

Session 5

Advocacy and Action: Women Speaking Out

OBJECTIVES:

- To reflect on the challenges, even threats, women face when they choose to demand their rights and speak out against injustice.
- To discuss the courage of women who do speak out.
- To consider strategies for women facing a backlash for taking a stand on important issues.

In This Session:

All the rights in the world do not protect a woman who feels intimidated and threatened if she speaks out. She needs to feel safe enough to take a stand. In this session, we will read about women in Morocco and Egypt who are standing up for their rights despite the lack of support from local authorities, police, and family members. We will discuss the paradox of men who are in positions to most help and protect women, in the government, in the police force, in the family, but who in fact use their positions to exploit and harm women. We will look at what these men gain for themselves and other men in society by intimidating women or ignoring their plight – whether they do this through unfair inheritance laws, limiting the right to work, or even denying women the right to fight for democracy alongside men.

In this session, we will read about a group of women in India who are fighting sexual harassment and assaults by acquiring self-defense skills and mobilizing in the streets. We will discuss their courage, and the value and potential shortfalls of short-term strategies to combat violence. We will ask ourselves whether it is short-sighted or simply realistic to guard women from dangerous men, versus finding ways to change society's underlying value system. What do women risk if they take a stand? What do women risk if they do nothing?

Reading Assignments:

Soulaliyate Women Speaking Out for Their Equal Rights

In Morocco, an estimated 30 million acres of land belongs to over 4,600 indigenous communities in 48 provinces. The land is owned collectively by nearly 2.5 million beneficiaries, in an arrangement that goes back

thousands of years to the time before the arrival of Islam. The ancient *Orf*, or customary law, dictates that the land cannot be sold or leased, but the *Orf* has been superseded by changes to land management laws across Morocco. Common lands have been sold and leased, with the proceeds going almost exclusively to men. The women from these collective lands are called the Soulaliyate, and they have been fighting for their equal rights to land and equal share in the land profits.

The Soulaliyate women come from very traditional communities where men make the decisions and male community leaders frequently have the last word. Even though under Moroccan law women have the same inheritance rights as men, in the Soulaliyate communities women are continually denied a share in the land proceeds. With urban expansion and developers buying collective lands at low prices, many Soulaliyate women who once had a right to live and work on the land are now forced to live in shantytowns on the peripheries.

Many Soulaliyate women are extremely poor, lack education, and lack community support. For them, going to the town councils to ask for their share in the land profits is extremely difficult. They struggle with the social stigma of speaking out and must cope with a community that is unwilling to recognize their rights. The women face bitter battles with former neighbors and even with family members. Sometimes they or their children are physically threatened. Sometimes their homes are damaged.

Rkia Bellot, a member of Morocco's Haddada tribe explains, "I have eight brothers. I'm the only one not to have received anything when our father died and the discrimination got even worse when they started selling land as compensation or handing out plots for building." When Bellot first spoke out and demanded her right to inheritance, her community did not support her. "The male members of the tribe said: 'You're just a woman.' When I appealed to the officials, they told me I didn't have 'the requisite status,' which is exactly the same thing, in more diplomatic terms."

"Selfishness and individualism are dominant. They insist on applying this custom. In fact, this situation has nothing to do with custom. It is related to their greediness. These practices have nothing to do with Islam, the Constitution, nature or morality. This is a shame neither a human being nor God would accept. How can a man accept to live in a large house while his sister is living in a shanty town?"

Soulaliyate women from other tribes describe their experiences when they started to advocate for themselves:

"My brother cultivated this land. You can see the trees. He makes a lot of money because he has another farm in addition to this one. However, he doesn't give us a penny. When we ask him about our rights, he says he never would have cultivated the land if he knew we had a right to it."

“When we started claiming our [compensation for the land], the men of the tribe, before they became violent toward us, mocked us saying, ‘If you get your compensation, we will wear a *takchita* [a traditional garment worn by Moroccan women].”

“In my tribe, women thought I was crazy, and men threatened to empty their clips into me.”

But over the past decade, Soulaliyate women from across Morocco have worked together to support each other and to bring their complaints to officials. Working with the Moroccan human rights group Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM),²⁴ the Soulaliyate women from tribes across the country have demonstrated at sit-ins, recorded their stories in videos, made appeals in local papers, and petitioned Moroccan government officials.

On October 25, 2010, the Interior Ministry issued a circular formally recognizing the right of Soulaliyate women to equal compensation. In March 2013, Soulaliyate women of the Kesbat Mehdiya tribe in Kenitra province received their first-ever land compensation payment. However, the ability of individual Soulaliyate women to receive the compensation they are due remains a difficulty, as too many traditional men choose to circumvent the ruling and too many officials do not enforce it. Soulaliyate women are now advocating for a law that will institutionally ensure that the provisions in the ministerial rulings are guaranteed and implemented.

WLP partners with ADFM to conduct advocacy workshops that help the Soulaliyate women with tools and strategies for fighting for their rights. One workshop participant stated her case succinctly, “I am a farmer, I have worked the land since my childhood. *So if you exclude me because I am a woman, I will have you know that the Moroccan Constitution has put women on the same footing as men in all areas and rights.* If you exclude me because I do not know how to work the land, let me tell you that I am a country girl and I planted as much or more than men of my tribe did. Now tell me on what basis and under what pretext I should be excluded from my land?”²⁵

24 WLP’s long-time partner organization in Morocco.

25 Information for this story was gathered from the WLP/ADFM video “Moroccan Women in Collective Lands,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxb9VikptAI&feature=youtu.be>, and articles in the ALMONITOR <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/11/women-movement-morocco-rural-land-rights.html#ixzz3hQeMC9BD>, The Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/10/morocco-women-inheritance-campaign-mandraud>, Global Post <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/rights/morocco-women-land-rights>, and WLP’s blog <http://www.blog.learningpartnership.org/2009/09/morocco-soulaliyates/>

Women Battle to Report Sexual Harassment in Egypt

Ester Meerman

Excerpts

Amira, 26, commutes to work every day by bus. “Most of the time it is too crowded to sit,” she says. One night she is almost at her stop when a man standing next to her tries to shove his hand down her trousers.

“From behind I felt somebody lift up my shirt and put their hand between my belt and my skin,” Amira describes, recalling how she created a big scene and dragged the man to the nearest police station.

It’s been more than ten months since Egypt adopted a new law that was supposed to make it easier for women in Egypt to press charges against someone who has sexually harassed them. Unfortunately, in reality, not much has changed.

At first the police officers made fun of Amira. “Go home, girl, they told me.”

When she insisted on pressing charges they started threatening her. “The officers knew who my father is, where he works and what his boss’ name is. ‘Surely your father wouldn’t like to hear that his daughter is a whore’ one of them said. They stood uncomfortably close to me the whole time and everybody in the building seemed to be undressing me with their eyes. They catcalled me and whispered dirty comments.”

According to a 2013 UN Women report, 99.3 percent of Egyptian women say they have been the victim of sexual harassment. More harrowingly, 51.6 percent of Egyptian men admit to harassing women. Meanwhile, only 6.6 percent of women who are harassed were found to seek help from the police.

“If you press charges for sexual harassment you get humiliated twice. First there is the actual incident and then you get harassed again at the police station”, Reda El-Danbouki, a prominent lawyer and women’s rights activist explains. “It creates a threshold to press charges and that is exactly what they want.”²⁶

Poll: Women’s Rights in the Arab World

A 2013 Thomas Reuters Foundation poll²⁷ surveyed 336 gender experts in 21 Arab League states and Syria that had signed or ratified the U.N. Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), on how well each was complying with the treaty. Egypt fell among the lowest on many of the criteria, followed closely by Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. The poll assessed violence against women, reproductive rights, treatment of women within the family, their integration into society, and attitudes towards a woman’s role in politics and the economy.

26 From http://www.huffingtonpost.com/egyptian-streets/women-battle-to-report-se_b_7143572.html

27 For more information on this poll, see: <http://www.trust.org/spotlight/poll-womens-rights-in-the-arab-world/>

The Thomas Reuter Foundation explained its findings:

“Discriminatory laws and a spike in trafficking contributed to Egypt’s place at the bottom of a ranking of 22 Arab states....

“Despite hopes that women would be one of the prime beneficiaries of the Arab Spring, they have instead been some of the biggest losers, as the revolts have brought conflict, instability, displacement and a rise in Islamist groups in many parts of the region, experts said.

“‘We removed the Mubarak from our presidential palace but we still have to remove the Mubarak who lives in our minds and in our bedrooms,’ Egyptian columnist Mona Eltahawy said, referring to Egypt’s toppled dictator, Hosni Mubarak. ‘As the miserable poll results show, we women need a double revolution, one against the various dictators who’ve ruined our countries and the other against a toxic mix of culture and religion that ruin our lives as women.’”²⁸

Questions for Group Discussion:

- What are the similarities in the experiences of the Soulaliyate women in Morocco and the women in Egypt? What justice is each seeking?
- What risks are the Soulaliyate women and the woman in Egypt taking by speaking out and advocating for their rights?
- Why do you think it is so difficult for the women in Morocco and Egypt to get the respect and concern they deserve? What do you think is going on in the minds of the brothers and fathers in Morocco who do not want to comply with the law that gives women an equal right to their land? What about the police officers who made fun of Amira when she reported her sexual harassment?
- In the face of so much opposition from family and authorities, what do you think empowers women like the Soulaliyates and Amira to step forward and speak out?

Group Exercise:

Ask the group to brainstorm: What rights must women, and men, have in order to advocate for themselves and to take action to fight injustice? (Among the rights participants might consider are freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to organize, the right to join a labor union, the right to a fair hearing, and many others.)

Encourage the participants to think of all the aspects of advocacy and public life that need to be protected. Their suggestions do not necessarily need to be stated as “the right to...” but simply relate in some way to relevant rights and freedoms. Ask them to make the list as expansive as possible. Record the suggestions of the group on a board or large sheet of paper.

28 <http://www.trust.org/item/20131108170910-qacvu/?source=spotlight-writaw>

Questions for Group Discussion:

- Why can taking a stand and advocating for your rights be so challenging?
- Do men face similar challenges as women when they advocate for their rights? In what instances are the challenges the same? In what instances might they be different?
- Do women need special (legal, political, or other) protections when taking a public stand and advocating for laws or policies? Or do laws and policies simply need to be applied to women and men equally for everyone to be able to speak out?

Reading Assignment:

Meet India's Red Brigade: The Teens Fighting Back against Rape

Paul Armstrong, CNN, August 14, 2013

Excerpts

In a dusty, run-down neighborhood on the outskirts of Lucknow, the capital of one of India's poorest and most conservative states, Uttar Pradesh, a vigilante group is making a name for itself. They're girls – mainly teenagers – who patrol their local streets protecting women and girls from sexual harassment. In their matching black and red black salwar kameez – the traditional garb worn by women across South Asia – they target offending males who have over-stepped the mark.

Their motivation is painfully clear. Every single girl in the so-called "Red Brigade" has been a victim of sexual assault – some have even been raped by their own family members, they say.

In most cases, the crimes have gone unpunished and the victim left to suffer the trauma in silent shame. These girls have been forced to act, they say, because no one else will.

While sex crimes are not exclusive to India, the number of reported rapes there has increased dramatically, from 2,487 in 1971 to 24,206 in 2011, according to official figures. But campaigners say this is the tip of the iceberg.

Fightback on

The self-defense group was started several years ago by teacher Usha Vishwakarma, who discovered that an 11-year-old girl she taught in the modest school block opposite her family home had been raped by her uncle.

Not long after this revelation, Vishwakarma found herself facing the unwanted attention of a colleague, who then tried to attack her. She managed to fight him off, but when she tried to report the incident, the local police were unimpressed. No one seemed to care.

Eventually she learned that all of her students had experienced some form of abuse – from lewd comments and cat-calls, to molestation and

rape. Many of the girls said they were afraid to go out alone for fear of being groped or worse. It was then that Vishwakarma decided the girls had to protect themselves amid the deafening silence from within their own community.

In groups of four or five, the girls approach males deemed to be harassing a girl and order them to stop. If the perpetrator refuses to heed their warning, they punish him by mocking him publicly. “The whole idea is to humiliate them,” she said. “We are well within our rights – this is self-defense. The police are not supportive so we have to defend ourselves.”

Martial means

And defend themselves they can. . . In a dusty gym on the other side of town, the girls – 15 of them – are put through their paces on threadbare mats by a local Kung Fu instructor. . . Gyan, their instructor, explained that he’s teaching the girls for free. “I’m doing it for my own daughter,” he said. “These girls are brave and what they are doing is humbling.”

The session ended with the girls lining up and bowing respectfully at their instructor. But it’s not just Kung Fu training the girls receive – the group provides a lot of support on gender issues, sexuality and health. It even helps younger children to attend school.

Protest

Hours later, the girls were joined by several other supporters for a protest on the side of a busy highway in the center of Lucknow. Led by Vishwakarma, the girls held placards in English and Hindi demanding safety for women and chanted for stricter punishment for sex offenders.

Asked whether they are dealing with a deep-rooted cultural problem, Vishwakarma’s 16-year-old sister, Lakshmi, shook her head emphatically. “This is not a cultural problem – it’s a social problem because men have a higher social status than girls.”

With two daughters campaigning against a hugely divisive issue in India, Vishwakarma’s mother admitted she had reservations about what they were getting into. “I was scared initially – I asked ‘why is she doing this?’ There was also a lot of pressure from within the neighborhood that she should not be doing what she was. . . I now feel what they are doing is good and helping to bring a lot of change – many boys who used to harass girls no longer do so because they are scared.”

Asked where she gets her courage from, Vishwakarma replied simply: “When you suffer, you get that courage. When you are victimized, you get that courage.”²⁹

29 From <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/13/world/asia/india-red-brigade/index.html>

Questions for Group Discussion:

- Usha Vishwakarma's sister says, "This is not a cultural problem – it's a social problem because men have a higher social status than girls." Do you agree? Why or why not?
- What do you think is going on when police officers do not respond to women victim's complaints, or when they even harass the women themselves? We know the police officers have or had mothers, and many have sisters, wives, and daughters. What is it about women speaking out and demanding their rights that makes the police officers behave so badly?
- What do you like about the Red Brigade campaign? What parts of the women's stories can you relate to?
- What criticisms do you have about the Red Brigade?
- On the one hand, the Red Brigade is providing a short-term solution to women's vulnerability by posting guards in the streets to protect women from harassment. But is it also possible that the actions of training in self-defense, guarding women, and being a physical symbol of women's vulnerability and strength has an educational impact on men and women who see the Red Brigade in their community? What lessons does the Red Brigade teach about women's strength, character, and self-reliance?

Group Exercise:

Women face all sorts of obstacles when they choose to speak out against injustice. Speaking out against physical threats or violence from men is particularly difficult because women sometimes risk being harassed, threatened, and harmed even by men close to them for simply speaking out. The Red Brigade campaign combined speaking out against harassment with self-defense training. Is this a realistic approach everywhere? Why or why not?

Ask the group to brainstorm strategies for speaking out against sexual harassment and sexual assaults. The purpose of this exercise is to realistically assess the risks of speaking out and the risks of not speaking out. The list of ideas should be recorded on a board or large sheet of paper for the entire group to read. No idea is too silly or short-sighted to be recorded.