

FOREWORD

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The activism of Arab women for political transformation is over a century old. A major scholarly library of research now exists to document Arab women's activism from the nineteenth century to the present. This literature tackles a variety of issues, including voting rights, nationality rights, citizenship, family law, children's advocacy, the environment, education, civil liberties, and democratic governance. Indeed, one can argue that there has never been a period in which Arab women did not express agency through a variety of political pathways. Yet, the representation of Arab women in Western news, social media, popular culture, and even in some scholarship often continues to reproduce the Orientalist tropes of Arab women as apolitical, as having no access to politics, or as politically silent/silenced. The Arab Spring of 2011 is often represented as an apparition, a fleeting moment of female activism that sparked an awakening only to be crushed. *Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring* attends to Arab women's activism in the Arab Spring not as a fleeting moment, but as one moment in a long genealogy of Arab women's activism.

Women Rising is a volume of hope grounded in history and in the lived present. The editors, Rita Stephan and Mounira M. Charrad, argue that "there is no going back" and that democracy in the Arab region is not dead. Rather, they remind us, political transformations are "messy, lengthy, and problematic." Change is not just coming, they contend, but it is occurring in the daily lives of women who stand up and fight for themselves, their families, and their people through engagements that become readily visible to the public, as well as through enactments that, while not recorded, nevertheless contribute to the small streams that eventually turn into rivers of change.

Women Rising brings together voices of women across the nations of the Arab region—from Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Mo-

rocco, Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, and Syria—and on and on. The editors bring forward voices from different religious and ethnic groups, across religious “divides” that they expose for their misrepresentation of women’s conditionalities. They attend to voices of women across class, regional, and urban/rural arenas. They recognize the importance of transnational Arab women’s voices, as these Arab women, spread across the globe, continue to invest in the transformations of their home countries. They intentionally trespass into and through topics less voiced, including sexual rights and sexual minorities—and protests, which are often ignored, such as “garbage” protests. They engage the many debates animating women activists across the region—constitutional reform, personal status laws, “Islamism” and “democracy,” movements of non-violence, militarism, authoritarianism, and sectarianism. They create spaces for the many forms in which these debates voice themselves—through art, photography, films, popular culture, cyberspace, blogging, graffiti, soundscapes, poetry, journalism, and the like. They track the many spaces that are created by women activists—universities, streets, villages, checkpoints, public plazas designated as “male” terrain, city centers, courtyards, and homes. They analyze the methods and tactics used by women activists to disrupt, unsettle, undo the structural, the institutional, the given, the normative, and the hegemonic.

In capturing these spaces, Stephan and Charrad mean to do some undoing themselves. They critique transnational feminists who homogenize Arab women’s activism within a unifying subaltern frame that manages to gaze only through a single lens. They challenge the ahistorical rendering of Arab women as having only “woken up” with the Arab Spring. They offer a correction to much scholarship, as well as popular culture, that finds comfort in the reproduction of the Arab woman as “victim” needing Western rescue. They take on sisterly Third World feminist literature, which is largely based on Latin America, Africa, and East Asia, by making the case for the specificity of the contexts of Arab women as countries that are generally not poor, have oil wealth unevenly distributed, and have a vast range of political and cultural experiences. They offer theoretical perspectives on resistance, revolution, and reform to inform the readings of the many voices brought forth in the volume.

Women Rising quilts together the stories, the views, the values, the experiences, the approaches, the styles, and the analyses of Arab women

throughout the Arab region and beyond. The stitching together of stories designed from so many fabrics of life is precisely what is needed to resist and undo the essentialism that continues to plague the representation of Arab women. Here, Stephan and Charrad assemble many pieces held together by threads of history into the present and beyond—the many spools, the many fabrics, the many colors—vibrant and alive to the lived realities. The totality is not one cover, but a patchwork—always in the making, always doing and undoing, always moved by agency and intent going forward and not back, and, despite the messy unfinished business, continuing to unfold as full of promise.

