

When Sexuality is Politics: The Struggle for LGBT+ Rights in Egypt

Athena Richardson (Elliott School of International Affairs)

RESEARCH PROBLEM:

As countries throughout the world struggle to legalize same-sex marriage, in Egypt suspected homosexuals are regularly arrested, tortured, and disenfranchised for their sexuality. Existing scholarly research in English is limited in regards to all sexual minorities, and has largely ignored homophobic violence against LBT+ females.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

How can contemporary activists use the historical evolution of LGBT+ identity politics to counteract prejudice and gain legitimacy within the international community?

My goal was to explore what role outside influences, such as colonialism, military conquests, and modern media, have had on the perception of sexual minorities in Egypt, to better understand how contemporary LGBT+ activists can use the historical process of identity politics to counteract modern day systematic and social prejudice.

PARTICIPANT SAMPLE:

In order to gain insight into the unique experiences of underrepresented LBT+ female Egyptians, my participant pool included individuals who:

- Were born female
- Identify as “Egyptian”
- Consider themselves “LGBT+ activists” and have participated in Egyptian civil society movements, including the 2011 Arab Spring

UNIQUE EXPERIENCES FOR LBT+ WOMEN:

- Very little scholarly information is available on the experiences of LBT+ females because women are generally underrepresented in Middle Eastern history and scholarly literature.
- Women in Egypt often experience harassment from police, making it problematic to report cases of homophobic attacks and harassment from the public.
- LBT+ women are expected to conform to gender norms by physically appearing feminine and heterosexual.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF HISTORY IN IDENTITY POLITICS:

“[We have] started to dig, and look back. This is one approach to provide [historical] evidence that homosexuality and transexuality is not a Western thing. It is deeply rooted in our culture, LGBT+ activists are now doing this, but in general people don’t talk about it. There is a lack of researchers and oral history that has not been documented and I believe if people do more research on this area [the international community] will be amazed.” ~Participant 2



Two people raising rainbow flags at a Mashrou' Leila concert in Cairo on September 22, 2017. This event is considered a catalyst for the 2017 crackdown.

“Compared to the current situation, [life under President Mubarak’s regime] was better, but in reality it’s sad because during and after the [2011 Arab Spring] revolution the situation is very bad for LGBT persons, people of color, Nubians. It’s bad for disabled people, for women, for everyone who is not male and Muslim... a masculine male, especially Sunni. It’s bad for everyone, but it’s getting worse and worse.” ~Participant 1

“People are still struggling in acceptance of themselves because of society, religion, culture, and legal background. It was very challenging to unify a group of people, and we need to take more steps apart from accepting ourselves.” ~Participant 1



2011 Arab Spring Graffiti near Tahrir Square, changed by pro-LGBT+ activists

CONCLUSIONS:

WHAT WESTERN ACTIVISTS SHOULD DO:

- Work in close conversation with local activists who are familiar with what is going on “in the streets,” who have a lived cultural experience with this oppression in order to create a culturally appropriate plan of action
- Provide funding directly to local nonprofits and non-governmental organizations whenever possible and legal
- Work to amend Article II of the UN Declaration of Human Rights to include “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” as internationally protected categories
- Conduct research to help build the narrative of LGBT+ rights in Egypt in order to build global awareness

WHAT WESTERN ACTIVISTS SHOULD NOT DO:

- Speak over Egyptian activists, rather than using our privilege to amplify their voices
- Attempt to tell local activists what they need, rather than listening to their requests
- Attempt to intervene directly, as this can often cause more contempt between the Egyptian government and political unrest
- Assume that Western techniques of institutionalizing LGBT+ rights which have been successful in the US and Europe will be equally as effective in the MENA region

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For full text including footnotes and works cited, please contact Athena Richardson at athena44@gwu.edu

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