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Throughout history, societies have faced popular protests and revolts that have stemmed from a host of reasons and have attracted the participation of all groups in society regardless of gender, religion, class, and age. While underlying complex and multidimensional causes of such protests and revolts do not affect all, evenly or in the same way, the mechanisms and results of subjugation compel people to collectively fight against and eliminate systems of suppression. In the case of Egypt, the uprising was legitimized by the peaceful participation of a cross-section of Egyptians. Women and youth, however, played an essential role that helps us better understand this particular uprising.

Within this resistance context, it is important to assess the impact of women and youth in promoting positive peace (peace understood as not merely the absence of war) in Egypt. Beyond a general overview of the uprising, we can explore the interlinked relationships between the involvement of women and youth in the uprising, the role of social media, and their relative access to new mediums of communication.

Historically, and in many ways, Egypt is one of the most iconic countries in the world. Three major aspects stand out today. First, Egypt is one of the oldest civilizations in the world with significant contributions in the fields of science, mathematics, and agriculture. Second, among the Arab nations, Egypt has been one of the most peaceful countries in the region. This state of affairs has given Egypt a global standing with regards to the promotion of peace in the region, within both the Arab League and the International Community. Despite this positive international reputation, Egypt has experienced its own share of internal conflicts and structural violence that have had negative effects on the social, political, and economic development of the country. Third, it could be argued that the 2011 Egyptian grassroots uprising is one of the most important sociopolitical events of modern times.

The existence of internal conflicts in a “peaceful country” can be explained by Johan Galtung’s conception of violence and peace. According to
Galtung, societies may not experience direct violence and war, but this does not necessarily mean they are at peace. Systematic marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation of individuals and groups in society contribute to structural violence, which in turn prepares the ground for direct violence. Structural violence ultimately causes human suffering and renders a search for positive peace elusive, which in Egypt resulted in the so-called Arab Spring uprising. The uprising lasted 18 days, beginning on January 25 at the Tahrir Square and ending on February 15, 2011 with the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. People took to the streets in protest and united under one particular slogan, “bread, freedom, and dignity.” This uprising had notable and unique characteristics. A significant cross-section of Egyptians participated, thereby legitimizing it. Moreover, the highly organized uprising did not have a single clear leader. It was not guided specifically by religious or gender issues, but was rather driven by a combination of social, political, and economic factors as well as facilitated by new communication technologies. Importantly, the grievances centered on the established social, political, and economic institutions that had frustrated the general population. These common grievances eventually influenced individual and group behavior. In addition, state institutions created conditions of oppression and multilayered domination, resulting in an “indignant” tipping point for the general population. Considering that these institutions are means through which socioeconomic and political rights are provided and protected, misuse, exploitation, or mismanagement of all or some of them have serious repercussions for each and every individual in society. In the case of Egypt, it can be said that corruption, the gap between the rich and the poor, and lack of access to basic resources led to the general population’s indignation and taking to the streets.

The uprising was characterized by the notion of “Selmya,” a peaceful means for addressing injustices in society. The peaceful struggle and campaign of civil resistance was comprised of a series of demonstrations, marches, acts of civil obedience, and labor strikes. By engaging nonviolently, the protesters ensured that they did not provide the government with an opportunity to utilize force, an instrument that had been used on occasion in previous displays of discontent in order to keep citizens in a state of fear and passivity. Through peaceful means, the indignant population protested to denounce the government and its policies. At the same time, they legitimized their own civil resistance and right to demonstrate against them.

In most Arab societies, women and youth are considered two distinct social categories. It is uncommon for them to interact in the public sphere. This understanding calls for a theoretical analysis into why the two social categories were able to interact and participate successfully in the Egyptian uprising, without much consideration for their gender, age, and religion. One such
theory is the idea of “interlocking systems” as employed by Helma Lutz, María Teresa Herrera Vivar, and Linda Supik. In this theory, the interlocking systems of oppression cut across the different sectors and groups in the society. This means that there is an inter-sectionality of the economic, political, and social causes of oppression. This interconnection helps to bond distinct social categories into a single category of victims of oppression. In the case of the Egyptian uprising, the unifying factor was systematic oppression rather than age, gender, class, or religion. Hence, women and youth were reacting to governmental systematic oppression that affected all of them.

Similarly, the theory of self-organization by Alain de Vulpian is also applicable in explaining the Egyptian uprising. This model is based on the idea that loosely structured groupings or associations come together in response to perceived injustices or problems. The groups start by organizing and defining communication mechanisms that are not easily controlled by the government or by those in power. Often, their mechanisms avoid the formal rules and chains of command found in conventional organization methods. The Egyptian uprising followed a trend of self-organizing. The activists came together in response to social, political, and economic deterioration. They formed structured networks using the Internet and social networks as a means for communication and civil mobilization. Although the government controlled the Internet, they were not able to destroy the self-organization of the protesters.

In support of these theories, women and youth (two distinct social categories) came out of the private sphere and pushed for change openly. The successful participation of these two marginalized social groups is connected to their ability to hold on to one issue and unifying idea—the “end of the regime.” If, on the contrary, these two groups had tried to organize around their quite distinct issues, it is likely that the uprising would have failed to achieve its objective. The role of women and youth in ensuring the success of the uprising can therefore predominantly be seen in factors such as their ability to self-organize and their sharing complaints and worries.

In most countries of the world, women and youth constitute the largest percentage of the total population. In Egypt, women and youth form more than 60 percent of the total population. In terms of classification and definition, women and youth are considered two distinct and different social categories. The term “youth” commonly refers to people between the ages of 15 and 30. Youth have become an increasing important area of study and policy in the Middle East due to population shifts and the fact that young people constitute the largest percentage of the total population. For instance in Egypt, over 60 percent of the total population is under the age of 30. In terms of education, Gamal Ghietas explains that most of the youth in Egypt are educated, with at
least 72 percent of the youth having a university degree. This means that most young people are not only literate, but are also highly skilled. Unfortunately, the job market is crowded. As noted by Abdel-Kader Shohaib, each year 700,000 new graduates compete for 200,000 new jobs.

In addition to limited job opportunities, many universities do not provide quality education. At the elementary and high school education levels, the implementation of restructuring economic policies in the 1990s led to the withdrawal of state-sponsored education. These policies ultimately deprived the majority of the young people of the benefits of quality education. Instead of receiving an education, they joined the job market, but as unqualified job seekers. Politically, Mubarak, his family, and his political allies blocked the Egyptian youth from participating in democratic processes. For instance, when youth-led Kefaya, also known as the Egyptian Movement for Change (EMC), attempted to protest Mubarak’s bid to renew his sixth term in office and his son’s candidacy for succession, the government retaliated with force. Several members of the group were detained, while police brutalized others. The government denied the youth the right to voice their concerns openly.

Women constitute 48 percent of the entire Egyptian population. Overall, the life of Egyptian women is shaped by different factors, such as a strict patriarchal system. During Mubarak’s regime, women experienced severe oppression and sexual harassment, which, unfortunately, has continued even after the fall of Mubarak. Other unequal legal policies that women face include discriminatory marriage, divorce, and child custody laws. There are a number of social phenomena that have been consistently used by the present-day political system to oppress women and exclude them from participating in politics. These are sexual harassment and “virginity tests.” Sexual harassment entails touching a woman’s body, stripping off her clothes, and even using sharp objects, while “virginity tests” involve confirming whether or not a girl/woman is a virgin. These two social phenomena have affected women in Egypt regardless of their age or location and have been repeatedly carried out by men at all levels: the military, army, colleagues, and family.

Sexual violations of women in Egypt are made worse by the fact that the state security apparatus, which is protected by law, abuse women in the name of protecting them. Overwhelming challenges confront women in Egypt and interfere with their family, personal social status, and livelihood. The fact that sexual harassment has been turned into a political tool of repression makes it difficult to deal with the perpetrators of the act. The failure to address these violations creates an image in which the oppression of women and the denial of their political rights convert their bodies into battlegrounds through which political machinations play out. Another element that disadvantages women is limited access to information technology. More specifically, only 37 percent of women are Internet users compared to 63 percent of men. This is due
to various factors, including fear of street harassment and the fact that few women work outside of the family and therefore lack access to computers and cyber cafes.

From this analysis, it can be said that women and youth have experienced forms of structural violence engineered by the state (political system) or state apparatus such as the military, the modern economic system, and the patriarchal system in their society (linked as well to cultural violence). For instance, in the politico-economic and patriarchal systems, the role and place of women in society is gendered and limited to the private sphere. In the same systems, youth are seen as irresponsible, immature, and inexperienced and in need of guidance. In effect, this patriarchal and cultural logic excludes the two social categories from most spheres of their society. When they do participate without authorization from the government, husbands, or elders, their actions are considered an obstruction, a threat to law and order, and in direct disobedience to societal norms.

Consequently, any effort by women or youth to resist bad governance and the lack of rule of law has been met in the past with state force. These violent strategies are implemented to deter open discontent and to maintain these groups in an oppressed state for the sake of “peace.” The uprising was thus an active expression of a general feeling of indignation in the face of over 30 years of oppressive governance. This means that the systems that silenced the Egyptian population were strongly entrenched in the society and had significant impact on the social, economic, and political well being of women and youth. To express their dissatisfaction with the regime, women and youth had to fight the very social, economic, and political systems that had subjugated them.

Considering the above, youth and women in Egypt had profound reasons for participating in the uprising. The regime had for a long time denied and violated their social, economic, and political rights. For women and youth, the spirit of indignation and success of the uprising was complemented by other factors. First, for young people, the maturity of the information age generation and their use of social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) provided the most elusive means of organizing and networking. Utilizing this technology, Egyptian protesters, especially young people, were able to organize, communicate, and network with supporters locally and globally. The membership of the social media was wide and inclusive. For example, during the Egyptian uprising, Facebook had 34 million users and there were 2,313 active pages between January 11 and February 10, 2011 where participants discussed resistance strategies. At the same time, between January 10 and February 10, 93 million tweets on the revolution were exchanged within Egypt, and between Egypt and the outside world. Social media therefore
enabled the majority of the protesters who were women and youth to make their complaints and worries visible and, simultaneously, to revolt against the oppressive regime of Mubarak’s government.

Second, and as explored above, the uprising was guided by a common feeling of discontentment and not an ideology per se. The leadership and specific ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the oldest opposition political group, had guided previous resistance movements for the removal of the regime. This group has failed over the years to achieve its objective of establishing another type of state system. Despite lacking a rallying ideology, the uprising was successful and led by ordinary Egyptians. It used simple slogans such as “bread, freedom and dignity” as well as “end of a regime.” The majority of the people, regardless of their class, religion, gender, and political affiliation, were able to identify with these two slogans and subsequently participate in the uprising. Similarly, ideology-free movement permitted the free participation of all groups in society, preventing the exclusionary practices of some ideology-based movements.

Third, young people felt the need to create a defining moment in their generation. They did not want to merely represent the largest percentage of a total population without hope for a better future. For the Egyptian youth, the majority of which were born during the Mubarak regime, the uprising was an opportunity to change the only system they knew—a system that was stratified, repressive, exploitative, and highly restricted access to public offices and other opportunities. Formally educated youth were faced with a bleak future. The Revolution provided a defining moment in their story and an opportunity for generating change.

A fourth factor that made the uprising successful includes the broad intercultural experiences of young women and men in Egypt. A good percentage of Egyptian women and men had studied in intercultural institutions in their country, Europe, and the United States. Moreover, social media had provided an opportunity to interact with each other, locally, regionally, and internationally. From these interactions whether physical or technological, it was clear to youth and women in Egypt that one could practice his/her own religion and also enjoy economic and political rights without discrimination. Therefore, they sought to guarantee these rights for themselves and future generations.

In a nutshell, the uprising was a good opportunity for all Egyptians, but particularly for women who had been victims of oppression for over 30 years. For instance, the civil resistance gave women an opportunity to break through the ceiling of fear and silence, which are the two greatest threats to freedom, dignity, peace, and social justice. During the uprising, women expressed themselves in the public as demonstrators, mothers, breadwinners, and
victims of social injustice. Unfortunately, women still faced different forms of abuse during the protest from the military. This did not deter them, however, from making their voices heard. They remained persistent in expressing their defiance of a system that violated their rights and stripped them of their dignity. The post-Mubarak era is filled with hopes and fears for both women and youth.

In conclusion, the Egyptian uprising started at the Tahrir Square as a peaceful and nonviolent social movement with very simple and immediate demands for freedom, social justice, and the removal of Mubarak from office. In all, millions of Egyptian protesters participated, with the majority women and youth from different socioeconomic backgrounds. While most of their demands are yet to be fulfilled, such as the inclusion of women in the government and an end to police brutality, overall, the Egyptian people were able to break through the glass ceiling of fear and intimidation. The fall of the regime does not yet signal the attainment of “bread, freedom, and dignity”; rather it marks the beginning of a long continuous journey toward a sustainable development and culture of peace.

RECOMMENDED READINGS


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