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Human Rights and Personal Stories

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Human Rights and Personal Stories

Abstract

Negar Azimi's "Prisoners of Sex" is a welcome reminder that human rights discourse should always keep its subject, "humans," firmly in view. The stories she tells of death, torture, hope, and survival bear witness to the challenges and dangers faced by gays and lesbians in Egypt.

Keywords

Human rights, Egypt, Homosexuality

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Human Rights and Personal Stories

by David L. G. Rice

Negar Azimi's "Prisoners of Sex" is a welcome reminder that human rights discourse should always keep its subject, "humans," firmly in view. The stories she tells of death, torture, hope, and survival bear witness to the challenges and dangers faced by gays and lesbians in Egypt. The need for such personal stories is powerfully expressed at the conclusion of her article in the quote from one of the anonymous interviewees arrested in Egypt for homosexuality, and that the reader knows only as "M":

...Americans talk about something called Islamic fascism, the Arabs go on about their values. All of us, and I don't mean gay men, I mean all of us who don't fit the norm—democracy activists, queens, anything—it's us who get branded as Western... We pay the price (§ 40).

"M" insists on "us": nonconformists and dissidents of various stripes who are assaulted legally, politically, and physically by those who dismiss them as "Western," folding their physical and emotional pain back into a discourse of rhetorical abstraction. The language of "East" and "West," "Islamofascism" and "Islamic values," glosses over particular people in favor of shallow ideological rhetoric.

"M" calls attention to two challenges for any advocate of human rights. First, just as the ideological rhetoric of "Islamofascism" or "Muslim values" distracts attention from real, human suffering, activists and queens can just as easily disappear under an abstract conception of right. As proponents and critics of U.S. policy in the Middle East mobilize the rhetoric of "human rights" and "democracy," these terms are too often associated with ideals, institutions, or policies rather than with people; these include terms such as: scared, laughing, ill, playful, beaten, beautiful, or dead.

Supporters of the Bush administration like to talk about women as voters in Afghanistan. Detractors mention "refugees" or "civilian casualties." In both cases, people become nameless symbols paraded out to lend weight to this or that side of an argument, often expressed in numbers: women are ["41 percent of registered voters"](#) in Afghanistan; civilian casualties in Iraq number in the [tens or hundreds of thousands](#). Such statements express part of the truth while masking other truths. When the President takes women voter participation in Afghanistan as a sign that ["women are free,"](#) that claim needs to be answered by stories about [death threats](#) against women's rights activists that continue in the same country. And arguing over the exact number and significance of the body count in Iraq needs to happen with an acute awareness of nine year old Amir Ahmad's death in a [cluster bomb strike](#).

In contrast to this abstraction of ideology, Azimi provides personal stories, from university students Hassan and Mo who argue interpretations of the Qur'an over lunch, to gay men like "M," who are arrested and beaten into submission by uniformed authorities, to the parliamentarian Mostafa Bakry, who worries that "the American agenda is promoting the rights of homosexuals." It is just as important to keep the opponents or abusers of human rights visible, to remember that they, too, are motivated by personal interests and fears. Rather than pontificate

about such themes as political culture or the tension between democracy and rights, Azimi keeps attention squarely on the stories of the people she encounters.

“M” raises a second issue for human rights activists in his allusion to the malicious characterization of activists as “Western.” I like to respond to concerns about the “Western” origins of human rights by pointing out the irony of ardent human rights advocates in the “East” who are called “Western” by governments that are themselves organized along the lines of the “Western,” sovereign nation-state. However, the real irony of characterizing human rights or democracy as being born of “Western values” is that these values are contested, as well as routinely violated, in the West. To put it another way, the “activists, queens, anything...who do not fit the norm” are not safe in the West. Torture, illegal detainment, surveillance of peace activists, and sexual discrimination do not just happen in Egypt or the Middle East.

To illustrate this, I’ll offer one story about a victim of human rights abuse in the U.S.: while arguments about the status of Guantanamo “detainees” continue, Mr. Al-Ghizzawi has been held there for 5 years without charges. He was picked up for a sizeable [bounty](#) in Afghanistan, where the military distributed thousands of [leaflets](#) promising huge cash payouts to anyone who could identify murderers or terrorists—a method practically guaranteed to result in wrongful detentions. Al-Ghizzawi has contracted tuberculosis at Guantanamo, but the U.S. army refuses to treat him for it. This is the sort of account that should stay in the front of our minds during any discussion of the detention of hundreds of such individuals at Guantanamo Bay. Many more stories need to be told about the [torture](#) of terrorist suspects, the [harassment of peace activists](#) by U.S. government agencies, and the [regular hostility](#) experienced by gay, lesbian, and transgendered Americans.

I applaud Azimi’s storytelling, and I take “M’s” concerns seriously. When the abstraction of ideology threatens to make humans invisible, it is urgently necessary to tell stories about particular people who are the real and proper subjects of human rights work and discourse.

David L. G. Rice is a graduate student in political theory at Duke University, where he has worked on campus labor issues with the community organizations Duke Organizing and Durham CAN. He was a volunteer human rights monitor for the Guatemala Accompaniment Project from '03 -'04, and returned to accompany genocide witnesses and case lawyers in the summer of '06. His dissertation is on nonviolent and peacemaking practices.