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Women As Fair Game in the Public Sphere: A Critical Introduction for Understanding Sexual Violence and Methods of Resistance

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Ever since sexual violence has become a daily reality for Egyptian women, the subject no longer requires a long introduction. In the past few years, every Egyptian woman has become vulnerable to varying levels of abuse in the street. The threats range from stalking, verbal harassment, and physical assault, to—in some cases—mass sexual assault. The spectacle of mass sexual assaults in Tahrir Square deservedly earned comment in the media and took on political weight due to the location and circumstances where the attacks took place. Nonetheless, close observers of the last few years have repeatedly noted that what happened in Tahrir was not a new phenomenon. **Group sexual assaults of women in Egypt have been recorded in the past, notably during the 2006 Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha celebrations in downtown Cairo.** Efforts to force the acknowledgement of those events were met with **complete denial by both state and society at the time**, and they lacked the political cover provided by the revolution-related events of January 2011.



[6 February 2013, anti sexual harassment march to Tahrir Square. The Arabic reads, in reference to Tahrir Square: "Space safe for everyone." Photo courtesy of Gigi Ibrahim via Flickr.]

The number of instances of public sexual violence has grown at a frighteningly rapid pace. As appalling as that is, the rise has been accompanied by a widespread complicity—across institutions and Egyptian society itself—that consistently impedes serious attempts to recognize and address—let alone combat—this violence. Very quickly, a rhetoric of justification emerged that sought to blame victims and bystanders rather than the perpetrators. The survivors of these attacks are blamed for their clothing, conduct, or reactions during the assault, and men who were on the scene are blamed for failing to perform their traditional masculine role of protecting women. This kind of reaction is perhaps best illustrated by the phrase that has become the automatic response to news of any new sexual assault: "What was she doing there anyway?"

This popular (*sha'bi*) rhetoric is paralleled by a cultural discourse that appears more progressive, though it ultimately differs little in its logic or the social explanation it offers. The discourse attributes sexual violence to gaps in education and wealth, as if this violence might be explained by the spread of poverty belts in Cairo, as if it is only working classmen who do the harassing, and as if the only women who are harassed are middle-class Cairenes. A broad segment of the middle class has accepted this rhetoric wholesale, and its proponents approach the explosion of sexual harassment as on the one hand, yet another manifestation of social decline in Egypt, and on the other, an indicator of

what the poor will do if they are not deterred by aggressive state security. Both the common justification approach for sexual violence and the more “progressive” discourse deliberately ignore how many different forms such violence takes. These discourses also ignore the facts that sexual violence occurs all over Egypt and that women of all socioeconomic backgrounds experience it. What we would like to argue here is that the new sexual violence is simply the normalization of a longstanding culture of sexual violence. In other words, while the violence itself may not be entirely new, the popular acceptance of it is.

This essay is divided into two parts. The first analyzes the meaning of sexual violence and its manifestations in Egyptian society, and highlights the central turning points in the creation of what we call a “culture of sexual violence.” In this section, we trace the roots of this culture by examining three pivotal dynamics: the relationship between social and institutionalized violence (i.e., violence which involves the state); the relationship between the private and public spheres and how each influences the other; and finally, how the logic of “protection” has prevented perpetrators of sexual violence from being held accountable for their crimes either by society or by law.

The second part of this essay looks at different efforts to resist sexual violence, which have resulted in the development of an independent social movement numbering hundreds, if not thousands, of young women and men who have chosen to stand up to violence using extremely diverse methods and tools. We conclude by raising two critical questions for the future of this movement. The first question addresses the connection of this movement to revolutionary activity and discourse. Is the movement against sexual violence part of a larger revolutionary movement, or is it a feminist movement with its own goals that are separate from the revolution? The second question relates to the movement’s capacity to persist in light of the kinds of tactics it employs and the relationships between its constituent parts (independent movements and established groups and civil society organizations). The article ends with several conclusions about the future of the movement and the possibility of building upon it.

What Do We Mean By ‘Sexual Violence in the Public Sphere’?

Have the rates of sexual violence in the streets of Egypt increased since the 25 January Revolution, or have Egyptian women of different social classes and ideological affiliations simply gotten fed up and decided to resist? Many people have wrestled with this question as they attempt to explain what some see as a new phenomenon in Egyptian society (or at least an inexplicable spike in the severity and frequency of sexual violence). In fact, the answer to both questions is yes: sexual violence has become more frequent and more severe since the revolution, and women have also resisted it more strongly. Alongside the steady increases both of instances of sexual violence and of women’s resistance, it is clear that this violence has taken on increasingly **vicious forms** that make the term “sexual harassment”—the popular phrase used to cover all of these crimes—wholly inadequate to describe all of the many different ways that sexual violence occurs in the Egyptian street. This kind of violence includes a range of actions: verbal harassment, threats, stalking, groping, sexual assault, rape, gang rape, and even murder. 2012 and 2013 witnessed two deaths from sexual violence in Egypt: **Iman Mustafa**, from Assiut; and **Shurouq al-Tarbi**, from Gharbiya. Both of these women died as a result of their attempts to resist harassment: **Mustafa was shot by her harasser; al-Tarbi was run over as her harasser attempted to flee the scene.**

Can we find causes for the rampant growth of sexual violence in Egypt? Perhaps the best starting point is to test the most common explanations. Is sexual violence linked primarily to Cairo and other large urban areas (such that it can be explained as part of rising urban crime rates more generally)? This is unequivocally incorrect. **All** surveys and evidence confirm that violence against women occurs in all parts of Egypt. The fact that the two deaths that resulted from sexual assault occurred outside of Cairo is clear proof of this. However, we also cannot ignore the urban aspect of crimes of sexual violence, which are in many cases directly related to the collapse of city infrastructure and urban crowding as well as the poor condition of public and private transportation, which particularly affects women.

Is this a phenomenon activated only during large political events? No; the lion’s share of this social violence is seen in the near-daily harassment and assault of thousands of women in the street, in the workplace, on means of transport, and in other public spaces. The efforts of **HarassMap**, **a service** that allows women to document where they were sexually assaulted on a virtual map, show the extent to which harassment occurs around the entire country. However, large protests have become occasions for collective sexual violence against women

Did the rate of sexual violence begin to increase after the January revolution in particular? Undoubtedly, yes. Despite the paucity of precise data and statistics, the emergence of new forms of violence, some of which had been terrifying in terms of their violence. In particular, the emergence of gang rape and the use of blade weapons in attacks are developments that must be examined in their own right. They may be partly attributed to the general spread of violence in society since January 2011 and the repeated clashes between demonstrators and security forces (and between citizen groups themselves). Likewise, we cannot separate the increase in violence against women in the public sphere from the fact that more women are now more active in more public spaces than before. Since 2011, women have in general forcefully and successfully asserted their right to protest and peaceful assembly as a key political and civil right. In this context, sexual violence against women may be read as an attempt to expel them from public spaces and to reinscribe prerevolutionary limits. Perhaps the best evidence of the spread of a culture of sexual violence is the fact

that these group sexual assaults are not limited to squares during protests but now also take place in other venues, such as at concerts and on public transportation. In fact, large gatherings of all kinds in Egypt had become places where women of all ages could be targets of different types of sexual assaults. **Egyptian women of all ages are narrating new reports of sexual harassment and/or assaults on the subway, in buses, and in taxis, almost on a daily basis.**

Can we speak of a link between the rate of these crimes and the emergence and growth of a culture that encourages sexual violence by giving offenders *de facto* immunity? Is there a link between the daily violence women experience and the planned, politically motivated violence seen in Tahrir Square more than once over the past two years? If so, is the role of the state here limited to its failure to take action and do its duty to deter such crimes? Or does its role go beyond that, rising to direct and indirect incitement of sexual violence? Answering these questions requires a quick review of the history of this phenomenon over the past few years, and an examination of the nature of the relationship between the rise of a culture of routinized sexual violence in society and the role of the state as direct or indirect facilitator and, at times, instigator of such violence.

From the State As Violator to Society As Violator: What Signals Does the State Send to Society about Women?

The year 2005 represents a turning point for sexual violence in Egypt. In a now-infamous incident known as **Black Wednesday**, the state hired thugs to sexually assault female journalists and activists opposed to a set of proposed constitutional amendments. The images of female journalists standing in the street with their clothing in tatters were truly abnormal and shocking at the time. Nevertheless, the response at the time was limited to a symbolic protest by activists carrying candles and wearing black. Overall, the incident did not provoke the outrage of the majority of Egyptians—the responses to the incident were confined to a circle of political and human rights activists in Egypt, all of whom treated it as yet another political crime to be added to the long list of the Mubarak regime's crimes. At the time, no one fully understood the significance of the fact that female activists could be sexually violated in the heart of Cairo in broad daylight in front of everyone. In fact, no one realized a year later when, on 22 October 2006, the first day of the Eid al-Fitr holiday, the first cases of mass sexual assault occurred downtown when groups of young men attacked women who happened to cross their paths, stripping off their clothes and sexually assaulting them. These crimes took place amid an almost total media blackout, broken only by a few bloggers who published **pictures and details of the incident** and who were later accused of fabricating stories and hurting Egypt's image. The Interior Ministry issued a statement denying that any group harassment had taken place.

Sexual violence grew more common over the next few years, as verbal and physical harassment of women increased throughout the public sphere. The new element in many of these instances was not merely social denial, but complicity. If a woman dared to object to harassment on a public bus or in the street, she would find everyone averting their faces or telling her to keep quiet to avoid a scandal. This blindness to the rising rates of violence reached its height during the Eid al-Adha holiday in 2009, when the daily papers published photos of small groups of young men surrounding several girls and attempting to harass them and to strip them of their clothes in the tiny neighborhood of Mohandiseen in Cairo. This time, the Interior Ministry was compelled to conduct an **investigation**, which resulted in the prosecution of several people. Several feminist organizations considered these incidents to be a clear warning sign. **At the time, a number of female activists** wrote about an emerging danger of groups of men goading each other to commit sexual violence. Nevertheless, state institutions and the media continued to ignore the issue, which contributed to the shame and disgrace felt by the women and girls subjected to the attacks. The situation continued to deteriorate until eventually women were raped in the middle of Tahrir Square itself—the symbol of the revolution—on four separate occasions (in November 2012, **January 2013**, and **June and July 2013**).

As this historical review makes clear, the ambiguous inaction of state agencies to the violence sent two unambiguous signals. On the one hand, it suggested that women's bodies were, in general, available for such attack, especially if women happened to be in the "wrong place" at the "wrong time." On the other hand, it indicated that crimes of sexual violence would likely go unrecognized, uninvestigated and, of course, unpunished. Thus the state let it be known that there was a kind of immunity from prosecution for perpetrators of sexual violence and that the public sphere was not safe for women. If the state itself, represented by the Interior Ministry, said as much in words and deeds, then the only way women could protect themselves was by minimizing their presence in the public sphere as much as possible.

More importantly, the message was also sent that women were responsible—in one way or another—for what might happen to them in public spaces. This message contained within it a familiar assumption, namely that men are responsible for protecting "their" women from other men. These messages thus doubled the burdens on everyone—men and women—and added new dimensions to the long-standing demarcation of men's and women's social roles. They cemented the binary of the "protective" man and the "weak" woman who, despite her weakness (or maybe because of it), would be held responsible for assaults against her body. The assumption by the state of the traditional male role—the protector who does not protect but actually takes part in the abuse—turns the classical understanding of the public sphere as a place for all citizens, male and female, on its head, creating a purely masculine public space where women have no place regardless of the rights provided by the constitution and the law.

Returning to how the state failed to deal with sexual violence against women developed over time, we note that, in 2006, as mass sexual harassment became a seasonal activity, the state initially withdrew from dealing with the phenomenon by denying it. As the cases and forms of sexual violence in the public sphere increased, the state's role as a facilitator and inciter of such violence became clear through both the escalation of the social discourse of women's responsibility for their own assaults and the explicit demand that women take care to monitor their own clothing and behavior in public spaces to avoid misunderstandings. Now, we have reached the terrifying point at which the police have become incapable of combating sexual violence even if they wanted to do so. Indeed, the police are no longer able to deal with this phenomenon on the ground due to its complexity, geographic spread, and the need for special security techniques like those used in anti-sexual violence units in more-developed states, which enjoy a high degree of independence and professional competence. Such professional competence is impossible to achieve for the police force in Egypt in light of its weakness and the absence of any real security sector reform, which was a critical demand of the 25 January Revolution. At the same time, the state itself, with its various security arms, remains a perpetrator of sexual violence. From using informal state militia thugs, to conducting virginity and pregnancy tests on female demonstrators, often held in custody under flimsy accusations, there is consequently no reason to assume good intentions on part of the state when it comes to fighting sexual violence against women.

A Culture of Sexual Violence between Private and Public Spheres

A discussion of the culture of sexual violence in Egypt is not complete without looking at the role played by the private sphere—namely, the family and the home, which are the sites where the protection-and-violence discourse is produced and managed on a day-to-day level. One cannot speak of a public space that privileges men without addressing the patriarchal private sphere that controls women's movements outside of it and forces them to engage in various practices that fall under the rubric of gender violence in its broadest sense. The most prominent of these practices in Egypt include early marriage, female genital cutting (FGC), restrictions on freedom of movement, and preventing women from making major life choices for themselves.

Is there, then, a relationship between a widespread culture of sexual violence in the public sphere and violations that take place in the private sphere? The term “the domestication of the public sphere” is used by many feminist authors to describe the relationship between the public and private spheres in countries that continue to be characterized by a chronic weakness of the state structure despite being at various stages of modernization (Kumar and Makarova 2008; Scott and Keates 2004). In these cases, the dominant patterns of relationships in the private sphere are transferred to the public sphere by turning the latter into a sort of very large home occupied by an extended family, not all of whose members know each other. This dynamic prevails in states where the social structure and power relationships are largely impervious to state penetration and influence. As a result, a public sphere arises that reflects the social, class, and gender relations that prevail in the domestic sphere.

We can see this in Egypt in several ways, the most prominent of which is the classist nature of police interactions with citizens. For example, a woman who works as a domestic servant for a middle-class family will seem to a policeman to be of a lower social class than himself, and the policeman will consequently deal with the woman on this basis rather than treat her as a citizen with rights and duties equal to his own (as the laws of the ideal public sphere would require). This dynamic is even more pronounced when it comes to women in general, as the twin logics of “protection” and “blaming the victim” that generally dominate girls' relationships with their families are transferred to the public sphere. If a girl's family and close social circle will not necessarily support her if she is sexually assaulted, why would we expect the larger community to support her? The consequence, in any case, is disturbing: those who are most blamed are precisely those, who by gender and class experience, already at most risk of exploitation, coercion and violence.

Exploring all of the links between the public and private spheres is beyond the scope of this essay. But it should be noted that the influence of the private sphere over the public increases when two basic conditions are present. First, when the power of the state in relation to society weakens, it becomes easy for social values to permeate state practices. Second, when the public sphere disappears, the influence of the private sphere over the public may increase. In this context, we see the classical sense of the public square—as a place for all citizens, male and female, to meet as equal persons with equal rights—transformed into a biopolitical hunting ground, peopled solely by predators and prey. In light of the weakness of the Egyptian state, and since the Egyptian public sphere is still in the process of formation as one of the primary areas of political struggle since 25 January 2011, it is only natural that we would see many features of the private sphere in the public one, like faint specters reminding us that the question of modernity in society in general, and its relationship to women in particular, remains present and unresolved.

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