

Arab women lead the charge on foot and online

BY EMAD MEKAY
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Asmaa Mahfouz, a 26-year-old Egyptian woman who two weeks ago had only one name, now boasts at least three. These include "A woman worth 100 men," "The girl who crushed Mubarak" and "The leader of the Egyptian revolution" Mahfouz, who began online political activism in 2008, is now credited for launching a video call that sparked the revolution against the autocratic military rule of President Hosni Mubarak.

Mahfouz is a member of a new lot of Arab women activists who are shedding their typical conservative image to lead or inspire a wave of pro-democracy protests that are reshaping the political future of several countries in the Arab world.

Mahfouz created a YouTube.com video in mid-January in which she urged "all young men and women" to leave their computer screens and converge on the streets of Egypt to protest the brutal and corrupt rule of the 82-year old Mubarak.

"I am a woman and I am going out on Jan. 25 and am not afraid of the police," she said a few days before the unrest broke out. "For the men who brag of their toughness, why exactly are you not joining us to go out and demonstrate?"

Her message reverberated she says, "beyond the wildest of dreams".

The 4 minute 30 second video was shared widely by Internet activists and was posted on many blogs and websites. Young people forwarded it on mobile phones — used by some 65 million Egyptians. Soon after, the government blocked all mobile phone networks.

"I had hoped Jan. 25 would gather 10,000 people at best, but I later realized after the police force withdrew and collapsed, that our day of protests turned into a popular revolution," she said on a Facebook.com page created for her by her supporters.

"My family was so worried about me and they told me women are not harsh enough for that kind of confrontation," Mahfouz said. "They now tell me they are so proud of me. I knew that if I get scared and everybody gets scared, then this country will be lost for good."

Mahfouz's words resonated not only in Egypt, but across the region.

"Asmaa's words were sincere and came out of the heart," wrote Reem Khalifa, a columnist for the Bahrain newspaper Alwasat. "Her words turned into a tsunami wrecking havoc with despotism, tyranny and injustice."

Asmaa Mahfouz is among millions of



PHOTO BY MOHAMMED OMER/IPS.

Women in the forefront of protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt.

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— MAHFOUZ
EGYPTIAN PROTESTER

women taking the lead during protests in Egypt and elsewhere in Arab countries.

In Cairo, women with sticks and iron bars in hand were patrolling some of the streets with their male relatives during the days of looting and vandalism that swept the city after the collapse of the Egyptian police force.

Mothers of several people who died in the initial days of the protests refused to receive condolences or hold funeral ceremonies until the revolution achieved its main goal of ousting the regime of Mubarak.

The mother of Khaled Said, an Internet activist who was beaten to death by police

officers in Alexandria last year, joined the protesters in Tahrir and repeatedly urged them not to go home before Mubarak left office.

Women were visibly in the forefront in demonstrations at Tahrir Square and other places — in a society where women traditionally have taken a back seat. Many volunteered to do body searches of other women taking part in the protests — it had become clear that the regime could sneak in weapons to be used against the protesters.

Across the Arab world, women have stepped into the forefront of dangerous anti-regime protests.

In Tunisia, human rights leader and blogger Lina Ben Mehenni was among the first to get word out about the Tunisian protests early in December through her tweets and blogs, despite police threats.

The mother of Mohammed Bouazizi, the young street hawker who set himself ablaze starting the Tunisian revolution in mid-December, was also doing her share, calling for change. Her sincere tears and wishes for justice galvanized hundreds of thousands of impatient Tunisians to eventually remove

the country's long time dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. The video of her tears went viral in the Arab world.

In Yemen, another country that has seen major anti-government protests, young woman activist Tawakul Abdel-Salam Karman was leading the charge.

It was 30-year-old Karman's arrest by President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime that set off days of major street demonstrations that threatened his hold on power. Karman, who is now free, remains one of the country's most outspoken critics of the regime.

"The Arab world is in revolt against dictatorships," said Magda Adly, of the El Nadim Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence in Cairo. "That's why we see women, Islamist or not Islamist, veiled or not veiled, coming together and leading what's happening on the ground. This is real equality and we'll never go back to square one."

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beginning have possessed is soon diminished or destroyed."

She tells of one man whose self-esteem was damaged through having to use public aid for his livelihood. "He had always been fully self-supporting previous to the accident in which he lost one leg just below the hip. After the accident he became a street beggar, but never overcame an intolerable sense of shame and degradation. The man who sits on a public street with his hat before him and begs would seem, to most people, to be more shameless and hardened in his profession than the man who asks for a night's lodging at the door; but this particular street beggar said that he himself had chosen the former method because it saved him from the shame of asking for help. "When I sit there, anyone can see that I am helpless, I do not have to speak."

During her chapter on mental health, she postulated the effect of long-term homelessness and dependence on one's mental state.

"One of the first questions of interest about insane homeless men is whether they are homeless and vagrant because of their

insanity, or insane because of their vagrancy. The mode of life of the true tramp or vagrant, with its excitements, excesses, and irregularities, is such that it might reasonably be expected to cause insanity in a certain percentage of this type of cases." She noted that "23 of the 52 insane were men of refinement, from good homes; eight were college men and 10 were high school graduates." Many of those deemed "mentally unfit" had been sent to Chicago after countless other cities had said that they were either unwanted or there weren't enough resources to provide aid, so they were given a train ticket to Chicago.

In her chapter on the homeless elderly, she lamented her client's situations. "No class of applicants from among the homeless seemed to be more uniformly hopeless and unhappy than the men who had passed 60, and who realized that the doors of industrial opportunity were being closed against them and that it was only a question of a short time before they must become wholly dependent upon charity."

She also noted that "it is almost equally difficult for men in their 50s to find well-paid employment, while in certain lines of work men who drop out in their 40s or even in

their latter 30s are not eligible for re-employment." She noted that this population were not idle, but "respectable Irish, German, or American workmen, or in some cases, business or professional men, many of whom have spent all their lives in Chicago and have contributed their fair quota to its prosperity and wealth." What she observed was a common urban problem before the advent of safety net programs like Social Security and Medicare.

Concerning this population she also noted that elderly women largely avoided this fate as they were offered board and care in a family's home in return for cooking, sewing, and nannying children. The male population did not have this skill set, and were not offered this opportunity.

In her chapter concerning chronic beggars she differentiates four categories: the anti-social men who consider society their prey, those who have drifted into the habit, those with personal and social handicaps, and the "accidental" beggar. She concludes that "the task of re-building or of building up for the first time, self-respect and habits of industry in men who have become chronic beggars, is at best, a difficult one."

Her chapter on runaway boys is particularly fascinating. In an antiquated way she confirms that many of the boys suffer from "spring fever" or "wanderlust" — diagnoses that have no basis in modern medicine. It is still stunning that 117 boys were designated homeless, many of whom came from good homes but wanted to see the world and ran away.

While some of the conditions that existed in 1911 have radically improved — namely care of the elderly and less frequent industrial accidents — reading the individual stories in One Thousand Homeless Men serves as a haunting reminder of how quickly one's life can take a turn for the worst when accidents and bad circumstances are compounded by poor access to medical care, education, or decent housing. Solenberger's appeal for public understanding and access to opportunity as essential for giving those who are down-and-out a chance for rehabilitation is a message just as important for Chicago today as it was a century ago.

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