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WAGING **NONVIOLENT** ACTIVISM

POST JAN 25: CASE STUDIES OF EGYPTIAN **WOMEN**

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“The beauty of nonviolence is that, in its own way and in its own time, it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil”

(King 1967: 62-63)

article
abstract

THE ARAB SPRING REVOLUTIONS THAT SWEEPED THE MIDDLE EAST IN EARLY 2011 ESTABLISHED THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN FACILITATING SPEEDY AND FAR REACHING MEANS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTIVISM. YET THE VERY SAME REVOLUTIONS ALSO DEMONSTRATED THAT THE REAL POWER IS HUMAN POWER. DURING THESE REVOLUTIONS, THE WORLD WITNESSED COURAGEOUS ARAB WOMEN AND MEN, WHO STOOD SIDE BY SIDE, PROTESTING FOR THEIR RIGHTS. I ARGUE THAT THE ARAB SPRING BROUGHT WORLD RECOGNITION AND RESPECT TO THE WOMEN OF THE REGION AND INFUSED THEM WITH COURAGE AND EMPOWERMENT TO CLAIM THEIR RIGHTS.

THE REVOLUTIONS EMPOWERED WOMEN'S CREATIVITY, ENABLING THEM TO FASHION INNOVATIVE NON-VIOLENT ACTIVISM CAMPAIGNS IN THEIR CONTINUED STRUGGLE AND RESISTANCE AGAINST TRADITIONAL FORMS OF PATRIARCHY, UNFAIRNESS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN. THIS ESSAY EXPLORES CASE STUDIES OF EGYPTIAN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT VIA NONVIOLENT MEANS OF STRUGGLE. THE THREE CASE STUDIES I EXAMINE ARE: WOMEN'S REACTION TO THE MILITARY ATTACK ON A FEMALE WHO WAS LATER DUBBED TAHRIR GIRL; WORDS OF WOMEN DOCUMENTARY SERIES, AND A FEMALE-LED GRAFFITI GROUP CALLED FEMININE GRAFFITI. THESE THREE CASE STUDIES EXHIBIT HOW WOMEN EMPLOY PEACEFUL MEANS TO FIGHT FOR THEIR RIGHTS AND STRUGGLE TO GAIN THE FRUITS OF DEMOCRACY SOUGHT AFTER IN THE ARAB SPRING.

EGYPT; WOMEN; ACTIVISM; SEXUAL HARASSMENT; VIOLENCE; EMPOWERMENT; SOCIAL MEDIA; ARAB SPRING; NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE; GRAFFITI

keywords

The Arab spring revolutions that swept the Middle East in early 2011 established the power of social media in facilitating speedy and far reaching means for collective activism.¹ Yet the very same revolutions also demonstrated that the real power is human power. What is imperative is the ability of millions of people to unite and resist violence and corruption with whatever means possible, be it online, through various social media or off-line, through protests, marches and diverse forms of art.

During these revolutions, the world witnessed courageous Arab women and men, who stood side by side, chanting and protesting for their rights. While some might say the Arab spring empowered women of the region and allowed them to make their voices heard. I argue that the Arab Spring brought world recognition and respect to the women of the region and infused them with courage and empowerment to claim their rights. The revolutions empowered women's creativity, enabling them to fashion innovative nonviolent activism campaigns in their continued struggle and

¹ Eltantawy, Wiest 2011.

resistance against traditional forms of patriarchy, unfairness and violence against women.

This essay explores case studies of Egyptian women's empowerment via nonviolent means of struggle. The aim is to analyze how women employ peaceful means to fight for their rights and struggle to gain the fruits of democracy sought after in the Arab Spring. The three case studies I examine are: Women's reaction to the military attack on a female who was later dubbed Tahrir girl; Words of Women documentary series, and a female-led graffiti group called Feminine Graffiti. Together, these three cases studies exhibit women's empowerment, courage and creativity, which enable them to utilize peaceful means to resist patriarchy, violence and dictatorship.

EGYPTIAN WOMEN & ACTIVISM

While some in the west might assume that the Arab Spring brought voice to the women of the region, analysts believe otherwise. Al-Ali asserts, "In light of western media representations and widespread perceptions among the public in western countries that women in the region did not just appear on the scene in 2011, we should clarify: for decades they had been active members in trade unions, political opposition parties and more informal networks and organizations that were all instrumental in the recent political developments."²

In fact, Egyptian women have a long history of activism. The 1919 revolution is one of the prominent events where women participated in political activism during nationwide protests against British colonizers.³ Additionally, for years, Egyptian women have been engaged in diverse activism that includes advocacy, research and scholarship, offering services, and working via nongovernmental organizations on various women's issues.⁴



THE REVOLUTIONS EMPOWERED WOMEN'S CREATIVITY, ENABLING THEM TO FASHION INNOVATIVE NONVIOLENT ACTIVISM CAMPAIGNS

² Al-Ali 2012: 27.

³ Ahmed 1992; Baron 1994; Badran 1995; Al-Ali 2002.

⁴ Guenena, Wassef 1999.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that Egyptian women were at the forefront of the Jan25 2011 revolution. For 18 days, they stood side by side with men, chanting, carrying posters, leading marches and utilizing social media tools to help bring down a 30-year dictatorship. "The prolific online and offline political activities of Arab women over the last several months have contributed a new chapter to the history of both Arab feminism and the region," argues S. Khamis.⁵

Yet, despite their great efforts, Egyptian women have yet to reap the fruits of their activism. History demonstrates that it is not uncommon to see women sidelined in the aftermath of a revolution, as the men reap the gains and women, along with their rights and demands, are ignored or outright violated⁶ This was the case following the Jan25 revolution in Egypt, where women were not involved in many of the negotiations following the revolution; women's demands were ignored, and no women were invited to join the Revolutionary Council that was formed after the revolution. Additionally, many women who joined protests after the downfall of Mubarak, claimed that they were sexually harassed, ridiculed and, in some cases, the women were violently attacked in public.⁷ Despite their significant absence from post-revolution democratic negotiations, I argue that women did indeed gain from their experience in Jan25. The women gained confidence, empowerment as well as knowledge on nonviolent activism.

METHODOLOGY

This essay examines how forms of nonviolent resistance, as described by researchers and analysts, are applied in the digital age. I specifically examine resistance by Egyptian women, through an in-depth analysis of three case studies. The essay surveys the women's use of social media, traditional media as well as rallies to communicate their anger and to shame the Egyptian army by sending a clear message that "The women of Egypt are a red line." I apply Baxter & Jack's multiple-case study methodology⁸ to analyze and explain the various forms of online and offline resistance adopted by female activists in the three case studies. The aim is evaluate the creative forms of communication employed by these women in their efforts to shame the Egyptian army and create online and offline communities of resistance to the post-revolution military rule.

⁵ Khamis 2011: 748.

⁶ Al-Ali 2012; Esfandiari 2012.

⁷ Al-Ali 2012; Esfandiari 2012; Moghadam 2012.

⁸ Baxter & Jack 2008.

Additionally, I apply prominent theories on non-violent resistance to identify the methods of nonviolent activism employed by these women and their effectiveness. Nonviolence has been practiced and promoted over the years in various parts of the world. For Gandhi, nonviolence is the absence of destruction and of “the desire to destroy.”⁹ In his efforts to turn the Indian masses against British rule in India, Gandhi encouraged nonviolence, which for him was a commitment and a way of life based on his religious beliefs.¹⁰ Gandhi, therefore, viewed violence and coercion as acts of destruction, be it physical or mental.¹¹ Similarly, Martin Luther King was also committed to nonviolence, based on his Christian beliefs. In his struggle to win more rights for blacks, King believed nonviolent means would reap more political and economic gains than the use of violence.¹² In his 1967 speech, *Where Do We Go From Here?* King says:

“Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can’t establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can’t murder hate through violence. Darkness cannot put out darkness; only light can do that.”¹³

For Gene Sharp “Nonviolent struggle is a much more complex and varied means of struggle than is violence.”¹⁴ It is a struggle that involves psychological, political, economic and social resistance. Sharp outlines 198 tools of nonviolent resistance that all fall under three broad categories: protest & persuasion, noncooperation and intervention. The three case studies I analyze in this study fall under Sharp’s first category of nonviolent protest and persuasion. Out of 54 tools that Sharp lists as various tools of protest and persuasion, I find that Egyptian women apply tools of communicating with a wider audience (using slogans, banners, posters and other forms of displayed communication); they employ symbolic public acts (displaying flags, wearing symbols like the stickers on their forehead or arm with slogans or anti-military messages; or using paint as a protest), and they employ processional tools, such as parades and marches.

Thus, for each case study examined, I ask: What is the purpose of the women’s activism in each case? What are the nonviolent resistance tools applied? How effective are these nonviolent campaigns?

9 Juergensmeyer 2005: 27.

10 Nojeim 2004.

11 Juergensmeyer 2005.

12 Nojeim 2004.

13 King 1967.

14 Sharp 2011: 30.

CASE 1: FATAT EL TAHRIR – TAHRIR GIRL

“Many political groups and virtually all governments operate on the unexamined assumption that the means of last resort and greatest effectiveness is violence, especially in a military capacity” argues Sharp.¹⁵ This was the case in Egypt when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over in February 2011 after the fall of Mubarak’s 30-year dictatorial rule. Between February 2011 and June 2012, which is the period of SCAF rule, Egypt witnessed multiple incidents of brutal violence by military officers against civilians, and more recently, specifically targeting female activists.¹⁶

Yet one precise incident stunned millions of women across Egypt. This was a scene from Tahrir Square on Sunday, December 18, 2011, where a woman, clad in a black robe and matching black veil, was dragged to the ground by Egyptian military officers. The semiconscious woman lay on the ground, as two soldiers pull her limp arms above her head. Her black abaya was pushed above her head, revealing a bare stomach and a blue bra, as a third soldier stomped his foot into her ribs and bare stomach.

Millions of viewers worldwide have watched the YouTube video of the brutal beating of this young woman, who quickly became a symbol for female revolutionaries across Egypt. The woman in the blue bra was hailed a heroine and dubbed on Twitter and Facebook as *Set el banat* (the best of all girls) and *Fatat el Tahrir* (Tahrir girl). The blue bra attack was a “turning point in our history as women in Egypt” argues Morayef.¹⁷ The attack confirmed how women continued to be a target for the authorities, even after the fall of Mubarak’s dictatorship.¹⁸ The incident was not the last, as many other women were later beaten and mistreated by military personnel.

Angered by the attack and by public reaction, where the blame was mostly on the woman and not the soldiers who attacked her, on December 20, thousands of women led rallies in various cities across Egypt to send a loud and clear message to SCAF – “The women of Egypt are a red line.”¹⁹ The rally in Cairo alone included between 6,000 to 10,000 Egyptian women and at least 2,000 men.²⁰ The men formed a human shield around the women to protect them as they marched the streets of Cairo. During this

15 Sharp 2005: 1.

16 Amnesty International 2012.

17 Morayef 2013.

18 In 2005, Mubarak’s thugs sexually harassed and beat up women who took part in anti-Mubarak protests (Morayef 2013).

19 Johnson, Harding 2011.

20 El Deeb 2011.

countrywide rally, women from all walks of life were seen holding posters and symbols. Examples include two posters of torn female clothing, symbolizing the stripping of Tahrir girl's black garment. These female protesters also employed symbolic colors; many women held the same red poster that read "Soldiers: Egypt's girls are the red line."²¹ These female-led parades marched throughout Cairo, Alexandria as well as other major cities, calling on other women and men to join them. Some of these women had yellow stickers on their foreheads or arms that read "down down with the military." Many women carried the Egyptian flags, while others carried newspaper clippings or hand drawn portraits of Tahrir girl. The women also used social media to plan the demonstrations and to document and disseminate information, pictures and videos of this event.



A PERFORMANCE BY THE FEMALE MINORITY,
THAT IS ABLE TO MAKE VIOLENT INCIDENT
MORE PUBLIC AND ENFORCE CHANGE

This case highlights the diverse tools of protest and persuasion cleverly utilized by Egyptian women to voice anger at SCAF's violence against women. One could argue that the combined use of marches, chants, posters, symbols as well as colors, works to create a nonviolent performance; a performance by the female minority, that is able to make this violent incident more public and enforce change. It is not uncommon for resistance to take the form of "community-based, identity-based, and minoritarian performances," where such performances are able to transform "the personal into the political (...)."²² This nonviolent performance was effective in publicly shaming the military. Whereas the military was previously viewed as a respectful power with the sole purpose of protecting the public, these female activists succeeded in shaming the military for violently attacking and humiliating members of the public.

Not only did these women succeed in shaming SCAF, but their nonviolent activism forced the army into issuing an apology, on the same day the protests took place. In SCAF's 91st communiqué, the officials said: "The army council deeply apologizes to the great Egyptian women (...)" and "We would like to stress on our full respect

21 Abd El-Latef 2011.

22 Schechner 2002: 261-265.

for Egyptian women and their rights to demonstrate and participate in the political life."²³

CASE 2: WORDS OF WOMEN

Women's activism comes in many shapes and forms. The use of documentary is one form of nonviolent resistance utilized by Egyptian activists post Jan25. Words of Women is a web-based documentary series that aims to both empower women and document their stories through individual interviews with diverse Egyptian women. The series offer a number of 12-minute-long profiles on Egyptian women from all walks of life. "The women talk about their personal lives and work before January 25 and their participation in the events and where she stands today."²⁴ The aim is to highlight these diverse women's roles in the revolution, their struggles and the impact of the Jan25 revolution on their lives. The series are directed by Leil-Zahra Mortada, who began the project in 2011.²⁵

The series focuses on women from diverse religious, educational, social and political backgrounds. In one episode, audiences are introduced to a housewife and mother, who says that she joined the revolution following the undemocratic arrest and imprisonment of her son during the revolution. She explains how she went from having no interest in politics to now being fully engaged and that she is not afraid to join any revolution and make demands. Another documentary in the series focuses on a young lawyer and political activist, whereas another introduces audiences to a student who had no relation or interest in politics until she attended her very first demonstration and then she could not give it up. The series also presents a Christian 64-year-old retired museum manager in Upper Egypt. She tells the audience that she was an activist in the 1970s and that she joined the Jan 25 revolution after her children informed her of the Facebook call for a revolution. She was very skeptical at first, but said joining the revolution brought her back to life. She tells viewers that, being surrounded by other protesters, injected her with courage and energy to try to create change. Another of these women is a conservative 20-year-old Muslim college student who became active in politics and demonstrations to fight the social, economic and political injustice. She cites the example of the brutal torture and death of Khaled Said at the hands of police officers and the extreme poverty that many Egyptians are forced into as two main forces that drove her to activism.²⁶

23 Maher 2011.

24 Elsayed 2012.

25 Words of Women Facebook Page.

26 Khaled Said was a young Egyptian man from Alexandria who was brutally beaten to

The documentary series is promoted by the creators through the group's Facebook page, as well as through other social media tools such as Twitter. These female activists, therefore, employ social media to voice women's resistance and the diverse struggles that brought them all together in the Jan 25 revolution. They also utilize social media to share updates on new additions to the documentary series. Not only are these activists utilizing digital forms of activism to tell the stories of Egypt's diverse women and how Jan25 impacted their lives, but they also document the women's contribution to the Arab Spring. The activist's poster for the series reads "Herstory... to remind history," thus confirming this idea that they are documenting in history the women's contributions to the 18 days of nonviolent protests that brought down the Mubarak regime. According to the Facebook page for Words of Women:

"It is history that tends in most cases to ostracize the participation of women and keep them in the shadow while highlighting the participation of men and attributing leading roles exclusively to them. This is why we are documenting Herstory."²⁷

In one interview, one of the creators of the documentary series explains that the project aims to offer accurate historical documentation of women's role in the revolution. The activist also explains that the project aims to empower all women.²⁸ Thus, by offering honest and diverse stories on how different women contributed to the revolution, the documentary series records in history that women were a major power in the revolution, illustrating women's diverse roles (protester, reporter, citizen journalist, graffiti artist, first-aid volunteer). Through women's voices and social media, the creators of Words of Women are able to resist male dominance and ensure that no one can deny their significant contribution to the revolution.

Activists around the globe increasingly utilize the Internet to mobilize people and also to produce and disseminate media content.²⁹ With the absence of mainstream media coverage of women's central role in the revolution, these activists introduced a new media alternative. According to the informational documentary 10 Tactics for Turning Information into Action, one central tactic is amplifying personal stories.³⁰ "This tactic is

death by police officers in public. Many Egyptians believe his brutal murder was the last straw that led to Jan25.

27 Words of Women Facebook Page.

28 El Sayed 2012.

29 Lievrouw 2011.

30 10 Tactics for Turning Information into Action website.

useful when people affected by the issue are not being consulted, and as a way to give an issue depth that resonates with the target audience."³¹ In this case, female activists are utilizing video, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to create and distribute videos that spread Egyptian women's untold stories on the revolution, given the absence of such stories in mainstream media.

CASE 3: GRAFFITI HARIMI

The last case I examine is that of Graffiti Harimi (Female Graffiti), a campaign launched by a majority-female activist group called NooNeswa who stencil graffiti of prominent Egyptian women as a form of resistance. These activists say they want to "reclaim" women's public space.³² They use the public sphere to create empowering images and messages for women, and they rely on social media to spread the word on their campaign. According to NooNeswa's Facebook Page, "Through graffiti, the campaign will tackle and invert negative social ideas/stereotypes, and instead, build images that are positive and powerful to honor the women of our society."³³ In an Associated Press interview, one of the campaign artists said the idea came about as these activists realized that their public space was shrinking following Jan25. She specifically mentioned how female activists had been violated by military and police during and after the 18-day revolution. Violations included virginity tests of female revolutionists, imprisonment as well as beatings. These abuses inspired these graffiti artists to resist such political and social injustices and voice their demands through their public wall stencils. The artists hope their graffiti will encourage other Egyptian women to find their voice and will bring public attention to their social and political problems. "We are not here to ask for our rights, we are here to take them ourselves," declared Graffiti Harimi activist Merna Thomas in the Associated Press interview.³⁴

Graffiti Harimi images are mostly images of women, including images of legendary Egyptian artists, with each image accompanied by a powerful quote. For example, one graffiti image displays the face of legendary Egyptian singer, Umm Kulthum, and it includes a verse from one of her songs "give me my freedom, set my hands free." Below the verse, the artist adds, "There's no such thing as 'Men Only.'" Another graffiti shows a renowned deceased actress and performer, Soad Hosni, with a verse from one of her songs that reads, "A girl is like a boy" to confirm the idea that there's no difference

31 10 Tactics for Turning Information into Action website.

32 Khalil 2012.

33 NooNeswa Facebook Page.

34 AP Making their mark in Egypt 2012.

between men and women. Other images include a stencil of three female faces: one completely covered, one with a headscarf and one uncovered. The caption reads, “Don’t categorize me.” Another example is a stencil of one of the pre-revolution female activists, Wedad al-Demerdash, who was the first activist to organize a workers strike in Mahala in 2006. The caption with al-Demerdash’s stencil reads “Egypt gave birth to women” as in Egypt gave birth to great women such as al-Demerdash.³⁵

“ THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT JAN25 EMPOWERED WOMEN IN THEIR YEARS OF STRUGGLE AGAINST PATRIARCHY AND INJUSTICE

Sharp includes paint as a form of nonviolent protest, among the nonviolent activism forms of protest and persuasion.³⁶ Thus, through this nonviolent art of graffiti, Egyptian female activists are able to reclaim their public space and impose their messages across the walls of Egypt. They are able to simplify their demands with images and quotes that are easily comprehended by their target public audience. In his analysis of street art in Hispanic countries, Chaffee argues that street art is characterized by its universal reach and is a significant medium of communication, given its ability to inform and persuade publics. He defines street art to include diverse forms of political communication, including graffiti, murals, wall paintings as well as posters. Chaffee further contends that such art gives voice to the voiceless, appeals to the public’s emotions and political beliefs and “breaks the conspiracy of silence.”³⁷ Truman extends this argument, saying that the essential purpose of graffiti is to “disrupt public visual sphere and draw our attention to the ways in which public space is constructed and controlled (...).”³⁸ This is what NooNeswa activists are able to do with their art; they are able to give voice to all Egyptian women; they are able to appeal to the public’s emotion and impact their political beliefs, and they are also able to disrupt the public sphere to impose their messages.

Another form of nonviolent activism that further aids the activists is *détournement*. According to McGaw, *détournement* is the “turning around” of images or ideas from the dominant culture through appropriation and superimposition of revolutionary ideas or slogans.³⁹ This includes rewording

35 All images are available on NooNeswa’s Facebook Page.

36 Sharp 2011.

37 Chaffee 1993: 4.

38 Truman 2010: 3.

39 McGaw 2008: 222.

conversations by comic strip characters, modifying a store sign or creating rebellious collages from recognizable government or commercial images.⁴⁰ NooNeswa activists take images of famous Egyptian females and turn them around by adding messages of empowerment. They also rework verses from songs, such as the quote “There’s no such thing as ‘Men Only,’” which they added at the end of the verse from Umm Kulthum’s song.

CONCLUSIONS

Sharp asserts that in the past, political campaigns relied mostly on protests and strikes as methods of resistance, which he argues is an error. He contends that a more effective tactic is to use diverse tools of activism to disperse resistance.⁴¹ Research confirms that diverse nonviolence campaigns are, in fact, powerful and effective tools of resistance. Through nonviolent action, activists are able to enhance their legitimacy; recruit more participants; make it more difficult for a dictatorial regime to respond to peaceful resistance with violence and inhibit the control over social media content.⁴²

This essay demonstrates how Egyptian women are utilizing diverse nonviolent means of resistance to voice opinion, contribute to political activism and enforce change. The three case studies analyzed exhibit how women, whose opinions and concerns are traditionally viewed as private, are able to make the private more public. They use everything from rallies, posters, protests, symbols, art and media to bring their private concerns to the public sphere.

There is no doubt that Jan25 empowered women in their years of struggle against patriarchy and injustice. The revolution infused women with courage and voice. Women are no longer afraid to make concerns or demands more public. Whether it is their uncensored exposing of shameful military transgressions, or recording women’s revolutionary history, or their outspoken graffiti demands of freedom and equality, women can no longer be silenced. “Women have grown aware of the power they can wield; they can no longer be relegated to their homes and to traditional roles.”⁴³ In sum, women have realized their potential as empowered nonviolent activists and will continue to amp up their long-muted voices via innovative peaceful activism to reclaim social and political gains reaped during Jan25.

40 Harold 2007

41 Sharp 2011

42 Sharp 2011; Stephan, Chenoweth 2008.

43 Esfandiari 2013: 4.

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