

Whose Shame Is It? The Politics of Sexual Assault in Morsi's Egypt¹

By Mariz Tadros

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ver since the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, they have been under the spotlight, pressured to demonstrate to the domestic and international public that their commitment to women's equal citizenship goes beyond lip service. Regrettably, when it comes to protecting women's bodily integrity, they have failed the test badly. Internationally, the Muslim Brotherhood's stance on violence was widely condemned at the Commission on the Status of Women's (CSW) annual event in March in New York, when it rejected the document and called for other Muslim nations to follow a similar course² In response to the damage done to the Egyptian government's international image at the CSW, President Mohamed Morsi felt compelled to hold a conference at the presidential premises on "the freedoms and rights of Egyptian women." Though the event took place, it was widely criticized by many actors as lacking in legitimacy.

Youth revolutionary movements, women's NGOs and coalitions have opened fire on the Muslim Brotherhood government on several accounts, first, for failing to make streets safe for women who are exposed to sexual harassment on a daily basis more so than before, secondly for being complicit in politically-motivated sexual assaults, and third, for sexually loaded remarks that the Minister of Media made.

Lets take everyday forms of sexual harassment first. According to a report on sexual harassment³ released on the April 1st, 2013 by Harassmap, 60% of acts of sexual harassment happen on the street, and half of all incidents take the form of groping. The profile of the harassers tended to be young, with almost half of all incidents being committed by children, and almost half by young adults and almost a third of the incidents involved harassment by more than one perpetrator:

"Around half of the harassers were young adults, aged between 18 and 29. Almost 40% of them were children under 18 and only 14.5% of harassers were adults 30 years of age or older.... Around 27% of incidents of harassment were mob harassment, with more than one perpetrator. More than half the victims who faced mob harassment faced the incidents alone, not in groups. Most of the perpetrators in mob harassment were men. In 45.8% of the incidents, it was possible to identify the age of the harassers. Around half of them were children and 45.5% were young adults."

These incidents are predominantly socially motivated: Sexually assaulting women becomes a way of passing time, or a way of flouting men's power over women. Most Egyptians have blamed a perceived sense of an increase in sexual harassment since the January 25th revolution to a breakdown in the security system, or a laxity in the police force's performance in maintaining safety on the Egyptian street.

However, not all acts of sexual harassment are socially motivated, some are deployed for political ends. During the phase in which the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) ruled Egypt, there were a number of incidents in which the army was responsible for using sexual assault against women protestors, a tactic widely believed to be intended to intimidate women not to engage in political activism against the status quo. Yet the frequency and intensity of politically-motivated sexual assault increased since the Muslim Brotherhood

government took over. The most widely publicized example, perhaps, is the very brutal forms of sexual assault experienced by Egyptian women demonstrating in *Tahrir* Square on the occasion of the second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution (January 25th, 2013). At nightfall, men organized in groups began to target women for sexual assault. Shoft Taharosh, a youth-led initiative that was formed in 2012 to address incidences of sexual assault, reported dealing with 19 cases of assault, six of which required medical intervention in addition to other cases of assaulted women they became aware of.⁴ They accused the Muslim Brotherhood for these acts of sexual assault that serve to scare women and their families from allowing females to protest against the regime. In response, thousands of women and men took to the streets to express their anger at the Muslim Brotherhood led government's failure to protect women from organized forms of sexual assault.

The strength of the resistance to the assaults on women's bodily integrity was further demonstrated again in April when protestors took to the street to demand the resignation of Minister of Media, Salah Abdel Maqoud, whom they called "the harasser". Abdel Maqoud, who is known to be affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood was implicated for making sexually loaded remarks first to a female journalist and second to a female news programme presenter on two different occasions. In the first incident in September 2012, Abdel Maqoud was appearing on a programme hosted by Syrian presenter Zeina Yazigi, and when Yazigi announced that she was about to play recordings, a plethora of opinions expressed by journalists, the minister said, "I hope they are not as 'hot' as you."⁵ In the second more recent incident that sparked the protests, Abdel Maqoud was discussing freedom of the press in a public event. Nada Mohamed, a young journalist with news website Hoqouk, asked him: "Mr Minister, where is this freedom when journalists are dying and getting beaten everywhere?" The minister responded: "Come here and I'll tell you where," which in Egyptian colloquial Arabic has a sexual connotation.⁶

The impunity with which the Muslim Brotherhood has emerged vis-a-vis sexual assault is partly a consequence of the monopolization of power in the hands of the ruling party (who cannot be disassociated from the Muslim Brotherhood) and partly a culture of impunity vis-a-vis perpetrators of sexual assault. The culture of impunity is manifest in the absence of any measures to hold the Minister of Media accountable for sexual harassment, and in the fact that none of the lawsuits made by sexually assaulted women against Muslim Brotherhood members have⁷ made it to court, signalling to the perpetrators that they can get away with it.

Clearly when President Morsi speaks of "those who use political cloaking for acts of violence," politically motivated sexual assault by the movement to which he belongs, the Muslim Brotherhood, is never to blame. The reaction from some readers to one article on politically motivated sexual assault has been to question why the Muslim Brotherhood should be held accountable for society's ills?⁸ Pre-orchestrated and politically motivated sexual assault intended to intimate female protestors from expressing their opposition in public spaces have been muddled with socio-economically motivated incidents of sexual harassment.

Such confusion serves to deflect responsibility away from the Muslim Brotherhood led government. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood movement should be held accountable for

incidents that their members have perpetrated. (See especially: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DkdYPs_qfE).

The second level of responsibility is the Muslim Brotherhood's government's failure to create safe streets for its citizenry whether they are the victims of socially or politically motivated sexual violence. Yet by talking about sexual assault as exclusively a social phenomenon, the blame then shifts to society.

Twenty focus group discussions undertaken in March 2013 with women and men in low-income Cairo communities, three Upper Egyptian governorates and one Delta governorate show that the general citizenry is well aware that incidents of sexual assault have been happening in protest spaces.⁹ While the findings are by no means generalizable to the entire population, nevertheless, they are indicative of general trends in public perceptions. People's reactions to the incidents of sexual assault generally tended to reflect the deep polarizations in Egyptian society. On the one hand, women and men who had never voted in the parliamentary or presidential elections for the Muslim Brotherhood and who opposed the existing regime saw the incidents of assault at *Tahrir* Square as intended to intimidate citizens not to go out and protest. On the other hand, those who had voted for the Muslim Brotherhood's FJP and the Salafist *Nour* party in the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections tended to see these acts as the responsibility of the women themselves and the "thugs" who protest. Those who had voted for the FJP but are not sure whether they will do so next time tended to be more varied in their replies.

What is striking are the answers of those who voted for the Muslim Brotherhood and who said they intend to do in the next parliamentary elections. In one focus group with men in Beni Suef, one man, 30, said, "the woman who goes down to *Tahrir* Square in the first place is a thug and not a self-respecting woman." One 22 year-old man in the same focus group explained, "the people who went down to *Tahrir* Square on the 25th of January [2011] were real revolutionaries but today the ones that go there are thugs." Two of the men associated women who protest today with drug taking and homosexuality. This pitting of the honourable revolutionaries of two years ago vs. the thugs of today is in tune with the Muslim Brotherhood's narrative: When they participated in the revolution, revolutionary activity was legitimate, when activism is turned against them, it is vilified as the work of a group of thugs. All eight in the group agreed that women should not go out to protest. The majority of the men in the focus group blamed incidents of sexual harassment blamed the "thugs" and the opposition for the incidents that happened in *Tahrir* Square. One went so far as to say the woman who go "to *Tahrir* Square go there because they want to be harassed." Three of the eight were of this view, and seven of the eight believed that women had some responsibility for the assaults because they should not have been there in the first place. Two in the group said that the freedom that society witnessed after the revolution [one which none of the women ever spoke of in other focus groups] was to blame – women should not leave their homes except for war. In another part of the conversation when they were asked what do they watch on television, they all said religious channels, and mentioned *El-Nass*, *Al-Hafez* and the Muslim Brotherhood's channel *Misr* 25th. It seems like more than a coincidence that a few days after women were sexually assaulted in *Tahrir* Square, on the Salafi television network *Al-Hafez*, Sheikh Abou Islam said:

“Egypt’s girls are not a red line...these women who are naked, indecent, and prostitutes are not a red line, they are going there to be raped: Nine tenth of them are crusadettes (women crusaders) and the other tenth are women who have no men to control them, they are widows who have no one to revere or to put them right – shame on you, where is your femininity? Where is the femininity that is due by religious law? These women are like ogres with their unruly hair.... she-devils called women”

Interestingly, in a focus group with men in one of Cairo’s shantytowns, where it happens that participants were against the current regime, the mens’ discourse was very different. They strongly believed that women have the right to go protest and those responsible for failing to protect women were the government and the president himself. Yet they too were more cautious about the dangers that now await women should they go out to protest in *Tahrir*.

In Qena, in a focus group with men, the responses again showed how political orientation influenced the responses on sexual harassment. One man who was more critical of the Islamists argued that women should never be exposed to sexual harassment, irrespective of what they are wearing and believed they are not to blame for the assault. Another man who supported the *Nour* Salafi party believed that the cases of sexual harassment were due to women’s attire. “I am against harassment but if a woman is wearing respectful clothing, no one would harass her. Have you ever seen a woman in the *niqab* [face veil] being harassed?”.

Among the focus groups with women, the variation was again influenced by political orientation (Islamist/non-Islamist) yet very few of the women said that women who go out to protest “deserve” what happened to them as with the focus group with the men in Beni Suef mentioned above. Certainly, there were views expressed that women get harassed because they are not modestly dressed and in such instances they deserve what they get. However, what is intriguing is the recurrence of the view that if a woman really must go to protest, then there needs to be gender segregation to protect her because it is not right for women to mix with crowds of men, and that is what causes harassment. “Why did she go out in the first place in a crowded area with men,” asked one woman in Beni Suef? She and others proposed that there should be separate parts, closed off, and only then should women go out to protest. Again, it is no coincidence that this is one of the ideas disseminated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Reda al-Hefnawy, a Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) member, has said, “Women should not mingle with men during protests.... How can the Ministry of Interior be tasked with protecting a lady who stands among a group of men?”¹⁰

The reaction to the question of who is to blame was striking. Many expressed the view that it is the responsibility of the protestors – they should have made sure that these spaces were safe. Others pointed to the thugs and the *fuloul* [remnants of the former regime] as being responsible. The majority of those who blamed the government and the Muslim Brotherhood more specifically tended to be against the regime. Others tended to blame “society” and “youth.” Herein lies the impact of the de-politicization of sexual assault: It is a social problem that requires social interventions. Some said women need to dress more modestly or not leave their homes unless necessary; others blamed it on social mores, *infelat akhlaqi* (lax morality) of society and the individual men who were responsible for harassment. Others said there is a need

for more religion: “We are lacking in religious values. If society would become truly religious, then this would not happen.”

What is evident from the focus groups is the extent to which the deep political fissures between those in favour and those against the current regime has influenced people’s willingness to see the sexual violence acts as a failure of the government to protect women. Sadly, in almost all the focus groups, across age, gender, geography, and political orientation, people feel that women should no longer participate in public protests. Those in favour of women’s rights to protest fear for their safety and those that deny women such a right believe that their presence there is illegitimate.

The wide exposure of the public to sexual violence in protest spaces has meant that those against the regime no longer support women’s political activism out of fear for their well being, while supporters of the regime have taken advantage of the general terror to demonize women as being responsible for their own violation. It is in essence a case of a regime making political exploits out of sexually assaulted women – a far cry from the Egyptian Revolution of January 2011 where women of all classes, religions, backgrounds stood side by side with men proudly demanding “bread, freedom and dignity.”

So much for dignity now.

ENDNOTES

¹ This article was written and submitted in May 2013, although it should be noted that in view of the pattern of politically motivated sexual assaults that was witnessed in 2011 and 2012, organizers of the nationwide *Tamarod* [rebel] campaign who called upon citizens to rise up to demand early presidential elections in late June were aware of the possibility that sexual violence may be used as a way to intimidate women not to participate. Organizers therefore sought to put measures into place in order to make protest spaces safe. However, regrettably, from Friday the 28th of June through to the 1st of July, there were over 50 cases of severe forms of sexual assault against women in *Tahrir* Square.

² <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/hoda-elsadda/war-against-women-csw-declaration-and-muslim-brotherhood-riposte>

³ Hend Kortam, “Harassmap: more than half of sexual harassment takes the form of groping” *Daily News*, April 1, 2013, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/04/01/harassmap-more-than-half-of-sexual-harassment-takes-the-form-of-groping/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/Shoft.Ta7rosh>

⁵ <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/04/14/minister-of-information-sexually-harasses-reporter/>

⁶ <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/04/28/women-protest-against-ministers-remarks/>

⁷ This refers to lawsuits waged in February 2013 in relation to the acts of sexual harassment witnessed in *Tahrir* Square on January 25th, 2013.

⁸ See <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/mariz-tadros/egypt-politics-of-sexual-violence-in-protest-spaces> and, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/mar/11/politically-motivated-sexual-assault-egypt>

⁹ Sixteen focus groups were conducted in five governorates with the following geographic coverage: The urban capital (Cairo), the Delta (Fayoum), and Upper Egypt (Minya, Qena and Beni Suef). The focus groups sought to cover both urban and rural contexts. Within each community, the four focus groups included men and women (though held separately). While the findings of the focus groups cannot be generalized for the entire population, they provide insights into the perceptions of different groups on violence, sexual assault and where the responsibility lies. For a more detailed study, see Tadros, Mariz: Politically motivated sexual assault in violent transitions: A case study from Egypt, IDS evidence report No. 8, 2013, <http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/politically-motivated-sexual-assault-and-the-law-in-violent-transitions-a-case-study-from-egypt>.

¹⁰ <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/02/11/shura-council-members-blame-women-for-harassment/>