

Sexual Harassment in Tahrir Square

Written by Nancy Gallagher

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NANCY GALLAGHER, JUN 27 2013

Before the Egyptian Revolution of 25 January 2011, sexual harassment was common in Egypt. Women were often ogled, stalked or verbally harassed as they went about their daily lives. Sexual harassment was most common on crowded buses or downtown streets where there was likely to be a high level of anonymity. Very few women reported being harassed to the police because of the widespread belief that it was the women's fault.

In 2005, however, sexual harassment became a highly visible political weapon. On the day of a referendum to amend Article 76 of the Constitution that would renew the presidential term of Hosni Mubarak, women and men activists demonstrated outside the press syndicate and the judges club against what they saw as a fake referendum. The ruling National Democratic party used a new security approach against the young activists. Its militias surrounded the demonstrators, split them into small groups, subjected them to verbal abuse, kidnapped the most prominent male and female activists and journalists, and took them to side streets to beat them. They were then taken to nearby buses or police stations. Security forces in plain clothes surrounded women and girls and tore their clothes, removed their veils, dragged them by the hair, and incited thugs to sexually assault them. Officers gave orders to men to break into shops and residential buildings where the women had sought refuge. Thirteen women activists were sexually assaulted that day.

The message was clear: the regime and the police would sexually harass any woman activists who demonstrated in favor of democratic reform. This event, called "Black Wednesday," was widely covered in the non-official Egyptian and international media. Women reported the assaults to the general prosecutor who dismissed the investigation on the grounds that the assailants were unknown, despite the many videos and photos of the attacks.

In 2006, twenty-four civil society organizations then filed claim 323 to the African Commission on Human & People's Rights on behalf of four of the women activists and journalists. The claim stated that the Egyptian government had violated the African Charter on Human and People's Rights that had been signed by the Egyptian government. Many journalists, writers, and human rights activists called for the resignation of the interior minister and the trial of those responsible for the assaults.

During 'Id al-Fitr, in 2006, a group of men attacked women and girls in front of a movie theater on downtown Cairo. They tore their clothes and subjected them to verbal and physical harassment. Sexual harassment was clearly a national problem. University seminars and conferences sought to understand the problem and how to deal with it. Newspapers and magazines discussed it. The attacks continued during national holidays. During 'Id al-Fitr holidays in 2008, 150 men were arrested in Mohandisin for mob attacks on women. In 2009, 300 attacks were reported during 'Id al-Adha.

In 2008, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) conducted a study of sexual harassment in Egypt. It found that 83 percent of Egyptian women and 98 percent of foreign women reported being exposed to various forms of sexual harassment and 62 percent of Egyptian men reported that they had sexually harassed women. 72% of women who had been subjected to harassment were wearing the hijab (headscarf) or the niqab (face veil) at the time.

Social scientists and political commentators have struggled to understand why sexual harassment in Egypt is increasing. Noted Egyptian journalist and novelist Alaa al-Aswany wrote in his weekly column in Masry al-Yum, "We

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no longer respect women in Egypt". He argued that this contempt for women derives from the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam that dictates that the woman's role is only for the pleasure of her husband and that she should accordingly be locked away from other men. Women circulating in public are therefore fair game for harassment. In addition, he argued, the ready availability of pornography on the Internet has increased men's disrespect for women. Finally, the high levels of poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and inability to marry have resulted in large numbers of men whose base needs for social advancement are not being met.

In 2010, the movie "Six, Seven, Eight" by screenwriter Muhamed Diab depicted through the lives of three women the experiences of millions of Egyptian women. One of the three is harassed going to work on an overcrowded bus. She joins a self-help group run by the second woman who was sexually assaulted after a soccer match. Her traumatized husband then abandoned her. The third woman was grabbed by a driver but ran after him brought time to a police station where the policeman refused to take her complaint. This incident was based on a true story in which a woman took her assailant to court ultimately leading to new legislation criminalizing harassment. The movie opened only a month before the 2011 uprising.

It has become a national trope that during the famous 18 days of the 25th of January 2011 revolution there was little or no sexual harassment in Tahrir Square. Women and men from all walks of life stood in a spirit of national solidarity calling for social justice and for an end to political oppression. Many women said they felt reborn, that it was the first time that they felt free and equal in public life. They hoped and believed in a new Egypt in which women and men would be able to pursue their lives in an atmosphere of mutual respect. On the night Mubarak stepped down, however, Lara Logan, a South African journalist reporting for CBS was surrounded by crowds of men, separated from her producer, camera crew, and two locally hired drivers, and submitted to a horrific and widely reported sexual assault. After 25 minutes, Egyptian women rescued her, possibly saving her life. The assault was widely reported in the international media.

Violent attacks, however, continued. On International Women's Day, March 8, 2011, just days after the revolution seemingly ended, Egypt and the world watched as crowds of men attacked women who were demonstrating in Tahrir Square for women's human rights. The following day the military arrested and humiliated young women activists by submitting them to virginity tests. The rational, military authorities insisted, it was to prevent them from claiming they were raped while in custody by proving they were already not virgins. Then the world witnessed an activist being dragged through the street, with her clothes ripped off revealing the blue bra she was wearing.

Numerous women were attacked in Tahrir Square in a seemingly methodical and premeditated manner. First crowds of men would surround the woman and attempt to separate her from her male and female companions. If they succeeded they would circle her, attempt to undress her and to use their fingers to penetrate her body, often claiming that they were trying to help and protect her. The woman's colleagues would desperately try to rescue her. Rescued women were taken to a nearby field hospitals or to an apartment that functioned as a kind of safe house where they were treated and taken to hospital if necessary. Attackers sometimes attempted to invade ambulances taking women from the scene. Many observed that mob psychology took over the crowds of men, but also that they seemed to be organized and paid to participate to keep women away from the square and from revolutionary activity in general. Were instigators paid by the military authorities, by remnants of the Mubarak era, or by the Muslim Brothers who assumed power two years after the revolution? There were few arrests and no systematic interrogation of harassers. Some argued that the men feared women's new visibility after the revolution and sought to reclaim public space for themselves. Others spoke of the near total impunity due to the absence of police in the square.

Several of the women braved public opinion and spoke out about their experiences. They went on talk shows, reported their harassment to the police, were interviewed by journalists, sued the military, and organized anti-sexual harassment groups. The women and their supporters were emblematic of a new revolutionary generation that would no longer keep quiet against sexual harassment and social injustice. Nazra for Feminist Studies and the other groups collected and published testimonies of women who had been subjected to sexual assault in Tahrir Square. From their testimonies and others on Facebook, twitter, blogs, videos, television, the women all stated that they could not tell who was helping or assaulting them, that screaming or resisting increased the violence, that the attackers were enjoying their pain, that they all had the same smirk on their faces, that men from all ages were participating, and that

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women of all ages were being attacked.

Filmmaker Ramita Navai shows in her 2012 film “Egypt: Sex Mobs and Revolution” that men from low-income Cairo neighborhoods were paid to disrupt protests and harass women. They would not say who pays them. In 2013, government spokesman announced that the government had received more than 1,000 reports of harassment, and that the president had directed the Interior Ministry to investigate them. In May 2013, the ministry announced that a special unit would be established in police stations to combat violence against women. NGOs such as HarrassMap have been formed to combat the problem. Women report incidents of harassment to HarassMap, which then puts them on a map that show where incidents occur. Vigilante groups have been formed to protect women in Tahrir. Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment and other groups patrol the square and try to protect and rescue activists. It is clear that women and men in the post-revolutionary period will no longer keep silent.

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