

## **Media Portrayal of Street Violence Against Egyptian Women: Women, Socio-Political Violence, Ineffective Laws and Limited Role of NGOs**

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### **Abstract**

“Often ignored in media coverage of the Egyptian revolution is how protests led by labor unions – many of them women based labor unions in the manufacturing cities of Egypt – catalyzed the revolution,” says Nadine Naber. Women are at the heart of every social movement that happens in Egypt and the Arab world. Nevertheless, the local media predominantly keeps attacking victims of street violence and sexual harassment, holding them responsible for being harassed. Portraying women, in general, as submissive or oppressed directly and indirectly feeds into the continuing practice of street violence and sexual harassment against women in Egypt. With the alarming statistics of violence against women documented by local women’s NGOs in recent years, this research argues that the negative, unethical and unprofessional media coverage of violence against women feeds into the systematic societal and state violence exercised against women, both in public and private places. It attempts to document the nature of local media portrayal of violence against women, outline its reasons and repercussions, and figure out attempts and possible solutions/recommendations to improve women’s image in the Egyptian media. Through analyzing significant instances of media attacks against victims of sexual harassment in 2011 and 2015, and conducting in-depth interviews with anti-harassment experts, media professionals and renowned figures, it aims to find ways to counter the unfair socially-accepted justifications, and thus help limiting the actual violence exercised against women.

**Keywords:** Egypt, violence against women, harassment, sexual harassment, media representation, NGOs, political violence

## Introduction

For more than a decade, Egypt has witnessed alarming levels of violence against women and girls, especially with rising numbers of street sexual harassment incidents and mob sexual assaults. The involvement of women's rights NGOs in countering this phenomenon, together with the proliferation and large scale impact of peer-to-peer media – in the form of pictures and videos via YouTube and various social media – has propelled local mainstream media to cover physical and sexual violence against women, especially since the uprisings of January 2011. The role of social media, together with local women's rights and anti-sexual harassment NGOs could reframe issues and amplify problems that the mainstream media will find difficult to continue to ignore. Nevertheless, Egyptian media coverage of violence against women remains occasional and limited to grand/significant incidents of sexual harassment and, by-and-large, are biased against women, which negates the essence of ethical journalism in democracies. This quality of media coverage arguably feeds into the continuous practice of violence against women and leads to exclusion and stereotyping of women in political life.

Violence against women in Egypt is a socio-cultural political phenomenon, due to a male-dominated culture and a patriarchal authority, as well as deteriorating economic conditions and a widening gap between social classes and categories. It is also integral to the wider context of political violence, the struggle over power, as well as the societal acceptance of violence against women. So, we can safely argue that violence against women is used in politics to strangle women's participation in all politics and political events. According to a UN Women study, *Violence Against Women*, sexual violence and harassment affected 53 percent of Egyptian women; of this, political violence aimed at stereotyping and exclusion from political life made up 27 percent and domestic violence 20 percent (Badran 2014). According to the Egyptian Center of Women Rights, 12 percent of women do not report harassment for fear of societal attacks. In addition, Egypt is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the 10 most unsafe countries for women in the world (Khan 2016).

Violence against Egyptian girls starts in the form of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in their childhood, which is socially accepted and encouraged by women and men. According to the 2015 Egypt Health Issues Survey (EHIS), around 9 in 10 women aged 15–49 have undergone the procedure. This number is only 4 percent lower than statistics from a 2008 survey. FGM continues to be a widespread practice in Egypt, despite being banned in 2008. Article 242 of Egypt's Penal Code criminalizes the circumcision of girls, and the punishment for performing FGM is a prison sentence ranging from three months to two years or a fine of EGP 5,000 (The DHS Program). Nevertheless, the law is obviously ignored, which encourages the continuous exercise of this crime against girls and women in Egypt.

“Street sexual harassment is an endemic social problem that harms women both physically and psychologically and violates their basic rights to safety and mobility,” says a report by HarassMap, a local NGO (HarassMap.org 2017). According to UN Women, 99.3 percent of Egyptian women say they have been subjected to street sexual harassment at least once in their lives, 49.2 percent of them say it happens daily and 48 percent of them say it has happened more since the 2011 uprising. In addition, there have been 500 reported cases of mob sexual attacks in Tahrir Square since January 2011 (Egypt Keeping Women Out 2014). If we link them to the significant incidents of street sexual harassment by political forces in 2005 and 2010, we find that violence against women in public has been systematically practiced to halt women's political participation and stereotype them to a limited number of roles where they

do not compete with men (Guenena 2013). The predominantly state-controlled mainstream media plays a crucial role in stereotyping women as well.

Especially after the fall of the Mubarak regime, attacks against women participating in the demonstrations have been on the rise. In the early days of SCAF (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) rule, women protesters were arrested and forced to undergo “virginity tests” and reports of rape by mobs in Tahrir square emerged. The local media was completely silent about this until reports of international NGOs were published in the foreign press, so that they had to admit it had happened. Then, under Mohamed Morsi’s presidency, in 2012, sexual attacks were continuously reported during Tahrir protests. Witnesses and survivors reported:

Tens of men surrounded the survivor tore off their clothes and groped their bodies. Some were raped by multiple perpetrators, who were often armed with sticks, blades and other weapons. Security forces failed to intervene to protect female protesters, prompting citizen movements to set up their own security patrols. (Egypt Keeping Women Out 2014)

With the alarming statistics of violence against women documented by local women’s NGOs in recent years, this research argues that the negative, unethical and unprofessional media coverage of violence against women feeds into the systematic societal and state violence exercised against women, both in public and private places. This research attempts to counter the unfair socially-accepted justifications for such a phenomenon by outlining its roots, and figuring out ways to delimit its growth through alternative media, the law and the NGOs.

The methodology used in this research include both conducting in-depth interviews with 15 media experts and professionals, women’s NGOs, and social psychologists, and analyzing two prominent case studies, the Blue Bra Girl (2011) and the Mall Woman (2015), in which the mainstream media bias was evident and social media played a central role in countering the unfair/unprofessional coverage. The in-depth interviews were primarily centered on asking them their opinion about the quality of mainstream media coverage, the role of the alternative media, both online and social media, in countering street sexual harassment in various ways and figuring out their views and recommendations for dealing with this issue.

The research starts by consulting the current and contemporary status of mainstream media coverage of specific incidents of violence against women in Egypt. Views of the interviewees are included in this part, to give a first-hand account on the current situation. The case studies are then analyzed to demonstrate by example the nature of media coverage that needs to be eliminated. The research then explains the effort exerted to combat this phenomenon at grassroots level, including local NGOs efforts as well as pushing for a law that criminalizes sexual harassment. Then the interviewees recommendations for improving the media coverage are outlined at the end of the research.

### **Status of Local Media Coverage of Violence against Women in Egypt**

To make sense of the local media coverage of violence against women in Egypt, we need to understand the status of the media in Egypt in general first. The local media in Egypt has historically been predominantly government monopolized and controlled by various laws. In addition to the Constitutional Law and the Press Law, media is also regulated through multiple legal texts such as the Penal Code, the Journalism Regulation Law, the State Documents Law, the Party Law, the Civil Servants Law and the Intelligence Law. This media includes print

media, broadcasting and news agencies, along with their online versions. Even private media outlets, such as newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations are operating under strict legal regulations and bureaucracy, and they continue to meet their personal agendas rather than the public interest (Mendel 2011; Constitute Project 2017; Elissawy 2014).

The mainstream media coverage of violence against women in Egypt has always been biased against women, holding them responsible for this violence in direct and indirect ways. This is mainly because the media in Egypt is fully state controlled by law. Even though the mainstream media negatively report on sexual harassment against women at work and in the street, the media discourse on the issue of political involvement of women is divided between supporting and opposing women in politics (Abu Youssef 2009: 1). This negates the universal principles and fair, balanced and objective reporting, as well as the basic ethics of media practice.

Violence against women in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, issued in December 1993 (resolution 48/104), adopted by the UN General Assembly, is defined as “any act of gender-based violence [that] results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Article One). Article Two specifies that “Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following:

- a. Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;
- b. Physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women, and forced prostitution;
- c. Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs. (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women 1993)

Considering those three criteria, a comprehensive study of print and broadcast media coverage of violence against women, by Enas Abu Youssef, indicates biased, sporadic and superficial coverage. The print media discourse does not reflect in-depth coverage or regular campaigns combating different forms of violence against women. Rather, most coverage was in response to particular incidents or as part of the coverage of public events, not a newspaper’s initiative to combat violence as a social phenomenon. Print media tackle issues of domestic violence hesitantly and neglect issues considered taboo and not to be addressed (Abu Youssef et al. 2009).

In this study, a detailed analysis of the coverage of community violence confirmed that print media discourse has contributed to creating a type of psychological violence against women. This happens by demeaning women’s image in discussions of crime-related issues, diminishing them through caricatures, or objectifying them as mere bodies or sex advertisements. Commenting negatively and denigrating the image of women when reporting on community violence brings into question the journalists’ awareness of the forms of violence against women. As a result of the sporadic and insufficient awareness of violence against women, the

journalistic discourse is very general and does not reflect unique environments or social classes (Abu Youssef et al. 2009).

The print media coverage, primarily oriented to the elites, the upper class, and upper segments of the middle class, with rare exceptions, marked complete absence of forms of violence that are prevalent among the poorer social classes. These include sexual harassment in factories and fields, incest in slum areas, and trading of girls through so-called summer marriages, are absent from the print media discourse agenda. Print media did not offer solutions to the issues addressed by either domestic or community violence against women (Abu Youssef et al. 2009).

Television, the most important means of affecting awareness among the Egyptian population, due to its significant viewership rates directed to the predominantly unliteral Egyptians, addressed issues of violence only periodically, and avoided discussions of critical issues such as domestic violence, the last on its agenda of interests. Egyptian television programs typically opposed community violence, and addressed domestic violence as a result of the general spread of violence, unemployment, and disintegration of the family. They did not suggest solutions to these problems nor encourage society to combat violence (Abu Youssef et al. 2009).

### **Outcome of In-Depth Interviews**

This comprehensive media research by Abu Youssef reflects the volume of media bias against women up to 2009. Such unfair and even unethical reporting on street violence against women continued through the January 25 Revolution and up to the present. This research consults the media coverage of two recent case studies of and analyzes them. It also draws the outcome of in-depth-interviews conducted with 15 media professionals, women activists in Egypt and women NGOs about their opinion and experience with the media coverage of violence against women, the role of alternative media and social media in countering this phenomenon.

The vast majority of interviewees pointed to a very limited coverage in terms of local television, both state and private, as well as print media and their official websites. The media coverage they noticed is limited both in terms of the space allocated to women's issues and the volume of incidents of violence against women as well. They also noted that there is a great deal of bias against the survivor in terms of the mainstream media coverage, whether it is a state or a private media. Most interviewees had great hopes that social and alternative media push off the lines of free media expression for mainstream media and enforce women issues and a favorable line of coverage into the news agenda. Some interviewees, however, were unsure about the effectiveness of the role of alternative and social media in combatting this phenomenon in a country where the great majority of people are under the poverty line.

Shahira Amin, Independent Reporter (Personal Interview 2017), pointed out that the ethical role of the media must go beyond fair and objective reporting into what she called "the reporter activist" in case of reporting about the amount of alarming violence to which women in Egypt are subjected to since their childhood, such as FGM, despite being attacked by everyone for reporting on a sensitive/taboo issue. Amin, who was a board member and reporter for Nile TV International (a state television channel), kept reporting on an annual basis for ten years, shedding light on the physical and psychological dangers to which girls in rural areas are exposed including losing their lives until a law criminalizing FGM was issued by the government. In 2010, she was honored by Ambassador Moshira Khattab, former minister of Family Affairs, for bringing this issue into public attention. "This is the kind of media coverage that we need," says Amin.

According to Amin, journalists should use their journalism to promote or further a cause. It is ok to be biased in favor of the weak or vulnerable, or those who have been subjected to injustice:

I've used my journalism to try and make a difference in the society. When I first reported on FGM in 2000, it was not publicly talked about much. The state security asked me why I was tarnishing Egypt's image. I told them that if it was not happening I would not be reporting it. After revisiting the story several times, a law was finally passed criminalizing the centuries old practice. I received a certificate from the national council for motherhood, thanking me for my efforts in helping to bring about the law. So, being persistent, and continuing to spotlight the weaknesses in the society, yields fruit in the end. The same thing happened with the virginity tests, when I broke the story in May 2011, after getting the first admission from a senior general that the tests had been performed. Critics said I was trying to defame the military. Local websites said I was being tried in a military court. A few months later a law was passed banning such humiliating tests in Egypt altogether. That is the role of journalists, to effect change in their communities. (2017)

The following two case studies are typical examples of how the media has dealt with two video recorded incidents that millions in Egypt have watched and condemned online using famous hashtags. These two significant incidents, The Blue Bra Girl (2011) and the Mall Woman (2015), indicate how local media coverage of street violence against women Egypt was deliberately unprofessional and unethical.

## Two Recent Case Studies

### **The Blue Bra Girl (2011): Why Did She Go There?**

In December 2011, footage of an anonymous woman, dragged and beaten by Egyptian soldiers, became a symbol of Egypt's political turmoil. During the attack, the unconscious woman had her abaya pulled up over her head, exposing her blue bra. After a few seconds, she appears to be unconscious as the beating goes on. According to Issander El-Amrani, despite the professionally shot video and picture, the military rulers of Egypt and their supporters in the media denied what everyone was seeing on video (Gladstone 2011).

First we had a picture that came out, then eventually the video, says El-Amrani. The video was popular on social media then later made it to private stations, where guests on political talk shows tried to deny what happened, saying this is not possible. The army does not do this, they declared, pledging that the pictures of the video were in some way doctored. A couple of days later, about 10,000 protesting women came onto the streets bearing that picture for the army to acknowledge it has happened (Gladstone 2011). Despite surviving the attack, the woman was demonized on talk shows and blamed for the violence she endured. Commentators accused her of deliberately wearing a blue bra to invite the attack. "The question they asked was how she could dare to wear such a bra, rather than how soldiers could attack a defenseless woman in such a way. Some accused her of being a whore, while others asked why she did not wear multiple layers of clothing under her robe," says Armanious (2013).

Egyptian commentators on talk shows and in newspaper editorials often posed the question, "why did she go there?" Posing such a question reproduced already existing hegemonic gender norms that delegitimized women's participation in political protests and blamed the victim for the assault. It also legitimized the soldiers' violence against women. Such attitudes were not

only expressed on state-owned media, but also in private media, which have been equally invested in promoting counterrevolutionary narratives. Ironically, the “blue bra” incident also illustrated the significance of popular culture in challenging official narratives of the mass media. There was an explosion of graffiti on the streets of Cairo, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, celebrating the bravery of the unknown woman, smashing the paradigm of shame and guilt about the female body and subverting the hegemonic norms of gendered respectability (Pratt & Salem 2017). While street graffiti art and social media hashtags raised awareness about the incident, they failed to hold the attackers to account or prevent the occurrence of more incidents.



Figure 1



Figure 2

### **The Mall Woman (2015)**

In October 2015, a closed television circuit captured a college student, Somaya Tarek, at the entrance of a Cairo mall being followed and harassed by a man in a very busy public space. She stopped and confronted the man and threatened to call security; he slapped her twice across the face. Tarek, wrote Salma Abdelaziz, “made a rare and even dangerous choice in Egypt: She decided to speak up and call for justice” (2015). The video went viral on social media the following day.

Somaya Tarek agreed to speak out as a survivor of sexual harassment in a popular talk show on Al Nahhar television with a woman host, Reham Saeed, but found an aggressive and accusatory presenter. “I see you were wearing a tank top and tight jeans,” Saeed says of the CCTV footage of the assault. “Don't you think that these clothes were inappropriate?” “There is no justification,” Tarek responds. “Women in hijab and niqabs all get harassed. There was nothing inappropriate.” Saeed then started raising doubts about Tarek's story before showing the victim's pictures, taken in a private setting and stolen from her mobile phone – which she had to leave with the production team while recording with Saeed – to accuse her of lewd behavior. “Just as there are harassers in the streets, some girls have really gone beyond the limits. You won't like this, but this is the truth. Keep your girls in check and nothing will happen to them,” continued Saeed (Abdelaziz 2015).

Anger about Saeed and the taboos used to justify sexual violence against Egyptian women overwhelmed social media in support of Tarek. An Arabic hashtag translated as #die\_Reham went viral on Facebook and Twitter calling for the boycott of products advertised on Saeed's program. More than 14,000 messages using the tag were posted in 24 hours. Other Arabic hashtags including “Reham Saeed” and “Prosecute Reham Saeed” also trended in Egypt, with many calling for a boycott of her program and the network that broadcasts it, the privately owned Al-Nahar TV channel (Wendling 2015).

An Egyptian court has sentenced television show host Riham Saeed to six months in prison for airing private photographs of a sexual harassment victim and claiming her personal choices warranted the assault. The Giza Court also ordered Saeed to pay EGP 15,000 for violating Somaya Tarek's personal freedom. Somaya Tarek initiated court proceedings after Riham Saeed aired private photographs, allegedly taken from Tarek's mobile phone without her knowledge or permission, on the television show Sabaya El-Kheir (Egyptian Streets 2016).

Following the outrage, Al Nahar television suspended the program temporarily to contain public resentment and five sponsors withdrew their advertisements and issued public apologies to keep their credibility. However, despite numerous advertisers pulling out, Saeed returned to television less than two months later. This indicates the power of social media in countering the unprofessional practices of conventional media. It also points to a general public anger about the media pushing for sexual harassment against women rather than exposing and countering this phenomenon.

Hala Mostafa, a women's rights' activist and a coordinator at the ‘I Saw Harassment’ initiative, said the local media's coverage of sexual harassment is problematic in general. For Mostafa, the media does not care about such cases. “Sexual harassment of women has become a media topic related to seasons, such as Eid celebrations, to the extent that it has become an inseparable theme from other practices of the occasion,” Mostafa explained. During Eid and other public holidays, ‘I Saw Harassment’ issues regular reports on sexual harassment incidents, making the issue more visible in the media (El Fekki 2015).

“The second situation where a case would get media attention would be ‘scandalous’ incidents,” Mostafa said. She referred to the case of a woman who was severely harassed in Tahrir Square during the inauguration of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in June 2014. As for how the media tackles and portrays victims of sexual assault, Mostafa said this occurs either through “denial or going off-topic”, without serving the case justice or objectively discussing its circumstances. “Sexual harassment is a crime that affects us all as a society. It should be covered properly, all year long, not with indifference, or in the manner Saeed did. I strongly believe she should face strict punishment,” Mostafa concluded. Meanwhile, despite an increase of libel cases against local TV hosts such as Ahmed Moussa and Mona Iraqi, for similar ethical cases, and despite even imprisonment verdicts issued on libel charges, none of them have been sanctioned (El Fekki 2015). These cases demonstrate that social media attempts to combat unethical media coverage have a limited impact. Despite pushing strongly for legal actions against the attackers, under the current regime they can easily be surpassed. Evidently social media fails to hold the state-controlled media to account completely.

## **Effort to Combat Violence against Women**

### **1 Grassroots Effort: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

At the grassroots level, local NGOs play a significant part in combatting all forms of violence against women in Egypt, but their role remains limited in the absence of a clear media strategy and effective legal frame. Various NGOs conduct large-scale awareness campaigns, but their biggest challenge remains in rural and slum areas, and indigenous communities, where people are deeply insecure and feel suspicious towards any development effort.

Women’s rights NGOs put much focus on combatting street sexual violence, specifically the 2005 incidents known as “Black Wednesday” when female activists protested in front of the Press Syndicate about the referendum to amend the constitution that would pave the way for Mubarak’s son to follow in the presidency. Female protesters were sexually harassed and assaulted by the security forces and state hired thugs. One of the protesters reported that some of these thugs penetrated her with their fingers. In 2011, after a five-year investigation instigated by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), the African Commission for Human and People’s Rights found the Egyptian government culpable in the mass sexual assaults of female protestors (Abdelmonem 2016).

This event was a turning point in the history of Egypt’s sexual violence against women. “Black Wednesday led to the vitalization of the women’s movement, where women were determined to start speaking out for their rights,” writes Sepulveda (2015). On June 1, 2005, the Egyptian Mothers group articulated its mission to give “voice for the silent majority of women”. They called on all Egyptians to wear black in support of the women who were harassed and assaulted. As stated in their call, “We have decided to go out next Wednesday, for the first time, in defense of the honour of Egypt’s women citizens...and demand the resignation of the Interior Minister.” Emphasizing its independence from all political groups, the Egyptian Mothers were the first civil society group to lay the foundation for the eventual Anti-Sexual Harassment movement (Sepulveda 2015).

Anti-harassment NGOs exert much effort to combat the mis-conceptualization of sexual harassment, in particular, and violence against women in general. They attempt to combat the common underestimation of sexual harassment as flirting, through various awareness campaigns helping society to become more and more intolerant towards such practices (Noora Flinkman 2016). Many of those campaigns, conducted by various anti-sexual harassment

movements, encourage people to report, expose and volunteer in tracking harassment cases, via social media. They train and send teams of volunteers to intervene in mob assaults to protect women from harassers in public places. According to Mosleh (2015), they encourage people to use social media to expose harassers, employing a number of hashtags—among them #AntiHarassment and #ExposeHarasser. The goal is to speak out against the daily sexual harassment they witness or experience, breaking the silence surrounding these crimes.

NGOs also use mobile technology and alternative media to spread awareness of women's rights and improve women's image. Two significant cases are HarassMap and ACT-Egypt. HarassMap, launched in 2010, makes use of digital media technology to spread awareness and collect data via crowdsourcing means. Taking advantage of social media and the widespread use of smart phones in Egypt, HarassMap encourages women and men to report incidents of sexual harassment as they experience or witness them. The website "maps" the reports online and in real-time. HarassMap.org is an "interactive mapping interface for reporting incidents of sexual harassment anonymously and in real time." According to Grove (2015), the project uses "spatial information technologies for crowd mapping sexual harassment." Trained volunteers encourage people in public places to take a "zero-tolerance" approach towards sexual harassment.

Another alternative medium countering the lack of awareness of conventional media to convey equality and present women as capable human beings is the project developed by ACT-Egypt, which produced a film "In the Mirror" exposing this lack of awareness. The film tells the story of a woman on her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday searching for her "true" self after having lived her life seeing her reflection through a "mirror" called "media". She remembers her life since childhood, and goes through the changes that happened in Egypt, and compares and contrasts them to the women's image in the media during the same period. Featuring interviews with media experts, and specialists in psychology, sociology, advertising and celebrities to explain women's image in each historic era, the film analyzes the nature and characters of filmmakers, to illustrate how their ideologies and social and political attitudes influence their vision of women's role, and in re-enacting this vision through the media (Media and Gender Justice 2014).

"In the Mirror" has been adopted by some human rights and women's organizations as "an advocacy tool" to fight violence directed towards women through the media. Some independent filmmakers expressed their intention to begin a series of productions and deliberations with media monitoring organizations. Overall, there is now a core of civil society organizations, academics and writers who take the issue of gender-focused media monitoring more seriously, as seen through their work (Media and Gender Justice 2014).

According to Hala Mostafa, Political Activist at Shoft Taharosh initiative (I saw harassment), who appears occasionally on television, since 2005 the Egyptian regime has used sexual harassment as a tool for political repression. Ever since the 2011 revolution, it has become systematic and very frequent. The first sign of this was the eve of Mubarak's stepping down, when a gang of anonymous thugs raped the American reporter Lara Logan of CBS, during the celebration of Mubarak stepping down in Tahrir Square. Later, there has been widespread waves of harassment against women activists or even any women participate in any street actions. On March 8th of the same year, the International Women's Day march was held then in downtown was harassed, and the women participant were harassed and violently beaten again with anonymous gangs, in the very next day the famous incident known as "virginity tests" against some female protesters which happened under the supervision of the army forces

and General Abd Elftah Elsisy the head of military intelligence at the time. When asked about that crime, he said it is a routine procedure by the army (Interview 2017).

Mostafa adds that the line of similar incident can go forever to cover everything that happened until nowadays. But let's talk about social media and its role in spreading awareness against this crime and covering and following the news of those crimes. In the period following the 2011 revolution, the media and press had a long period of freedom, a lot of news websites launched, and every single breath that happened anywhere can be published immediately, and of course TV shows that last most of the night and cover everything. At that time, lots of activists launched pressure groups, support for survivors and voluntary initiatives to combat sexual harassment. Social media, and the media in general, was an important tool to reach the largest number of people in the shortest time, to highlight sexual harassment and inform people about the facts and the incidents, launching campaigns to define what is sexual harassment to women and how to deal with harassment, educating men on the danger of harassment against society, and at the same time, monitoring and documenting all the cases and trying to pressure or push the governments to take action to combat the disaster. However, the most important thing about using social media tools (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) was spreading knowledge about the danger of harassment, and maybe that there is something named sexual harassment the first place (Interview 2017).

## **2 Legal Effort: Political Violence and the Anti-Harassment Law**

Street sexual harassment and political violence in Egypt are directly linked to women's participation in public life and political events. Norms of gender and sexuality are encoded in gender violence legislation in Egypt. In their 2008 report, "Clouds in Egypt's Sky", the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), for the first time, placed on the state the responsibility for women's security in public. Within the report, ECWR urged the state to design a new law that would "define and criminalize" sexual harassment and to set new regulations for police and legal procedures. Essentially, ECWR called on the state to increase efforts toward managing the problem of sexual harassment, even as it focused its work at the community level (Abdelmonem 2016).

The lack of legal framework to protect women from street sexual harassment was further demonstrated in a study for ECWR, which indicated that police tended to mock women filing reports, that women did not believe the police would help them, and that foreign women identified police officers as harassers. Effective enforcement of the law depends on the police believing something wrong has been done. Here the study writer claimed that belief in the wrongness of certain actions stems from social roots and that police officers themselves are no different from other members of their society who do not always know or believe in the law (Abdelmonem 2016).

In June 2014, and on the day of the inauguration of the current president, nine women were raped by mobs while celebrating in Tahrir square, with one assault caught on video causing widespread outrage as it went viral online. Sisi visited the woman who was assaulted while she was in hospital, and made a public commitment to tackling impunity towards sexual violence and harassment in Egypt, which was widely praised by the predominantly pro-government state-controlled media (Sexual Violence 2014).

This act was met with much skepticism from the women's rights campaigners and activists as just a media show more than anything else. First, the issue was politicized by the media "to imply that the sexual violence has solely been perpetrated by the Muslim Brotherhood during

the post-revolutionary period since 2011, rather than an epidemic in which the police, the military, and the judiciary (through widespread failure and willingness to prosecute) have all been complicit.” Second, Sisi was responsible for the forced ‘virginity tests’ when he headed the military intelligence during the SCAF period in 2011 (Sexual Violence 2014).

The law introduced in 2014 that criminalized sexual harassment for the first time was criticized by anti-harassment activists for “not going far enough in its sanctions against harassment, and not being practicable”. Activists were concerned by “who will be prosecuted under the new law: namely, that it will be deployed to make sexual harassment and sexual assaults ‘apolitical’, by punishing the crime when it is committed by civilians but not providing oversight to ensure apparatus of the state such as the police and the military do not, themselves, also commit sexual violence and harassment” (Sexual Violence 2014). A deep-rooted cultural problem cannot be resolved just by a law that is applied by the same people who reportedly committed this crime repetitively.

Sexual assaults against women protesters in Tahrir Square put the issue of political violence against women into the public and media spotlight. It has been a long-standing and systemic problem in Egypt, representing a major obstacle to women’s participation in politics and political events. According to the report “Egypt Keeping Women Out,” these crimes have been constantly met with “almost complete impunity,” with successive governments failing to address the crisis. Violence targeting women protesters is “aimed at silencing women and preventing them from participating in protests. Many of the survivors and witnesses interviewed believed that attacks are coordinated and seek to break the opposition.”

While the Egypt Keeping Women Out report documents numerous cases of harassment over the last few years, no one has been brought to justice since March 2014: “no investigation has been opened”. Impunity by both the state and society contribute to the continuation of such crimes, as the perpetrators know they will not be held accountable. Labelled as an “epidemic”, such violence is met with absolute impunity and a climate of tolerance.

However, a May 2015 report released by the International Federation for Human Rights (IFHR) shattered much of the optimism of rights advocates, dashing their hopes for quick progress. According to the report, security forces were themselves routinely using sexual harassment and abuse against political prisoners and detainees. While the report does not identify victims by name, it nonetheless paints a grim picture of widespread, systemic sexual violence against prisoners in the country (Amin 2016).

In addition, the lack of legal definition of sexual harassment, which covers a wide range of actions, from flirting to rape, also contributes to this. NGOs which work on raising awareness report that women do not know what constitutes harassment; verbal and visual harassment, such as name calling or sexual invitation, are not recognized as such. There is a social tendency to downgrade the actions, so that the survivor reports, for example, sexual assaults and rape as sexual harassment (Egypt Keeping Women Out 2014). This minimization of such crimes, by the state and the predominantly state-controlled media, makes them invisible and socially accepted.

The state failure to address the violence against women, according to the Egypt Keeping Women Out report, is well reflected in the widely spread discriminatory political and religious discourse reflected in the mainstream media, which blames the survivor and implies that women should not be in public places. Several religious clerks blamed women for their own

harassment, arguing that they wear provocative clothes intentionally to be harassed. In the meantime, there is an increasing number of youths, males and females, volunteering to prevent sexual harassment, to protect survivors, expose perpetrators, and document incidents. The factors fueling this persistent violence include the lack of security, blaming the survivor with shame and stagnation, the climate of impunity and the lack of accurate data and statistics (Egypt Keeping Women Out 2014).

Nevertheless, Amin (2016) contends that change is happening, albeit slowly. The women are no longer tolerating such crimes and are speaking out. Youths are also raising public awareness through their engagement in dozens of grassroots initiatives fighting sexual harassment. What remains is for men to realize the extent of the damage and pain they inflict on the women they harass and assault. But first and foremost, the state has to come to terms with the magnitude and gravity of the problem, admitting that these are not isolated cases but a cancer that has spread from police stations and prison camps to university campuses and public transport.

### **Research Outcome and Recommendations**

To determine solutions to the endemic issue of violence against women and, specifically, sexual harassment, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 media professionals, media figures, human rights experts, women's rights activists. The results of the interviews included the following recommendations:

- The media should use positive terms, such as survivor not victim.
- Not to ask or use information that implies ethical judgments that hold the survivor socially responsible, such as what she was wearing or what time of the night the event occurred.
- There should be a balance between the audience's right to know and the survivor's privacy.
- Sexual harassments are not individual incidents; they are part of a socio-political/cultural context. This must be the reporting context.
- The media should be able to provide the survivor with information about rehabilitation or legal centers that can help them.
- The media should not downgrade the violence, and report rape as harassment and harassment as flirting and so on.
- The media should stress the principle of equality between men and women designated in the constitution.
- Ethically the media should be on the side of the survivor not the criminal. This does not negate the principle of media objectivity.
- To combat the problem, the government and the media people should synchronize efforts with anti-harassment NGOs, women's NGOs, rehabilitation and legal centers to raise awareness at grassroots level, and to report accurately and regularly on the issue.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this study demonstrates the strong correlation between media-aided state violence and societal violence. Societal acceptability and justification of violence against women is backed by the systematic violence exercised by the state along with the favorable mainstream media coverage for such crimes. To counter this, the state must adhere to and enforce the anti-

sexual harassment law and the penal code to prevent violence against women, and raise societal awareness about women's rights in equality and freedom.

NGOs and civil society organizations are exerting their utmost efforts to combat violence against women in various formats, through documenting violence on their websites and conducting awareness campaigns as well as training teams of volunteers to combat street sexual harassment. Those teams act as body shields for women in large gatherings and social celebrations, such as the two Islamic feasts. NGO members bring to people's attention the amount of violence exercised against women by reporting and documenting it on social media. The availability of such information in social media and making it available in the public sphere, forces the mainstream media to cover such news, invites them to speak and, thus, spread awareness on a wide scale when there are grand violations.

In addition, NGOs use alternative media, such as HarassMap, which uses crowdsourcing technology to gather and map accurate and up to date information to document violence. At the same time, they encourage women to report what they come across anonymously. ACT Egypt, also, has produced a film that grabbed significant attention towards the amount of violence to which women are subjected.

All such efforts, however, will not be effective enough in combating this phenomenon unless there is a concerted effort from the side of the government to enforce laws protecting human rights, along with the mainstream media, together with the NGOs to improve the status of women and the image of women, and thus the level of awareness in society.

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