

# Women and the Arab Spring: Human Rights from the Ground Up

By Nadine Naber

Women are at the heart of every social movement that happens in Egypt and in the Arab world. There is a portrayal of Arab women as submissive or downtrodden... people ask us, what will happen to women's rights if the revolution succeeds? We say, it can only get better... We'll sort out our own differences.

— Ahdaf Soueif, world-renowned Egyptian novelist

**D**ominant human rights frameworks tend to define women's human rights in terms of individual political rights, a framework that prioritizes legal and rights-based claims and the cause of women's equality under the law. As a result, rights related to economic and social justice are deemed secondary concerns at best. For women of the global south or women of color in the U.S. context, an additional problem exists. Human rights frameworks developed in the global north often rely on "culture-blaming," defining culture or religion as though they exist in the abstract, outside historical circumstances, and explaining culture or religion (i.e., Islam) as the cause of women's oppression. When it comes to addressing gender and human rights issues in Muslim majority societies, dominant U.S. feminist analyses often engage in "culture-blaming." Consider for instance, the period following the attacks of September 11, 2001, when feminist organizations such as the Feminist Majority supported the Bush administration's invocation of "Muslim women's oppression" as a pretext for military intervention in Afghanistan, despite the devastating impact of military invasion on Afghan women.

Such feminist frameworks in relation to Arabs, Iranians, Muslims, and/or the Middle East developed out of long-standing European Orientalist images of hyper-oppressed shrouded Arab and Muslim women who need to be saved by American heroes; and of Muslim societies that need to be modernized—even if it meant through U.S. military violence. Instances of such representations can be found in the media, on the internet, in classrooms, and on the streets.

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The Egyptian revolution revealed how women in Egypt are redefining the most crucial human rights issues which impact their lives. While their stories do not represent the entire Arab, Muslim, or Middle East regions, they provide us with a look into gender and human rights from the ground up and illustrate the urgent need for a broader analysis of gender and human rights in Muslim majority societies.

## Poverty and State Repression

Often ignored in media coverage of the Egyptian revolution is how protests led by labor unions—many of them women-based labor unions in the manufacturing cities of Egypt—catalyzed the revolution. In fact, it was women from the large working-class apartment buildings on the margins of Cairo or from the cement-block constructions of the villages (who work making purses and shoes, and putting together toys and computer circuit boards for sale in Europe, the Middle East, and the Gulf) who joined with factory workers in 2008 to mobilize and found the movement that led to this uprising in 2011 (the April 6 youth movement). In Egypt, ending poverty is at the forefront of women's demands for human rights and dignity. More specifically,

the women (and men) of the April 6 movement are conceptualizing poverty not only as a domestic political or legal problem, but as a consequence of global processes such as the Mubarak regime's investment in neo-liberal economics (or the "conflation of politics and business under the guise of privatization"), and the role of the military in the political system. Writing from a similar perspective, Walter Armbrust

contends that the military, particularly high-ranking officers played a central role in financial corruption:

Military spending itself was also lucrative because it included both a state budget and contracts with American companies that provided hardware and technical expertise. The United States provided much of the financing for this spending under rules that required a great deal of the money to be recycled to American corporations, but all such deals required middlemen. Who better to act as an intermediary for American foreign aid contracts than men from the very same military designated as the recipient of the services paid for by this aid? In this respect the Egyptian military-industrial complex was again stealing a page from the American playbook; indeed, to the extent that the Egyptian military benefited from American foreign aid, Egypt was *part of* the American military-industrial complex, which is famous for its revolving-door system of recycling

retired military men as lobbyists and employees of defense contractors (2011).

Poverty is a central component of gender and human rights in Egypt, and is deeply interconnected with domestic and global political and economic forces.

#### Women as Agents of Change

During the revolution Egyptian women acted as agents of social change, not passive victims of “culture” or “religion.” The women involved in the Egyptian revolution are of all ages and social groups—they participated because they want an end to poverty, state corruption, rigged elections, repression, torture, and police brutality. Since the revolution began, women have led marches, participated in identity checks of state supported thugs, and patrolled the streets to protect homes from looters and vandalism. They helped create human shields to protect the Egyptian Antiquities Museum, the Arab League Headquarters, and one another. They helped organize neighborhood watch groups and committees nationwide in

order to protect private and public property. Women bloggers have played key roles in mobilizing demonstrations, and many investigative journalists, including those who have faced beatings and arrests by police, are women. Professional women offered specialized services—physicians set up clinics and lawyers informed people about their rights under the law. Mothers of martyrs have also been at the forefront of the revolution. The mother of Khaled Said, the activist who was beaten to death by police officers in Alexandria last year, joined the protesters in Tahrir and repeatedly urged them not to go home before Mubarak left office.

#### Sexual Harassment and Political Participation

Egyptian women activists’ demands also call for more complex human rights frameworks. Some women coupled their demands against the state with gender-specific demands for dignity against sexism and patriarchal violence, representation and inclusion in the new government, greater access to education, health care, and food, and increased opportunities for

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social spending benefits. In fact, many Egyptian women are conceptualizing the problem of sexual harassment beyond inter-personal or individual problems of patriarchal male behavior towards Egyptian women on the streets. Women such as Engy Ghozlan, active in the struggle against sexual harassment in Egypt, created an organization for women to report sexual harassment via text message. Yet in addition, many contend that the militarized Egyptian state supports and condones sexual harassment. For many women activists, challenging violence against women entails simultaneously challenging state violence. In this sense, passing sexual harassment laws or criminalizing individual perpetrators cannot provide comprehensive solutions to the problem of violence and harassment against women.

#### Gender and Human Rights: Beyond Orientalism

Some critiques have called upon Western audiences to re-frame the way they understand gender and human rights in Egypt. Master Mimz, a protest rapper in the UK best represents this point in the lyrics to her song, "Back Down Mubarak," where she states: "First give me a job—then let's talk about my *hijab*." World renowned Egyptian novelist, Ahdaf Soueif, echoes this view: "We are really tired of people outside telling us how to live our lives and how to organize our society and what is best for us as women."

Looking at Egyptian women's demands, from the ground up it becomes clear that changes in the law and individual rights,

while necessary, only scratch at the surface. Moreover, Orientalist approaches that blame culture or religion only obscure the ways that cultural values are shaped within historical contexts and material realities such as the pressing struggle for jobs, food, health care, dignity, and an end to the interconnected problems of harassment, violence, and state repression. Finally, gender and human rights must be framed in a global context, in ways that can account for the relationship between women's oppression, state and military practices, the global economy, and U.S.-led empire. Many women activists incorporate a critique of the U.S. government's decades of support for the Mubarak regime in their demands for women's human rights in Egypt. Egyptian American media pundit Mona Tehawy captured a general sentiment permeating the Egyptian revolution when she stated: "U.S. 'stability' comes at the expense of freedom and dignity of the people of my or any country."

In the spirit of broadening the analysis of gender and human rights in the Middle East, we may draw upon the ways women of the Egyptian revolution are conceptualizing human rights and the theories of many critical feminist legal scholars and activists across the globe. As legal scholar Diane Weissman puts it: "By reframing the issue of women's inequality as a global issue, it may be easier for activists to raise concerns that might otherwise be relegated to the background, or perhaps even abandoned, if such issues were to be articulated as a problem arising within the modern territorial state."

#### About the Author

Nadine Naber is Associate Professor of American Culture and Women's Studies and a CICS Human Rights Fellow for 2011/2012. She developed and is teaching a course on *Gender Violence in a Global Context*, and will deliver a public lecture on *Feminism, Human Rights, and War: The Case of Lebanon, 2006 to the Arab Spring*. Professor Naber has been actively involved in human rights-related work, both as an academic and activist, since the early 1990s. She has worked closely with major Arab feminist scholars and activists with whom she co-founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association North American chapter (AWSA NA). Through AWSA she led delegations to the U.N. International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994), and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). She was founder and co-organizer of the U.S. national conference AMWAJ: Arab Movement of Women arising for Justice (2005).

Her most recent book, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*, New York: New York University Press, Series: *Nation of Newcomers; Immigrant History as American History*, is forthcoming in 2011.

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