The Journal of North African Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fnas20

Young women and social media against sexual harassment in North Africa

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Published online: 11 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: Loubna Hanna Skalli (2014) Young women and social media against sexual harassment in North Africa, The Journal of North African Studies, 19:2, 244-258, DOI: 10.1080/13629387.2013.858034

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2013.858034

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This article discusses anti-sexual harassment initiatives launched in North Africa within the broader context of the Arab Spring. Although women’s rights groups have mobilised against gender-based violence for the past few decades, recent initiatives signal interesting shifts in how the young generation of women and men behind these initiatives conceptualise the linkages between sexual harassment, citizenship and the gendering of democracy. I use the Egyptian Harassmap and the Moroccan Women-Shoufouch as examples of how young activists combine on-the-ground mobilisation with cyber activism that maximises the potential of new communication technologies (Internet and cell phone) and social networks (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube). I argue that it is through this combination of online and offline activism that they have succeeded in exposing the complicity of political and patriarchal forces in (re)producing and condoning sexual harassment before and since the Arab Spring. Drawing on various sources, including interviews with young activists, I underscore interesting generational shifts in how young activists think of, talk about and react to sexual harassment within societies where the topic has long been condemned to silence. Recent efforts, I contend, promise to launch an irreversible process of change.

Keywords: young cyber activists; sexual harassment; Women-Shoufouch; social media; Morocco; Harassmap; Egypt

North African societies seem to be grappling with seemingly contradictory developments since the Arab Spring. On the one hand, they are the theatre of unprecedented levels of violent sexual harassment against women protestors, activists and those who simply use the streets. During the mass protests that ended the presidency of Mohamed Morsie early July 2013, reported cases of sexual assault and rape of women in Cairo’s Tahrir Square reached 91 (Compendium 2013). A Tweet from the recently created Egyptian activist group Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment (OpAntiSH) states that ‘among the reported cases tonight [July 1, 2013] are grandmothers; mothers with their children; seven-year-olds. Common denominator: all female’.

On the other hand, and as violent sexual harassment continues to cut across class, age, religious and ethnic differences, the young generation of (women and men) activists seems to be more committed than ever to break the silence around sexual harassment, document it and mobilise around it. Since 2010, young activists from Morocco and Egypt have adopted bold
and creative ways to counter sexual violence and force their societies to recognise the pervasive violation of women’s rights. Egyptian groups, including Nazra for Feminist Studies and Harassmap and Moroccan initiatives such as Women-Shoufouch (WS), have invested in digital technologies (cellular phone and Internet) and online social spaces (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) to expand on the traditional repertoire of mobilisation used by earlier generations of feminists (marches, petitions and lobbying). They also produced more reports detailing the brutality and frequency of sexual harassment (Compendium 2013), collected testimonies from victims and witnesses of harassment to circulate on social media spaces, online publications (e-zines and web-blogs) and traditional media (print, broadcast and radio).

In this paper, I discuss the levels of complexity that sexual harassment has gained since the Arab Spring. As atrocious as this form of gender-based violence is today, it is important to underline that sexual harassment has been the vexing reality of North African women decades prior to the recent political upheavals. The 18-year-old Libyan Danya Hajjaji captures well this reality when she writes on an online youth platform: ‘If you haven’t been stalked all the way to your front door at least seven times in your life as a girl, you must’ve been the lone survivor of some kind of apocalypse that hit North Africa’ (International Political Forum 2013).

The Arab Spring, however, created a context that helped shed light on the scope and brutality of sexual harassment and expose the political forces that deploy it to terrorise women and neutralise their political agency (Compendium 2013). The documentation and visualisation of ‘sexualized assault and terrorization of women activists’ (Amar2011) have made it an irrefutable reality as scores of citizens and activists record it, Facebook it, Tweet it and post it on YouTube for the world to see. When the first well-known mass sexual assaults took place in downtown Cairo in the 2006 post-Ramadan celebration of Eid Fitr, the attacks were captured by camera-ready cell phones, immediately posted online and hotly commented on in the Egyptian blogosphere before the mainstream and international media paid any attention. With the help of digital technologies, activists continue to collect visual evidence about the similarity of mass attacks that throw women in what they now call the ‘Circle of Hell’ – the large crowd of men who close in on them as dozens of aggressors simultaneously fondle, strip, molest and at times rape their victim(s).

This new visualisation, I argue, has contributed to demystifying sexual harassment within societies where the topic has long been shrouded in a cloak of silence. Blaming the victim of sexual harassment, which is pervasive in North African societies as in all patriarchal societies, has condemned women to silence and, in the process, condoned violence, normalised it and trivialised it. In societies where women’s bodies and mobility are controlled through strictly prescribed codes of ‘purity’ and honour, any violation of women’s body is taken as a dishonour of the entire family or community for which women, and not their aggressor(s), are held responsible. Sexual harassment, as the Moroccan writer Laila Lalami states while reflecting on her own childhood, ‘was so prevalent that complaining about it was like complaining about bad weather. Besides, even if I had spoken about this, I would have been the one blamed, not him’.1

Despite the persistent social silence around sexual harassment and in spite of the resilient logic of blaming the victim, the innovative anti-harassment initiatives that are emerging across North African seek to specifically interrupt these trends while creating broader societal debates about the issues. Thus, questions that were unheard of only a few years ago, are now debated within homes, on radio stations, television programmes and increasingly in public gatherings. Few months after introducing the Moroccan anti-harassment Women-Shoufouch, for example, the founders posted on their Facebook page an invitation to discuss the following questions:
Is there a real difference between flirting and harassing? Does women’s dress choice justify sexual harassment, rape or any other form of violence against women? Would a protest march change mentalities and break taboos? Are you (men and women) ready to take to the streets to provide support to this movement? Are you for or against the legal criminalization of sexual harassment in Morocco? (22 October 2011)

While the invitation asked participants to meet offline to reflect on the above questions, similar conversations started taking place particularly among young people since the turn of the millennium. When the region’s young netizens discovered the freedom and joys of breaking social taboos online, they started challenging each other to define the meaning and implications of sexual harassment. They also started blaming each other, critiquing their societal institutions, but also motivating each other to take action to end it.

Today, that discussion is no longer confined to the circle of bloggers, feminists, activists and champions of human rights. The young generation of activists wants the discussion to take place in the open despite the fact that most launch their recent initiatives online and on social media. The young generation of cyber activists leading anti-harassment initiatives comes from all socio-economic, educational, ethnic and religious backgrounds. By transcending these differences, they want to re-engage their society into debating broader and deeper gender questions including the moralisation of space, the social unacceptability of women’s use of public space, the invisible dimensions of gender-based violence and the forms of masculinities and femininities it (re) reproduces.

Drawing on personal interviews I conducted with the founders and supporters of some recent anti-sexual harassment initiatives in Morocco and Egypt, I discuss why and how the cyber activists are utilising digital technologies and social media as favoured tools to combat harassment. I reflect on the distinctive character of such recent initiatives, as WS Morocco and Harassmap Egypt, and situate these within the larger context of feminist struggles against gender-based violence. Since the majority of the founders and supporters of the initiatives are young women and men, I also reflect on how their activism sheds light on important dimensions of their generational understanding of citizenship, rights and freedoms. Early sociological work on generations (Mannheim 1952) has pointed to the importance of generational analysis especially within contexts of rapid political and sociocultural transformations. More recently, some scholars contend that given the unprecedented scope of transformations in developing countries since the 1980s, generation and age structures, more than class, might be more critical for understanding social and cultural change (Skalli 2011).

The young activists I discuss in this paper reveal a generational awareness about the distinct challenges they face and the tools they have to mobilise against sexual violence. Danya Hajjaji, the 18-year-old Libyan quoted above, reminds us that hers is a generation that should be vigilant about the perpetration of sexual harassment even in the spaces assumed to be ‘youth friendly’. As she puts it: ‘Remember when Internet forums were used to discuss important political issues?’ she asks her readers:

Now they’re infested with misogynistic posts and pictures of random Libyan girls followed by nasty rumours. Whether it’s a girl seen on Tripoli University’s campus sporting a Mohawk or a non-Hijabi woman holding up a placard with ‘Don’t tell me what to wear, tell them not to harass me’ sprawled over it, you can bet someone will sneak a picture of them and post it on every social networking site they could think of. (International Political Forum 2013)

This statement underlines the multiple ways in which patriarchal ideologies reinvent themselves in the real and virtual spaces while appropriating the very ‘liberation technology’ (Diamond...
activists are using. Liberation technologies are thus not gender neutral or sufficiently liberating on their own.

This paper is informed by feminist insights on gender-based violence, women’s cyber activism and the calls for the gendering of the meaning and practices of citizenship and democracy. In the best of cases, the gendering of citizenship entails institutionalised gender equality that enables women and men to enjoy and exercise the ‘social and economic as well as civil and political rights’ (Waylen 2007, 16). These rights cannot be guaranteed without a democratic polity based on the principles of gender equality and justice in the private as well as public spheres. I use the ‘gendering of democracy’ to emphasise women’s inclusion in the body politics and the governance structures where citizenship rights can be exercised and protected (Hatem 2005; Moghadam 2013). The sexual harassment of women not only constrains them in the daily exercise of their citizenship rights, but also violates them in every fibre of their humanity even when they are key players in the democratic transitions of their countries.

The patriarchal roots of sexual harassment

Definitions of sexual harassment in the feminist sociological, cultural and legal literatures abound (Connell 1987; MacKinnon 2002). Yet, there is a consensus among scholars and activists that sexual harassment is a ‘gendered expression of power’ (Uggen and Blackstone 2004). In all its dimensions, harassment threatens women’s mobility, curbs their participation in the public domain and limits the practice of their full citizenship.

Hence, sexual harassment falls within the broader framework of gender-based violence which the United Nations 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (CEDAW) broadly defines as any act ‘of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life’. The United Nations’ General Recommendation 19 specifically underscores the coercive nature of sexual harassment as ‘such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour as physical contact and advances, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography and sexual demand, whether by words or actions. Such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem’. Conceptualising sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence is important since it allows us to identify broader patriarchal structures that normalise ‘power over’ women, in the sense of control and domination as explained by Rowlands (1997).

Further, feminists and activists also underline ways in which sexual harassment is sustained by a deeply entrenched patriarchal gender system that discriminates against women and favours ‘a dominant normative form of masculinity’ (Uggen and Blackstone 2004, 66). Although multiple masculinities and femininities exist within any single sociocultural context, patriarchal institutions privilege ‘hegemonic masculinity’ over all other alternative masculinities (Uggen and Blackstone 2004, 66).

In North African societies, as in all patriarchal societies, the policing of women’s bodies and the promotion of men’s sexual power over women are foundational principles of hegemonic masculinity. Patriarchal institutions (family, schools, religion and media) socialise men and women into holding hegemonic masculinity as the norm and sexual harassment as one of ‘the performative requirements of masculinity’ (Quinn 2002, 386). On the other hand, women perform normative femininity through their silence, acquiescence, modesty and compliance with prescribed gender roles.
Yet both men and women can be victims of sexual harassment and both men and women can and do challenge its normalisation. The simplistic opposition of all-men-are-sexual-predators and all-women-are-powerless victims not only fails to capture this complexity, but also denies social actors their resistive and agential powers.

Recent feminist scholarship has broadened the analytical framework for understanding harassment by drawing attention to the complicity of the authoritarian state in the production, sanctioning and mobilisation of sexual harassment as a tool for disciplining its citizenry. Amar’s (2011) probing examination of sexual harassment in pre- and post-Mubarak regime discusses this complicity in the regime’s reproduction of the neocolonial logic of the hypersexual working-class male against the hyper vulnerable middle-class woman. Egypt’s authoritarian regime, he demonstrates, has deployed sexual harassment as ‘a nodal controversy for addressing (and deflecting) issues of labor mobility, police brutality, class conflict, youth alienation and social disintegration in an increasingly polarized polity’ (Amar 2011, 303). Harassment became a measure to pacify the dissenting political body and terrorise (potential) women political activists by rendering ‘impossible the figure of the respectable, pious woman who is a legitimate protestor against the police rather than a victim protected or rescued by the police’ (Amar 2011, 303).

The Egyptian case illustrates the argument that feminists have been making all along; namely that sexual harassment makes ‘more realistic our understanding of how power operates in ways that sustain unjust and unequal micro and macro Regimes’ (Enloe 2013, 80). There is a long history of patriarchal backlash against activist women who seek to make legitimate political demands. This backlash, as Cynthia Enloe explains, takes the form of disparaging stereotypes to discredit their activism, trivialise and counter their criticism of oppressive institutions. Stereotypes include generalisation about women’s political naı¨vete´ and short-sightedness, elitism, inability to dissociate the ‘political’ from the ‘personal’, failure to choose the right timing for mobilising around their personal issues and their vulnerability to foreign influences and ideas (Enloe 2013, 78–79).

The young women behind the recent initiatives against sexual harassment that I discuss below not only disrupt this patriarchal logic, but also puncture the silence that normalises sexual harassment in the quotidian of their lives. True, efforts to break the silence started since the 1990s with such established women’s rights groups as the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR) and the Moroccan secular feminist groups as the Union of Feminine Action (UAF) and the Moroccan Association of Democratic Women (l’Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc) (ADFM). Their efforts centred on producing evidence with which to lobby the policy-makers for legal reforms (ECWR 2008; Rhissassi and Moulay Rchid 2003).

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the younger generation of activists has refused to concede that addressing sexual harassment is dissociated from the everyday struggles for democracy, dignity and justice. Many refuse to be intimidated by the violence of the harassment as Mozan Hassan, a young Egyptian woman activist, lawyer and director of Nazra for Feminist Studies stated:

For years Mubarak’s regime was torturing women, harassing women, detaining mothers and daughters and the wives of prisoners to put pressure on them. For sure this is still the culture of the SCAF. It’s a culture-based on violence towards women. They want to exclude us from the public. The SCAF want to give the message that revolutionary people, if they are men, they are thugs, if they are women, they are sex workers and prostitutes . . . It’s important to give the message that we are not afraid and we are willing to die. (Ramand and Mahdy 2012)
**Nazra** is also active in many Egyptian coalitions against sexual harassment. The same defiant spirit animating its founders is expressed by many young women I interviewed who refuse to ‘concede the street’ to men ‘despite the high price we pay for it’.

## Going online against sexual harassment

The Arab Spring has shed light on the extent to which young women have been invested in and actively involved in human rights struggles. In North Africa, as in the rest of the Middle East, many young educated women turned to digital technologies and web applications tools to express their experiences and frustrations with sexual harassment. A few moved beyond Tweeting, blogging and Facebooking to establishing themselves as ‘cyber activists’ – seeking to mobilise and initiate action on and offline and transform the ‘inevitability’ of gender-based violence.

Recent initiatives from Morocco and Egypt illustrate the interesting ways in which young women connect the micro and macro dimensions of violence, on the one hand, and link sexual harassment to the struggles for democratically gendered societies, on the other hand. The cases also demonstrate ways in which social media have started to transform ways in which young women express their generational consciousness, do politics and participate in the ongoing transformations in their societies. While their cyber activism establishes a continuation of prior efforts by feminist groups and women’s rights groups, it also distinguishes itself from them in self-conscious and unconscious ways. Young women activists, for instance, are often hesitant to identify with ‘feminism’ – but when they do, they hasten to add that theirs is a feminism that embraces diversity of class, race, gender, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation (Skalli 2011). Some young women also tend to be more critical of the older generation of feminists whose leadership they reproach for being ‘elitist’ and ‘out of touch’ with the reality of ‘ordinary’ women in general and young women in particular (2011, 339). Finally, even those who consciously dissociate themselves from feminism seem to have unconsciously incorporated feminist principles in the practices of their everyday lives, including the right to working and walking in a harassment-free environment.

## Mapping harassment in Egypt

When the sexual harassment attacks of *Eid fitr* took place in Cairo (24 October 2006), established Egyptian bloggers Wael Abbass and Malek Mustapha witnessed the events from a nearby café, captured them on their cameras and immediately circulated them online. The news went viral on the blogosphere. Male and female bloggers were outraged not only by the viciousness of the attacks, but also by the indifference and complicity of the police and the subsequent silence of mainstream media. The women who were attacked were of ‘all sorts, veiled, wearing the niqab, unveiled, Muslim and non-Muslim’ commented Malek. It was a ‘confirmed’ conspiracy of silence, reported the famous blogger Sandmonkey, after his ‘sources’ in the news media informed him that ‘the Egyptian authorities’ requested Al Jazeera not air the coverage of the assaults ([www.sandmonkey.net](http://www.sandmonkey.net)).

The young Egyptian woman journalist, blogger and human rights activist, Nawarah Negm, ‘blew the whole thing wide open on live television on the Dream Channel’ thus challenging the conspiracy ([www.sandmonkey.net](http://www.sandmonkey.net)). The following day, young female journalist Mona Al Shazly did a full coverage story of the assaults on public television. Thus, Nawarah, Mona and many other bloggers and activists defied the conspiracy of silence condoned by the state,
mainstream media and society and launched the debate in the public arena to engage all members of society. One of the significant gains from this move observes 25-year-old Sandmonkey is that sexual harassment ‘became a male–female issue, not just a female issue, in a society that often excuses male behaviour as a result of their nature and their frustration with life and relies on women to control and restrain society’.

Interestingly, anti-harassment initiatives that emerged since 2006 have also been a male–female collaboration, and the many formal and informal anti-harassment coalitions and groups insist on such a gendered collaboration. In her definition of the goals of the Cairo-based Egyptian Feminist Study Centre, Mozn Hassan states that *Nazra* is an organisation composed of young researchers and activists of both sexes. We aim at enhancing the involvement of young men and women in the gender debate in Egypt and the Middle East, believing firmly that Women’s Rights represent an indivisible element of Human Rights on the one hand and of Democracy on the other. We seek to let out a younger voice within the Human Rights and Feminist movements in Egypt, opening a door for the participation of a new generation of activists and researchers. ([http://nazra.org/en](http://nazra.org/en))

Although *Nazra* is not exclusively focused on sexual harassment in Egypt, its founders represent the young generation of activists who believe in a more gender inclusive form of activism. It is a generation that seeks pragmatic solution to ‘taboo’ subjects and gives greater visibility to all aspects of gender inequalities, particularly those that mainstream media avoids. Hence, deploying ‘innovative methods of communication’ ([http://nazra.org/en](http://nazra.org/en)) and utilising traditional (face-to-face, radio and television) as well as digital media for circulating information are not taken as elitist strategies but intrinsic components of the struggle.

These are precisely the principles embraced by the founders of Harassmap who brought together their expertise in information technologies and experiences in anti-sexual harassment activism to create ‘the volunteer-based initiative with a mission to end the social acceptability of sexual harassment in Egypt’ ([http://harassmap.org/en/](http://harassmap.org/en/)).

Many of the founders of Harassmap started collaboration with the existing ‘traditional’ women’s rights organisations, including the ECWR. They launched Harassmap because they wanted more than the traditional methods of lobbying the government and advocating for legislation to criminalise violence. Without undermining the validity of these strategies, they wanted an initiative that would engage the community with its women and encourage women ‘to take action’ with immediate impact on the ground. The community of volunteers is engaged in reporting, documenting and texting about harassment on the ‘spot’. When victims of harassment send their SMS messages, a team of experts reads and verifies the collected information and then enters it on the online map to visualise the ‘hotspots’ of violence. The data plugged onto the map also helps activists identify the areas they should prioritise for awareness-raising campaigns.

Other volunteers provide advice and assistance with services ranging from psychological to medical, as well as self-defence classes. Relying on the increasing accessibility of cellular phones in the country, the founders and volunteers of Harassmap encourage the telling of personal experiences to challenge the dominant stereotypes and myths about harassment. The Harassmap team first collects the myths from their followers, then they are debunked one by one through evidence-based data. In the 2013 annual report for instance, one reads the following: ‘Myth: if the reason for sexual harassment is sexual frustration, why is the 7-year-old harassing?’ In response to this, the Harassmap team states that ‘based on Harassmap’s latest annual report (covers the period October 2011–October 2012) 39.1 percent of the harassers were children
under the age of 18.' Other questions ask ‘if the reason for sexual harassment is illiteracy, why is the teacher harassing?’ and ‘why are schools, universities and centres for private lessons locations in which 4.3 percent of the reported incidents took place’ (http://harassmap.org/en/resource-center/).

Harassmap gained over 17.6 thousand Twitter followers through these and various other innovative strategies and services. The team uses the technology to create a safe space for the victim of harassment to express frustration without the fear of being judged by family and friends or dismissed by the police. Safe space is particularly critical for sharing painful experiences and interrupting the isolation of the victims.

Similar efforts in Egypt can be seen in other initiatives that emerged in 2012. OpAntiSH also relies on the active engagement of volunteers, on their technological expertise and investment in human rights struggles. Harassmap and the Egyptian Initiative support the work of OpAntiSH for Personal Rights, a human rights organisation founded in 2002 (http://eipr.org/en). In addition to raising awareness, OpAntiSh and its supporters provide Hotline numbers during protest days and train rescue squads to rescue women when assaults take place. These efforts are not only meant to keep the streets safe, but also make political work possible for women.

**WS Morocco**

In Moroccan Arabic, *Women-Shoufouch* is a loaded term of harassment on the streets. Its meaning ranges from the most literal question of ‘what’s up?’ and ‘look here!’ to a more sexually suggestive invitation to engage in a sexual act. The founders of WS subvert the sexual meaning of the phrase and reformulate the question in Arabic to highlight the ‘women’ factor while asking ‘shouldn’t we be looking for a solution’ to end sexual harassment.

Yet, the founders of WS wanted to subvert more than the terms of harassment. According to co-founder, Majdouline Lyazidi, although the initiative is an inspiration from the Canadian Slutwalk, adapted to Moroccan society, it is meant to create a dialogue, to end the taboo about rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment, and to spread awareness across the country. ‘No’ means ‘no’, and there’s a huge difference between ‘to flirt’ with someone and between ‘to harass’ or ‘to sexually assault’ someone. It’s time to stop perpetrating this dangerous confusion. (Almiraat 2011)

The emphatic use of the ‘no’ points to the different interpretations men and women give to the various terms describing violence.

Hence, Majdouline introduced WS on Facebook as a ‘scream of anger’ that should appeal to every girl and women exposed to the daily acts of aggression on the streets. The ‘scream’ went viral and found immediate echo on and offline. In less than 15 days after the Facebook was launched, more than 3000 members, women and men endorsed the movement with their support for action. The initiative gained instant offline publicity when print media initiated a controversy by presenting Slutwalk as a defiant call by the country’s prostitutes for their own ‘Arab Spring’. For Majdouline and her colleagues, the controversy is part of the ‘success since it created the buzz we need’. Part of the success is also turning them into popular media figures seen, heard and quoted in various national and international media outlets defending and defining their initiative.

When asked about the motivation of the initiative, Majdouline Lyazidi states in one of the interviews that
Growing up, I’ve never really understood why society kept teaching us the ‘don’t get raped’ mentality instead of a ‘don’t rape’ one, anchoring in that way a never-ending victim-blaming process of ‘she was asking/looking for it.’ I think it’s time to change this mentality, we’ve got to give a chance to the next generations to walk the Moroccan streets feeling SAFE & RESPECTED – a feeling Moroccan women are missing today. (Almiraat 2011)

What she is expressing is not only her resentment of the inevitability of violence on the streets, but also and most importantly the skewed social norms and patriarchal interpretive schema that legitimate gender-based violence. One might be tempted to read her statement as a mere expression of ‘anger’ from a young woman seeking to justify her reproduction of the Canadian SlutWalk. But Majdouline is not stranger to the language of human rights and personal freedoms. She has been a member of Amnesty International Morocco since 2008 and volunteered in the Youth Club of one of the most established Human Rights associations in Morocco, the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH). She was also a Global Girl Media citizen journalist in Morocco where she honed the tools of digital media that helped her report on sexual harassment, high school dropout rates and violence against women.

The other co-founders of WS are young women well versed in the language of human rights and the principles of dignity. Layla Belmahi who gave WS its name, self-identifies as a human rights activist but refuses the label of ‘revolutionary’ that the New York Times used (5 April 2012) to describe her in association with the youth-led democracy movement of 20 February. She was only 15-year-old when she first discovered the youth movement on Facebook, and since ‘it has played an important role in shaping my [Layla’s] political consciousness by introducing [me] to political debates and activities despite [my] parents’ discouragement’. Layla also acted as the Production Assistant of the documentary 475 that recounts the suicide of Amina Filali. The documentary by Nadir Bouhmouch, a young Moroccan director, editor and co-producer, brought together a young team of activist men and women to give great visibility to the patriarchal forces that trivialise the consequences of sexual harassment (http://www.475lefilm.org/index.html).

When silence is no longer an option

The few anti-sexual harassment initiatives discussed above illustrate the important ways in which young people deploy information technologies in ways that are transforming their engagement with their socio-political realities. In this sense, they are extending the long tradition of women activists’ innovative uses of communication technologies in engendering citizenship and fighting gender-based violence (Skalli 2010).6

The initiatives, however, do more than merely indicate how social media expand the repertoires of action. They reveal significant ways in which the young generation of women activists is articulating their distinctive approach to struggles for their rights. They do so through questioning the bargain with patriarchy, redefining the terms of the debate on sexual harassment and acting out what I called elsewhere their feminist repositioning. The young generation redefines their feminist activism by highlighting both its continuity with the previous generations as well as its distance from it (Skalli 2011).

Questioning the bargain with patriarchy

Commenting on contemporary Egyptian feminists, El Shakry states that they ‘have refused the patriarchal bargain that has historically been offered by the State and by state feminism – admis-
sion into the public sphere on condition of political quietude and adherence to bourgeois norms of respectability’ (2013, 84). El Shakry’s statement alludes to at least two key shifts in how young feminists are responding today to sexual harassment: rejection of silence as an option and refusal to sacrifice women’s rights in the alter of the nation’s priorities during the ‘transitional’ phase.

In virtually all the recent anti-sexual harassment initiatives, the question of ending the ‘silence’ surrounding sexual harassment is front and centre. Silence is the product of fear: fear of confronting the harassers on the street; the fear of their retaliation with physical harm; the fear of being ridiculed and dismissed when reporting on sexual harassment; the fear of sharing it with family and friends who might question, if not criticise, the modesty of their dress and behaviour on the street; and the fear that complaints put further restrictions on their freedom of dress and movement. These fear factors have a cumulative and chilling effect of socialising women into tolerating violence in silence.

Silence, in turn, has the consequences of ‘normalising’ daily acts of violence and making women anticipate them as the inevitable price for entering the public space. As Laila Lalami states, women’s silence ‘is what binds all these men together. Silence is what they count on, what allows them to continue’. Many young women bloggers are beginning to intentionally use the same vulgar language they hear from their harasser to reproduce for the reader the reality of harassment. Writing on the recent Moroccan e-magazine Quandisha, young Moroccan blogger Belghazi (2013) explains this choice: ‘but how can we change a reality, if it is imaginary? Telling sexual harassment in all its details, its vulgarity and describing the consequences it has on us, we make visible and real this epidemic’.

Interrupting silence also serves to expose the mythology that has grown around sexual harassment including men’s equation of harassment with flattery of women’s beauty. Chebbak (2013), a young Moroccan doctoral student and vice-president of the Moroccan Association of Friends of English (MAFE), got a glimpse of this mythology during one of the workshops she co-organised: ‘some guys think that when they harass, they don’t hurt but they just boost women’s self-esteem’. In 2008, the ADFM published the results of their second study that confirmed this widespread belief. Nearly one-third (33%) of the male interviewees consider sexual harassment as ‘normal’ behaviour and half of them believe that women enjoy being sexually harassed on the street. While men elevate it to the status of a ‘compliment’ to women’s beauty, an astonishing 35% of the interviewed women trivialise the scope of sexual harassment on the streets by dismissing it as inconsequential acts of ‘insolence’ (bsala or dsara in Moroccan Arabic).

However, detailed testimonies of survivors of sexual harassment are beginning to tell society that there is nothing trivial about violence. ‘I can take shotgun pellets and live ammunition rather than live through this again’ stated the Egyptian filmmaker Aida El-Kashef (El-Sirgany 2012). Hence, activists today are urging victims of sexual assaults to look at their testimonies as acts of ‘heroism’ and ‘resistance’ and tools to shame the perpetrators of violence (Compendium 2013, 38).

Redefining the terms of the debate

‘Shame needs to change sides’ (Il faut que la honte change de camps) is one of the powerful statements that Majdouline tirelessly repeats when she is interviewed about WS. Her statement points to the patriarchal blame/shame logic that penalises the victim and excuses the perpetrator. In Moroccan Arabic, the closest translation of shame is hchouma. It encapsulates a complex moral order which prescribes norms of behaviour, strict gender roles and expectations. The hchouma code applies to both women and men. For instance, men are traditionally expected
to avoid eye contact with women or girls they do not know. Women, however, are socialised or rather ‘brainwashed’ into a much stricter adherence to the code. They have to dress modestly, honour the code of shame and accept punishment if they fail to do so.

However, activists are debunking the myth of the ‘provocative dress’. The ECWR also confirmed the irrelevance of the dress argument in its 2008 study *Clouds in Egypt’s Sky*: 72.5 percent of harassment victims surveyed were veiled. Most surveyed men confessed to harassing women not because their dress is provocative, but to satisfy ‘repressed sexual desires’ or because harassment ‘makes them feel masculine’ or as many said, simply because ‘they are accustomed to harassing women since they were young.’

As Chebbak rightly observes, every woman is harassed ‘every time she goes out regardless of her age, shape, colour, ethnicity, background ... and no matter what she wears, even if she puts on potato bags’ (2013). Nidal admits that wearing the veil has done little to dissuade men from harassing her. She therefore resorts to the religious text, the Quran, to question the foundations of the dress debate. As she puts it

this whole issue of ‘indecent clothes’ is just a very weak and ‘loose’ excuse for men to carry on their horrendous habits. We are a Muslim country where almost every Muslim Moroccan prides everywhere about being a Muslim ... In *Surat an-Nur*, the Almighty Allah states: ‘Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their modesty. That is purer for them, verily Allah is All-Aware of what they do’ (24:30). Isn’t this a verse where the Almighty Allah asks men to lower their gaze and guard their modesty? Did He by any means in this verse or in any other verse state that, well if women aren’t dressing decent enough then you should harass them? No, He didn’t. Muslim men take pride in being Muslim, but as long as they don’t abide by this and other verses, their pride amounts to bigotry. (Chebbak 2013)

Nidal’s turn to the Quran gives religious legitimacy to her criticism of hegemonic masculinity. Her specific use of *Surat an-Nur* questions the misogynistic interpretation of the texts that places masculinity above and beyond the religious call to ‘modesty’.

Thus, young women and activists not only refuse to internalise the fear and blame logic, but also they point to societal institutions that produce, condone and perpetuate violence against them. During protest marches organised by anti-sexual harassment coalitions in Egypt, one reads signs in Arabic and English saying ‘control your sons not your daughters’ and ‘educate your sons, do not control your daughters’. In one of the detailed testimonies by an Egyptian harassment victim that *Nazra* posted online, the victim’s ‘blame’ shifted to anger in a very powerful way:

Who should I blame for this? Mubarak for destroying my country’s education so those men have no respect for women? Our useless police? Our religious leaders who claim that they want what’s best? Our educators who turned into businessmen? Our politicians who just want power? Who? I don’t know who to blame ... But I am really angry at many religious leaders ... our leaders ... I am angry at everyone who just does remote control charity and not get involved in the society and try to help them ... I am angry at all the mothers who teach their sons that they are superior just because they are men ... and tell their daughters that they are inferior just because they are women.

Statements such as these convey the feelings of indignity and injustice caused by sexual harassment.

The human rights approach to sexual harassment

When asked to self-identify in terms of their activism and ideological leanings, many young women activists resent the process of ‘labelling’ on the basis that it confines the multiplicity
of their identities. If pressed, however, they would express more comfort self-identifying as human rights activists than feminists. I discuss the reasons for this ‘generational shift’ elsewhere (Skalli 2011), but I stress here that transformations in the political, economic, sociocultural and media landscapes have produced different subjectivities and positions towards human rights and feminism. Human rights give the youth a broader umbrella to address issues related to sexual rights, which the previous generation of feminists often overlooks. Yet, recognition and respect of each other’s differences beyond gender, age, class and religious differences are central to many young activists working on sexual harassment.

Also, while many young women embrace feminist ideals of ‘empowerment’ and ‘equality’, they remain sceptical of the leadership style or priorities of the previous generation of feminists. Where earlier generations of women rights activists are seen to have prioritised the targeting of state policies and legal reforms (Hatem 2005), the younger generation wants to emphasise inclusive citizenship in the practices of their everyday lives. Walking the streets in the clothes of one’s choosing and defending sexual rights are part of this. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) defines this trend as ‘Everyday Feminism’. Although the EIPR is an active partner in the coalition fighting sexual harassment, the initiatives does not deploy the feminist framework, but defines ‘who we are’ in the language of ‘basic rights and freedoms’ ‘civil liberties’, economic and social justice, democracy and political rights, and criminal justice (http://eipr.org).

To others, institutionalised feminism is unresponsive to youth’s realities, capabilities or needs. Hence, there is a tendency to refuse being ‘confined to the feminist label’ as Layla Belmahi explained to me in an interview. Other young women tend to identify as feminists only when they define what it means to them personally. Eighteen-year-old Fatima-Ezzohra Boutayeb, a Moroccan student and member of the Student Feminist Club in her school, notes this in the statement below:

“We are creating our own feminism, with the exception of Aicha Ech-Chenna whom we all admire, we don’t know the other feminists … The truth is, I do not identify with them, I identify more with Zineb El Ghazoui, Ibtissam Lachgar or Alia Almahdy, the Egyptian who posed naked to fight obscurantism … We want to reinvent feminism because we are convinced that we need to be provocative today … the new feminism we represent must confront a new kind of misogyny because the men who harass us in the street follow us now on the Internet to insult us. This has to stop! They already believe the street is their territory, they cannot after all monopolize the Web. (FDM 2012)

This conscious choice of self-identification, however, does not mean that the young generation of activists does not acknowledge or even solicit the support of established feminist groups in society. Rather, they reposition themselves towards them as a gesture of independence from the ‘tutelage’ of the old. In fact, one of the reasons why the organisation of the first WS protest march took nearly six months after the initiative was first announced on the Facebook page, as Layla Belmahi explains, was because they needed the endorsement of women’s groups from whom they sought added legitimacy for action. For Layla that support came in different forms ranging from inviting the founders of WS to use the offices and materials necessary for the march to getting advice on how to get official authorisations. She particularly credits the UAF with playing a huge role in providing both the logistical and ideological supports to the young activists. What young women seem to particularly appreciate is the fact that it was an example of intergenerational communication that was based on the principles of mentorship instead of paternalism.

Further, the young generation emphasises human rights dimension of their activism because it allows them to engage both men and women from different fringes of society in a collaborative effort. Virtually all the recent anti-harassment initiatives call for the support of young men as
active participants in awareness-raising campaigns, for protest marches or on-the-ground provision of support and protection. A Tweet from the Tahrir Bodyguard (TB) calling volunteers for a meeting on 3 July 2013 specified that volunteers ‘Not only women – men are also part of @TahrirBodyguard’. The TB identifies as a ‘non-political/non-partisan group of men & women working on empowering women, raising awareness and ground intervention to end all forms of sexual harassment Cairo, Egypt’.

Current debates about and initiatives against sexual harassment speak to larger contestations over gender roles and expectations in society, the meaning and exercise of citizenship rights, as well as the implications of all of these on the gendering of democracy. While patriarchal ideologies stubbornly reproduce the gendered divisions of public (masculine) and private (feminine) realms, activists young and old continue to fight against the violence that normalises men’s appropriation of the street as a legitimate arena of displaying hegemonic masculinity.

The environment in which the initiatives discussed in this paper were launched is characterised by both unprecedented level of violence against women and also, unprecedented determination of activists to record violence through any medium and communication platform possible (Nazra 2012). It is also an environment where we see the emergence of a young generation of young brave, articulate and assertive women prepared to fight for their dignity against all odds. One has to recall the trend set by 27-year-old filmmaker Nuha Rushdi when she took to court the truck driver, Sherif Gommaa, who sexually harassed her in 2008. His jail sentence set a legal precedent in the country and the region. Then, when young Samira Ibrahim took the Egyptian military to court for forcing on her and her fellow protesters the humiliating virginity test in 2011, she made the powerful argument that silence is no longer an option.

Although the Moroccan WS never developed into ‘the first movement against harassment in the country’, as its founders wanted it to be, and although many of the young generation are criticised for resorting to information technologies to which only a few have access, their accomplishments are considerable on more than one level. In addition to breaking silence, demystifying the logic of harassment and exposing state complicity against women activists, their initiatives have launched what, I believe, is an irreversible dynamic of contestation against the normalisation of gender-based violence. A Facebook page called ‘Denounce your Harasser’ was created on 14 March 2013 with the following address to the readers: ‘if you cannot knock out your harasser, If you cannot disarm him, take a picture of him and shame him.’

Individual and collective efforts to fight sexual harassment are increasingly bringing together the real and virtual worlds in ways bound to have far reaching implications.

Acknowledgment

Research for this paper has benefited from the 2013 Dean’s Summer Research Award. I thank the School of International Service at American University (Washington, DC) for supporting my research travels to the region.

Notes

1. Available at: http://lailalalami.com/2012/on-sexual-harassment/.

2. In Morocco, for example, the youth team of the Moroccan Association of Democratic Women, one of the established secular women’s rights groups, conducted a research project on sexual harassment of women and published their results in a guidebook.
3. SlutWalk marches started in Canada in April 2011 when women protested against a police officer, who ‘advised’ women complaining about sexual harassment, that they should avoid being dressed like sluts if they do not want to be harassed.

4. For a full coverage of the controversy generated by the name SlutWalkMorocco, see Almiraat (2011).


6. I am referring here to the network ANARUZ created in 2004 by a coalition of women’s rights organisations. While Anaruz does not deal exclusively with sexual harassment, its broader mission is to reduce all violence against women. More recently, the coalition of ‘Spring of Dignity’ was created under the leadership of the Association Marocaine de Défense des Droits des Femmes, ADFM, l’Association Marocaine delutre contre la Violence Faite aux Femmes and the Fédération de la Ligue Démocratique des Droits de la Femme. The coalition of ‘Spring of Dignity’ defines itself as a synergistic movement advocating ‘for a radical and global redrafting of the penal code that will guarantee women protection and discrimination against women’ (Printemps de la Dignite 2010).


8. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/efda7.mota7resh.


