



Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring

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The Labor Strikes That Catalyzed the Revolution in Egypt

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

Nadine Naber accounts for the ways everyday life engagements with multiple structures of oppression underlined the conditions and the grievances that inspired the participation of many of the women in the Egyptian revolution. She explains how the women workers' struggles that emerged in 2005 coincided with the struggles against gender injustice. She also relates gender-based demands to broader struggles such as racial justice, anti-imperialism, and anti-authoritarianism and warns against the potential dangers of attaching lesser value to different forms of oppression during different time periods.

Keywords: Nadine Naber, anti-imperialism, anti-authoritarianism, racial justice, women workers' struggle

Two kinds of stories have been consolidated as predominant representations of women's activism within the Egyptian revolution in both dominant US and Egyptian corporate media discourses: (1) stories about how Egyptian women activists rose up to fight sexual harassment; and (2) stories about how Egyptian women mobilized en masse only to be pushed out of political participation afterwards (Naber and Said 2016). Mona Ezzat, labor organizer and human rights activist, points out that both cases reify the Western fixation on Egyptian women as if there is no broader context or political struggle (beyond "sexism") shaping their activism. All too often, she notes, it was as if outside commentators were exclaiming, "'Wow, the women of Egypt!' without any discussion of why they came to protest. We need a true understanding of the reality of women's lives and what brought them out to the street en masse. ... I'm stunned by this fixation" (Ezzat 2013).

Ezzat's critique reflects the limitations of the liberal feminist lens that shapes dominant US and Egyptian discourses about Egyptian women's activism, as though their activism is simply a response to sexism. These discourses have assumed that women activists and protesters rose up to fight either against sexual violence enacted by Egyptian men or for equal political participation in official and unofficial politics. Meanwhile, these dominant stories relegate to the background the demands of the revolution for which women risked their lives—bread, dignity,

and social justice—and the structural violence inflicted upon Egyptian women by neoliberalism, militarism, corruption, and authoritarianism, out of which these demands emerged.

In this chapter, I focus on the six-year period preceding the official revolution of 2011, when Egypt witnessed a series of workers' strikes wherein women were central actors. As Egyptian feminists have been **(p.29)** doing all along, this chapter contributes to efforts committed to providing alternatives to both the liberal feminist (singular gender-based) and masculinist “unite and fight” (singular class-based) narratives by mapping the gendered socioeconomic conditions and grievances that inspired the participation of many women in the political actions that catalyzed the revolution. This chapter shows that women workers' struggles over class oppression and authoritarianism were co-constituted with struggles over gender injustice and that even when women protesters or strikers did not assert an explicitly “feminist” agenda, gender injustice and gender demands persisted. Of course, women workers' activism emerges out of the broader conditions in Egypt related to class and gender oppression, including the interrelated structures of authoritarianism, neoliberal economics, militarism, and the US's imperial alliance with Egypt, as Paul Amar (2011) and El Said, Meari, and Pratt (2015) have shown.

This chapter recognizes that, given the complex ways in which multiple oppressions have structured the lives of women workers, women involved in either the strikes of 2005–2008 or the revolution of 2011 may not have accorded all oppressions the same saliency in their activism all the time. It simultaneously acknowledges the potential dangers of attaching lesser value to different valences of oppressions (such as sexism) at different points in time. I am interested in what we can gain from reflecting back on the implicit structures of gender oppression that haunted the workers' strikes of 2005–2008, especially as they relate to dominant demands of the Egyptian labor movement, the Egyptian revolution, and the future Egypt revolutionaries have been fighting for.¹

This study is based upon ethnographic, collaborative, and participatory research I conducted in 2012, 2013, and 2016 with twenty Egyptian women activists who participated in the revolution, have dedicated their lives to struggles for gender justice, and worked together in the coalition of revolutionary feminist organizations that formed in February 2011. Here, I focus on conversations with Mona Ezzat, a labor organizer and director of the Women and Labor Program at the New Women Foundation. Ezzat has been at the forefront of activism and research related to women workers, women's economic and social rights, and the right to organize for Egyptian women.

(p.30) The Conditions of Twenty-first-century Egypt

At the turn of the twenty-first century, social movements against the interconnected forces of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and imperialism peaked in Egypt. Spring 2005 was a key moment in this history when activists mobilized against a referendum on constitutional reform that made it impossible for candidates to run for the presidential election unless Mubarak's governing party (the National Democratic Party—NDP) permitted them to do so. Government supporters and security forces targeted women protesters, attacking their bodies and chasing them through the streets. The story of journalist Nawal Ali, attacked and nearly stripped by NDP, made international headlines—yet no one was held accountable despite protests (Slackman 2010). Such events have increasingly directed the attention of Egyptian anti-authoritarian/pro-democracy movements to the state's use of systematic gender violence. On the ground, grassroots initiatives that combine principles of both gender justice and anti-authoritarianism continued to develop (Amar 2011). During this period, women workers stood at the forefront of a

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series of mobilizations leading up to the revolution of 2011 (el-Hamalawy 2008). Workers' strikes between 2006 and 2011 catalyzed the official revolution of 2011 (generally understood as the eighteen days prior to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak), and women were heavily active in these strikes (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009; Slackman 2010). Ezzat contends that the conditions inspiring women's participation in the labor strikes of the early twenty-first century developed over the preceding thirty years:

Egyptians have suffered from economic policies whose feature was to showcase the Egyptian market on the grounds that it had cheap labor. We witnessed the acceleration of the pace of privatization, leading to the sale of a number of factories at low prices. Government policies supported deals to sell companies and factories for profit and labor laws disadvantaged workers. These forces inspired a workers' movement, including many women. It escalated because these economic policies led to an increase in impoverishment, driving large segments of women into the labor market. The industrial sector absorbed many women workers—in spinning, weaving, pharmaceuticals, the food and electronics industries, **(p.31)** among others. These are the same factories whose workers opposed privatization and saw financial and administrative corruption. Numerous protests emerged, with women in large numbers.

(Ezzat 2013)

By 2004, as the outcome of years of mounting frustration and struggles with bureaucracy and financial and administrative corruption in the public and private sectors, a wide movement of workers from different sectors was consolidated in Egypt. Women workers, heavily impacted by the policies Ezzat describes, were active in the major strikes of this period, as well as specific protests. They were especially active organizing within women-dominated sectors, such as nursing or education, or even the information sector, where they walked door to door collecting information and census data. She explains,

Women and men joined protests because they were struggling with the same problems. Although the media and society were surprised women were participating in protests, their participation was a natural action. They were motivated by financial need and wanted to secure their families. They were under threat of being fired because their companies were being sold to privatization or because of corruption so women protested like men to defend their jobs and their workplace and this is a continuation of the long fight of women in the labor movement since the forties. Women were supporters and organizers. They prepared and participated in the negotiation process with the government.

(Ezzat 2013)

These realities inspired mobilizations that came to be celebrated worldwide, such as those within Mahalla Spinning and Weaving textile mill in 2006, the largest industrial strike between 2004 and 2010. Mahalla Spinning and Weaving is one of the largest textile mills in the Middle East, with a labor force of twenty-seven thousand. In 2006, after a series of injustices, the company refused to grant workers a bonus the prime minister had promised to them. Egyptian police cracked down on workers who went on strike. This synopsis, composed from various interviews, represents the dominant narrative that circulated among activists in Egypt and internationally about the strike of December 7, 2006: Three thousand women garment workers left their posts. In some instances, women inspired men to join the strike. Production slowed **(p.**

32) almost to a halt. Workers rejected a twenty-one-day pay bonus from the factory management. The strike continued for two more days, reaching a total of all twenty-seven thousand workers present. On the fourth day, government officials offered a new compromise and promised a twenty-one-day bonus in addition to LE89 (equivalent to five US dollars) for each worker, one month worth of bonuses, and a half salary for January.

Many Egyptian and international activists have recognized women like labor activist Wedad Al-Damrdash. In a 2013 interview, Egyptian labor organizer (coordinator of labor communications at the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights and member of the Popular Alliance Party) Dalia Moussa told me, “One of the most prominent activists in Egypt’s labor movement is Wedad from Mahalla Spinning and Weaving. ... She mobilized co-workers who feared that taking action would land them in jail.” The *Washington Post* also covered Wedad’s activism: “Wedad led women out of the building onto the mill grounds when the strike was supposed to begin but most men had not joined them” (Sly 2011). In Egypt and internationally, dominant narratives recognized women’s labor activism not only in Mahalla, but in Asfoor, in Alexandria, and across Egypt.

While these stories identify women labor activists as “heroes” of class struggle, they obscure the gender injustices that shaped their labor activism. Stories of the Mahalla women fail to address the struggles of sexual harassment that women workers faced as they participated in public space. In an interview, Ezzat told me, “Like Mahalla, international stories have also narrated the well-known sit-in against Mansoura-Spanish Company through the story of a woman named Maryam—who played a key role inside the factory—or with references to the numerous women workers who participated in the sit-in. Mansoura-Spanish Company is in the Nile Delta province of Daqahliya, where women make up 75 percent of the labor force” (Ezzat 2013).

The tax collectors’ strikes of 2007 (the largest collective of actions of the 2000s, involving fifty-five thousand real estate tax collectors employed by local authorities) have been remembered similarly (Beinin 2011). For three months, the property tax collectors went on strike to demand improvement in their working conditions. In progressive Egyptian and international discourse, the story of the tax collectors’ strike tends to appear as follows:

(p.33) The strike culminated in an 11-day sit-in when 8,000 tax collectors, including many women, camped out together with their children. They slept in front of the Ministers’ Council building and won a 325 percent wage increase. This laid the groundwork for Egypt’s first independent trade union. Women labor activists convinced their husbands they had to leave their families, fight the battle and sleep in the street even if they knew they would be beaten and arrested there. Even if their husbands did not agree, they were determined and they would go. They knew they had to go because they were getting paid 90 pounds a month and believed it was not a choice—even though they were negotiating with families to go and still had to stay on top of their housework, child-care, and so on but they were not making enough to stay alive.

(el-Hamalawy 2008)

Fatma told me that Egyptian labor organizers collectively acknowledge the crucial contributions of women workers who participated in the tax collectors’ strike (2013). She told me, for example, that they refer to Aisha Abu Sammad as “the amazing trade unionist”; that they acknowledge the contributions of Mervat, who, “with the land improvement workers was sleeping in the street in front of the Parliament building for many days in 2010 and standing

chanting to encourage and lead her colleagues”; and that they referred to a woman from the rural Beheira area as one of “those who left her children and husband at the peak of the struggle!” (2013). Leftists and labor organizers have affirmed that women formed an important component of the matrix of forces propelling the mobilization that toppled President Hosni Mubarak in February of 2011. But feminist labor organizers like Ezzat have been insisting upon a gender analysis of women’s labor and labor activism:

While women and men are struggling shoulder to shoulder, they do not have the same power in decision making. It is not only the factories, corporations, or government that are oppressing women (and men), but it is also workers (men), the unions (led by men), and the structures of family, community, and society that shape women workers’ lives and work. While women participated with men, shouldn’t that make her also a partner in the decision making? Here you will find them say, well, it is because her role is with the family. She is his partner as long as she is protesting **(p.34)** and striking. They do not deny the role of the women but who will come and work with her on the issues of day care or sexual harassment or equal wages? We have a large gap in wages, up to 27 percent advantage to men! (2013).

Ezzat is referring to conditions whereby 20.2 percent of women participate in (formal) economic activities compared to 79.8 percent of men; and a gap in salaries between women and men continues to grow, despite the ways women and men came together within joint labor struggles. Official government data reveals that men workers make 13.8 percent more than women, and that women are relegated to jobs that align with patriarchal assumptions equating womanhood with mothering and home-making, including a concentration of women in the fields of education, health, and social work. Some sectors employ a particularly high number of women, such as nursing, where women workers live in what Ezzat calls “slave like conditions,” including extremely low pay, discrimination in salaries, sexual harassment, an unsafe work environment, constant punishment at work such as pay deductions, long hours without overtime pay, and a lack of childcare and other crucial services (2013).

By assuming that the kinds of jobs where women work in larger numbers are “women’s jobs” and therefore less important, patriarchal assumptions help to sustain the disproportionately low salaries women receive. Women are virtually nonexistent in trades such as mining and construction, and the percentage of men in managerial roles is double that of women (68.8 percent for men and 31.2 percent for women). Generally, more men occupy higher-level jobs compared to women (Ezzat 2012), and a gap in salaries exists between men and women workers for conducting the same work despite similar levels of education and experience (Shaaban 2014).

Even though women workers were not articulating gender-specific demands in their labor activism of this period and women and men workers share similar struggles, their life conditions (which inspired their actions) cannot be reduced to class struggle alone. Gender injustices such as the interconnected forces of (1) patriarchal family structures, (2) patriarchal structures at work, and (3) sexualized harassment permeate women workers’ lives.

(p.35) While the percentage of women working in Egypt is high, dominant family structures have marginalized the women who were involved in the major strikes of 2005–2008 in the area of decision making at home. Women workers are primarily responsible for housework in addition to their paid work. New Women Foundation is currently developing a program (started in 2010 and continuing) about the power imbalances that emerge in such contexts, calculating and

balancing the time for unpaid work and protecting women working in the unofficial work sector. Women's problems as workers—from inequality in pay to the need for childcare at work—are not taken seriously, given the dominant assumption that women are primarily mothers. In other words, a patriarchal logic constructs the normative worker as a man (and women as mothers) and therefore excludes women from crucial decision making within labor activism. According to Ezzat, "When I talked to the men about women's participation in a union vote they say we cannot give women a vote as a member because she is home and cannot make a union meeting at night. And they act like they are being considerate to their woman comrades" (2013).

Yet while the gendered components of class struggle tended to be left out of the strikers' demands, the gendered components of class struggle were primarily responsible for a dynamic in which women's massive participation in these mobilizations often remained invisible and unrecognized. In a 2013 interview, labor organizer Fatma Ramadan (executive board member of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions and member of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party) told me, "Even though they are working, they are also primarily responsible for household care and childrearing. They work so many hours and then leave to do housework and deal with family commitments." Ezzat similarly explained,

Because workplaces don't abide by the law and don't provide nurseries, the woman is still the one who wakes up on her own at five or six in the morning to see that her child is taken to the nursery or to her mother or neighbor. Then she turns around to go to work. Then she picks up her child and stays up all night doing housework. She is discriminated against based on the type of work she does and on the basis of gender and she often doesn't know that the law guarantees her the right to child leave, **(p.36)** maternity leave, nurseries, time for breastfeeding, and that she should receive equal wages. Also, even under poor working conditions and with unfair work requirements, depressed wages and [an] unstable labor market, and not having qualifications for decent work—women's work does not improve a woman's situation within her family, nor her rights within her extended family (2013).

Because the combined effects of class and gender co-constitute women workers' life conditions, men workers are more visible, because they do not have to leave strikes to return home to do housework or childrearing. An exclusive lens of class struggle limits our analyses of women's life conditions by ignoring the co-constitution of multiple oppressions that women workers in Egypt face and privileges the realities of men workers. An exclusive lens of class struggle also obscures the conditions that have prevented women from being as visible as men. Alternatively, the predominant feminist frameworks that center upon the struggles of middle-class women fail to account for the deeply intertwined conditions of gender and class oppression and do not account for the struggles of women workers.

An analysis of the gendered and sexualized underpinnings of authoritarianism and neoliberal economics that give rise to sexualized violence in Egypt is beyond the scope of my analysis. (See Amar 2011 for more information.) However, it is well established that sexualized violence in the workplace is an outgrowth of dominant ideals that equate women with motherhood and gendered conditions in the workplace. For instance, since many women workers lack stable contracts, they can be easily reprimanded or fired for reporting sexual harassment. Ezzat explains,

Because women were in the financial districts and were working without contracts, it made it very easy to fire them or face harassment from their boss or coworker. She cannot prove this and it leads to attacks against her. She is forced to remain quiet or she does not know the law and procedures she can take. This is tied to the lack of policies that would protect women at work and make them feel safe to report harassment. Sexual harassment also happens inside the government sector. But even among leftists, there is talk about government-led violence but not about the violence **(p.37)** committed by the worker against the worker or the violence that comes out of living in poverty.

In 2013, Ezzat told me about recent efforts to establish independent unions related to gender equality in the workplace; the successful formation of childcare in particular factories; and how women's participation has increased in unions, the workplace, and political parties.² She explained how these efforts are taking place within a larger environment where government officials constantly refer to the role of women in economic growth projects but fail to establish policies, laws, or projects that support the distinct struggles of women workers. Discussing future visions, she said,

What would truly shake up [authoritarianism] would be the arrival of a broad social movement made up of all the marginalized sectors of society, among the workers and the farmers, men and women, so we can build a foundation in the heart of these villages, that could truly shake up the voting blocs. I see the coming battle as a battle of economic rights and social rights, a battle for people's livelihoods, a battle for all people's wages, because we need to bring in the people who, because of the political reality, are absent. If we could draw them in on the grounds of their economic and social rights, we would be doing something very important. At the center of this are the issues of women because of the questions of justice, equality, citizenship. You can't just talk about them and exclude the rights and issues of women within them.

Conclusion

Ezzat's words capture the multidimensionality of Egyptian women workers' realities. Classism and authoritarianism are gendered, and their struggles cannot be reduced to either the struggles of women *or* the struggles of workers. Orientalist and liberal feminist paradigms, which single out women's activism in the Arab region only when it can be explained as a response to "cultural" or "religious" forms of oppression and masculinist paradigms that conceptualize the normative worker or activist as a man, do little to further women workers' struggles for social justice. But given the complex ways in which gender, class, **(p.38)** authoritarianism, and neoliberal economics co-constitute one another, the dominant voices of the workers' strikes of 2006–2008, like the eighteen days of the revolution of 2011, did not accord all oppressions the same saliency all the time.

There is no magic formula for how much gender analysis is enough in a given context, but we must remain attentive to questions of power, history, and context. The extent to which women activists might hold each axis of power—of race, of class, of gender, and of sexuality—in view will vary depending on who we are talking about, what they are doing at the time, what the historical and political context is, what is at stake, and who their audience is. What is important is that we do not flatten our analyses of gender and/or class or make universal proclamations about either. We need flexible analyses that will vary their focus, just as different valences of power become more or less salient at different points in time. At the same time, there is a danger in ending the analysis of the saliency of oppressions here—especially since the socially inscribed gendering of women's bodies becomes more salient than ever in moments of intense

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violence. The point is not that priorities do not have to be selected or that postponing certain issues and agendas is not sometimes necessary and important—yet it is urgent that we carefully consider how these decisions get made, what kinds of criteria are used, and what their implications are for truly inclusive social movements and meanings of freedom.

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Notes:

(1) See, for example, the position paper Egyptian feminists wrote, insisting on the interconnections between sexualized violence and state violence in Egypt: “Position Paper on Sexual Violence against Women and the Increasing Frequency of Gang Rape in Tahrir Square and Its Environs,” Nazra for Feminist Studies, Nazra, February 4, 2013, <http://nazra.org>.

(2) “New Woman Foundation Congratulates Faraj Allah Company’s Workers Union Success on Providing Nursery,” New Woman Foundation, <http://nwrcegypt.org>.