

The "we" of women's rights

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It is difficult to know what to say in response to Mona Eltahawy's explosive [article](#) on the experience of women in Middle Eastern countries. She writes about a level of institutionalized brutality that demands that readers pay attention.

At the same time, she doesn't say anything new, nothing that wasn't already made too vividly clear during the Arab Spring. Women telling of their experience at the hands of both police and protestors pointed to an unacceptable level of violence levied at women just because they're women and appearing in public.

But what to say? Many commenters have quickly turned to an "Islam vs. the West" set of comparisons, and the immediate result is a degradation of the conversation. Self-righteousness or smugness about the relative parity of women in our society takes us in the unhelpful direction of pitting "us" against "them." Comparing Christianity and Islam on the subject of women's rights is likewise of little value, a litany of analogous gains or losses, a losing battle for everyone. What seems to be most needed is an emphatic and united "we."

But this "we" is elusive. Last December, when a photograph emerged (featured in Eltahawy's article) of uniformed police assaulting a young woman in Tahrir Square, a campaign erupted in which a "blue bra" became the symbol of solidarity and connection. That campaign said, "Every time you are demeaned, I am demeaned. Every time you are silenced, I am silenced." It demonstrated the worldwide longing for freedom and equality that Eltahawy gives a rightfully angry voice to.

The only problem with this symbol was that it was not one that men and women could share. Likewise, many Middle Eastern women and activists [are complaining](#) about the overly generalized terms that Eltahawy uses to make her point. Men of good will are painted with a broad brush. Is there another way this conversation could take place that preserves the energy and passion of Eltahawy's voice, but that also unites men and women, East and West in this common purpose?