

State complicity in the sexual abuse of women in Cairo

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There is a growing belief that the post-revolution spate of sexual attacks on women is a reflection of a large-scale and co-ordinated campaign from Egypt's security forces, seeking to undermine or intimidate the political opposition. Zoe Holman spoke to the founder of anti-harassment network Imprint.

The air in down town Cairo is thick with something other than dust, exhaust-fumes and revolutionary ferment: testosterone. Any woman will find it hard to ignore the pungency of male sexuality in the Egyptian capital, as even youths for whom puberty seems a pipe-dream ape a variety of lewd words and gestures, from the audacious to the appalling. Despite the banality of this daily circus, the phenomenon also has more threatening manifestations, with habitual acts of violence and provocation occurring in the most public of places, as has been reported extensively since the overthrow of Mubarak last year. That Egypt appears beset by a post-revolution spate of sexual abuse has been highlighted internationally by assaults on a number of prominent foreign journalists, most notably CNN's Lara Logan and more recently, Sonia Dridi of France 24. Yet outside of the spotlight of these attacks, NGO estimates suggest that some 83 per cent of Egyptian women have been subject to sexual harassment in some form, be it obscene comments and inappropriate touching on modes of transport, or more extreme cases of groping, stripping and rape.

"This is not just about sexual frustration," says 27-year-old activist and IT worker, Nihal Saad Zaghloul. "Many of the boys doing it are too young to have any real sexual feelings or impulses yet. But they see their older brothers and fathers do it and get away with it and so they think it's okay. It becomes a badge of pride."

Zaghloul became one of the 83 per cent in June when she was attacked in Tahrir Square by a group of men who pursued and surrounded her, grabbing at her body and hijab. After blogging about the attack, the following week she channelled her energies into rousing dozens of men and women to protest against harassment in the city centre - only to be set upon once more by some 50 men, who physically assaulted both men and women in the gathering. The incident provided a goad to Zaghloul's campaign and by the August Eid holiday, 'Imprint' anti-harassment network was founded [1] and poised to tackle the problem on the ground through a mix of patrolling, deterrence and enlightenment. Sexual harassment typically reaches its peak in Cairo during Eid - some 727 instances were reported to authorities this year - and with 170 policing volunteers recruited over just three days, Imprint was in a strong position to intercept the tide on the streets of the capital.

"We play on the psyche of the people," says Zaghloul. "You go there with mass numbers so harassers are afraid to do anything because they know they'll get caught."

The group operates on this premise of prevention, with volunteers co-ordinating with police to patrol high-risk neighbourhoods at prime times in high-vis garb, accompanying potential victims and warding off potential attackers. Imprint is not the only grass-roots initiative attempting to cleanse Egypt's urban centres of sexual predation - as Eba'a El Tamami describes in her article Harassment free zone [2] - but as Zahgoul explains, many of the other campaigns have played into a causative culture of machismo by employing violent vigilante methods against offenders, and in turn, attracting equally violent retribution campaigns. While the majority of its members are men, Imprint shirks these more primitive tactics in favour of the civil art of persuasion.

"It can get violent on the streets but you always have to keep your cool. This is something we always try to instil - staying calm, avoiding violence and employing strong arguments. Men are quite open to being talked to by other men. We come up against a lot who argue back of course, saying 'she was wearing this or that', but around eight out of the ten men we speak to ultimately get persuaded."

The characteristic rationale for harassment that Imprint volunteers encounter amongst both perpetrators and non-perpetrators reflects one of the central reasons for the endurance of sexual violence in Egypt. For despite the proliferation of cases reported since the revolution, women-rights campaigners agree that this is no fresh epidemic. As far back as 2005, women in Cairo reported being stripped and assaulted during the Eid holidays, yet the prevailing culture of silence around the issue meant that such widespread practices went largely unrecognised.

Egypt has strong punitive measures in place for sex offenders, with penalties of between 3 to 15 years imprisonment for assault. Yet throughout legal history, there have only been two convictions - one in 2008 and more recently in October, a man handed a two-year prison sentence and 10,000 Egyptian pound fine for groping a woman's backside.

"The problem was always there," says Zaghoul. "There were many previous incidents like the current ones we're seeing and nobody said anything. But now with social media, and women starting to speaking out, it is in the open. People feel that it has increased, but it is more that the taboo is being broken."

One key to breaking this taboo around public discussion of sexual violence in Egypt is the concurrent erosion of its age-old justification world-over: the blame-the-victim mentality. Unsurprisingly, Zaghoul recounts her volunteers' quotidian encounters with men seeking to exculpate their own and others' responsibility for harassment with the most tenacious of excuses.

"It is always us - either because you're not veiled, or if you are veiled, because your clothes are not loose enough, or for example because you're wearing a T-shirt that says 'love' on it! It goes on and on - there is always some reason."

Yet so too, Zaghoul and others suggest that this mentality has until recently pervaded amongst Egyptian women, indoctrinated to see themselves as sex-objects, and partly explains the under-reporting of sexual offences in the country. Encouraging victims to both recognise and speak-out about abuses is therefore a condition for winning wider public and political support for the anti-harassment cause.

"As long as the women are silent, you cannot defend the subject," says Zahgoul, "No-one can defend you or blame your attacker, because who knows, maybe you liked it, maybe you wanted it?"

That women neither like it nor want it is a fact that has apparently - if unbelievably - been lost on vast swathes of Egyptian men, which reflects what Zahgoul says is another key cause for harassment: ignorance.

“For most young men, women are like aliens. They really do not know how or what they feel, or what goes on inside of them, so for many guys it is like a journey of discovery.”

Zaghoul is not the first to express the view that genuine cluelessness, as opposed to maliciousness or perversion, inspires many acts of harassment in Egypt and indeed, it seems to correlate to the primarily adolescent characteristic of the offending demographic. Sex education in Egypt is anecdotally limited to the basic biological functions, with most of the subtleties left to guesswork or experimentation. Added to this, conservative religious discourses around sexual propriety further encourage a mindset of infantilising or excusing male behaviour while mystifying or demonising female sexuality. Zaghoul recalls various advertising campaigns recently put forth by Islamist groups in an attempt to minimise sexual harassment in the name of piety, including one Eid flyer aimed at Egyptian women, who were warned “do not be a reason for sexual harassment this holidays.” Another Salafi campaign, depicting an unwrapped sweet covered in flies, instructed men to “cover up your lollypop.”

“I wanted to slap them”, says Zaghoul. “Religion is about controlling yourself and in Qu’ran, before god spoke about a women covering herself, he first instructed the man not to look. Ultimately responsibility is with men, but these types of advertisements are typical of extremist leaders who almost always blame the women and assume the men have no self-control. It is totally humiliating for both sexes.”

The increasing influence of Islamist elements in Egypt’s shaky post-revolution leadership does not bode favourably for attempts to dispel such archaic ideas about sexuality. Commentators have noted the sluggish, largely rhetorical response of Morsi’s government to demands for action to combat sexual violence, while Islamist voices in the government have already proposed abolishing sex education from the school curriculum altogether.

Yet more sinister perhaps than governing apathy about sexual violence, are suggestions of state complicity in the pandemic. A number of activists, observers and victims believe that many of the attacks witnessed during and since last year’s revolution are a reflection of a large-scale and co-ordinated campaign from Egypt’s security forces, seeking to undermine or intimidate the political opposition. By tarnishing political demonstrations with sexual violence, it is perceived that elements of the security forces hostile to the revolution might discredit its moral standing, while deterring female protesters from taking part - a view which is corroborated by attacks on high-profile figures such as international reporters. Egyptian journalist and former state-TV anchor, Shahira Amin, even recounts receiving direct threats following her investigations around the role of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces in ‘virginity test’ assaults on female protesters during 2011. Following her public support for the legal suit by Samira Ibrahim, the most prominent victim of these practices, Amin received a mysterious posting on her Facebook wall stating “do you want what happened to Lara Logan?”

Like Amin, Zaghoul also sees state forces at play behind the attacks in and around Tahrir - tactics she says are a hangover from the Mubarak era when sexual violence was a standard tool of political intimidation.

“It is absolutely true that some of it is state-co-ordinated,” she says. “This is clearly what happened to me and my friends. Often when men go to Tahrir they get searched, and cannot take weapons, so what else can they do? They can use their hands to sexually harass women, or even men.”

The wave of abuses reported alongside this fortnight’s resurgence in mass protests in the Egyptian capital is a stark reminder of the persistence of sexual violence in Cairo, be its sources popular, cultural or political. While there have been co-ordinated efforts to pre-empt and combat abuses in

Tahrir in recent weeks, as was the case last year, the problem risks being sidelined by what are perceived, even amongst revolutionaries, to be larger or more pressing political struggles.

Yet Zaghoul sees many of the factors behind the prevalence of sexual abuse in Egypt as innately connected to the popular discontents that precipitated last year's revolution. With much of the male population feeling emasculated by political and economic disempowerment, she suggests that sexual harassment brings many an affirming sense, albeit illusory, of control or status.

"Many Egyptian men or youths don't have a purpose in life," she says. "They feel like they are invisible. As one harasser said - 'if I do this and a women yells at me, then I feel I exist.' It is ultimately a way of getting attention."

Through Imprint, Zaghoul and her colleagues are attempting to divert this sense of aimlessness into more constructive efforts to eliminate, rather than perpetuate, sexual harassment by giving recruits a goal that is both tangible and laudable. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with a broad-base of men of all ages and religious and political backgrounds volunteering their services for patrol.

"Part of it is that those men feel that they can do something with their hands finally, other than holding a sign or protesting," she says. "They feel useful."

Similarly, Zaghoul explains that local police forces, long de-valued by the state and maligned by ordinary Egyptians, have been enthusiastic about Imprints' campaign, co-operating to facilitate arrests and increase patrolling in high-offending areas.

Yet despite these promising developments, events in recent weeks reflect the difficulty of defending women's freedom and security in a situation of political upheaval. Zaghoul is well-aware of the violations taking place against women in Tahrir Square and other parts of down town Cairo amidst the chaos of mass protest and violent clashes.

"We have not patrolled in Tahrir this week", she says, "because we don't want to be affiliated with any political stand. Also, we know that violence will be used and we strictly do not use violence."

Zaghoul is emphatic that Imprint should remain non-aligned and that members participate as committed individuals. In circumstances fraught with incendiary political and religious disagreements, removing the campaign for women's rights from an ideological context is perhaps the most effective way to address the problem of ensuring that individual rights do not get overlooked in the broader struggle for collective ones

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<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/zoe-holman/state-complicity-in-sexual-abuse-of-women-in-cairo>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/Imprint.Movement.eg>

[2] See on ESSF (article 29145), [Harassment free zone – A fight against sexual assaults in Egypt](#).