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Agency, Equality and Courage: A Case Study of Women on the Front Lines of Egypt's 2011 Revolution

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Research Panel: Gender, Violence, and Agency

Presenter: Carol Gray, University of Connecticut

Title: Agency, Equality and Courage: A Case Study of Women on the Front Lines of Egypt's 2011 Revolution

Abstract:

How were women involved in Egypt's 2011 revolution/uprising? What role did they play vis-à-vis male activists? To what degree were Egyptian women "equal" during those 18 days in Tahrir Square? These questions will be explored within the context of interviews conducted by this writer in Cairo during and following Egypt's 18-day revolution (uprising). This essay will explore the public/private sphere split, political consciousness-raising, and gender equality within the context of the stories of Egyptian women on the front lines of protest.

Much of the recent literature on women's protests in Egypt has focused on women's victimization. Critical gender theorist Ann Barrows has argued in other contexts that normative debates have often tried to "align gender directly with women and victimhood, which undermines women's agency as active participants" (2010). This paper will reframe that perspective, looking at women's agency as organizers, activists, researchers, and leaders in the 2011 uprisings that resulted in the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's dictator for almost thirty years.

Sprinkled throughout this presentation will be segments of interviews highlighting the personal stories of several women active in the Egyptian Revolution. Noha led protests in her community and recalled what it was like to have her voice leading chants being responded to by thousands of men. Nahla, volunteering with the Front to Defend Egyptian Protesters, staffed a hotline to record protesters being detained. Ana was on the Nile Bridge as hundreds of riot police tried to fight back hundreds of protesters trying to reach Tahrir Square. She was later arrested by security forces.

This paper will share their views on gender equality and demonstrate the agency of women during the uprisings through their examples.

About the presenter:

Carol J. Gray, J.D., L.L.M., is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Connecticut. She was a Fulbright Scholar at Concordia University, Montreal (2013-14) and a Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholar, Cairo (2010-February 2011).