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The Radical Potential of Mothering during the Egyptian Revolution

DURING THE CENTRAL PERIOD OF THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION—generally recognized as the eighteen days between January 25 and February 11, 2011—as well as the months that followed, mainstream Egyptian and US media discourses reified patriarchal nationalist notions of mothering and revolution. A Reuters article reflecting this pattern focused on celebrations that began the night before Mubarak's ouster: "Mothers pushed little children in strollers, with red, white and black Egyptian flags painted on toddlers' cheeks. People waved the national flag, danced and sang patriotic songs as soldiers looked on."[1] This story, like many popular accounts of the Arab Spring, used images of mothers and children to underscore the point that all sectors of society participated, the implication being that *even* mothers—those subjects most "unpolitical," "innocent," and "unknowing," *even* those most "sacred," most disconnected from public space, and most closely connected to domestic reproductive labor—took to the streets.

A related narrative that circulated internationally focused on the mothers of martyrs brutally killed by the Mubarak regime. This figure

1. Marwa Awad, "Egyptians Pack Tahrir for Protest and Celebration," *Reuters*, February 25, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/oukwd-uk-egypt-idAFTRE70O18Y20110225.

sensationalized the regime's violence against the people of Egypt through the ultimate icon of human suffering — the grieving mother. Consider Laila Marzouk, mother of Khaled Said, whose brutal killing by the police came to be a key spark of the Egyptian revolution. Known as Khaled Said's mother, Marzouk is now an international icon of the Egyptian people's suffering at the hands of the regime. The widespread circulation of images of Marzouk holding photos of her deceased child implies that the suffering of mothers is exceptionally horrific, unlike any other.

Like the mother of the martyr, repeated representations of mothers and children filling up the streets en masse reinforce cultural understandings of mothers as abject beings, extensions of their biological children, symbolic of an inner sanctum, or mere supporters of the "real" (male) revolutionaries rather than agents of the revolution with subjectivities in their own right. While both types of representations align with the Arab Spring's critique of dictatorial regimes, they reify the sanctity of motherhood; normalize the conflation of domesticity, reproductive labor, and femininity; and portray the mother not as a fighter for justice but as a mother first and finally.

This reduction of mothers' revolutionary role united the discourse of both the repressive Egyptian state and those who sought to challenge it. Throughout Mubarak's reign, the regime attempted to repress resistance through similar heteropatriarchal concepts of womanhood and motherhood. During the 2000s, it justified the shaming of activist women, including mothers, by distinguishing between the good woman at home and the bad woman in the streets. Similarly, the Security Council of the Armed Forces (the transitionary government put in place after the ousting of Mubarak) deployed gendered and sexualized tactics in its effort to quell the revolution. Between 2011 and 2013, they engaged in tactics from virginity testing of women protesters to denuding and dragging a woman protester through the street.[2]

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2. Nazra for Feminist Studies, "Continued Militarization: Increased Violence against Women Human Rights Defenders during Dispersal of Cabinet Sit-in . . . Women Activists Beaten, Brutalized and Subjected to Sexual Violence," December 18, 2011, http://nazra.org/en/node/53.

This essay disrupts such imagery by "unsentimentalizing mothering" and exploring its radical potential within the context of revolution.[3] I do this by critiquing the patriarchal representations described above, whether pro-regime and traditionally nationalist (mothers as extensions of biological children) or revolutionary nationalist (idealization of mother of the martyr). I also aim to challenge widely held feminist conventions about motherhood that frame it as in conflict with revolutionary practice, as though mothering is merely an unfairly gendered burden that confines women to a depoliticized, heteropatriarchal private sphere.

Such a narrow conception of motherhood has been effectively challenged by decolonial and women of color critiques that detail how, for many women across the world, mothering is co-constituted not only through patriarchy but also through the structural realities of socioeconomic oppression, racism, and/or colonialism. These analyses challenge conventional feminist concepts of motherhood that have historically devalued mothers of color, colonized mothers, and mothers from the global South for whom activism is intertwined with motherhood rather than resisting it.[4] Yet, while decolonial and women of color scholarship has paid increasing attention to *activism* and mothering, most still focuses on a motherhood-driven politics in which motherhood is the impetus for activism.[5] Research on political motherhood has importantly theorized its potential to mobilize women, especially via the experience of maternal loss. It prioritizes a focus on motherhood in relation to biological children over other contexts where women activists are mobilized by social injustices unrelated to their motherhood. These

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3. I use the term "mothering" to refer to traditionally gendered reproductive labor, which is often invisible or deemed invaluable, including childcare, cooking, cleaning, managing home finances, and caregiving in general.
4. Melina Abdullah, "Womanist Mothering: Loving and Raising the Revolution," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1 (2012): 57–67.
5. Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994), 248, 257–58; Julie Peteet, "Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone," *Signs* 23, no. 1 (1997): 103–29; Michelle E. Carreon and Valentine M. Moghadam, "'Resistance Is Fertile': Revisiting Maternalist Frames across Cases of Women's Mobilization," *Women's Studies International Forum* 51 (2015): 19–30; Anwar Mhajne and Crystal Whetstone, "The Use of Political Motherhood in Egypt's Arab Spring Uprising and Aftermath," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 1 (2018): 54–68.

images can thus unintentionally reify the heteropatriarchal reduction of motherhood to a sentimental or symbolic identity. The problem is not with analyses of political motherhood *per se* but with the *pattern* and *history* of when, where, and how women get written into the story of revolution and how their roles as mothers get incorporated.

I also seek to disrupt the dominant tendency of framing women's participation in the Egyptian revolution in terms of success and failure, whether or not the revolution "was good for women" or whether "women won their rights."[6] These, I contend, are the wrong questions. In addition to the obvious limitations of a liberal rights framework (i.e., gaining rights under the law will end state violence), diagnosing revolution in terms of success or failure obscures possibilities that belie conventional spatio-temporal analyses. Drawing upon the invaluable, critical feminist literature on women and the Arab Spring, this essay asks instead how women who are already activists engage in activism while mothering.[7] How are the politics of revolutionary activism informed by their mothering? What radical possibilities can be mapped through women activists' mothering labor? Exploring these questions, I argue, promises to expand our notions of where revolutions take place, what counts as revolutionary actions or practices, and to whom the category of revolutionary actor applies.

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6. Richard Armstrong, "Has the Egyptian Revolution Been Good for Women's Rights?" *Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, February 6, 2012, http://blogs.shu.edu/diplomacy/2012/02/womensrightsinegypt; Alex W. Schulman, "Has the Arab Spring Been Beneficial for Women?" East-West Institute, March 28, 2013, https://www.eastwest.ngo/idea/has-arab-spring-been-beneficial-women.
7. Shereen Abouelnaga, *Women in Revolutionary Egypt: Gender and the New Geographics of Identity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016); Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi, "Beyond the 'Woman Question' in the Egyptian Revolution," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (2011): 683–91; Hoda Elsadda, "Women's Rights Activism in Post-Jan25 Egypt: Combating the Shadow of the First Lady Syndrome in the Arab World," *Middle East Law and Governance* 3 (2011): 84–93; Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, eds., *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Hala Kamal, "A Century of Egyptian Women's Demands: The Four Waves of the Egyptian Feminist Movement," in *Gender and Race Matter: Global Perspectives on Being a Woman*, ed. Shaminder Takhar, vol. 21, Advances in Gender Research (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2016), 3–22.

After critiquing dominant nationalist representations as well as feminist engagements with mothering and activism, or the lack thereof, this essay pursues two methodological tracks: "Finding the Mothering in the Revolution" (Parts I and II) and "Finding the Revolution in Mothering" (Parts III and IV). Both seek to highlight moments and ways in which women (and others) performed mothering labor alongside revolutionary activism, contrary to notions that would posit the two as incompatible. I look at a time and place easily recognized as revolutionary — in and around Tahrir Square during the eighteen days of the Egyptian revolution — but also seek to disrupt assumptions about mothers' relationships with that space and what kind of activities "count" as revolutionary. This article destabilizes understandings of where revolutions take place by highlighting the crucial contributions made by women activists who remain home with children — both during the revolution and beyond.

I argue that the mothering of these Egyptian women is constituted by a radical potential precisely because they do not experience mothering as incompatible with revolution. Instead, their mothering is a practice resisting state violence. Here, mothering is not mobilized as an identity or role but as one practice intertwined with others. I draw on my ethnographic research with women activists who participated in the Egyptian revolution while mothering young children. Most of my interlocutors identify as secular leftists and socialists. Nearly all have college degrees, yet they occupy varying socio-economic positions — from working class labor organizers to upper-middle class university professors and a host of positions in between. Given the severe targeting of leftist activists by the Egyptian state, their activist commitments complicate their class positions. As Sheri Ortner explains, "class is not some natural object lying around in the world," and "different rhetorics of class" (in this case leftist ideology) have different implications for everyday experience.[8] Whether or not my interlocutors have access to resources such as housing, legal aid, employment, or education and despite the reality of socioeconomic inequality between them, they are not "wholly constructed by their class position."[9] As Ortner reminds us,

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8. Sherry B. Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 11.
9. Ibid., 14.

class "is a project" made with and through varying axes of power, including one's gender, political ideology, and practice.[10]

All of my interlocutors were involved in the wave of activism that unfurled in 2000 and later catalyzed the revolution of 2011. Fatma, a working-class labor organizer, told me:

> 2000 was the beginning . . . involving mass solidarity with the Palestinian intifada, the resistance of the farmers who had been evicted from their land, demonstrations led by the unemployed and workers. In 2006, the strikes and sit-ins increased. They beat us, but we broke through the thick wall the regime had built and shed light on it. People saw this was a way to demand rights and didn't quit.

Leftist activism at the turn of the twenty-first century involved resistance to authoritarianism, capitalist economic and political globalization that connected the rising cost of living and structural adjustment programs dictated by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and the repression of activists and NGOs. As anti-capitalist discourse rose to the surface among young leftists in the 2000s, it grew within wider activist circles in alignment with global anti-war and anti-capitalist movements. Most of my interlocutors share a similar activist trajectory as what Dalia, also a working class labor organizer, explains:

> In 2004, I worked with the Revolutionary Socialists organization, then a small movement, and then with the Socialist Popular Alliance Party. We were working for a revolution but thought our children will achieve it. But the huge wave of protests of 2010 among the workers and before that, the workers' strikes of 2006 and 2008, gave us hope that workers and those who were politicized around government fraud, torture in the prisons, and the clamp down on freedom would mobilize. By 2010, these things were all out in the open and our movement was happening in the streets.

Of course, the scope and breadth of perspectives among women activists in Tahrir was heterogeneous, including women of various political ideologies—from Islamist to nationalist—and various socioeconomic backgrounds, such as working and peasant women who were not

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10. Ibid.

directly involved in leftist movements but were equally revolutionary and willing to make sacrifices so the revolution could thrive. My focus on leftist women's activism in Egypt grows out of my own life history as a leftist activist-scholar originally from Al-Salt, Jordan, who has lived primarily in the United States. Since the early 1990s, I have been involved in transnational and women of color feminist and gender-nonconforming movements that link anti-imperialist/anti-racist feminist movements in the Arab region and in the United States. These connections were strengthened when I moved to Egypt in 2001 to work as an assistant professor at the American University in Cairo, where I became actively involved in leftist activism. I have remained sporadically involved in leftist and leftist feminist activism in Cairo by joining protests, meetings, and social gatherings as well as attending and leading workshops. Virtually, I have also been active through social media, phone calls, and email as well as writing for leftist Egyptian magazines and newspapers and fostering connections between feminists from the Arab region living in different locations. I came into my research on mothering when I joined two leading Egyptian feminist organizations as part of a project to document women's participation in the revolution in 2013, with the goal of contributing my interviews to their archives.[11] As my research progressed, I noticed that practices of mothering gave texture to the revolution. My observations have also emerged out of my own experiences as a mother-activist who has witnessed the exclusion of mothers and our visions from social movements in the United States, even though mothers and caretakers disproportionately experience the ripple effects of state violence, while also imagining some of the most expansive, collective visions of freedom and liberation that I have ever known. After considering these ideas, I return to some of my interlocutors interviewed between 2016 and 2018 in order to discuss mothering during the eighteen days of the revolution more explicitly. I interviewed a total of twenty women. My analysis is also inspired by the anthology *Revolutionary Mothering* (2016), edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams. As Gumbs reminds us, revolutionary mothering is less of a gendered identity and more of "a possible action, a technology of

11. The archive of the Women's Oral History project, organized by the Women and Memory Forum, documents and records the impact of events in Egypt since the outbreak of the revolution of January 25, 2011.

transformation that those people doing the most mothering are teaching us right now."[12]

CONTROLLING MOTHERHOOD IN EGYPT

Concepts of motherhood were integral to the formation of the Egyptian nation in the nineteenth century and through the revolution of 1919.[13] In the context of British colonial domination, Egyptian nationalists constructed a vision that was not simply a mimesis of the heteronormative, bourgeoise European family, but entailed, as Omnia Shakry explains, "modernizing" discourses that took on local forms through a "a normative and didactic discourse that helped to re-create and redefine the parameters of what was considered ideal concepts of motherhood, child rearing and domesticity."[14] "Modern motherhood," based upon marriage and an idealized nuclear family, was reconstituted in line with middle-class notions of respectability, including "rational economic and scientific hygienic domesticity within the framework of a bourgeois family and child-rearing."[15] Motherhood thus became fundamental to national identity, especially in terms of preparing a new generation for its contribution to the progress and advancement of the family and the nation. Idealizing elite, middle- and upper-middle-class households that aligned with new concepts of bourgeoisie domesticity relied on territorialized notions of the nation, promoting a rigid demarcation of the public/political and private/domestic spheres as well as rationalizing and reproducing hierarchies of class, gender, and sexuality.[16] Simultaneously contained and celebrated as "mothers of the nation," women were warned that any betrayal of the heteronormative family and its idealized concepts of motherhood implied the "decimation of national character."[17]

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12. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "M/Other Ourselves: A Black Queer Feminist Genealogy for Radical Mothering," in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, ed. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), 23.
13. Omnia Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt," in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 171–212.
14. Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play," 186.
15. Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, 171.
16. Ibid., 256.
17. Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play," 156.

Under Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–1970), Anwar Sadat (1970–1981), and Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), ideologies of "motherhood," while changing, remained at the center of debates about the Egyptian nation, though in different ways and to different degrees. Under Mubarak, the regime explicitly worked to prevent women from taking up public space. As Paul Amar argues, the regime policed society through concepts of respectability. Women who defied middle-class concepts of home, motherhood, and family to join public street protests against the regime were associated with prostitution, arrested, and assaulted based upon a logic that conflated criminality, protest, and sexual transgression.[18]

Such strategies reached their apogee in the early 2000s during the largest street mobilizations in over thirty years. Spring 2005 was a key moment. The Mubarak regime used normative, nationalist concepts of gender and family to support state-led gender violence as a strategy to deter women from participating in various mobilizations against neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and imperialism.[19] The most violent incident occurred on May 25, 2005, 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-sponsored mobs, security forces, and NDP supporters targeted women protesters, chasing them through the streets and stripping them of some or all of their clothes. The story of journalist Nawal Ali, who was attacked and nearly stripped by NDP aggressors without anyone being held accountable, is one high-profile example of security forces attacking women's bodies as punishment for defying norms of womanhood, motherhood, and domesticity. On June 1, 2005, women activists gathered in front of the Journalists' Syndicate to call for the resignation of Habib al-Adly, the interior minister responsible for the country's oppressive security forces. Lucia Sorbera, writing on this period states: "No one can forget the tragedy of 5/25/2005 when security forces cleared the way for 'thugs' and its men, donning civilian clothes, to violate women in front of Saad Zaghlul's memorial and the Press Syndicate." One police

18. Paul Amar, "Turning the Gendered Policies of the Security State Inside Out? Charging the Police with Sexual Harassment in Egypt," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 3 (2011): 299–328.
19. Ibid.

officer explained why the state used violence against women protesters, stating "so you would stop taking part in demonstrations again."[20]

Following the pro-democracy protests in 2005, the Mubarak regime intensified its deployment of nationalist discourses of class, gender, and family to control women protesters. By 2006, it became common knowledge among leftist Egyptian activists that the "police always targeted women's bodies when breaking up a strike or protest."[21] In doing so, Amar points out, the state diverted attention away from its own violence by stoking anxieties regarding gender, family, and respectability among the Egyptian public. Amar situates the Mubarak regime's use of sexual violence during this period within a broader context in which a dominant demand for middle-class norms — including moral pressure for self-discipline, depoliticization, and assimilation — operated to produce a sense of moral panic. Sexuality (masculinized and femininized) were targeted in different ways and to different degrees in order to repress and disperse protests.

While the Egyptian state mobilized heteronormative, patriarchal notions of motherhood in order to control and depoliticize women, their discourse, perhaps unintentionally, also aligns with dominant critiques of patriarchy that tend to reduce motherhood to a restrictive domain. Such discourses assume that mothering and revolution are incompatible and that, in order to participate in the revolution, Egyptian women would need to escape the chains of domesticity imposed by motherhood. As I will show, however, women activists caring for children did not feel the need to prioritize one role or space over another.

MOTHERS AND THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

I was in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when the revolution began, following developments as they happened through social media and phone calls with friends and family. Over fifteen million Egyptians participated in the first eighteen days, which started with marches and demonstrations

20. Lucia Sorbera, "Body Politics and Legitimacy: Towards a Feminist Epistemology of the Egyptian Revolution," *Global Discourse* 6, no. 3 (2016): 493–512.

21. This sentiment was shared by all of my research participants; this quote specifically was stated by Mona Ezzat in an interview.

and culminated in the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak.[22] Hundreds died and thousands were injured in violent clashes before the handing over of power to a transitional government, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces. Participants came together around shared grievances related to authoritarianism, dictatorship, and corruption coupled with the devastating impact of over two decades of neoliberal economic policies on the lives of everyday Egyptians — from "substandard education and rising unemployment to phenomenal poverty levels, soaring inflation, massive disparities in income and lifestyle, and political repression."[23] The demands of the revolution were broad, inspiring widespread support: bread, dignity, social justice, and ultimately, the ousting of Mubarak. Specific demands included increasing the minimum wage; improving unemployment benefits, education, and health services; ending the state of emergency and practices of torture; respecting court sentences; dismissing the minister of the interior; and limiting the president to only two terms.[24] In a mere eighteen days, Egyptians succeeded in "dislodging authoritarian rulers, dismantling a number of institutions associated with them, including the ruling parties, the legislative bodies, and a number of ministries, in the meantime establishing a promise of constitutional and political reform . . . in manners that were remarkably civil, peaceful, and fast." [25]

Women comprised a significant number of the protesters in Tahrir Square during this period. One study found that 40–50 percent of protesters during the eighteen days in Tahrir Square were women.[26] Women organized and led protests, guarded entrances to the square,

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22. Mostafa Omar, "Egypt's Unfinished Revolution," *International Socialist Review* 77 (2011), https://isreview.org/issue/77/egypts-unfinished-revolution; Emad El-Din Shahin, "The Egyptian Revolution: The Power of Mass Mobilization and the Spirit of Tahrir Square," *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 3, no. 1 (2012): 46–69.
23. Shahin, "The Egyptian Revolution"; Jessica Winegar, "A Civilized Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 4 (2016): 609–22.
24. Shahin, "The Egyptian Revolution," 66.
25. Asef Bayat, "Paradoxes of Arab Refo-lutions," in *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order?* ed. Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer, and Ziad Abu-Rish (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 29.
26. Cassie Biggs, "Women Make Their Power Felt in Egypt's Revolution," *The National*, February 14, 2011, http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/women-make-their-power-felt-in-egypts-revolution#page2.

gave speeches, attended to the injured in makeshift clinics, checked the IDs and bags of protesters, handed out food, maintained Facebook and Twitter posts, and hurled stones at the police.[27] Many women stayed overnight in makeshift tents.[28] Dominant concepts of mothering continued to permeate popular discourse both inside and outside Tahrir during this time. Pro-Mubarak supporters invoked the norm of the "good mother at home" to deter women from participating in the revolution. Feminist scholar Hania Sholkamy recalls:

> When we congregated at around 3:00 p.m., we sensed a brewing resentment among hundreds of almost all male anti-protest protesters. "Go home and make Mahshy (stuffed vegetables)!" . . . "Back to the kitchen" and "off the square" were other chants. One elderly gentleman stood in the middle of those on the pavement and said that the posters they held were an offense to the good women who are "mothers of the martyrs" and who deserve respect and rights, not like these women who deserve nothing.[29]

Pro-revolution activists and protesters also mobilized limiting images of mothers — idealizing mothers of martyrs, extending the kinship/maternal terminology to shame soldiers, and using mothers only to bring their children to protests.[30] Such representations relied only on mothers' symbolic value, ignoring the actual work women with children were performing in support of the revolution. The next section asks what traditionally gendered practices of mothering were performed in Tahrir — even if not by women — and the potential therein for a revaluation of women's reproductive labor.

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27. Ibid.; Nadia Taher, "'We Are Not Women, We Are Egyptians': Spaces of Protest and Representation," *City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action* 16, no. 3 (2012): 369–76.
28. Mohamed El Dahshan, "Egyptian Women Eye Revolutionary Role," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, March 8, 2011, https://iwpr.net/global-voices/egyptian-women-eye-revolutionary-role.
29. Hania Sholkamy, "From the Square to My Kitchen," Open Democracy, March 4, 2011, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/from-tahrir-square-to-my-kitchen.
30. Anwar Mhajne and Crystal Whetstone, "The Use of Political Motherhood in Egypt's Arab Spring Uprising and Aftermath," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 1 (2018): 54–68.

FINDING THE MOTHERING IN THE REVOLUTION

Part One: Protesting While Mothering

Leftist activists were committed to street mobilizations as a strategy for regime change long before the revolution began, but occupying Tahrir was a dream that had yet to be realized at the start of 2011. On January 25, when the dream seemed within reach, activists were aware of the dangers of staging a sit-in, but they committed to accepting that risk.[31] It was precisely because of the physical dangers protesters knew they would face that they also understood how numbers mattered and that maintaining a significant presence in the square would be vital to the sit-in's survival. Those who stayed in the square knew what to expect in terms of violent opposition — from tear gas and Molotov cocktails to state supporters on camels, horses, and motorcycles trying to disperse crowds — even if they did not know yet how intense such opposition would be. They also knew that to stay in the square meant enduring harsh conditions such as sleeping on cold concrete, not going to the hospital for care, and potentially being away from home for long periods of time.

For my interlocutors, the question was not whether to participate but *how*. Shereen is a university professor and leftist activist as well as co-founder and board member of a long-standing, leading feminist organization in Egypt. In 2011, her son was preschool aged. She was committed to going to Tahrir at the start of the sit-in:

> We knew those who are going to the streets will be beaten. We could all be killed. On January 25, it was a fight until the evening. People decided to stay. I had to ask myself, what will happen on the 26th? There was no school. I was stranded at home with my son watching TV. On the 26th, it was obvious this is the beginning of the end of Mubarak's regime. The decision you make as you're watching television is, do you take part in this? I arranged for my son to be with a friend. My sister and her son wanted to go with us. I had to tell them that there is a risk.

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31. Atef Said, "We Ought to Be Here: Historicizing Space and Mobilization in Tahrir Square," *International Sociology* 30, no. 4 (2015): 348–66.

After arranging child care, Shereen went to Tahrir, where the danger was real and apparent:

> There was a line of police. We chanted, "*Yuskut, yuskut Hosni Mubarak*," [Down with, down with . . .] and we pushed to the gates. They blocked us. We marched next to the mosque and they blocked us. We marched to the gates of Abdel Azeez. I knew this would work because they were running next to us and didn't know what to do. There was no way to block us. We were walking, and I couldn't see the end of it. I am sensitive to chemicals. There were motorcycles without license plates with Mubarak's men running between us. There was smoke rising. I didn't feel comfortable taking a breath. I knew this wasn't normal. Usually, they ride through our protests taking pictures. This time they were distributing a chemical. Young people were putting on their masks. We didn't have those masks. By the time I reached Midan Dukki, I started having difficulty breathing. My sister and I went back on foot to her place. We were walking back. This demonstration was still going. There were no phones, nothing.

Undeterred, Shereen returned to the sit-in again a few days later and remained even when state propaganda sought to misrepresent the situation there:

> On February 2, I left my son with my sisters. There was something funny about the square because there were people you didn't know that would stand next to you. You would be discussing and you would find a strange man there you didn't know, joining you. We saw the exchange of stones next to the museum since the morning. My sister was calling, asking if I was okay since the national TV was showing people on camels and horses heading to Tahrir saying they're going to burn it up. "You have to come back now!" She started crying and I told her there were no camels. This is probably propaganda. . . . Many people came with strollers. I usually went on the days when there were no marches. The idea was to fill up the place at all times. We got phone calls from family watching TV saying we should leave now. We saw the camels and horses riding in and protesters removing their riders. We had been at the *mujama* [central government administrative building] and we got two horses and a camel. They expected protesters to jump back and run away but we didn't. The young people would let them in, then they jumped those camel riders and brought them down. They would deliver them to the people's army.

The state's manipulation of TV news reports was a highly effective strategy for leveraging family members' concerns to scare those in Tahrir away and discourage others from joining. Yet by remaining, and reporting back on the real conditions, participants committed to the sit-in knowing that information had become a weapon. Even when she was in the square, Shereen continued the work of mothering by continually assessing the situation and deciding whether and when conditions called for her to return home. Far from confronting a one-off, zero-sum decision between "being a mother" and "participating in the revolution," Shereen was negotiating how to do *both*:

> Once the situation got bad, and the stones kept being thrown, we went to my sisters and watched the rest on TV. We started seeing the snipers appearing later that day with the Molotov cocktails. That night we listened to Mubarak and we took it as a joke. Then came the mobilization in the *mujamaa* [shorthand name of a large administrative building in Tahrir]. On February 8, we marched to Tahrir to show that we, as university professors, are against the regime. You cross *kubree jama* [Jama Bridge, in Giza, near Cairo University] and you hear the people chanting "*al-sha-ab khalas, asqut alnadham*" [the people, it's done, the fall of the regime]. It was thrilling. February 11, the day Mubarak stepped down, we all marched to Tahrir. I remember hearing "*Al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam!*" [the people want the fall of the regime]. We spent the whole day in Tahrir, then went back home and heard on TV that Mubarak is stepping down. I had to stay home because of my son; everyone else went to celebrate, but I watched it on television.

Even though she was not in Tahrir for Mubarak's announcement, Shereen experienced the thrill of knowing that she had participated in the revolution by contributing to the sheer numbers needed to hold Tahrir, witnessing and reporting to others what was going on there, bringing medical aid where needed, and demonstrating as a representative of her profession.

Rania — a journalist, alternative education activist, and co-founder of programs that create open knowledge production in Arabic — organized camps of youth and media activists while also making ongoing choices about whether and when to bring her two children to Tahrir:

> I was staying in Garden City [close to Tahrir Square]. We could hear everything. It was scary for my son. War crafts flying over Tahrir. It was very overwhelming for him. The media was spreading lies and creating panic. Because I was connected to social media work, I knew the right people on the ground and what was going on. On the 29th, I knew it was okay to bring Hamza, but as a mother, I was frustrated I couldn't sleep over in the square. I wouldn't risk being physically away from my children overnight, but I would have camped out!

Rania made informed choices about when to bring her children and how long they could stay based on her activist history and connections. She recognized bringing her children as a profoundly meaningful act that helped encourage others:

> The biggest sign of commitment is that I'm there with the most important being in my life . . . saying, "We are here!" and it was a way to dissipate the rumors about danger so more people would come to the streets.

Caring for her children was a responsibility that Rania needed to manage. Yet while she was explicit with me about avoiding a utilitarian approach to children's participation in the revolution, she also found that bringing Hamza added symbolic weight to her participation. She did not mobilize *as* a mother (i.e., politically motivated as the mother of a martyr or only fighting for "mothers' issues"). As an activist, Rania was aware that protesting while mothering sent an important message. Sana, a leftist artist and activist who had two young children at the time of the revolution, went to the square even though she knew she faced the risk of death:

> We made sandwiches for the kids and went to Tahrir in the morning until the kids' school ended. During the Camel Battle, they came home at 2:30 p.m. I was supposed to leave Tahrir.[32] There were [government sponsored hit-men]. I could have left, but I thought . . . everyone I know is here. I can't leave them. I left at 6:00 a.m. We [my kids,

32. In order to quell the revolution, pro-Mubarak loyalists rode horses and camels through Tahrir Square, attacking protesters. Protesters fought back, inspiring new energy that is understood to have helped move the revolution forward toward the ousting of Mubarak.

> husband, and I] were talking all the time. It didn't enter my mind if I would die. I met many mothers, like a worker from Minya, when we were hiding. She tried to convince her husband and kids that she wanted to come to Tahrir, and they said no, but she left them and came. Sometimes, they cut off communication, and I was separated from my husband in the square or couldn't get in touch with mama where the kids were staying. After January 28, I brought the kids because we could go in and out [of the square] easily.

Making sandwiches, navigating school schedules, going to demonstrate, risking death, talking to other mothers, communicating with family, and deciding when is appropriate to bring children to Tahrir are activities densely interwoven with my interlocutors' accounts of the revolution — not impossible conflicts but the simple reality of their experiences. For Sana, protesting while mothering was an imperative that necessarily took different forms at different times, but as she told me, at no point did it occur to her that she had to choose one or the other.

Shereen, Rania, and Sana's involvement in Tahrir took place while thousands of women and mothers were filling the square. Hundreds of news reports documented the immense presence of mothers during the eighteen days — from pregnant women and mothers with infants who slept overnight in makeshift tents to families showing up with lunch and lawn chairs and mothers smuggling in supplies for protesters.[33] Yet even when they chose not to physically join the sit-in, my interlocutors — like many other mother-activists — were actively involved in the revolution. They were still engaged in mothering even when they were protesting and not physically with their children.

Sana and Shereen's stories reveal practices of mothering that often go unnoticed, even when their kids are not with them, such as arranging

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33. Nawal El Saadi, "From Tahrir Square: The City in the Field," *Women's Media Center*, February 7, 2011, http://www.womensmediacenter.com/news-features/from-tahrir-square-the-city-in-the-field; Leana Hosea, "A Woman's Place in the New Egypt," BBC News, March 23, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12819919; Nabil Kamel, "Tahrir Square: The Production of Insurgent Space and Eighteen Days of Utopia," *Progressive Planning* 191 (2012): 36–39; Sarah A. Topol, "Revolutionary Logistics," *Slate*, February 5, 2011, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2011/02/egyptian-protests-how-to-collect-trash-set-up-bathrooms-and-charge-cell-phones-in-the-middle-of-a-revolution.html; Ahdaf Soueif, *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2014), 27.

for others to care for their children and continually weighing the pros and cons of remaining in the square alone and/or bringing their children. Like Rania's performative act of bringing her son to spread the news that the square was safe, for Sana and Shereen, simply being in Tahrir Square while making sure their children were cared for constituted a refusal to allow mothering to sideline protesting. In the back and forth between fighting state violence and caring for children, protesting while mothering has the radical potential to disrupt a primary boundary that sustains authoritarian regimes. In this moment of intense battle and resistance, protesting while mothering refuses to reduce women's labor to the domain of reproduction/domesticity and resists government repression that would define protesting women and mothers as shameful, immoral, and deserving of punishment.[34] Shereen, Rania, and Sana understood that they could die and that the regime labeled women protesters as prostitutes deserving of punishment. Yet they refuse to align with state discourse, disrupting the character and spatiality of public political space in Egypt as well as the overdetermined divide between private and public. Perhaps, in doing so, they also expand dominant concepts of gender and family. Remaining in the square while mothering also disrupts widespread feminist concepts that interpret mothering as coercively depoliticizing and disempowering. Of course my interlocutors faced challenges related to mothering. Yet even when feeling "stranded at home" or missing out on sleeping overnight in Tahrir, my interlocutors did not frame protesting while mothering as an irresolvable contradiction but as a set of pragmatic decisions. They understood that state violence made Tahrir dangerous at times but mothering did not reduce their political engagement or excitement.

Part Two: Mothering in the Square

During the first eighteen days of the revolution, journalists, activists, and scholars referred to Tahrir as a utopia and pointed to the unprecedented crossing of gender, class, and religious boundaries therein. They cited the stark reduction in incidents of sexual harassment, the first-time experience for many women of political inclusion and participation, and other

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34. Sherene Seikaly, "The Meaning of Revolution: On Samira Ibrahim," *Jadaliyya*, January 28, 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27915/The-Meaning-of-Revolution-On-Samira-Ibrahim.

instances of men and women uniting to work together.[35] Renowned Egyptian blogger Mona Seif wrote: "I have never felt as at peace and as safe as I did during those days in Tahrir. There was a sense of coexistence that overcame all of the problems that usually happen — whether religious or gender based."[36] Nearly all of my interlocutors shared similar memories illustrating people overcoming differences and crossing traditional boundaries in various ways. Zain, a staff member at one leading feminist organization, told me: "We were all there, hand in hand to fight the same thing." Prominent Egyptian feminist scholar Hoda El Sadda told me: "During those eighteen days, everyone played a part. You couldn't tell the differences."

The context of Tahrir Square blurred the lines around reproductive labor normatively performed by women and traditionally understood as maternal. The literal life-and-death conditions of the square raised urgent concerns such as how and where people would sleep, go to the bathroom, eat, and get their basic needs met, inspiring new recognition of the importance of such caregiving and domestic work. A revolutionary strategy was to define Tahrir as reclaimed territory protected from Mubarak's security forces by gated entrances and checkpoints. Sustaining the protesters required reorganizing the provision of basic services for a growing population. Here, forms of revolutionary nurturing that both aligned with and transcended the figure of the "mother" were necessary to protesters' survival and to maintain the sit-in itself. This work included sustaining mobile medical clinics and electricity, collecting garbage, feeding people, keeping them warm in the cold, and caring for the injured.[37] Revolutionary nurturing transcended biological motherhood as the idealized form of nurture as women and men alike acted

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35. Samia Mehrez, ed., *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 3.
36. Fatma Naib, "Women of the Revolution," *Al Jazeera*, February 19, 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2011/2/19/women-of-the-revolution. This is also exemplified by the words of leading Egyptian feminist activist Mozn Hassan, who stated in an interview with *The National* that "No one sees you as a woman here; no one sees you as a man. We are all united in our desire for democracy and freedom," quoted in Biggs, "Women Make Their Power Felt."
37. Sherine F. Hamdy and Soha Bayoumi, "Egypt's Popular Uprising and the Stakes of Medical Neutrality," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 40, no. 2 (2016): 223–41.

as nurses, provided food, and distributed blankets while also taking breaks to engage in traditionally masculinized tasks such as breaking and throwing stones.[38]

By the third day of the revolution, protesters had set up a substantial infrastructure within the square that included a camp, media rooms, medical facilities, stages, restrooms, a storage system, food and beverage carts, newspaper booths, art exhibits, and gates at every entry point. Ahmad Shokr, writing for the *Middle East Report*, described the significance of caregiving and reproductive forms of labor alongside more conventionally recognized political forms of labor in times of protest:

> [The protesters] were preoccupied . . . with basic necessities—food, shelter, security—[and] questions of political strategy. . . . The most mundane acts—sweeping the streets, preparing food, pitching tents—proved the people's ability to sustain themselves, despite the regime's attempts at sabotage. It was through these everyday practices that Tahrir became a truly radical space.[39]

Merely accessing basic supplies was a site of struggle involving the risk of injury, arrest, or death. Pro-Mubarak activists and the army sought to intimidate people bringing in supplies and obstruct the flow of food and medicine into and out of the square. Numerous incidents of violence resulted. Getting supplies required extensive coordination and sharing of information across participants regarding how to evade the authorities. One protester recounted to a journalist that she had told pro-Mubarak forces blocking her from the square that she was on their side in order to get the supplies through—or as she succinctly summarized: "I lied [in order] to live."[40] Shereen recalled:

> My sister and I went back on foot to her place. . . . [Other activists] said it is raining and we have to take blankets and plastic sheets down. I called friends to tell them how to take things in without being unexpectedly attacked. My friend told me where the secure

38. Naib, "Women of the Revolution."
39. Ahmad Shokr, "The 18 Days of Tahrir," *Middle East Report* 258 (2011), https://merip.org/2011/04/the-18-days-of-tahrir.
40. Katherine Gustafson, "In Egypt, Something Rare and Remarkable," *Huffington Post*, February 11, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/in-egypt-something-rare-a_b_821665.

> entrance points were and where they were confiscating things. She told us not to make the blankets visible in the car. There were tanks blocking the entrance but my friend told me to park far away and arranged for me to meet someone. Two young men came and we carried the blankets and the other things.

Not only did men and women work together, but their reproductive labor was crucial to sustaining the sit-in against adverse conditions, from inclement weather to violent attacks. Many of the protesters in Tahrir interpreted the military's targeting of those bringing in supplies as an explicit attempt to kill them through starvation.[41] At one point, a protest began near Tahrir, and a group of men trying to bring supplies started chanting, "Sit in, sit in, until they let the food in!"[42] Hanan Sabea argues that "Tahrir time" was constituted by an ordinariness that was also the basis for its extraordinariness.[43] I suggest that the ways in which normatively devalued or invisible forms of labor took on visible, public, and urgently political meanings contributed to and helped to define the revolution. The survival, both of the protesters' bodies and the revolution, necessitated that political labor extend beyond giving speeches and fighting the state (the work of men); normatively feminized forms of labor became urgently revolutionary. Under conditions of life and death, protesters (whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously) affirmed the value of reproductive labor. The labor of mothering was not merely symbolic (as in the empty idea of Egypt as mother or a woman reduced to the mother of a martyr, etc.) but essential for day-to-day political and physical survival. The circumstances of battle brought the value of reproductive labor into sharp relief and created an opportunity for traditionally gendered and invisible work to be recognized anew.

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41. Ibid.
42. Will Englund, "At Tahrir Square, Egyptian Army Feints and Jabs with Anti-Government Protesters," *Washington Post*, February 7, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/egypts-military-feints-jabs-with-protesters/2011/02/06/ABH2a5E_story.html.
43. Hanan Sabea, "A 'Time Out of Time': Tahrir, the Political and the Imaginary in the Context of the January 25th Revolution in Egypt," *Hot Spots*, Society for Cultural Anthropology, May 9, 2013, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-time-out-of-time-tahrir-the-political-and-the-imaginary-in-the-context-of-the-january-25th-revolution-in-egypt.

Scholarship on gender and revolution has established that during moments of battle, women often take on men's work, temporarily disrupting patriarchy.[44] A revolutionary feminist dilemma has long been whether and to what extent societies can sustain these disruptions afterward. In 2013, Hoda Elsadda told me that the Egyptian feminists she works with shared the idea with one another that "we will not be another Algeria," referencing their concern that women who played leadership roles during the Egyptian revolution may soon be pushed to the sidelines of political movements. Mothering in the square also sheds light on an alternative dilemma — whether and to what extent men who did normatively feminized reproductive labor in Tahrir Square would continue to share or at the very least value it after the revolution. My point is not to suggest that the gendered division of labor has been permanently reconfigured since the revolution — far from it. I want to highlight that moment of radical possibility when forms of labor often derided as "mothering" could be revalued and recognized as essential, deeply political forms of labor for all. Likewise, there is radical potential that more and more men could perform such labor and not have it singled out, either to be celebrated as exceptional or mocked as unmasculine. Simply naming and highlighting these moments of possibility, however fleeting, is necessary for imagining a different future.

FINDING THE REVOLUTION IN MOTHERING

Here, I shift to the methodological track, "finding the revolution in mothering." I look at spaces and practices more traditionally understood as domestic to show that even when women activists stay home and/or focus on the reproductive labor of child-rearing, they remain deeply engaged with revolutionary politics.

Part Three: Activism from the Homefront

For some women, mothering informed their political involvement, especially when they lacked the privilege of childcare or were caring for a newborn. Despite these spatial limitations, social media enabled women to participate in the revolution in meaningful ways, in this case, by

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44. Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

sharing essential political information with comrades in the streets or relaying information between the streets and neighborhoods *while* performing reproductive labor at home.[45] Some women affirmed the home front as an activist space. And yet, home was no safe haven during the eighteen days of the revolution with neighborhoods threatened by government-sponsored militias [*baltagiyya*] who were "closely linked to the state and its arbitrary use of violence . . . and its tendency to use illegitimate means to serve the interests of a small minority at the expense of the whole nation." Farha Ghannam documents that women and children

> vividly described the terror that struck [their neighborhood] and the fear that engulfed them for days. To defend their neighborhood against potential attacks, men formed groups and armed themselves with batons, bottles, knives, and hoses. They stayed up day and night and worked together to watch over their streets, monitor cars, check identities, clean streets, and offer basic services.[46]

To make matters worse, the Mubarak regime used social media as well as the traditional news media to deter protesters, crush their hope, and quell their involvement. They spread rumors that the protests were smaller and less significant than they were and censored Egyptian news agencies reporting directly from the streets. The regime intensively circulated pro-Mubarak/anti-revolution rhetoric through social media and TV across the country, including the rumor that Israeli, US, and Iranian interests were behind the revolution. Some women who stayed home to mother accessed revolutionary counter-narratives through their comrades in the streets and disseminated them via social media to their friends, neighbors, and family members. They considered this an important strategy for challenging state propaganda and inspiring neighbors to

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45. Hoda Elsadda, "Arab Women Bloggers: The Emergence of Literary Counterpublics," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 3, no. 3 (2010): 312–32; Sonali Pahwa, "Politics in the Digital Boudoir: Sentimentality and the Transformation of Civil Debate in Egyptian Women's Blogs," in *Freedom without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, ed. Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 25–50.
46. Farha Ghannam, "Meanings and Feelings: Local Interpretations of the Use of Violence in the Egyptian Revolution," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012): 32–36.

support the revolution rather than the regime. Deema, who worked at an NGO, stayed home with her newborn during the revolution, but she was no less active in her efforts to counter state propaganda and ensure that news from participants on the frontlines reached the neighborhoods:

> People everywhere were believing state propaganda. Protesters would send us information we would distribute in the neighborhood to pass consciousness to people by talking with them. Neighbors were divided based on what media they were watching. Not everyone saw how national TV channels were controlled by the government. If you went to get something from the store, you would talk to people—put out as much information you could get from the protests as you could.

Deema was caring for her newborn while politicizing neighbors and connecting them with the revolutionary spirit on the ground. One is reminded of Angela Davis's description of Black women during the period of slavery in the United States who were responsible for their households while "encouraging those around her to keep their eyes on freedom."[47] Deema, likewise, was caretaking for both her newborn and the revolution.

Many women also used their direct access to TV news and the internet at home to transmit information to comrades in the streets. These activist mothers were already embedded in leftist movements, which connected them with the revolution's most essential social media networks.[48] Young social media activists such as Mona Sief became internationally recognized for blogs or tweets that helped fuel the revolution. Yet, less attention has been given to the spaces from which people blog, tweet, or text. Rania spent part of the eighteen days in the square and part at home with her children. Her experience with media activism gave her direct access to these social media networks, and she used them to their fullest advantage:

> The rumors going around were scaring people. I felt they should be buried quickly so more people would get down to the streets. This

47. Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 1–14.
48. Naib, "Women of the Revolution."

> motivated me to help spread news through social media while I was home. When the internet was blocked—especially since Twitter was the main source of knowledge for activists, I was working to retweet with a hashtag that posted directly to my Facebook account during the eighteen days and for the next six months. I became a newsfeed. It was a non-stop effort. I helped create the Egypt Influence Network that Twitter users used to influence each other. It provided information on what is really going on—all the details possible—on the ground. It was all documented, recorded, and spread around as much as possible. I was re-tweeting people who I knew for sure were trusted people as a direct result of not trusting mainstream media. I had sources I knew were right there on the ground witnessing with their eyes and I was re-tweeting what is happening. When Twitter and Facebook were blocked, I sent an email to everyone with a link on how to access [them] . . . including to a friend's service outside Egypt. This gave access to youth who didn't have connections with what was going on.[49]

Far from motherhood preventing her from participating in the revolution, Rania's activist networks and know-how enabled her to inform protesters across Egypt about various events happening on the ground, challenge state propaganda and misinformation, help activists prepare for the forms of state violence to come, and provide protesters with access to wireless internet when the regime shut it down.

Women like Deema and Rania were actively involved in well-established feminist practices of invisible labor. Jessica Winegar, importantly analyzes "invisible labor," such as cooking and managing household funds, which were essential to the Egyptian revolution, challenging the notion that the "true locus of transformative politics is an urban square."[50] Social media activism from the home front entailed the "non-stop effort" of spreading news via Facebook and Twitter, debunking media rumors, and linking people to wireless networks—all while managing the household and childcare. New technologies and social media allowed Deema and Rania to infuse caretaking with activist resistance against the state and to sustain their work beyond the traditionally

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49. Ranwa Yehia, "Wednesday, February 2, 2011," *Ranwa Yehia's Blog*, February 2, 2011, https://ranwayehia.blogspot.com/2011/02.
50. Jessica Winegar, "The Privilege of Revolution: Gender, Class, Space, and Affect in Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012): 67.

defined "invisible labor" conducted at home. If they were not caring for children at home, they would have been in the streets protesting. Staying at home did not require them to decide *whether* to participate in the revolution, only *how* they would do it.

Social media activism from the home front has the radical potential to expand the possibilities of revolutionary involvement and disrupt patriarchal assumptions that determine the kinds of activism that deserve to be valued. Social media activism while mothering adds to already established critiques of international rhetoric that frames the Egyptian revolution as a Facebook revolution led by middle-class, male, tech workers such as Wael Ghonim, who was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.[51] Highlighting such actors exclusively obscures a longer history of coalitions that made the revolution possible and the broader range of actors on the ground whose activism was central to sustaining it. Dominant accounts pay little attention to the diverse spaces from which social media activism emerged. All too often, narratives assume the user is posting as a sole individual from Tahrir Square or the streets and apartments immediately surrounding it. Dominant patriarchal discourses define work done at home by women as secondary and less significant than "real" activism conducted in the streets by men. Few international discussions have acknowledged these multiple spaces of activism and, specifically, the social media activism of women who were posting while mothering.

Indeed, revolutionary labor is conducted by different kinds of people across space. What would it mean, then, to seize the radical potential of posting while mothering as a practice that blurs the public and private and expands the possibilities of revolutionary action and labor? In Rania and Deema's stories, we see how activism from the home front disrupts the ideal of the good mother who conducts reproductive labor away from the public political domain as well as the association between revolutionary subjectivity and the masculinist freedom fighter in the streets. At the same time, their activism challenges the widespread feminist concept that mothering is merely oppressive and constraining.

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51. Ghonim became an international symbol of the Egyptian revolution, creating an anonymous Facebook page that garnered significant support. However, his recognition erases the significance of over a decade of leftist and labor organizing leading up to the revolution.

Part Four: Mothering for the Revolution/Pedagogy of Revolutionary Mothering

Several of my interlocutors talked about the radical significance of mothering not only one's own biological children, but also the children of broad revolutionary communities. This included educating children by example — i.e., modeling the coexistence of motherhood and political action — and educating children *for* revolution by giving them the tools to be critical thinkers while passing on stories of the revolution to new generations, especially when they are threatened with erasure or destruction. All of the women I talked to understood raising the next generation as profoundly *political work*, or as a pedagogy of revolution. Here, mothering takes place in the social context of a community, not just the nuclear family. Indeed, for many of these activists, their "chosen" political family was just as meaningful to them. Understood in this way, mothering holds the potential to disrupt heteropatriarchal expectations of family and construct more fluid, flexible roles and expectations. In the stories that follow, my interlocutors discuss mothering in ways that I refer to as a pedagogy of revolution, which consciously and intentionally aims to foster a revolutionary spirit or consciousness among children. Over and over, mothers told me stories about supporting and nurturing their children's participation in the revolution. Heba described educating her children about what was going on, a process that began well before the eighteen days of the revolution:

> My son was only three years old. My daughter was eight and already more politically conscious. The first time she learned of the revolution was when Bin Ali of Tunisia left. There was a protest in front of the Tunisian embassy near our home and my partner and I were jumping up and down at home. We talked to her about why we were so happy and our friend said he would babysit so we could go to the protest. Later, we watched a protest with our daughter on Al Jazeera that took place in Alexandria. A sign she saw held by an elderly woman that said "*Irhal ya Khanzeer*" [Leave you pig] inspired her to make her own poster. I asked her about what she will make. She said: "*Irhal ya Khanzeer*" [leave you pig]. She came to a protest with me with her sign. After she heard gunshots, I had to explain to her that what is going on in the streets is good and we must remain optimistic. People saw her and were taking pictures of her with her sign telling her, "We like your sign." Another time, activists created an event

> called *fanan al thawra* [artists of the revolution] where they brought art supplies and did revolutionary art in the streets. I brought my daughter and she made art with them. All along, I talked to her about how this is so they will live in a better world. The revolution will make a different future and finally, we will live in a country we want to live in—one we want to build. When she was younger, she used to ask me why there is always garbage in the streets and how poverty could end. When the revolution started, I told her: remember those questions? This is it. Later, she started her own campaign to clean up the streets.

Here, mothering is driven by a pedagogy that engages kids in creating a different future through positive change in society. In Rania's case, she shared her activist connections on social media with her son and, indirectly, his friends:

> Nabeel was with me in Tahrir on January 28. It was one of the scariest moments for me because he was never in a street protest before or engaged in that way. Once they blocked Facebook, all those kids who had nothing to do with the revolution figured out what is going on when they realized Facebook was blocked. I was able to get access to Facebook and Nabeel ended up privileged among his peers because he sent them links to access the internet and his friends starting asking him about what is going on and he had answers to give them. It was because he was with me. It was empowering for him to have this alternative lens.

Rania's access to the internet and information literally helped to educate her son and his peers, while her political engagement and connections modeled a radical version of activist mothering. Sana and Rania enact a pedagogy of revolution through parenting that blurs the boundaries of where revolution and mothering begin and end. Their mothering emerges as subversive reproductive labor. Sana, Rania, and other activists involved in mothering enact what Alexis Pauline Gumbs refers to as "investing in transforming society while nurturing resistance."[52] As a pedagogy of revolution, radical mothering reconstitutes the labor of raising and nurturing children. As Sana talks with her daughter about

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52. Gumbs, "M/Other Ourselves."

garbage in the streets and what she might write on her sign, Rania provides her son with an opportunity for empowerment. Both pass on tools for social change, contribute to the formation of a new future, and disrupt the notion of mothers as silent, agentless supporters of men revolutionaries.

Most of my interlocutors performed disproportionately more child-rearing labor, ending up at home with kids more than their male counterparts. Nonetheless, even within this gendered division of labor, activist women enacted mothering as a powerful tool for revolution. In addition to reconstituting "family" beyond the state's definition, mothering for the revolution redefines revolutionary labor itself. Here, communal mothering has insurgent potential, especially since Sana and Rania's modes of political action transcend individual masculinist ideals and the heteronormative biological status quo of mothering — centering instead upon collective responsibility for the future. By mothering the children of all revolutionaries, they build political consciousness while nurturing, caretaking, and what Gumbs refers to as "weaving resistance into the fabric of everyday life."[53] Mothering for the revolution relies upon the potential of domestic space to nurture resistance and mobilize the responsibilities that "fall upon" women and mothers.

I did not interview youth, and an analysis of their agency is beyond the scope of this article. Yet my interlocutors understood themselves to be child-rearing for their community and collectively parenting a future generation with one another. Paralleling what queer studies has conceptualized as mothering that challenges traditional kinship norms *and* contributes to changing the world their children will inherit, my interlocutors talk about their pedagogy of mothering for an alternative future, for revolution, and for social change.[54] Mothering for a democratic future entails nurturing not only one's own biological children but also performing reproductive labor for the larger community and society. It assumes that children do not belong to particular individuals (i.e., as property) but are essential to the collective project of building a more democratic future. As Gumbs argues, child-raising constitutes collective resistance work when mothering entails "raising and caring for children as a life-force toward the world we can only transform together."[55]

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53. Ibid., 28.
54. Ibid., 19–31.
55. Ibid., 26.

Reflecting on my analysis of "mothering in the square," it is noteworthy that these women's approaches to parenting helps highlight the political and pedagogical nature of mothering while also underscoring the centrality of that work to the revolution. Tasks such as preparing food and bringing blankets are understood by revolutionaries as crucial, valuable forms of work, not just secondary afterthoughts.

CONCLUSION

While there were significant numbers of women who participated in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, this essay is not about numbers or making large generalizations. Nor is it about representing the experience of all women in the Egyptian revolution, something I could hardly do using ethnographic research. Rather, by considering the narratives and experiences of activist women who were mothers during the revolution, this article disrupts many normatively gendered concepts of revolution, from "the radical male hero" to the "woman as symbol of the people." Given that the revolution did not turn out as we hoped it would, there is now an instinct to look at how and why things fell apart. Yet to assume that the eighteen days of the revolution did not amount to anything that endured risks normalizing failure as simply a return to how things were and always will be. It is precisely because there has been a massive backlash in Egypt that there is also a need to refuse the pessimism that so often follows failure. If the possibility for revolution comes again, knowing "what went wrong" the first time will surely be important. But even more crucial, I argue, is a clearer vision for our future, including whose work we will value and the relations, not just of protest but also *care*, needed to sustain the spirit of revolution for longer next time. Rather than interpreting the possibilities of the Arab Spring reductively or understanding the significance of activist mothering in Tahrir as relevant only within those extraordinary circumstances, I am interested in how such performative enactments can reconfigure our *imagination* toward a revolutionary future. Does the practice of mothering constitute moments of unrealized, yet still radical potential? By emphasizing and amplifying mothering as a political practice, this article sheds light upon unfinished alternative futures that, while overlooked, were also embedded in the revolution all along. I have attempted to illustrate how the practice of mothering can offer a glimmer of hope, however fleeting, for both

imagining *and* bringing a feminist and gender-nonconforming revolutionary future into being.

Asserting the radical potential of mothering allows us to recognize how heteropatriarchal concepts and traditional gender norms can be disrupted and how we might imagine an ever-expansive revolution that is not limited to the boundaries of a public square or to a singular notion of the revolutionary actor. The practice of simultaneously protesting and arranging for childcare, for example, blurs heteropatriarchal concepts of what counts as the battlefront and what forms of labor are necessary in order to move a revolution forward. Also, when everyone — not necessarily biological parents — performed what I have called revolutionary mothering to sustain the Tahrir Square sit-in, we can see the recognition of reproductive labor as both pressing and political. This shift reconfigures the traditional division of labor. When women activists stay home to care for children, their social media activism moves the revolution forward and transforms how radical action takes place, enabling an alternative imagination of where activists can leverage political knowledge and connections to sustain resistance. When women mother future generations together, toward revolution, they reframe mothering from biological responsibility to collective radical pedagogy. As my interlocutors equip youth with the mindset of revolutionary practice, the future-oriented underpinnings of mothering can be seen. As children and revolutionary mothers envision a new future together, they participate in building a new kind of society *and* forging new forms of being, both of which are essential to bringing about a revolutionary future. In this sense, the radical potential of mothering during the Egyptian revolution lies in both the rupture that breaks the present and in the careful cultivation of people from every generation who care for others and are themselves cared for at street protests as well as in the home. Both feminized and masculinized forms of labor can help build an alternative future. This article identifies moments of potential, far from fully realized success, but it also suggests that any future revolution needs activist mothering, in all its forms, if it is to survive.

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