure space for women in traditional society, but families are just a basic productive and living unit for human beings; they are not only women's, but also men's requisite existing space in which neither men nor women can meet all their needs. Public spaces should be seen as the necessary mental and physical spaces for women in marginal areas at the beginning of socialization. In this kind of special space, women could go out from home and go freely into society. Then they could enter the men's society after building the capacity to do so, and thus develop and improve as human beings. Therefore, in this sense, the community can be seen as a public space for women to share their views and opinions.

The questions I would like to raise here are, if individual women can be empowered only through their own actions or through actions undertaken as subjects of their own empowerment, how can individual women within a community use their own strategies for empowerment, and what sources of support are individuals able to mobilize for their empowerment? I will try to answer these questions in the later sections.

#### *Communication takes place in variously controlled 'political spaces'*

Referring back to the earlier discussion on Habermas' (1991) notion of communicative action and the public sphere, in his view, communicative action will offer us a notion of symbolic agreement in our daily cultural and language activities; the result of such action is that this kind of symbol system will help to coordinate social action for human survival. Habermas' theoretical analysis of communicative action encourages us to understand our language and helps us use it to generate effective rational choices in terms of achieving democratic forms of interaction. Does the nature of authority in China translate communicative action meaningfully into the 'public sphere' as a space in which we negotiate our differences with one another and mobilize around a common purpose, or does the communication take place in a sphere that is controlled by the government?

A possible answer to such a question comes from WEMC China researchers' experience inside the China Component when it was sought as part of the communication strategy to 'mainstream' local findings and insights. This entailed shifting from highly productive activities at MESO-level (for instance, in the Henan Muslim communities, WEMC researchers were bringing together female religious leaders, local government representatives and secular women's group representatives in a space made 'safe' by mutual trust and familiarity with a shared code of political conduct) to MACRO-level communication (e.g., from Henan to the capital Beijing and the government-steered Communication University of China, hosting a conference in December 08 to which WEMC researchers contributed; the event was attended by government representatives and cadres, among others).

Such a widening of the space for communication brought opportunities and an increased impact. Thus, the insights and methodologies from the WEMC projects that were shared at the event proved to be an inspiration to all participants, including researchers working on government-funded projects in Tibet and other minority areas. On the other hand, communication, never neutral, takes place in a space controlled by the central Party/State. It is worth noting, and this is a lesson not only for WEMC work in China but wherever authoritarian regimes are in place, that the site of communication is a space controlled by the government, ever exposed to the controlling gaze of the State apparatus.

It is becoming clearer that governmentality is embedded in a local public sphere; however, the question is whether the relative power at the different levels can lead to a distinct structuration of state power at macro, meso, and micro levels? To answer those questions, first, we need to understand what we mean by governmentality. Foucault, in the later years of his life, started to develop a new concept of governmentality that was based on his previous theoretical discourse on power and bio-power. Foucault presents governmentality as a form of art of government with a wide sense of government that he thinks includes ranges of control techniques and that is also closely associated with his other theory on bio-politics and power-knowledge. Foucault's notion of governmentality offers a new understanding and development of power; he directs us to think

that power not only performs as a top-down model, but that it includes the social control of disciplinary institutions and a concept of knowledge.

So, what does Foucault really mean by a concept of governmentality? For instance, according to Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2000):

For Foucault, the theory of governmentality can be divided into two types. First, there is the 'social contract' model. This position argues that states and systems of government came into existence when individuals 'agreed to give up certain freedoms in order to benefit from banding together. In other words, people 'contracted in' to statehood and being governed - a kind of legal contract that is basis of government.

(Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000, p.83)

Yet, it is not hard to see that this type of social contract model is focusing on how a government controls and contracts its citizen, so the advantage and disadvantage concerning how individuals and groups in the society have been governed has been simply ignored. In comparison with the first type of the governmentality, the social contract model, Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2000) also indicate, "There is an alternative position to 'social contract' theory based on the idea of continuous 'social warfare'. In this version, a group or groups seize power, establish themselves as dominant in a society, and set up the state in terms of their own ideas, values and self-interest" (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000, p.86),

Further, Foucault led us to think of a movement from focusing on who has the power to an idea based on how power can be exercised more efficiently. In Foucault's understanding, that state then considers producing a 'policy' that can be also understood as a technology that is able to take the responsibility for internal security, stability and prosperity; in other words, the most important role for the state is population management.

So, the question here is whether the strategic policies at the meso-level play a positive role in helping individuals achieve self-empowerment. Do non-state actors, such as regional governments and related GO and NGO agencies, become very active (as was stated earlier on) because this level is relatively distant from the power centre at the macro-level? Have those related actors provided positive socio-cultural opportunities for intervention with individual activities at the micro-level? Can the policy from the state also be blocked because the power structure at the meso-level has been captured by the para-state level? The aim in the following sections is to provide a more detailed analysis to help answer the above question.

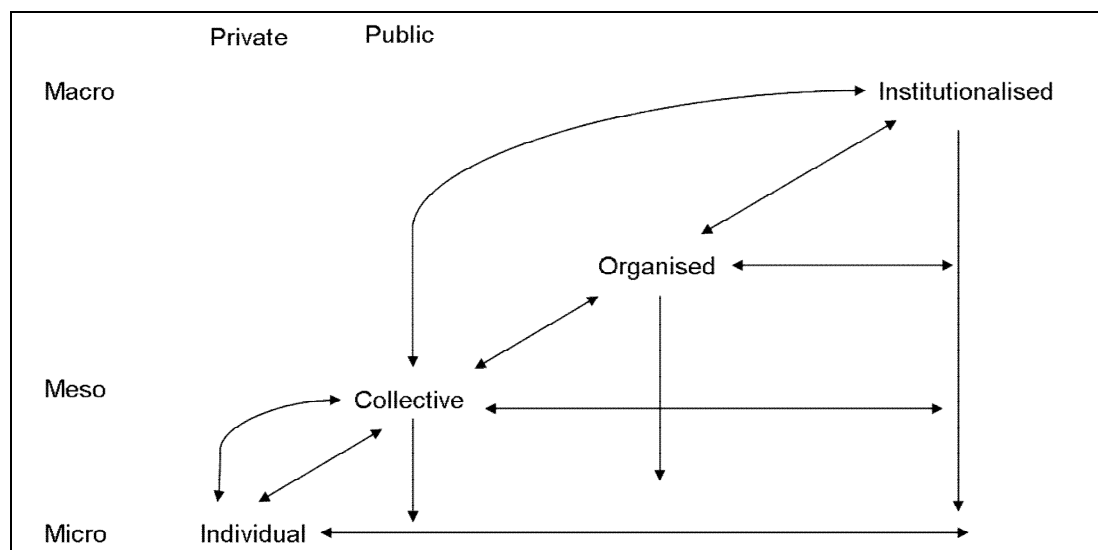
#### *What happens at a micro, meso and macro level?*

Yet, a process of empowerment can be considered only if a neoliberal strategy is rejected. The practice of democratisation requires an active social state, encouraging citizens to act as cultural border crossers and helping them gain access to the relevant skills, knowledge and dispositions to engage in public life as active listeners and producers.

Figure 1 shows how public opinion can be captured and transformed at the different levels (micro, meso and macro level); it may also help to analyse the strategic option for individual empowerment at all levels. The activities and policy are at the meso level (the regional and the local level) where regional and local actors become more active because the level is distant from the power dynamics at the macro level (central government level), while at the same time it has provided opportunities for intervention with the general public and individuals at the micro level. Thus, the diagram also suggests that when the public space expands to encompass individuals' actions, public opinion can be translated into a decision to become more organised and then institutionalised. For instance, individuals may get together to express their opinions. The question raised here is how such a transformation can be made to occur at a macro level; in other words, how such a transformation can be institutionalised and be made more permanent by the state.

For instance, when women safeguard their rights, their space has been expanded, and individual behaviour somehow will be transformed into a collective effort to become more organized (we can call it institutionalized behaviour). So, the difference between "collective" and "organized" is based on different degrees of performance. Take demonstrations as an example; women may gather together, but their aggregation is not necessarily for longer than the duration of the procession, nor is it bound to form a stable organization. Therefore, it becomes clear that

becoming “institutionalized” is easier than becoming just “organized”, because it is caused by radical changes in specifications that may be transformed into social morality. Institutionalized behaviour (e.g., matters of concern to women and their rights in the mainstream) is often seen as the ideal model of social change, but must the situation be so?



**Figure 1:** Public opinion may be captured and transformed at the different levels (micro, meso and macro level)

*Power, resistance and empowerment at a local public sphere in a Muslim context*

Within a certain kind of public sphere, power can be seen to operate in different ways. As has already been argued, power in the public sphere is more like the perpetual interaction between the public interest in cultural and governmental dynamic operations. Foucault’s notion of power is a complex concept and a set of relations between individuals, different groups and various areas of society, which changes with circumstances and time. On the other hand, power is not completely negative in terms of working to repress or control people; it is also highly productive (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000). So, here we can understand that power is also about empowering, enabling and resisting.

According to Habermas, the notion of the public sphere also discusses a sphere that will encourage a kind of exercise between the private opinion of all individuals’ everyday life in society and the state’s exercise of power. Furthermore, a public and social sphere is where individuals gather together to somehow express their opinions and to act against an unreasonable and domineering form of social power. Yet, as Xu Lili discusses (2009), whether Chinese Muslim women could realize empowerment, whether from outside to inside or from inside to outside, just depends on whether they own a public and safe space, which includes the physical, mental and social space for Muslim women’s empowerment: the physical space is a public space’s location; the mental space is a safe feeling and a safe identity, and the social space is a public communication space. If Muslim women go out of the home and enter society without a public and safe space, it is possible for them to return home again or become a lower class in society.

However, power is exercised in terms of its implicit claims to objectivity and truth in a local public sphere. It is possible to see two main forms of resistance to this emerging through the detailed analysis in this study. Yet, that power is also enabling, for instance, Danaher, Schirato and Webb state, “Power produces resistance to itself, it produces what we are and what we can do, and it produces how we see ourselves and the world” (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000; xiv). According to Foucault, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1978:93).

Yet, despite such concerns, the status of resistance might also be linked to, or in other words, be tied up with particular forms of resistance, and those particular forms of resistance may also



indicate the forms of power with which Muslim women are competing. So, according to the rationale of the relationship between power and resistance, the first form of resistance in a local public sphere comes through the clear process of understanding their own culture in which individual Muslim women from the local community and NGO engage in order to work out their position under such a power structure. The second main form of resistance identified is a government-led model. Although individual understanding and perspective do play a role in how power should be exercised in a Muslim context, Muslim women still need to understand how public safe spaces for all can come to serve Muslim women's development in the process of empowerment.

## Conclusion

Given the philosophical and sociological explanation of the notion of Habermas' public sphere in this paper, it is still not easy to define a public sphere within a WEMC context. Some argue that a public space is a safe space (Xu, 2009) and is the precondition for women's empowerment. However, individual activities and opinions in the public sphere are also captured and transformed at the different levels (the micro, public, and individual level; the meso, regional, and local level; and the macro and central government level).

It also seems that as a public space expands to encompass individuals' actions, public opinion can be translated into a decision to become more organised and then institutionalised. The question is, when does a public space become a safe space for members of the public to exchange their opinions? It seems that only after the public opinion has been translated into an institutionalised level (governmental level) does the public space then become a safe space. This is because it does not matter whether Chinese Muslim women realize empowerment from outside to inside or from inside to outside, depending on whether they own a public and safe space. Given the nature of authority and leadership in China, most of the communication with a public space takes place in a controlled 'political sphere, as governmentality is embedded in a local public sphere, and the relative power at the different levels can lead to a distinct structuration of state power at macro, meso, and micro levels. Individuals may get together to express their opinions at the micro level, but their opinion can be transformed into an institutionalised level and be made more permanent by the state.

Given the nature of authority and leadership in China, it is difficult to see whether a 'public sphere' can be seen as a space in which we negotiate our differences with one another and mobilize around a common purpose; the issue becomes very complex.

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