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**Beyond Tahrir:
Women In Egypt Battle Sexual Harassment and Assault**

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by

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Report

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Abstract

Beyond Tahrir: Women in Egypt Battle Sexual Harassment and Assault

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Since the 2011 revolution, the media has given much attention to the problem of sexual harassment and assault in Egypt. Attacks against female journalists and protestors have thrust the issue into the international spotlight, but it is a problem that has plagued Egypt for years. The majority of women in Egypt face some kind of sexual harassment everyday. This report is about the men and women who are working to stop sexual harassment and assault in Egypt.

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Beyond Tahrir: Egyptian Women Battle Sexual Harassment and Assault

Before the Arab Spring of 2011, and the ensuing clashes that turned much of Cairo into an urban war zone, the women of Egypt had long been fighting their own battle. For Dina Mohamed Rashad, the struggle began when she was 10 years old. As she followed her parents down a crowded street in Cairo in 2003, a strange man suddenly grabbed her. She couldn't understand why the man was groping at her chest, and didn't scream out for help.

When she was attacked again two years later, she fought back, hitting the assailant in his head with her purse. She found the nearest police officer. The man was taken into custody--but the attack was really her fault, the officer said. Her clothes were too tight, he argued. She continued to insist that the police charge the man. They would have to examine her body, the officer said, to see if they could find any evidence of the attempted attack. When she refused an examination, she was told that she was too young to file a report. "Don't worry," the officer said, "We'll tell him not to do it again. We'll beat him."

But the tough talk from the police did little to allay her concerns. "Since then," Rashad said, "I have no faith in the police. I have to defend myself."

Today, the 22 year old university student with henna-dyed red hair that she wears loose and uncovered, can no longer count the number of times she's been catcalled,

groped, and brutalized simply for being a woman walking down the street or riding the Metro.

“Many times,” Rashad said, “I’ve been beaten in the streets.”

Recently, as she waited to catch a subway train, a man grabbed her hand. She told him to go away, and within seconds she was on the ground, being kicked and hit. A circle of bystanders gathered but no one intervened. When her attacker finally grew tired and left, she stood, shaking, trying to rearrange her clothes, and yelled at the crowd: “How can you call yourselves men? How can you stand still and not do anything?”

No one offered her assistance. Instead, someone told her the attack was her fault: “If he was hitting you, you must not be a good person.”

The ceaseless attacks initially led Rashad to ask herself: “Am I wrong or what?”

But she has decided it’s the people in the streets who are wrong.

“I want to be free. I want to walk in the streets without anyone trying to say a comment about how I dress, about my body, anything.”

And the first step to gaining that freedom, she says, is to get the Egyptian public to admit that sexual harassment is a widespread, serious problem that has an impact on thousands and thousands of women.

THE WORST COUNTRY FOR WOMEN

A United Nations report released in April 2013 found that 99.3 percent of women and girls in Egypt have experienced some form of sexual harassment, and 49 percent of

them report experiencing some form of daily harassment. The study includes verbal abuse, stalking, inappropriate touching, indecent exposure, and even rape.

In June 2013, a few weeks before the coup d'état that ousted then President Mohamed Morsi, Rashad went to work for a newly formed anti-sexual harassment group called Hypatia. The organization, named after a famous female philosopher who taught mathematics, philosophy, and astronomy in ancient Alexandria, aims to educate the public about the political, economic, and social effects of violence against women.

Hypatia is one of the dozens of human rights groups that formed after the June 2011 revolution that toppled the 30-year regime of President Hosni Mubarak, who had kept the country under a perpetual state of emergency. Under Mubarak, the government was empowered to arrest and imprison citizens for any reason and any length of time without a trial. During his rule, activists were frequently imprisoned.

The emergence of groups dealing with sexual harassment and women's rights was directly connected to the general rise of activism after the 2011 revolution, according to Dina Samir, the former spokesperson for HarassMap--the first group in Egypt to focus specifically on the issue of sexual harassment.

"People began to care more about the country, and became more well informed, they had a sense of ownership," Samir says.

HarassMap, Hypatia and other anti-sexual harassment organizations had to spring into existence because the Egyptian government has been loathe to address the problems, many experts say. And while the tactics of the groups vary, the goals are the same today:

to pressure the nascent government to make women's rights a priority and to make the country a safe place for women.

Out of the 22 African and Middle Eastern nations in the Arab League, Egypt is ranked as the worst country for women, according to a recent report by the Thomson Reuters Foundation. The 2013 survey of 336 gender experts ranked how countries adhered to key provisions in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. The report cited sexual harassment and the high rate of violence against women as key reasons for Egypt's abysmal ranking.

Women in the country have endured the problems for years--but the issue garnered international attention after reports about brutal attacks occurring during the 2011 protests against Mubarak. On Feb. 11, 2011, CBS News correspondent Lara Logan was swarmed by a mob of men who tore at her clothes, beat her and, as she described it to *The New York Times*, "raped her with their hands." Other female journalists and demonstrators experienced similar assaults. Logan told the *Times* that prior to her attack, she was not aware that sexual harassment and assault were so pervasive in Egypt. "I would have paid more attention to it if I had had any sense of it," she told reporters.

The Logan case attracted the attention of many people outside of Egypt, but prior to the incident, activists were already laying the groundwork for an anti-sexual harassment campaign. Rebecca Chiao, who holds a master's degree in international studies from Johns Hopkins, had been working the non-profit organizations since 1998 and had moved to Egypt in 2004. She quickly realized that she and most of her female coworkers were overwhelmed by the daily harassment, and in 2005 she started the

Egyptian Center for Women's Rights' campaign against sexual harassment and began to advocate for new legislation. A survey she launched confirmed that sexual harassment was a widespread problem that affected women from every walk of life.

She felt the government would never act fast enough, so Chiao and others launched HarassMap in December 2011, to allow people to anonymously report incidents of sexual harassment with text messages, tweets, and Facebook posts, which show up on an interactive map online. HarassMap also connected victims of sexual harassment and assault with legal resources and organizations that offered rehabilitation and psychological support. In the past, Samir says, "women would be embarrassed or afraid to talk about sexual harassment," but platforms such as HarassMap have given women a safe space to share their experiences, and have made the topic less of a taboo. HarassMap has received hundreds of reports of sexual harassment and assault from all over Egypt -- with many of the incidents occurring during mass political demonstrations.

For some of the people who had been energized and inspired by the Arab Spring, the attacks against women were a sad, demoralizing development. In the early days of the 2011 revolution, a festive, utopian atmosphere enveloped Tahrir Square. Change, and hope, were in the air. "It really was an ideal city," says Rashad. "I felt that the revolution had really started to change things."

She and other women initially felt safe and protected in the square, but the tranquility of the early days of the revolution quickly dissolved as more and more women came under attack. On March 8, 2011, 300 women marched to Tahrir to demand social equality from the new government. Once they reached the square, a mob of men taunted

and beat some of the women and sexually assaulted at least half a dozen of them, according to one news account.

Blogging for the Women's Media Center, Logan wrote that she believes she was deliberately targeted by agents from the Mubarak regime. Many experts and people who were present at the demonstrations believe that Mubarak's government hired thugs to attack women during the 2011 protests. The regime allegedly used similar tactics in May 2005, hiring men to sexually assault women who were among a small group of activists protesting proposed constitutional amendments, according to the Cairo-based newspaper *Egypt Independent*.

Morsi's government has also been accused of using similar schemes and the brutality against women in Egypt again made international headlines during the summer of 2013. On July 5, *The Guardian* reported that at least 169 incidents of "sexual mob crime" had occurred in Tahrir Square in the previous five days. Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment--an activist group that formed in November 2012--received reports of over 80 assaults against women on just one day, July 3.

"The thugs were hired by the government to terrorize the demonstrators," Rashad said. "They wanted more chaos in the country, they wanted it to be insecure, and to make people think that the demonstrators were dogs."

Mariz Tadros, a research fellow at the United Kingdom-based Institute of Development Studies, believes that the use of sexual assault as a political tool increased after the Muslim Brotherhood came into power with the election of Morsi. "The army and the former Mubarak regime were both responsible for using sexual assault to oppress

the dissenters,” and the attacks have only increased in “number and intensity after the Brotherhood became politically empowered,” she wrote in the online magazine *openDemocracy*.

Rashad adds that she has talked to individuals who admit they were hired to attack women during political protests.

But the attacks don't stop at political protests. Women are frequently brutalized during many other occasions around the nation: after football matches or during religious holidays--basically any time a large crowd congregates in a public place. Gangs of men have been reported to rove the streets of Cairo, assaulting women during Eid Al-Fitr, the holiday that marks the end of Ramadan.

“The phenomenon of large-scale sexual assault that took place with increased regularity in Tahrir Square throughout 2012 and 2013 may well have separate, political causes,” said Lucy Marx, a co-founder of the Cairo-based non-profit Dignity Without Borders. “However, we believe that the high incidence of sexual harassment in Egyptian society as a whole may also have been a contributing factor to this, and at the very least made it more difficult to address and tackle these exceptionally violent crimes.”

CREATING SAFE SPACES

Dignity Without Borders was co-founded just three months ago by Marx, a British citizen who has lived in Egypt for the past four years, and six other human rights workers. Most of the founding members previously worked with a group called Tahrir

Bodyguard, which sends individuals to mass demonstrations to intervene when they witness sexual harassment or assault.

Marx said in an email interview that she helped create the organization because she felt that a “crucial part of tackling the phenomenon of sexual harassment in Egypt was working to change attitudes and behavior at a deeper level.”

Women’s rights and safety have become increasingly tenuous since the 2011 revolution, just as human rights in general have suffered as a result of the political instability, adds Marx. But the increased media attention has also prompted a much-needed discussion. It’s “heartening” to see how many organizations have grown in the last two years to “protect, defend, and fight for women’s rights,” she says. “The growth of Egyptian-led movements and organizations to fight harassment and ensure the empowerment and participation of Egyptian women is one positive by-product of a turbulent and difficult time for the country.”

One of the newer anti-sexual harassment initiatives is called the Imprint Movement, created in July 2012 by Mahmoud Nader and four of his friends. Nader, then 21, wasn’t an activist at the time, but an engineering student focused on his studies and the odd jobs he worked to help support his family. But after witnessing abuse inflicted on women during demonstrations in Tahrir Square, he and his friends decided to form a group that would provide security for women. They quickly realized that the problem extended beyond the square, and the group extended its patrol to the Metro. Unlike other organizations, Imprint decided to work with the police, getting permission to patrol the underground transportation system. “The police felt embarrassed when they saw us

working,” Nader says, and so they began to help the growing number of Imprint volunteers, recruited from local universities.

Volunteers also go on patrol during Eid Al-Adha, the annual religious festival that many refer to as the “holiday of harassment.” During the festival, large groups of young men gather in the streets. Many police officers are on vacation. And, says Nader, it’s a recipe for a “disaster.” Now Imprint volunteers not only patrol the streets and intervene when they witness harassment, but they also try to raise awareness by bringing up the issue with people in the streets. Sometimes they appeal to the financial bottom line:

“We became friends with the shopkeepers and told them that if a woman feels safe in the street, they will come and buy from you and help you,” Nader said.

Imprint volunteers also attempt to talk to harassers -- many of whom are naturally wary, afraid that they will be beat up by the volunteers. But the men would calm down “after we told them that we would never act violently against them,” Nader says. Some even agreed to join the anti-harassment campaign.

Impressed by Imprint’s work, and the fact that many of its volunteers were 18 to 20 year old men--a demographic that is largely responsible for harassment--the United Nations asked the group to join its Global Safe Cities Initiative. The partnership allowed Imprint to expand its work in the Metro: Volunteers printed information about sexual harassment and safety, and distributed it in the underground. Nader was excited to see people carrying the literature, printed on reusable folders, months later.

Imprint has continued its security patrols, but is increasingly focusing its efforts on raising awareness and getting to the root causes of the problem.

“Imprint is focusing now on changing the way society perceives women from second-class citizens or objects to a solid grasp on the concept that women are human beings,” said Asma Abdel-Rahman, a spokesperson for Imprint. “We are seeking to change the attitudes and behaviors that lead to violence against women.”

BEYOND THE SQUARE

While physical assaults are the ones most commonly reported in the press, constant verbal assaults weigh heavily on women who live in Egypt.

Amanda Zohdy, whose father is Egyptian and mother is British, has lived in Egypt for the past seven years. She says that she experiences verbal harassment at least 20 times each day: “Verbal harassment is an attempt at control without touching. It’s not as bad, but it comes from the same place. It’s a way for men to say, ‘You belong to me.’”

Zhody founded the Anti-Sexual Harassment Action Group a few years ago, after coming home from “yet another day of constant harassment on the streets of Cairo.” She felt it was “just a kind of women’s tax for living here,” and the problem wasn’t widely discussed. But she considers herself lucky, because she’s “only been sexually assaulted three times” and she attributes this “good luck” to financial privilege. Unlike many Egyptian women, she is able to avoid walking in the streets or taking public transportation because she can afford to take taxis.

But the U.N. study and others show that harassment still affects women in Egypt regardless of their income levels or even how they dress. Women who wear the hijab, the veil that covers a woman’s hair, or the niqab, which covers the face in addition to the

hair, are just as likely to be subject to sexual harassment and sexual assault as women who do not wear the veil. Although 72.6 percent of men surveyed for the U.N. report said that the reason they harassed a female is because “the girl’s dress was not decent and revealed her body contours,” nearly 76 percent of women reported that they were wearing conservative clothing and no makeup at the time of their harassment.

It is a problem that transcends class and religion, because “it stems from sexism which also transcends class and religion,” says Dr. Hany Henry, a psychology professor at The American University in Cairo.

Marx agrees that the high incidence of sexual violence is related to women’s “exclusion and marginalization” within Egyptian society. She says that there is a widely accepted belief in the country that “men should have opportunities that are not available to women” and that there’s also a widely held assumption that “a woman’s morality and value lies in her modesty and chastity. This has led to a situation where sexual harassment often takes place with impunity in public and private life and is accepted as the status quo and often dismissed by people of both genders, either as acceptable or as something undesirable but inevitable.”

Clearly, there have also been historical shifts in the way harassers are allowed to proliferate. Samir says that in the pre-Mubarak era, harassers were not tolerated: “They were often beaten or had their heads shaved by witnesses.”

THE CONTRIBUTING CULTURE

Henry, who is conducting a survey of the attitudes of Egyptian men, says sexual harassment was less pervasive in the 1970s because society was less religious. He says the harassment intensified during the Mubarak era along with the uptick of religious affiliations. According to a 2011 report in the *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, religious associations represented more than 10,000 of the 30,000 “civil society organizations” in Egypt. The organizations--from charities to social clubs--offered basic social services while “promoting their religious agendas,” according to the report.

“The more religious society had become, the more it perceived women as a source of infatuation that should be covered up,” Henry says. “The widespread notion that women should dress conservatively led to a ‘blaming the victim’ mentality. In other words, the more religious society became, the easier it was to blame women for sexual harassment.”

Today, it is not hard to find Egyptians who believe that sexual harassment is a “divine punishment” for women who dare to leave their homes alone, says Rashad. Prominent political figures have essentially asserted as much.

In February 2013, the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* reported that multiple members of the Shura Council--the upper house of the Egyptian Parliament--said that women who attended protests “bear the responsibility of being sexually harassed.” This notion is derived from a conservative and tendentious interpretation of certain passages in the Quran that deal with modesty and the place of women in society.

Sheikh Musa Furber, writing for *The Egypt Independent*, says that Islamic law clearly says that “a man who is even leering at a woman, without touching her, is guilty of a sin, regardless of how she may or may not be dressed.” But, Furber says, people have embraced the idea that women are to blame because many religious groups issue statements and pamphlets that focus on the woman’s responsibility to dress and act in a way that discourages attacks.

Due to the pervasive culture of “victim-blaming” that pervades Egyptian society, the vast majority of sexual assaults in the country go unreported. The U.N. study found only 1.1 percent of victims of sexual harassment or assault requested assistance from the police. There were many reasons cited for not asking for help: fearing for one’s reputation, lack of willing witnesses, fearing additional harassment from the police, and a general belief that there are no real laws to penalize harassment.

But in fact, there are strict laws that protect the victims of rapes and sexual assaults. Article 306 in the Egyptian Penal Code describes the punishment for “any person who exposes another to indecent assault publicly via words, actions or gestures.” Punishment includes a minimum prison sentence of no less than six months and no more than two years and also a fine. Article 267 describes the punishment for “any person who copulates with a female without her consent.” This code specifies that the punishment for rape is “penal servitude for life” or “the death sentence.” But these laws are rarely, if ever, enforced, say many experts.

In May, the Egyptian government announced the establishment of a small police force of women trained to deal specifically with acts of violence against women. The

specialized unit is supposed to provide psychological support for victims of assault and was created with the idea that women would be more likely to report assaults to other women. The unit, based in Cairo--a massive metropolitan area with a population exceeding 18 million--is composed of 10 female officers. And some women's rights groups are concerned that the police unit is primarily a public relations stunt that does little to actually deal with specific cases of assault.

And so, in the absence of adequate police protection, Egyptian women are increasingly taking actions to defend themselves.

According to both the U.N. survey and activists, many women carry small weapons, like knives or sticks, to use in self-defense, and it's increasingly common to find street vendors selling pepper spray and electric shocking devices. Some prefer to use the small pins that keep their veils secure to deter wandering hands with an unexpected stab. Rashad carries a heavy chain. She says the weapons can be useful, but it's difficult to act quickly enough to use them.

"When you get harassed, your mind is completely confused and you don't know what to do," Rashad said. "Sometimes your mind is just too tired to face them and you don't want to make trouble."

A few days before the June 30 protests, Rashad was sitting in the crushing summer heat with her friend Poka, another activist, drinking Pepsi outside a closet-sized cafe a few blocks from Tahrir Square. A fight broke out across the street between a young girl, one of Cairo's many street children, and a man twice her size and roughly

three times her age. The man lunged at the girl, and Poka got up to intervene, but the girl had run away.

“See, this shows how their minds are small. They’re ignorant,” said Rashad.

She had just been talking about the mindset that contributes to sexual harassment. It’s a culture that often permits violence, and that is based upon deep-seated values that she thinks will be difficult, if not impossible, to change in the near future.

“For now, they won’t listen,” Rashad said. “Now we are working for the next generation. This generation can’t understand because of the old traditions they were raised on. We’re doing our best. They can’t make us too afraid. We will defeat them and walk in the streets demanding freedom and social justice. We will defend our rights.”

INSTABILITY THWARTS PROGRESS

The current political instability has made it even more difficult for some anti-sexual harassment groups to work. Abdel-Rahman says that Impact has been forced to “postpone our work and turn to plan B, to reconsider our plans. The issue of women’s rights and women’s safety has been overshadowed.” Right now, it’s difficult to convince people that women’s rights are important. As the Egyptian government works to pass a new constitution, the public’s attention is focused on reforming the government and stabilizing the economy, she says.

But as Egypt struggles to maintain any rule of law, Imprint and other groups are vowing to continue in their fight against sexual harassment and assault, hoping that social justice can still be achieved via creative and tireless activism.

HarassMap is still working on community outreach, sending volunteers into different neighborhoods in Cairo--and also in other parts of the country--to create “harassment-free zones”. Volunteers talk to doormen and shopkeepers, and encourage them to stand up to sexual harassment, rather than ignore it or participate in it themselves. The organization plans to extend its “harassment-free” program to include more public spaces like malls, restaurants, and public transportation systems.

Imprint plans to pick up its university awareness program in February, “to build an ever-expanding community of young leaders” that will step in to stop and prevent sexual harassment and all forms of violence against women. It will also begin working in primary and secondary schools with a program that’s designed to educate young people about mutual respect, positive communication techniques, and to recognize the value of each gender to society.

And although Dignity Without Borders is a non-partisan organization, it is campaigning for the integration of women’s rights into the constitution. The group recently participated in a peaceful vigil outside of the Shura Council, the upper house of the Egyptian parliament, with two other anti-sexual harassment organizations, and plans to continue to hold on-the-ground awareness-raising campaigns in the coming months.

But even with many activist groups staying the course, some women in Egypt are growing increasingly frustrated. They hope the crusading organizations can succeed, but each week that goes by there seems to be new reports about some other atrocity inflicted on a woman in Egypt.

Rashad said that violence against women has escalated to such a scale that she is now terrified to walk in the streets. In November 2013, a young woman named Esraa Mohamed was followed by a man while walking in downtown Cairo. He attacked her with acid, burning her buttocks and upper thighs. Rashad fears more attacks.

“You can’t even imagine what we are going through,” Rashad said. “You feel like you are trapped. It’s a feeling that kills you inside.”

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