

**STOP BULLYING: Ending Violence and Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual
Orientation and Gender Identity
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United Nations Headquarters – ECOSOC Chamber

*Remarks by Nadine Moawad – Coordinator of the Coalition for Sexual
and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies.*

My name is Nadine from the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies. We are an international coalition of over 40 organizations working in countries in two regions: the Middle East and North Africa and South & South East Asia, otherwise known as the countries most in objection to the human rights of LGBTs locally and in the UN.

The challenges of breaking through very heavy taboos around sexuality in most of our countries are solidified by legal frameworks that criminalize homosexuality with colonial sodomy laws and, in some cases, punish it with the death penalty. Religious and cultural excuses are used to justify systematic violence towards LGBTs, from arbitrary detention, torture, blackmail, humiliation, physical and sexual violence, hate crimes, etc. You know all this.

The challenge we have is to think together about how to use international spaces in the United Nations where states where LGBT rights have been already solidified as human rights to leverage support for civil society organizations and initiatives working on sexuality within difficult frameworks. Quite often, homosexuality is viewed as a Western import set to destroy Muslim culture. But that is not unique to LGBT issues, the same is done for women's rights and human rights. And it doesn't help when the spread of Islamophobia in both public opinion and state foreign policies, in wars and occupations, sometimes underlines our discourse around international LGBT human rights. And so the nuance is important, in understanding the contexts and the work of grassroots organizations in countries unfriendly to LGBT rights – in working politically for social change, justice, and the protection of vulnerable populations.

It is crucial, in talking about youth in the MENA specifically, to understand the opportunities now within the Arab Spring. The youth of the Arab world have been – for the past year – transforming states, toppling dictators, figuring out their visions of democracy. And the big question everywhere is how will these changes affect social justice? LGBT rights, women's rights, human rights. Will there be new spaces for new, young voices to come out or will the recent quests for democracy and human rights be taken over by ruling parties as conservative – or even more so – than the previous regimes? I have more questions than answers. But we do have some great opportunities that give us hope for the near and long-term future. And here are some of the most important strategies and realities to remember.

First of all, the obvious statement that gay and lesbian identities and the pressing need for legislation and awareness that protects them and allows the fair share of dignity and respect is a universal demand, part of our universal understanding of human rights. Sometimes we are

forced to get on the defensive when being attacked that these are issues unique to Western countries – just because it so happened that North American and Western Europe were quicker in their history to bring visibility to LGBT rights. It is difficult that we are forced into this box of saying: Diversity in sexuality has historically been expressed in all sorts of cultures, everywhere, anywhere. What is certain, however, is that the frameworks and discourses for addressing sexual diversity have been dominated by the West, and while human experiences of desire and love and sexuality are universal – expressions and frameworks coming out of many countries in the Global South have been brave and creative in re-inventing discourses around LGBT rights, homophobia, coming out, etc. And it's really important that we, as a global movement, open up the room and the space for these diverse expressions and models of organizing.

Secondly, we are in a battle for sexual rights in general – oppression of women's bodies, outdated reproductive frameworks, rape laws, sexual harassment and violence – these are all issues that are slowly emerging to the forefront of human rights in the Arab world. It is our job as LGBT advocates to make sure that LGBT rights are part and parcel of this new movement, of the women's movement, and of the human rights movements at large – something which has been a continuous struggle for us over the past decade.

Thirdly, that these are youth-led revolutions and that strides they are making for freedom of expression have been phenomenal. Arab youth have given us hope and despite the threat of backlashes in places like Tunisia and Egypt, they are pushing forward relentlessly and that alone – the spaces we are opening for freedom of speech will without a doubt bring valuable opportunities for sexual and gender diversity. We must also remember that LGBT communities in the MENA have been organizing – underground and with small, numerous initiatives – for many years now and we can trust them to strategize intelligently and grasp the opportunities they see fit.

And so, what we must do, as a global movement, as global partners concerned for the rights of LGBTs, is continue to talk together, to strategize together, to put pressure at government levels and at grassroots levels, to not compromise on the rights of sexual minorities while at the same time being careful of global political tensions that could exploit LGBT rights for hegemonic gains in ways that harm our work on the ground rather than support it.

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