Documentation

Outlines of the Revolt
Gender Critical Perspectives from the Arab World

Weltmuseum
17. March 2014

Edited by Magda Seewald
Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Magda Seewald and I am a project coordinator at VIDC and I am very happy to welcome you all tonight to the panel discussion: **Outlines of the Revolt – Gender critical perspectives from the Arab World.**

My special welcome goes to our speakers of tonight and thank you both for coming. Let me also thank the Austrian Development Cooperation for its financial support and the Weltmuseum for its cooperation as well as my colleagues from VIDC for their support in organizing this event and last but not least I would like to thank the interpreters Gabrielle Gallo and Thomas Musil.

Within the lecture series on the Arab uprising the VIDC has analyzed the uprisings from different perspectives. We have looked on social movements in the region, on the role of Islam within the uprisings and on Western and Arab interventions into the rebellions. On the occasion of the International Women’s day, which was celebrated 2 weeks ago, we will focus tonight on the rebellions and their impact on gender relations in the Arab world.

When it comes to gender relations and women in the Arab world Western commentators tend to focus, often in a very orientalist manner, on the suppression Arab women face in their societies. Therefore virginity tests and rape cases were highlighted in many media. However we should not forget that we all live in a patriarchal setting with all its consequences as the recent published report of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, entitled *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey*, has shown. One outcome of this report was, that 1 out of 3 women in Europe have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their live time.

Tonight our speakers, Maya Mikdashi and Mariam Kirollos, will share their experiences from Tahrir square and their perspectives on the impact of the uprisings on gender relations with us. Let me briefly introduce to you our chair of tonight’s panel: Helmut Krieger. He is a consultant to the VIDC. He is a social scientist and a lecturer at the Institute for International Development at the University of Vienna. Currently he is also working in the APPEAR-Project Conflict, Participation and Development in Palestine.

I wish us all an interesting debate and may ask you Helmut now to introduce our speakers. Thank you!
Thanks a lot to the VIDC for facilitating this panel discussion on gender critical perspectives on the Arab world. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming here. It is my distinct pleasure to chair this session on gender critical perspectives on the Arab world and we sure are very pleased to welcome Mariam Kirollos and Maya Mikdashi.

As Magda already mentioned, the subject of today’s event is on the one hand a critical analysis on the ongoing uprisings in the Arab world from a gender perspective, and, on the other hand, a critical analysis on what is perceived as gender and sex when speaking and writing about the Arab world. That’s to say we also will critically reflect on what we do understand as gender relations as well as the studies of sexuality when it comes to the Arab world, given the fact that we are all more or less confronted with hegemonic discourses on the Arab world which can hardly hide their orientalist or even Islamophobic preconditions and presumptions.

Given this situation the following questions will be discussed at tonight’s event: On the one hand, what does sexual violence mean in today’s Egypt? How is it linked to power relations in the country? And how can brutal forms of sexual assault and rapes during protests be effectively combated?

On the other hand, what must the study of gender include? How is a critical analysis of gender relations connected to other societal categories and relations, such as class and race relations? And in general, how can gender justice be understood as an integral part of struggles for economic and political justice?

These are main questions and I hope we can answer them, or at least some of them, despite the limited timeline we have and despite their complexity.

Before we start, let me briefly introduce Mariam Kirollos and Maya Mikdashi. Mariam is an Egyptian feminist-activist and human rights defender based in Cairo. She’s one of the founding members of operation Anti Sexual Harassment and Assault (OpAntiSH): a group that is combating the growing problem of sexual harassment and collective sexual assaults, rapes against women during protests, especially in Tahrir square in Cairo. The group patrols the streets during protests and fights off men as they attempt to encircle and assault women, as we will see in a short video clip presented by Mariam. The group also provides legal and medical support and follow-up care for girls and women after these assaults. Furthermore, Mariam is one of the cofounders of the student leftist movement at the American University of Cairo.
We are very pleased to welcome Maya Mikdashi too. Maya holds a PhD from Columbia University’s Department of Anthropology and she is codirector of the documentary film “About Baghdad”. She’s currently an associate professor and director of graduate studies at the New York University’s Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies. At the same time, she’s cofounder and editor of Jadaliyya. Jadaliyya, I think meaning dialectic, is a free e-zine featuring English, Arabic and French language content by academics, by activists, by journalists, as well as artists, from and/or on the Arab world, Turkey, as well as Iran. Jadaliyya is produced by the Arab Studies Institute, so it’s an absolutely necessary and quite extraordinary website presenting a lot of debates on the Arab world, and really, you should follow it.

Maya’s research interests are, among others, socio-cultural anthropology, legal anthropology, citizenship studies, nationalism, secularism, gender studies, human rights studies and industries, liberalism and neoliberalism, and last but not least, refugee studies. Among her numerous publications I would like to mention just a few. Articles forthcoming in the following year: “Law, Sex, Citizenship: Another Way of Studying the State in the Middle East.” This article will be published in the *Handbook of Contemporary Middle East History* edited by Jens Hanssen and Amal Ghazal. The next one is “Queering Citizenship, Queering Middle East Studies,” published in the International Journal of Middle East Studies in May 2013. And another one is “Sexual Violence is a Crime, Sometimes,” published in *After Words: A Reader for Academic Writing* in 2012. As I have already mentioned, numerous articles were published in Jadaliyya the e-zine: “How Not to Study Gender in the Middle East”, published in 2012, and, for example, “The Uprisings Will Be Gendered”, also published in 2012.

Last but not least, some words about the form of our panel discussion. Each panelist will speak for about 20 to 30 minutes. Then if you’d like to we’ll have a discussion among the panelists, or some questions, and then we’ll open the floor to questions and comments. So, please let’s begin our session, and welcome, Mariam.

**Mariam Kirollos**

*According to the current situation in Egypt we respond to Mariam Kirollos’ request not to publish her lecture.*

*Video from Operation Anti Sexual Harassment/Assault, Cairo*
Scholars, activists, and non-governmental organizations have long drawn attention to the regulation of gender and sex norms in the Arab world. This is not surprising, given the ways that gender and sex have served as civilizational markers in modern history and objects of curiosity by anthropologists or ethnologists; it is very fitting that we are here in this museum. Miriam Cook called it the obsession of gender issues in the Arab world and has used the term “muslimwoman” as one word. “Muslimwoman” is always the same, has no history and no context.

Over the past three years (and it seems crazy that it has been three years) the ongoing uprisings in the Arab world have brought into focus some dominant ways that sexual and bodily rights are framed, gendered, and politicized. These can be grouped under three loose themes, each of which deserves further study and each of which has a history: One is the equation of gender with women and/or sexual and gender minorities. Two is the ways that gender and sex panics are linked to a fear of Islamists (this functions as a secular alibi — we can definitely see this in Lebanon and Syria). Third, is the use of gendered and sexed violence to discourage or discredit protests, revolutionaries and fighters and the discursive separation between political and sexual violence. And here the political coding is: political violence happens to men and sexual violence happens to women. We are seeing this most clearly in Egypt, Syria, and to some extent in Bahrain.

Today I want to sketch these out quickly and then think more about the third section; to push us to think what separating sexual violence from political violence does to our analysis. So that we are not only trying to understand what things mean, but rather, what particular framings of gender and sex do in the world.

1) Over the course of the uprisings we have seen journalists and academics write about “protestors” without mentioning gender until they get to the “female protestors”. Similarly, in much political science the “citizen” appears as an unmarked and universal category until studies of “female” and/or “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ)” citizens (and non-citizens, by the way) disturb this chimera. When we read of these “female protestors” are we to assume that all previous analysis of “protestors” has been about men? If so, why does this not factor into analysis? Are men not gendered? Is citizenship an ungendered and undifferentiated category except when talking about female citizens? If we believe that an attention to gender is important to understanding how women live their lives, then why not extend the same courtesy to men? What power dynamics and hegemonic discourses are being reproduced with every selective deployment of “gender” in
the media and in every syllabus on “politics” or “citizenship” that includes one or two weeks about “women” or “gender”? We are seeing this logic play out again in coverage and analysis of the Arab uprisings, where a study of “gender” has become a synonym for the study of women and LGBTQ Arabs.

The ungendered body does not exist, just as the unclassed body does not exist. Such disarticulation reproduces the normative and liberal fantasy of the ungendered body and of ungendered politics and the unclassed body and unclassed politics. But gender is not something that one can be outside of, whether by choice or not. It is not an analytic lens that can be withheld and deployed according to genitalia and/or sexual practices of the people being studied. When an attention to gender is limited to female and/or LGBTQ people in the Middle East, it reproduces the study of gender as the study of how (other) men treat “their” women and sexual minorities.

We should be vigilant in questioning the ways that a gender analysis is deployed and withheld. We must insist that everyone is gendered, just as everyone, rich and poor and middle class, is “classed”. One of the clearest examples of the difficulties of thinking this way is in the war on terror, which is saturated with discourses about women’s rights and Islam etc., but what is often not see is the gendered male body in the war on terror. If we think of suicide bombers and the way it is spoken about as sexually repressed, that they are angry, that they have a problematic relationship with their mothers. It is spoken about in a very gendered way. It is interesting to think about this in the city of Freud. That is a certain way to understand sexuality and suicide bombers together and yet it is never marked as gender. What gets marked as gender is what these men do to the women. When you think of the sexual torture in Abu Ghraib so much of it was a sort of mix of gender and culture. Why do you do this kind of torture: because Arab men cannot stand being sexually humiliated, as if any other man it is fine. And yet we never or rarely use this as a gender analysis.

I think this kind of framing is politically irresponsible. Only if we think men and women are separable and only in a world where women alone carry the burden of gender would an article like “Why do they hate us” make sense.

2) A second prevailing mode of framing, gendering, and politicizing the uprisings is the fear of Islamists, which in many ways functions as a secular alibi. As Islamists gained ground in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria concerns over their potential gender policies caught the attention of the international media. While such concerns and interest are certainly important, why do they gain such momentous traction only when it comes to Islamists? After all, have non-Islamist Arab political parties and powers had such wonderful and progressive gender policies all this time? This selective fear of Islamists rests on familiar assumptions about Islam (scary) secularism (redemptive and progressive).
Many Arab secularists dismiss the Egyptian and Tunisian elections primarily because Islamists won, and many try to dismiss or discredit the ongoing Syrian uprising - civil war - by branding it “Islamist”. Such a selective fear of Islamists has more to do with Islamophobia than with feminism.

For example, I have studied the Lebanese legal system, focusing on personal status, criminal and civil law, for years now. Despite the intricate ways that these interconnected bodies of law produce citizenship in Lebanon, whenever I discuss my work people ALWAYS want to know more about shar’ia and its assumed “oppression” of women. These questions always come after I have carefully explained that in Lebanon certain Christian and Jewish personal status laws are much more stringent in their production and regulation of normative gender roles than codified Islamic personal status laws (which are not the same as shar’ia, historically speaking). In addition, civil laws have more wider reaching “gender effects” than any religious personal status law. More broadly, Islam is not the only religion in the region, although it often seems to be in mainstream media coverage. When an action such as the hitting of women by men for not conforming to “proper” gender roles in ultra orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem or in conservative neighborhoods of Riyadh is scripted in radically different terms the reader should pause. At these moments you are not reading about Islam or about gender, you are reading within a discourse about Islam and gender.

Gender equality and justice should be a focus of progressive politics no matter who is in power. Unfortunately, Islamists do not have an exclusive license to practice patriarchy and gender discrimination/oppression in the region. The secular state, with the full support and backing of the international community, has been doing it fairly adequately for the last half a century.

3) The third frame we can employ to understand dominant discourses related to the uprisings are the uses of gendered and sexed violence to discourage or discredit protests and revolutionaries. But what I am really interested in is the analytic separation that we made between sexual and political violence or more broadly. Sexual violence happens to women, political violence happens to men. The Mubarak regime and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Muslim Brotherhood and now, Sisi, have used sexual violence to discourage and discredit Egyptian protestors and revolutionaries. Female protestors and activists have been subjected to “virginity tests”, vicious beatings, and charges of immorality. In fact, everywhere there has been an uprising, the regime in question has propagated a discourse of immorality among male and female protestors. In Yemen women were actively discouraged from joining protests by security forces that targeted them for repression. In Bahrain a cry for “public morality” was thrown against men and women fighting to overthrow a repressive monarchy. Such statements are meant to discredit protests and protestors as cesspools of immorality and sexual licentiousness. In turn, the spectacle of Egyptian security forces publicly beating and dragging a woman down
a street is a warning to others. It is forcefully implied that women and men should stay at home and away from the impunity with which (secular) security forces can violate a protestors' body.

Faced with the practice of sexual violence, we should not decontextualize it from the larger infrastructures of oppression that people live under.

For example, Israeli attempts at “pinkwashing” its settler colonization of Palestine highlight how Israel saves gay Palestinians from their Islamic culture. In this way, the Israeli state hopes to paint Palestinians as homophobic Islamic fundamentalists in order to discredit now well over a century of resistance against settler colonialism, occupation and apartheid. One year ago Hillary Clinton made a speech at the UN about gay rights and she called on the Palestinian authority to protect “gay rights” in Palestine, with no mention of the Israeli occupation. I will summarize it here:

Today, the promise of “gay rights” for Palestinian goes something like this: The United States will protect your right to not be detained because as a gay, but will not protect you from being detained because you are Palestinian. As a queer, you have the right to love and have sex with whomever you choose safely and without discrimination, but you do not have the right to be un-occupied, or to be free from oppression based on your political beliefs, actions, and affiliations. As long as it is Arabo-Islamic culture and its manifestation through (Palestinian) law that is oppressing you, we are here for you. If you are being oppressed by Israeli colonial policies, you are on your own.

The alienation of sexuality from politics can also be seen in liberal understandings of “women’s rights” or “human rights” more generally. Homophobia or sexism or patriarchy is not one transhistorical thing, nor is it experienced in the same way or to the same extent by people the world over (because they themselves are not the same thing). Can we think of a Syrian gay man protesting against authoritarianism and neoliberal market restructuring or the Bahraini woman fighting against monarchical rule without assuming that they are mostly affected by homophobia or sexism? For the majority of the people of the world, oppression, to paraphrase Edward Said on culture, is contrapuntal. It moves, it is multi-directional, it is adaptive, and it forms a terrain of interconnected injustices. Separating and emphasizing one of these oppressions helps to obscure others, and this obscuring does work in a neoliberal identitarian framework where the “right to freedom” is most articulated through the right to consumerism and consumer identities.

The separation of sexual violence or gender oppression, of gender and sexual rights from “politics” can be seen in many places. In Egypt female protesters have been beaten, dragged through streets, and shot at along with their brother protesters. They have been imprisoned, disappeared, and repressed just as ruthlessly as their male comrades. They have been pinched, grabbed, assaulted and harassed by both regime supporters and their political allies.
at Tahrir. They have been stripped and they have been raped, in the offices of police and medical examiners, and in the spaces of the public. Their vaginas, anuses, and breasts, the very organs that mark them as women, have been targeted and violated by individuals and groups of men on every side of Egypt's political divide.

Sadly, this fact, that it is precisely the violence and rape of women that transgresses political divides, does not shock us.

The daily possibility of sexual harassment, assault, and repression forms, in large part, the female political subject(s) in the modern state era. Public assaults in Cairo, mass and public rapes in India, and the fact that every two minutes a woman is sexually assaulted in the US or that over a quarter of all women in the European Region experience physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner — these are only amplifications and spectacular examples of the sexual violence that women and girls face across the divides of nations, cultures, religions, and economic systems; in peace and in war.

We cannot continue to deny that men and women and boys and girls face different assemblages of violence and vulnerability daily in the streets of Homs or in a Jordanian refugee camp. If we do, our analysis of military tactics used in Syria, for example, is deeply impaired. There is no universal, ungendered, unclassed, and anonymous protester or body of protesters. And yet, writing about rape in Syria, sexual assault in Egypt is somehow a “social issue” and, shunted off to those boxes called “gender studies”, “women's issues”, or “social/cultural dynamics”, comfortably outside politics. We can no longer afford such comfort. So panels on political violence, for example, might not include work on sexual violence, which may be an entirely different panel - probably something like this one “gender and the uprisings”. Again here, we see the separation of “sexual violence” from “political violence” — one is coded “female” and one is coded “male” — similar to those that have studied histories of liberalism it is a similar folding of social/domestic/private, political/public sphere.

In Egypt, it is this bifurcation of the “social” from the “political” that has allowed Mubarakists, officers, Sisiists, and Muslim Brothers, along with their regional and international allies, to set the terms of struggles for gender equality. Those terms — gender quotas for parliament and cabinet, family laws, and birth control — are silent on the dire need of meaningful social and political change. It is these false dichotomies between gender and politics, between the economic and the cultural, that will continue to impede the very possibility of transformative revolution in Egypt and beyond.

The urge to highlight one factor over another while thinking about sexual violence in a particular context is seductive: it is either culture, history, imperialism, or, more generally, that fuzzy thing we can all agree to be against, patriarchy. It is more difficult, and less
conducive to action (and this is where the conversation between academics and activists is so productive), to pause on ambiguity, contingency, and the ways these factors and others are woven (often tensely) together in each act of sexual violence - which is itself an intractable and constitutive aspect of political violence. to simplify sexual violence - to consider it a woman’s or social issue or even an issue of “human rights”, is to de-gender and depoliticize it. It is to reproduce an unmarked universal “THE citizen” or “THE protester.” A mythical subject position that fails to capture the complexity of political life in an age of governmentality and neoliberal securitization. We cannot afford these false lenses anymore.

Analysts and journalists who write on the Syrian refugee crisis or Egyptian protestors who use the singular voice are making a choice. They choose to interpolate a universal that does not exist. I would like to suggest that this choice is a political act, and it does political action in the world. It imposes analytical limitations on the very possibility of understanding the various ongoing struggles for transformative change we are witnessing today. It reinforces a long-standing reality in which agents of power appropriate, control, and limit struggles for gender equality by folding them in the residual categories of “women’s empowerment” and “women’s participation”. This folding pretends to offer an easy solution to gender violence and inequality, which they will simply dissipate if more women were to exercise their right to vote or serve in parliament, for example.

In today’s global security state it is not possible to write the political without writing about the body; the body itself is both a medium and the primary target of modern politics and state intervention. The uprisings, unfolding at the surface of so many beaten, broken, triumphant and depressed human bodies, have again shown this. One cannot approach politics or revolution without a focus on the body. But also, and just as importantly, one cannot conceptualize the body without thinking through sexual difference and gender. We need political intifadas and uprisings. Just as importantly, we also need conceptual and analytic intifadas and uprisings.

**Discussion**

**Kriollos’ comment on Maya’s talk**

You said de-gendering sexual violence, which I find a very huge challenge at this point and it comes again to the fact that it’s very difficult for men. I remember in February 2012, a number of men came out to the media and said that they were raped in prison and very little was done; I don’t think any foreign media outlets actually wrote about that. It’s definitely a huge challenge, so I don’t know if there are any - it will take another male revolution, from a male perspective I guess. If you have any advice in that sense: how can we do this? Because as well, I maybe forgot to mention in my small talk: even our male volunteers get sexually assaulted in the process of bringing out survivors.
Mikdashi: I think that it’s very important to really understand the ways that sexual violence has always been gendered, and coded, as always female, it’s always a man doing this to a female, so all other sort of constellations and possibilities of sexual violence disappear. Including same sex, gendered violence, including violence against men by women, violence against men by men, all of these things disappear. To me this became most clear when I was doing some research on the Syrian uprising and the refugee crisis, where again even when male sexual torture was being discussed, or male rape, it was almost already assumed those men became women. The men, in the act of being raped, they became feminized. It was almost impossible to conceptualize it outside of this frame, outside of the most basic gender frame: you are penetrated, you are a woman, you are feminized. But if you think of Gaddafi, for example, you remember when Gaddafi was caught he was captured, there were people who caught him who were trying to anally penetrate him in anger. That moment to me is always striking when I think about the confluence of political and sexual violence, and unfortunately, I think, it’s become something that we cannot move beyond.

Krieger: Thank you very much again, and I think it’s time to open the floor to questions and comments. So, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for your questions, and please use the microphones.

Audience: I actually wanted to ask you here is you were mentioning about in Israel some pinkwashing campaign, can you explain a little about what this is?

Krieger: I think we should collect some questions and comments if there are some more.

Audience: Thank you very much. There is one point which I’d like to raise: that sexual violence in certain countries in the Arab world is used as a weapon by governments to suppress their opponents. I come from Sudan. And I know this is a practice. The police itself, in certain areas, arrest women and they practice this for two purposes: first of all, to keep her mouth shut, secondly to humiliate her family, built on the cultural background, and they wouldn’t talk about it. And through that, they will even threaten complete regions. This is being done in Darfur, being done in other parts in the north itself also. And this I believe needs some attention, that particular issue. Then, the experience of Egypt, this is happening in Syria now. The issue is what is supposed to be done to solve all these problems? I believe one of the issues is awareness. There is no awareness in a simplified manner. It cannot be told in one year or ten years or so but there is need to change the educational system, there is need to create, to use the media, there is need to create multiplier effects. Your group for instance in Egypt, yes, this is appreciated what you are doing, but with about 60, 70 million people, how are you going to handle? Unless you have a multiplier effect, unless you have
netting - this is my personal view, based on experiences of NGO’s in netting and multiplier effect in various aspects.

**Audience:** I’m from Afghanistan, living in Indiana right now. And just one question for Maya, about the gender issue, I believe that sometimes, you know, when women raise their voice, for their rights, it’s of course, they have to raise their voice and get their rights. But my question is, sometimes I think that if women try to ask for their rights, isn’t it a degradation of the opposition? They should ask more for human rights, they should ask as a human, not as a woman, does it make any sense?

**Krieger:** Yes, thanks for your questions. Maybe you’d like to start with pinkwashing?

**Mikdashi:** Sure. So just a little background on the pinkwashing campaign: This actually follows on a sort of hasbara technique, hasbara meaning Israeli state propaganda. This is the latest manifestation. So previously there were always conversations about the equality of women in Israel versus the way that women were treated in Palestine. They always had this other propaganda campaign about how Arabs in Israel, or Palestinian Israelis, have more rights than anywhere else, as if that somehow justifies the occupation of Palestine. Now, recently, in the past three years, activists have really documented ways that the Israeli Foreign ministry has drawn up plans that include gay rights within this framework. And for example in the United States you have lecture tours of Palestinian self-professed gay refugees seeking refuge in Israel. So there’s an understanding and there’s an attempt to produce Israel as a space of human rights, of equality, and to shift the attention from the occupation to the democratic and equal human rights of Israel. Gay bodies, queer bodies, and female bodies have been used as vehicles to produce this image. So that’s sort of the background on the pinkwashing campaign.

It is true that sexual violence is used both by regime and anti-regime, and I can say, I don’t think this is a necessarily - you know I’m an anthropologist, so I have an allergy to the word culture, a very well produced allergy. I don’t think these are necessarily cultural problems as much as they are structural, political, historical, economic, all of these things. For one thing, if you look at, for example, the United States, and the prevalence of sexual violence in prisons, against male and female inmates by guards and by each other - they just released a study where they said a third of all inmates, and you know the United States has the highest prison population in the world compared to population, a third of all inmates have been raped. This is very much a mass problem of sexual assault, because a third of the prison population means like 2 million people in the United States, and yet this is not remarked upon and it is definitely not considered cultural. It is definitely not considered something about American culture, which is just into prison rape. Like that’s an integral part of American culture. And yet when we talk about places like Egypt we assume that there’s
something about culture that we have to understand. I think we need to be very careful when using the word culture for dramatic effect.

The last thing I would say is that, women’s rights are human rights, if we start thinking in that way, we might as well say human rights are male rights and women’s rights are women’s rights. And that’s just not the case. The fact of the matter is that there is a patriarchal world system, there is structural inequality, and that is why when you say women’s rights you say human rights. It’s actually it’s a reflection of the anemia and weakness of human rights that you even have to say women’s rights, because they should be one and the same and they are one and the same.

Krieger: Thank you, next questions?

Audience: Two very quick questions: One, it was about 14 years ago the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was passed, that led to a lot of hope around - it involves women’s involvement in peace building and mediation situations, also in post-conflict and peace building as well as the protection issues for women in refugee camps. I know Egypt is a bit of a special case because it’s not seen exactly as a conflict directly the same way that some other armed conflicts that we think of are. But I just wonder from, either of you, to what extent is this resolution in your experience, ever referred to, ever used as a tool?

Mikdashi: So is this CEDAW?

Audience: No, the UN Security Council Resolution, so coming from the big guys, the big five sitting at the table. Or maybe connected to that, if you have any thoughts or ideas for people sitting here in Austria about what either of the Austrian Development Cooperation, or any kind of solidarity groups in other countries can do, I know the situation in Egypt is quite complex and perhaps there are other larger players who maybe could take bigger actions, but any thoughts you have for the audience.

Audience: I would like to make a short remark to human rights whether they are women’s rights. Human rights have their history, and when they were proclaimed there were no women’s rights in there. At the very beginning in the French revolution they were really white, male rights and they had to be reclaimed and they had to be fulfilled with women’s rights. Also children’s rights were not in there originally, they were proclaimed and reclaimed afterwards.
And I have a short question about feminist movements in all these countries you mentioned, because I’m quite sure that there are self organizations of women. I would like to know whether there are feminist movements who see themselves as such and self-organizations of women. I think that’s one of the most important things that women’s movement or feminist movements need in such difficult situations after war.

Mikdashi: I think that there are as many types of feminism as there are types of people. There’s a long history of feminist movements in the Middle East, across the Middle East, but largely, what has happened is something global, which is that feminism has sort of dissipated. There isn’t as much anger, like productive political anger. This is not something that is just in the Middle East; in Europe as well, and in the United States, for sure. You wonder where the feminist movement is, where it hasn’t just become an NGO. No seriously and this is not just something we have to ask the Middle East, this is something we have to ask ourselves: Where has feminist action gone? Where is it? What does it mean to be working as a feminist today, as an activist, as a political actor, and how are these sort of possibilities already channeled into what we call reform, which is not what people thought feminism was in the sixties and the seventies. So we have to ask ourselves this question, and it’s really a global question: what has happened?

I think this is a really important question, like what can we do here, what kind of solidarities can we form. One of the things that I always tell people is actually, to be a feminist where you are. That’s something you can do. So in the United States when people ask, what can we do in solidarity? You can say, you should be involved in the American feminist movement. Don’t just be a feminist for the Middle East. Be a feminist here. Fight your battles, because if we really are interested in gender justice it has to be something that happens everywhere. It cannot be something that is marked regionally. That’s the first step I would say, be a feminist in your context. If you want to be in solidarity with feminists in Egypt be a feminist in Austria. That’s sort of a basic feminist claim.

Now, in terms of the UN Security Council: This is always a strange question, the UN Security Council. And I think what I’ve just said, actually, about what the fate of feminism in our neoliberal age is encapsulated in this question, where it ends up being a question about a UN Security Council. "Do people listen to a UN Security Council resolution", as if that is a feminist claim, or a framework from which to understand feminism and gender equality. And the truth of the matter is in the Middle East and in many parts of the world the UN has no credibility whatsoever. No credibility, especially the Security Council. There’s a very important reason for that, which is Israel/Palestine and more recently Syria, and the way that the Security Council has historically been a political tool of exerting global power. So I would say that if I was in a protest in Beirut, and somebody said, “Oh what do you think of the UN Security Council resolution?” I would say, “I don’t really care. Who cares?” If anything I see these resolutions as ways to channel revolutionary possibilities into questions
of reform that only the state can fix when oftentimes it is the state that is oppressing us. So were asking the state to save us from its own oppression. The Security Council is nothing more than the superpowers of the world, or who used to be the superpowers after the Second World War, coming together and deciding things for the rest of us.

Krieger: Thank you very much. Are there some more questions?

Audience: Thank you very much. Actually you mentioned only the Security Council, not the whole UN. The Security Council it is very clear because it is a monopoly of a very limited number of countries. Not everybody had a chance to be there. There is a permanent five: they have the control. This is a fact. This is why there is a lot of contradiction, there is a lot of weakness, there is a lot of unfairness, there is a lot when it comes to Israel, but on the other side, when you come to the UN at large, the General Assembly, there are a lot of good positive aspects, particularly concerning the rights of women, human rights, even there are organizations specializing in this particular issue, and I believe we should encourage and we should control and try to be part of the advocacy of NGOs to clarify to weaknesses and try through those countries. There are some countries which are positive that are working for that purpose and so, connecting with them and asking them to improve the weaknesses and that is I believe - thank you.

Mikdashi: I didn’t mean to be dismissive about questions of solidarity. I think they’re very important. But I think there’s a danger in assuming that the feminist struggle is over in the West and it has to be achieved elsewhere. I mean we just heard Magda said a third of women have been physically, sexually assaulted and that’s a low number, because that’s the reported number in the EU. Clearly feminisms work is not done. Clearly it’s not done in the United States where women make 90 cents to the male dollar. And clearly it is not done when it’s not understood to be part of an anti-war struggle, a serious, cohesive, coherent struggle. I think sometimes people assume that solidarity or the things that affect women are only the things that we already say these are women’s issues. So one of the things in Europe that would make a big difference, and would be a feminist intervention, is to counter Islamophobia. This is a feminist intervention of solidarity. One of the things, for example in the United States, being anti War on Terror is a feminist action. Not only if it’s about a female body or if it’s about rape or if it’s about whatever then we are feminists. And Lila Abu-Lughod has written about this very, very persuasively; that there’s a displacement onto the so-called third world, that is where feminism needs to happen. And what that does is that it produces for us a false sense of security and it depoliticizes actually, and it stops us from working towards equality where we live.

Krieger: Thank you both very much for your contribution to our event, thanks a lot.