In drawing public attention to Egyptian women’s experiences of gender violence, activists prevent victims from experiencing gender violence in isolation, they identify the cultural and political roots of the violence, and they bring it to national and international attention in their efforts to effect systemic reform. The irony is that international attention often translates these activists’ efforts into fuel for stereotypes that demonize Arab men. Using an ethnographic case study of intimate violence, this talk will examine the link between love and desire, pain and violence, kinship and gender roles, and use that as a springboard for examining a dilemma of representation: when ethnography is always political, how can we write about, and write against, gender violence in the Middle East? In an international economy of representations, how might we proceed to examine structures that enable the oppression of women without creating a category of passive Egyptian women who are oppressed -- thus missing the ways that women successfully defy male dominance, and the ways that men refuse or fail to dominate?

Warning: This paper will include a brief narrative of sexual assault which may trigger strong reactions for some listeners.