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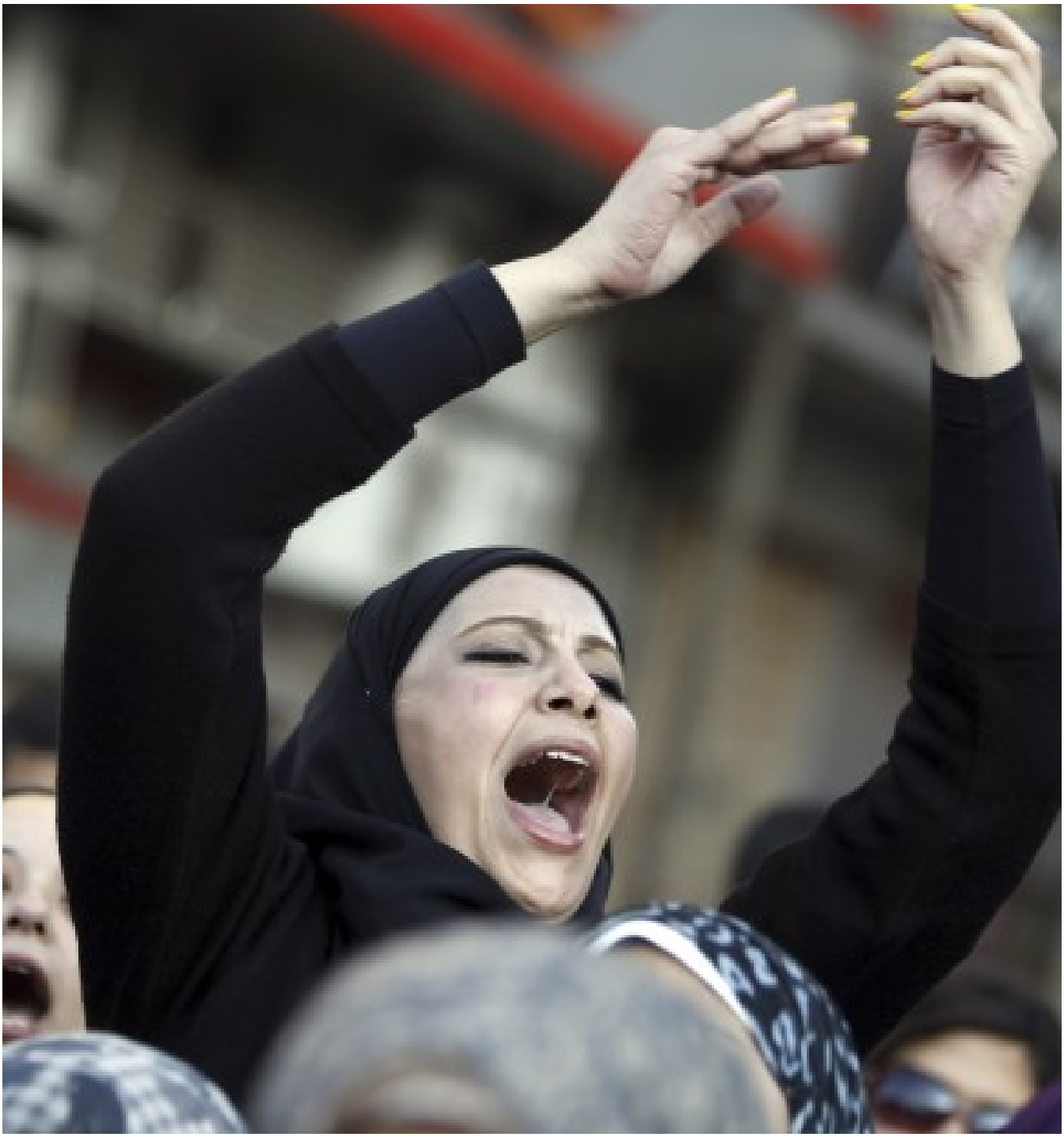

Human Rights from the Ground Up: Women and the Egyptian Revolution

To support women's rights in Egypt, the international community must condemn state violence, support civil society, and work for economic justice.

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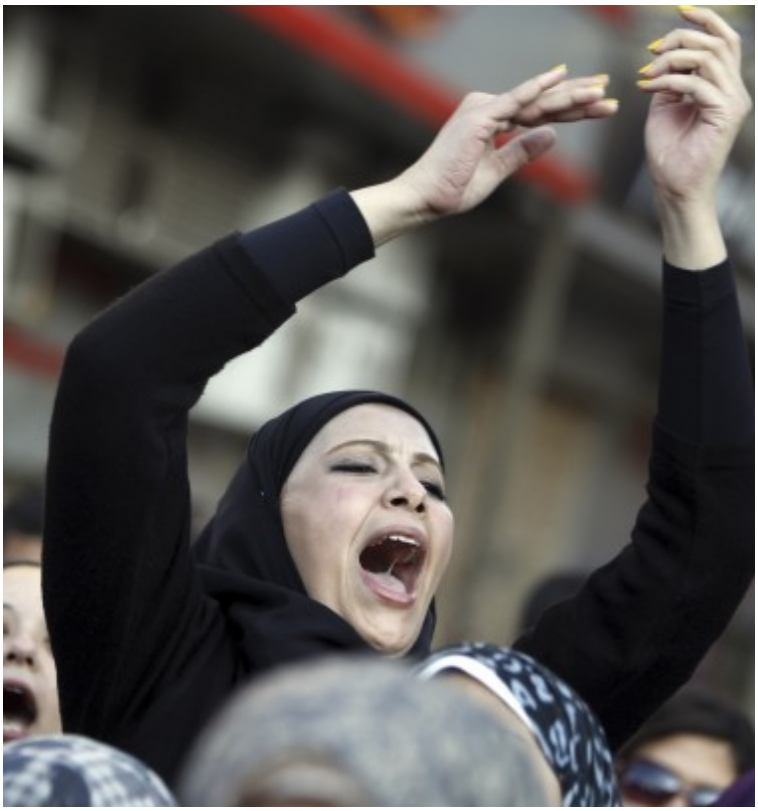

Amid ongoing battles over the shape of political systems in the Arab world, intense sexual violence against women in those countries, and protest movements by women fighting for their rights, advancing the causes of Arab women is of utmost importance. Yet international human rights advocates often confront the struggles of women in Arab countries far too simplistically.

In the work of international agencies, policy makers, activists, and the media, two approaches predominate. The first is "culture-blaming," in which Arab culture or the Islamic religion is seen as the cause of women's oppression. The second defines women's rights in terms of individual political rights. This approach pursues women's equality under the law, stressing constitutional rights and participation in official politics.

Let's look at why these discourses are limited, and what a better approach would be. To illustrate my point I focus on three key issues that are central to women's struggles today in Egypt: sexual violence, official politics, and poverty.

Sexual Violence

International media and policy makers have treated cases of sexual violence in a very specific way. They portray sexual violence as a problem in which individual men, driven by social and cultural norms, violate women's bodies. Prime examples are the U.S. corporate media's reporting on Lara Logan, the CBS journalist who was sexually assaulted in Cairo, and the Obama administration's public statements that the Egyptian government should do more to prevent rape and bring attackers to justice.

But if we take a closer look, we see that the increased sexual harassment, gang rape, and sexual violence in Egypt is being directed specifically at women participating in protests. As a coalition of Egyptian feminists and their allies have pointed out, the

people committing the assaults are intent on hijacking the revolution. They aim to break the will of Egyptian nation as a whole.

Egyptian state officials — including the police, army generals, and others — have a long history of targeting female activists, human rights defenders, and journalists. These actions occurred throughout the Mubarak era. Now, with many of the same officials still in power, state practices have continued, including systematic sexual violence perpetrated by the armed forces and police. These policies are deeply connected to the gendered and sexualized forms of torture and state violence that the United States supported through extraordinary rendition and military assistance to the Egyptian government.

Therefore, we need to ask several questions.

First, what happens when the international community does not condemn systemic patterns of state violence? The international community spoke up loudly when Lara Logan, a white American woman, was attacked by Egyptian men. But the international community remained silent when former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak sponsored thugs who en masse attacked, and in some cases beat to death, Arab women in the streets, such as Sally Zahran.

Consequently, what happens when the international community remains silent as current Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi empowers and raises the salaries of the already corrupt police, despite the fact that they have been accused of attacking and killing women and protesters?

Finally, what happens when torture and state violence, which have always relied on sexual violence and violence against women, remain in place for decades?

We can see what happens by looking closely at the recent incidents of gang rape and violence in Egypt. The international political and economic support given to a dictator (Mubarak) who regularly used sexual violence and torture to control his population, as well as the current international support for a government (Morsi's) that continues such practices and even rewards the perpetrators, creates the conditions for ongoing violence toward women. The result, predictably, is more violence and a legitimation of sexualized violence in the streets.

Sexual attacks cannot be reduced to the actions of individual violent men or cultural norms. They are instead integral to the ongoing political persecution of activists who seek to change the political basis of their society.

Even if new laws are created, as many advocates seem to favor, there is no way to ensure that they will be upheld. In the case of sexual violence in Egypt, the state is

taking no action to prosecute those responsible under existing laws, let alone investigate crimes.

As U.S. feminists fight against sexual violence in U.S. prisons and the military, the focus on law does not take into consideration the role of state violence in producing, sustaining, and legitimizing sexual violence. In their pursuit of personal security and freedom, how can women call upon the police, given that the police themselves are enacting sexual violence?

Official Politics

Not surprisingly, the violence against women and other marginalized groups in the streets of Egypt reflects, in part, their lack of representation in the halls of power.

Gender-related problems abound in Egypt's political system. In the now-dissolved parliament, women held only eight seats out of 498 (four of the eight women are from Morsi's party). Only 7 percent of the constitutional assembly that drafted the current Egyptian constitution were women. Similarly, after the latest reshuffle, Prime Minister Hisham Qandil's cabinet includes only one woman.

Problems extend to the constitution, which in the words of Dina Samir, "included generic words and lacked mechanisms to protect against gender inequality and violence."

But focusing on the number of women in official political roles, and on provisions in the constitution, is a limited approach at best. Instead, we need to see women's problems as an extension of larger issues related to revolutionary change. The problem in Egypt is not just the exclusion of women. It is also the exclusion of Copts, youth, and pro-democracy groups. We cannot say that women specifically are the victims of the new regime when there is still not a functioning democracy in place.

As an Egyptian feminist scholar and activist Hala Kamal told me in December 2012, "the question we need to ask is not simply 'are women included in or excluded from the new parliament?' Instead, we should be asking: 'Do pro-revolutionary women want to be included in a corrupt government?' Perhaps they might see their leaders elsewhere: in street politics, in the women's tents, in the mobilizations against sexual terrorism, the massive demonstrations for ending poverty, state corruption, and violence, or the grassroots political parties." Focusing only on "women's equality" ignores the reasons why many women are not interested in or don't trust formal politics, especially in the wake of excessive violence against women and sexual terrorism.

In short, we cannot be narrowly focused on the exclusion of women from official government positions when we have in place a corrupt new neoliberal regime obsessed with power and little concerned about human rights or social justice. Addressing equal participation for women is not simply about quotas, what ends up in the constitution, or elections. It is about ensuring that women will be included in a government that is not corrupt. It also means committing to women's leadership beyond official politics — in labor unions, for example, or in political parties — to impact the process of creating a democratic state. We can only talk meaningfully about women's rights if the rights of everyone else involved in the revolution are also accounted for.

Poverty

While the media and the international community routinely publicize sensationalized aspects of electoral politics and the law, they largely leave poverty unmentioned. Yet poverty is a major driver of women's participation in revolutionary social change.

The United Nations does address poverty within its development framework. However, that discussion is about decreasing poverty through such technical mechanisms as income-generating projects and education for women.

Such an approach fails to recognize women as agents of economic justice struggles. It also fails to place responsibility for poverty on the governments, agencies, and corporations of the global north. Due to this failure to examine their own society's role in producing poverty, proponents of this approach wittingly or unwittingly adopt a colonialist stance in which people of the "developed global north" set out to "save" people of the global south from their "under-development."

Arab women from the revolutions don't want to be saved by outside benevolence. They want to live in a society where they can be agents of their own destiny. In fact, during U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's recent trip to Egypt, women told him to stop sending aid.

Poverty was a major factor that mobilized many women to participate in the revolution. In 2008, women coming from the large working-class apartment buildings on the margins of Cairo and the cement-block constructions of the villages joined with factory workers to mobilize. They helped found the movement that contributed to the revolution.

The rise in poverty set into motion in 1991 by the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment regime continues today. Morsi's recent acceptance of an IMF loan helps explain why the United States continues to support corrupt Egyptian

rulers. Through the enactment of the conditions attached to the loan, and general moves to accommodate market forces, women will suffer from new subsidy reforms, changing labor market structures, fewer employment opportunities, lower recruitment in the public sector, and changes in the provision of public goods and services.

In Egypt, the current regime is not interested in women's education or political empowerment. "It serves them best," concludes Dina Samir, "if women remain uneducated so they can make use of them as an election bloc whose votes they can buy with essential goods."

Making an Impact

Gender violence cannot be fixed by passing laws against rape or sexual violence — especially when the military and police participate in gender violence and not even the old laws are enforced. Women's political exclusion cannot be resolved by superficial fixes like implementing quotas for women's participation in politics. And poverty will not end through economic aid or development programs that fail to account for the conditions that produce poverty.

In the case of Egypt, the goal of international action shouldn't simply be to make sure women — or members of any other marginalized group — get a seat at the table. The goal should be to support Egyptian people in setting up a table worth sitting at — and to hold various regimes, including the United States, accountable for supporting dictatorships and neo-liberal expansion.

Under these circumstances, what can the international community do to support Arab women?

First, the international community needs not only to condemn violence against women, but also to condemn torture and state violence more generally. After all, it is these long-standing gendered and sexualized forms of violence that give rise to, justify, and legitimize sexual violence on the streets. Condemning state violence means in part holding the United States accountable for its complicity in Egyptian state violence.

Second, when it comes to official politics, the international community needs to go beyond measuring the success of women's rights by the number of women in official political positions. Instead, it should support women participating in grassroots movements and civil society organizations such as labor unions, political parties, and local organizations. Extending this kind of solidarity to existing women's organizations would mean acting not as saviors, but as allies.

Finally, with regard to poverty, the international community needs to change its framework from economic development to economic justice. International aid should no longer be tied up with support for corrupt rulers. Instead, aid should hinge on accountability to people's struggles for dignity and social justice.

Such changes would move international organizations closer to making a tangible, lasting impact in Arab women's lives.

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