**Anti-Sexual Harassment Activism and Changing Social Norms in Egypt**

**Abstract**: Sexual harassment is a global problem. Based on available data, Egypt has higher than average rates of sexual harassment for the Middle East and North Africa region. This article explores how one organization, HarassMap, has engaged in anti-sexual harassment activism and sought to change social norms to move toward an environment of zero tolerance. We highlight the evolving activism since 2011, and its respective learning, within an operational environment influenced by political, religious and socio-cultural influences. The organization has effectively contributed to the changing of the public discourse and supported the development of policies in university and private sector settings, many of which are firsts for the country. The article provides insight on how anti-sexual harassment activism can occur in challenging contexts as well as reflections more effective forms of support that external actors can provide.

**Keywords**: HarassMap, Egypt, Harassment, Advocacy

**Introduction**

Sexual harassment is a global problem; 35% of women around the world have experienced physical or sexual violence (UN Women, 2018). While data is limited in the Middle East and North Africa, studies in Egypt suggest the experience of sexual harassment is very high - 83% of Egyptian women have experienced sexual harassment (Shoukry and Hassan, 2008). This article focuses on the pioneering and innovative approaches that HarassMap has taken since its founding in 2010. We analyze how it has confronted the challenges of anti-sexual harassment activism and to assess its experiences in seeking to change social norms. While many initiatives emerged after the 2011 revolution that aiming to make the country a safe place for all, HarassMap stands out as being a long-term effort that has had significant positive impact. This article assesses why and how it has done so.

HarassMap was “Egypt’s first independent initiative working to counter the wide social acceptability of sexual harassment” (Kirollos, 2016: 147). The organization acted to “voice, represent and champion a social right, in this case that of being free of harassment” (Bernardi, 2017: 216). HarassMap is most well-known for its crowdsourced map that tracks incidents of sexual harassment and violence. The platform interfaces Google Maps with text messages, mobile apps, social media and a public forum. The incidents themselves are not verified, but the submissions are assessed in terms of content as well as mapping accuracy. Reports remain anonymous to the public, but individuals who submit reports are directed to support services. Since its establishment in 2010, HarassMap has also engaged in a wide range of offline activities, from street-based awareness raising to engaging university administrations and partnering with the private sector.

In conjunction with a host of efforts by other initiatives and organizations, significant positive change has occurred. Skalli, in her comparative assessment of Morocco and Egypt, argues that 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” (2014: 256). The efforts of HarassMap have contributed to a changing broader public discourse and socio-political environment wherein legal and policy changes have taken place. El-Ashmawy notes that “not only have these organizations been influential on the ground and in the streets, but they have also had some vital influence on policymaking, for they incited the formation and legislation of the 2014 law that criminalizes sexual harassment for the first time in Egyptian history” (2017: 251). The work of HarassMap was critical for the adoption of a policy at Cairo University, the first of its kind in the nation. Drawing upon the experience of HarassMap, this article traces the history of these changes alongside organizational activities in order to provide insight into what has been learned regarding anti-sexual harassment activism and changing social norms.

**Methods**

Qualitative data was collected in May and June of 2018, in the form of individual interviews with experts, former and current members and volunteers, as well as key stakeholders. Discussions were also held with members and volunteers. Interviews with experts were conducted before data collection for contextualization, as well as following data collection to triangulate and verify the findings. In addition to qualitative data collection, we also draw upon the available literature and media. Using three search platforms (Web of Science, Google Scholar and the platform of the University of British Columbia), we identified 115 academic publications (books, articles, theses) and 70 media reports (largely from an Egyptian English daily). The selection of academic material was comprehensive, as we sought out material from multiple sources to ensure as many relevant sources were identified as possible. Alternatively, the media analysis is only comprehensive for one Egyptian daily, while other media sources are included as per relevance. The qualitative data was enhanced with a review of internal materials and HarassMap reports, capturing internal learning as well as external reporting and public documentation.

This study is not an in-depth analysis of why sexual harassment occurs, nor why the prevalence is particularly high in Egypt. There is a myriad of theories proposed by citizens and academics for this (e.g. economic downturn and unemployment, lack of legal enforcement, notions of masculinity and unrealistic social expectations, the influence of media, the lack of religious values, the way individuals dress, amongst others). Our objective is not to assess the validity of these claims, but rather to understand how one organization has attempted to make Egypt a safer place for all people, one wherein there is no tolerance for sexual harassment. The learning also sheds light on activism within challenging contexts, with layers of governmental restrictions and uncertainty regarding what can and cannot be done (having serious consequences, including many activists being jailed). It also sheds light on working within a socio-political context where both state and society were, in their own ways, against the work of the organization. Thus, we focus on how the organization navigated the complex working environment in seeking eliminate sexual harassment and transform norms regarding its acceptability.

**Background**

Although public attention to the issue was limited and revolved around high profile incidents, sexual harassment was commonly experienced before the uprisings of 2011. A study in 2008 found that 83% of Egyptian women reported being exposed to sexual harassment, while 46% of women reported that this occurred on a daily basis (Shoukry and Hassan, 2008). Despite the frequency of its occurrence in peoples’ daily lives, the issue was rarely spoken about and was not acknowledged as a problem in the public discourse. In fact, ‘sexual harassment’ (Arabic: *taharrush jinsi*) was not widely used; instead terms specific to assault for physical violence or flirtation for non-physical forms were common. There were multiple factors contributing to this situation, amongst them included a lack of clear laws and weak enforcement of those that did exist, but also socio-cultural norms regarding masculinity as well as limited reporting of the experience of sexual harassment due to stigmatization and shame (Rizzo, Price and Meyer, 2012). The beginnings of anti-sexual harassment activism took place following an incident known as ‘Black Wednesday’, which was a mass sexual assault that took place at a protest against a constitutional amendment (after a long legal battle, in 2012 the government was found culpable of these assaults; El-Ibiary, 2017). The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR) began a campaign against sexual harassment in 2005, which is notable in that it made progress in advocating for legal change, but broad public engagement remained limited.

The idea of using crowdsourced data and online mapping technology as a data collection mechanism and as an awareness raising tool began in 2008, when former employees of the ECWR submitted the idea to the for funding (via the ECWR to an international competition). While the proposal was not successful, it resulted in the creation of a new organization, HarassMap, which was launched in December 2010. The co-founders believed that the work of the ECWR was important, and that new laws were required, but the application of these changes required transformations to the socio-cultural acceptability of sexual harassment. From the outset, the map was viewed as a means, not an end in and of itself. The use of crowdsourcing was an important means of engaging the broader public, providing a space for people to anonymously have their voice heard, and for the organization to clearly demonstrate the extent of the problem. Changing norms, values and responsibilities necessitated multiple avenues of community engagement and mobilization, while the map acted as a source of evidence, a tool for awareness raising and dialogue creation, it also acted as a service, as those who reported incidents were given information about legal, medical and psychological support services.

After its establishment, HarassMap gained popularity in part because of its timing. The revolution of 2011 took place just months after the map was launched and a spirit of volunteerism and citizen action was at levels not recently experienced in Egyptian civil society. In addition, events that took place within, and after, the revolution, enabled HarassMap to engage in critical moments wherein sexual harassment and violence became a national concern. During the initial protest movement in early 2011 there were reports of sexual assault, including by groups of men, but this did not attract much media coverage or attention (some felt this may tarnish the image of the revolution). One of the key turning points for increasing public engagement regarding sexual harassment and violence was the ‘blue bra incident’ that occurred in December 2011. Images of an unclothed woman being violently beaten by military officers went viral, sparking open conversations about sexual harassment and violence (although it is worth noting that post-revolution violence was not limited to stand sanction or sponsored acts, but included a broader group of assailants). The first mass citizen movement against sexual harassment and violence followed the December 2011 event, with an estimated 10,000 people marching and proclaiming that ‘the women of Egypt are a red line’ and ‘Egypt’s women are not to be stripped’ (subsequent movements would also include ‘Egypt’s men are not to be stripped; Tadros, 2016). The incident was covered in international media and drew the attention of politicians from around the world. During this critical period, Canada’s International Development Research Centre was a key early supporter, starting in 2012, enabling the organization to better understand the crowdsourced data and improve its platform.

As reported incidents continued, and grew in severity and scale, sexual harassment and violence entered the public discourse in an open way that had not previously occurred: 19 women assaulted on 25 January 2013; attacks targeting women protesting sexual assault on 8 June 2013; 46 women assaulted on 30 June 2013; 80 women assaulted on 3 July 2013, and so on (Langohr, 2013). Concerns about sexual harassment and assault became so widespread that when protest movements were preparing to oust then President Muhammad Mursi in 2013, one of the key issues that occupied planners was how to prevent incidents of sexual harassment and assault. Some initiatives were forms with the primary objective of responding to incidents of sexual violence within protest contexts, and most discontinued with the protests. In the years that followed (post 2013), the ‘mob’ sexual assaults declined, but everyday sexual harassment did not; many reporting that in post-revolution Egypt everyday sexual harassment remained at very high levels – studies by HarassMap confirm these experiences (HarassMap 2014).

**HarassMap**

When it launched in 2010, HarassMap was an informal collective of people brought together by the idea that if more bystanders started to take action when sexual harassment happens, a critical mass will be formed, eventually creating a social norm of zero tolerance of sexual harassment. One of the foundational ideas driving activities was to alter the acceptability of sexual harassment, specifically engaging bystanders to speak up and clearly convey that such actions will not be tolerated where they live, work and study, and also in the public sphere. The socio-cultural change was envisioned to occur through bottom-up action, driven by a range of community-based activities. Over time, HarassMap also engaged with institutions, such as universities and companies, to institute policies and create units to receive reports about sexual harassment and forward on for addressing by respective authorities. These initiatives aimed to create safe institutions where women can work and study while knowing that sexual harassment will not be tolerated. At the same time, these institutions would (re)establish the consequences for harassers, while promoting positive role models of individuals who stand up against harassers.

The activities of the organization are outlined in greater detail in the following section, however it is worth noting that the impact of the organization has resulted in international recognition, awards and support. Some of these include: World Summit Youth Award in 2011, Deutsche Welle Award for ‘Best Use of Technology for Social Good’ in 2012, a certificate of recognition from the American Association of Geographers, being listed on the Nominet Trust 100 (recognizing the use of digital technology to change the world for the better) in 2014 and the Local Hero Award by Deutche Welle and Shabab Talk in 2015. Support for HarassMap work has been granted by Canada’s International Development Research Centre, MATCH International Women’s Fund, UN Habitat and Deutche Gesellschaft fur Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), amongst others. For legal reasons some of this support came via an incubator organization that HarassMap worked with. Unique for a relatively small initiative, the impact of HarassMap has been global and has inspired and supported similar projects and movements in countries across the world – the organization has received more than 50 requests from groups around the world for replication support (outlined in more detail below). The global replication of HarassMap’s work is one indication of the impact it is having within and beyond Egypt.

At the height of its volunteer engagement, over 1,500 people were engaging in anti-sexual harassment activism as a part of HarassMap’s work. The organization, was, and continues to be, led by a core group of individuals, who provide leadership in specific action areas (e.g. corporate partnerships, school and university partnerships, civil society partnerships, marketing and communication). In 2014, the Ministry of Social Solidarity gave all 'informal' organizations a grace period of two months to register, and extended this period a few times. Registration under Law 84/2002 presented restrictions regarding approving grants as well as the types of permitted activities organizations could engage in. The public space continued to shrink in the following years, until 2016 when rumors about a new restrictive rule started circulating, which turned out to be true. HarassMap had to keep a low profile and cut out some activities for various reasons, including the inability to bring funds in the country and the difficulty in obtaining security permits for specific activities. In 2016, the organization had to stop one of its primary and first activities – community outreach and engagement – and reduce its activism across the board. HarassMap also kept a low profile in the media and in public. Civil society was further restricted in 2017 (Law 70/2017), effectively giving the government the ability to close down any organization if it sees that the activities may “harm national security, public order, public morality, or public health.” The new law enables the government to monitor day-to-day activities and even organizational leadership appointments. Consequences of not abiding by these new limitations include imprisonment and significant fines.

Before delving into the activities of HarassMap, we also wish to acknowledge the diverse array of organizations that have been engaging with this issue, and the collaborations that have occurred. The organizational learning outlined in this paper is reflective of experiences well beyond HarassMap’s own work. As the first initiative focused solely on sexual harassment, HarassMap inspired and nurtured some of the others (e.g. volunteers moved on to found other initiatives). As of 2018, it is the only initiative left working solely on the issue. While not a comprehensive list, the following organizations made notable contributions to the broader societal impacts described in this article regarding changing social norms, policies and laws, each in their own way: ECWR, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), Basma Movement, Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment, Tahrir Bodyguard, Al Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, Nazra for Feminist Studies, Shoft Taharosh – I Saw Harassment and Ded el-Taharrush. These organizations played critical roles in documenting incidents and providing emergency support (see Boutros, 2017). Due to a number of reasons, most of these initiatives and organizations have since closed or had their assets frozen (of these only ECWR and EIPR remain active, neither are working specifically on sexual harassment).

**Activities and impact**

Retrospective reflections on organizational activities have the potential to lose sight of the critical importance of timing and the conditions that enabled the emergence of new sets of activities. This section outlines activities by type, and particularly runs this risk. At the outset, therefore, we wish to emphasize the temporal dimension as the different sets of activities are analyzed. For example, the data collection, linking to services and campaigns occurred in tandem, but here are presented in activity-based sections. HarassMap's sources of information include reports from the map, data from offline activities and information from online interactions with the public (social media platforms). This raw data informs HarassMap's team on emerging/changing trends; it is then curated and constructed into attractive messages by the team. These messages are assembled to form training manuals and design campaigns. The campaigns are then disseminated back to the public through the same channels from which the data was collected – online and offline. The trainings manuals are used to train volunteers and other partners of the organization. In this way, the different areas of HarassMap's work feed each other. The role of HarassMap's team is primarily to manage data collection, analyze information, and present it back to the community in structured and attractive ways. We have referred to these linkages within the respective sections in an attempt to highlight these connections. Alternatively, a chronological structure could have been utilized, however we feel the activity-based structure is a more suitable way to convey the learning, as similar activities are presented together (e.g. all the campaigns).

*Making the invisible, visible; changing the public discourse*

The first challenge for civil society actors engaging in anti-sexual harassment activism was to make the ‘invisible’ and/or ignored problem of sexual harassment, one that is visible and acknowledged. In other words, it had to publicize the problem of sexual harassment and address a range of myths regarding it. In order to shift the public discourse from one that either denied the problem or one that argued the subject was too sensitive for open discussion, new avenues for communicating the problem were required. A publication in 2008 provided the evidence that sexual harassment is widespread (Shoukry and Hassan, 2008), but did not result in these changes. HarassMap utilized a different approach – one arguably less rigorous in methodology – in attempting to translate information into sustained and broad conversations about sexual harassment. When HarassMap launched, the first objective was to raise awareness about sexual harassment, as there “was still widespread disbelief and non-acceptance that *taharrush ginsy* [sexual harassment] was a real phenomenon in Egypt” (Abdelmonem, 2016: 81). The crowdsourced map, with specific narratives and geospatial information, provided a visual tool that people could relate to. Using data to demonstrate the gravity of the issue “stories become sets of machine-readable data and re-emerge in the form of a human-understandable set of visual elements that can bring the victim to the fore and show places, reports and statistics” (Bernardi, 2017: 219).

For HarassMap, in “order to end the social acceptability of sexual harassment… all members of society need to take on personal responsibility for speaking up against the practice, especially those on the sidelines who ignore or watch sexual harassment incidents but do nothing” (Abdelmonem, 2015: 105). The innovative nature of the map drew national and international attention to the issue, and in doing so helped to make the invisible, literally visible. The “online tool gives women a voice, allowing them to effectively contribute and receive information, starting a community dialogue about the problem” (Cattle, 2016: 437). Tadros concludes that “very rarely do people today deny the occurrence or say it is something socially unacceptable to talk about” (2015: 16). This is the breaking of the silence that Skalli (2014) argues results in irreversible social change.

While the map was successful as a communication tool it was also a service in and of itself. The anonymous platform provided a way for targets and survivors to voice their experiences, documenting and mapping incidents of harassment. While this did not lead to a rise in reporting per se, it was important in conveying the extent of the problem because multiple studies have found very low levels of reporting (3% in 2008: Shoukry and Hassan, 2008; 2% in 2014: Fahmy et al, 2014), contributing to the lack of awareness about the extent of the problem. Silence on the topic was perpetuated by a lack of reporting sexual harassment to the different channels available. Reporting to the police is the most conventional way to report; however, administrative and social barriers compromise women's access to justice in sexual violence crimes in general. There was a need for an increase in the number of police reports; more importantly, there was a need for the flow of information not only about sexual harassment but also about technical steps for preventing it, including tips on how to make a police reports, guidelines on how to intervene when witnessing sexual harassment and how to respond to harassers. The map provided another avenue for people who were reserved about approaching formal channels of justice. In addition to posting the information on a map, survivors received information about where to access free services, such as legal aid, medical support, how to file a police report, psychological support and self-defence classes. One of the campaigns launched by HarassMap in 2015 attempted to further enhance reporting by outlining what information is needed or required when filing a police report.

*Campaigns*

The map was never thought of as the primary activity for the organization, and to-date reports on the map are relatively limited given that nearly half of all Egyptian women experience sexual harassment on a daily basis (Shoukry and Hassan, 2008). Instead, the map was a tool as well as a means to enable other forms of activities. The information provided from the map inspired new forms of activism and continues to do so. It also provided invaluable information to be used in other activities such as campaigns. For instance, one of HarassMap's campaigns aimed to challenge the justifications of sexual harassment was inspired by information collected from the map. The team collected the stereotypes used and then resorted to the map for challenges; for example, if the stereotype holds that 'a person harasses because of sexual frustration' the team pulled reports from the map that recounted harassment incidents by young children, who have no sexual frustration. Similarly, the stereotype of 'late marriage leads to sexual harassment' was challenged by map reports indicating that married men were reported as harassers. Young argues that the “visual representation of crowd-sourced data has a positive impact on the usability and consumption of data among stakeholders, thereby improving the effectiveness of HarassMap’s offline programming” (Young, 2014: 9). One example of this is a series of online and offline campaigns, each providing its own insight regarding how the organization can achieve its goals of changing social norms (see Table 1). The lessons learned from these campaigns highlight how the organization has responded, adapted and learned following each campaign.

**Table 1. HarassMap Campaigns and Lessons Learned**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year (launch)** | **Campaign** | **Target Audience** | **Lessons** |
| 2013 | ‘Why Does He Harass’(The Myths Campaign) | Bystanders | Avoid protective language that would re-enforce the patriarchal structures of men protecting women and emphasis the right of all to be free from harassment. |
| 2013 | ‘Get It Right’ campaign(by a coalition of actors) | Society at large | The list of reasons and excuses for harassment is endless. Work on the root causes of power dynamics and patriarchal structures. Clarify terminology and avoid negative portrayals of men, such as depicting men as animals (this can normalize harassing behaviors and be used as an excuse). |
| 2014 | ‘I Will Not Be Silent’ | Survivors | It is important that women and girls act as active bystanders for their own empowerment and as a means to shift power dynamics. |
| 2015 | ‘We Want A Policy’(University campaign) | University Administration | Both top-down and bottom-up approaches are needed for developing an anti-harassment policy on campus. Having champions within institutions is critical. The role of media in influencing decision makers following well-known incidents can advance implementation and approval of policies.  |
| 2015 | ‘Harasser = Criminal’ | Society at large | Windows of opportunity (new law) result in high engagement. A legal focus raises concerns about demonizing when shifting stigma from survivors to assailants. |
| 2015 | How to Report | Survivors | In order to enable changes to the environment where more reporting takes place, individuals needs to know what information is useful / needed (particularly in a system of justice when things are not always clear). |
| 2015 | This is not a Flirtation, it is sexual harassment  | Society at large | In order to raise awareness with the public, personal connections must be made with those who experience harassment. |
| 2016 | Types of Sexual Harassment | Society at large | Not all non-physical forms of sexual harassment are recognized as being harassment, clear examples help broaden understanding. |
| 2016 | Workplace Policy Inquiry | Women | It is challenging to deal with corporate mentalities. Change the language used with businesses to get them on board. |
| 2017 | ‘Who Doesn’t Get Harassed” | Society at large | Moving beyond binaries requires engaging intersectionality. |
| 2018 | Consent Campaign | Society at large | Introduce the concept of consent into the discourse to address the on-going question about the difference between flirtation and harassment need to be addressed with clarity of examples and language use. |

The campaigns were designed to target specific issues, often occurring in moments in time wherein those particular discussions were prioritized or pertinent. The ‘myths campaign’, for example, set out to address some of the most common justifications or excuses for sexual harassment, which was a first step required once the issue had become more openly discussed. The campaign directly addressed common stereotypes and misconceptions by asking thought provoking questions, such as: If harassment is because how women dress, why are veiled women harassed? (see Figure 1). The campaigns have been shared via social media platforms as well as in posters, television ads, on handbags, as graffiti, and in other art forms.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| https://harassmap.org/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/Myths_Updated_webpage%20crop.jpg | From top left to bottom right: *If harassment is caused by poverty, why would the company manager harass?**If harassment is caused by illiteracy, why would the teacher harass?**If harassment is caused by the delayed marriage age, why would the father of the children harass?**If harassment is caused by sexual repression, why would the seven year old harass?* |

**Figure 1. Example from the ‘Myths Campaign’**

Another campaign sought to address linguistic challenges – particularly the vagueness that surrounded the differences between the commonly used *mu’aksa* (flirtation) for non-physical actions, to be more inclusive and shift unwanted behavior to be included as *taharrush* (harassment) and *taharrush jinsi* (sexual harassment), while also differentiating its use from more specific terms, such as *atadaa al-jinsy* (sexual assault), *al-unf al-jinsy* (sexual violence) and *htk’ ird* (indecent assault). Questions about what constitutes sexual harassment have continued to arise, which encouraged the organization to create a campaign around consent in 2018 (this too poses linguistic challenges as words have slightly different implications, even within regional dialects of Arabic).

The campaign that garnered the most attention, and was most heavily invested in by HarassMap, was the ‘Harasser = Criminal’ campaign (see Table 2). In this instance, a window of opportunity emerged as a new law had recently been passed (2014), adding sexual harassment explicitly to the criminal code, and outlining minimum punishments. External changes, such as this legal change, are examples of how organizations like HarassMap cannot manufacture critical junctures wherein significant advocacy opportunities exist, however they need to be ready and resourced to be able to take advantage of them. As Tadros notes, a “number of enabling factors such as the media, the issuance of a new law, and initiatives such as Harassmap, Imprint, and many others have played a major contributing role to breaking the silence around the occurrence of sexual harassment” (Tadros, 2015: 19). Importantly, it has often been the confluence of these enabling factors that have allowed for significant change to occur.

**Table 2. Reach of ‘Harasser = Criminal’ campaign**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Re-Tweet reach | 2,600,000+ |
| Facebook reach | 200,000 |
| YouTube impressions | 2,300,000+ |
| Printed poster distributed | 8,000+ |
| Television ad reach (estimation) | 250,000+ |

Given the diversity of campaigns over time, both in content and in format, the organization has also learned which media tools to use and how to best use them. Part of the reason the ‘Harasser = Criminal’ campaign had such a wide reach was that it had funding to support design and promotion. In many other instances, when funding was limited, the organization opted to use the tools available to them, often focusing upon social media engagement. Situational choices regarding media use were influenced by other factors as well, such a printed content being used more widely when the dissemination potential was great with large numbers of volunteers doing street campaigns. Contextual factors aside, a former Executive Director felt that social media was the most effective when it engaged with relevant and timely issues, for example in response to popular television dramas during Ramadan. Tapping into these discussions and audiences enables the organization to obtain a high level of engagement with timely and relatable content. Social media is also interactive, allowing for two-way conversations, as opposed to one-way information dissemination modalities of other media forms. It also presented limitations, such as the limited audiences (tending to be younger, urban and of relatively higher socio-economic status).

*Training*

HarassMap volunteers and members have provided training in a wide range of settings and for diverse purposes. At the outset, training was primarily geared toward community-based volunteers, who would then lead their own sub-teams of volunteers for street-based engagement. These volunteer teams would speak with people in public settings and encourage shop keepers and businesses to become safe spaces while at the same time probing them on their views on sexual harassment and assessing likelihood of change. While these processes were not easy, “it was in the iterative process of doing intervention (on the streets), then sharing, debating and reflecting, that opportunities for sustained transformations occurred” (Tadros, 2015: 15). The hundreds of volunteers that have supported HarassMap over the years have primarily done so via these street-based activities. This engagement was an invaluable source of data for HarassMap as it informed the team on changing trends, emerging justifications for sexual harassment, and innovative ways of responding. For instance, through outreach activities, HarassMap learned that 'eating in the street was a new excuse for sexual harassment as 'women who eat in public were asking for it.' However, measuring the extent of creating a critical mass in a given area was remarkably challenging, as would be expected from any assessment of behavioral change in a context of limited resources and restrictions on data collection.

After the legal challenges in 2014, the organization had to reduce street-based activism (all street-based activities had to be stopped in 2016), and thus also its approach to training. HarassMap thereafter directed all of the training and volunteer management resources toward university campuses, and expanded that work. The organization is currently working with 10 universities in Egypt (see more below). Students raise awareness in self-run groups, while faculty and administration work to develop new policies and establish a unit within the university to implement the policy – receiving and investigating sexual harassment reports. In addition to universities, HarassMap members have trained media professionals – from journalists to directors as well as graduate media students - in an effort to change the media landscape and media coverage of sexual harassment. Another example of new forms of training the organization has provided is to other service providers, such as civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, with the aim of mainstreaming sexual harassment in the work of organizations engaged with various social issues and different vulnerable groups.

In the early years of street activism, volunteers sought to work with local businesses to become safe spaces. More recently, HarassMap has been engaging larger corporations. For example, in 2015 a partnership was developed with Uber in Egypt, whereby its staff were given training and in the future its drivers were reached with a video and quiz as well as an audio production that was presented on the company channel alongside other required organizational audios, such as updates on legal changes. This content has reached an estimated 50,000 Uber drivers in Egypt. In another instance, a construction company was required to have sexual harassment training as part of a USAID contractual requirement. However, once training was provided to technicians, management also took an interest and requested training as well, as it sought to understand challenges related to high turnover of female staff. A number of other private sector partnerships have developed. Training workshops are one means of “how HarassMap staff and volunteers serve as important mediators and translators of norms and values circulating into and within Egyptian society” (Abdelmonem, 2016: 122) and attempt to create constructive discussion spaces regarding the issue in diverse spaces throughout society.

*Changes to law and policy*

“HarassMap is working with existing advocacy campaigns and has succeeded in building enough public support that the media and the government have taken notice: the Ministry of Justice and the National Council for Women responded with a new bill on harassment, public support has resulted in a successful court case, and the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism increased awareness of the issue.” (Kahl and Larrauri, 2013: 10)

Governmental changes since 2010 have presented two, somewhat contradictory, experiences for HarassMap. On the one hand, the operational environment for civil society organizations has been severely restricted, effectively closing many organizations and curtailing the activities of all others. On the other hand, however, there have been positive legal changes regarding sexual harassment. A new draft law was proposed by the Task Force for the Prohibition of Sexual Violence in 2012, but was not approved due to regime changes. In May of 2013, a Violence Against Women Department was created within the Ministry of Interior and in June 2014 sexual harassment was criminalized in the Penal Code (Kirollos, 2016). In the following year, in April 2015, a national strategy to combat violence against women was adopted under the auspicious of the National Council for Women (Kirollos, 2016), which included increased policing in hotspot areas followed by an increase of arrests and convictions (Bernardi, 2017; Sepulveda, 2015). The National Council for Women and the Ministry of Interior have been inviting civil society groups to provide input in addressing sexual harassment (Tadros, 2015: 21), although there are questions about the sincerity of these calls (see Abd El-Hameed, 2013; Abdel Rahim and Fracolli, 2016). While these changes are positive, they ought to also be viewed as attempts of governmental agencies to control civil society, as well as necessary invitations because these initiatives are without the capacity and resources to effect change, and thus civil society actors are required.

The community mobilization program was one of the first to be undertaken at HarassMap, starting with the map from the very beginning, despite some occasional changes in strategy. About two years after the launch of HarassMap (and the community mobilization program), the team realized the importance of institutional work – working in a top-down way as well as a bottom-up approach. The organization started volunteer recruitment on university campus, which was very promising from the start not only because youth tend to be enthusiastic and hopeful, but also because shifts in culture are easier to measure in a contained physical space. The team started a partnership with Cairo University, specifically with a team of feminist professors who supported the objective. This was another instant in which HarassMap seized an opportunity. Student teams received similar training to street volunteers and disseminated all of HarassMap's campaigns, in addition to later having campaigns designed specifically for universities. On-campus volunteers were actively raising awareness against sexual harassment on the student level, while professors were lobbying for a policy on the administrative level.

As a part of its university-based work, HarassMap is working with administrations and faculty to advocate for the creation of units that handle sexual harassment within the university and support the development of policies regarding it. To varying degrees of progress, this is occurring at ten universities, with Cairo University being the most successful. In fact, the policy at Cairo University was the first such policy in the country. The emergence of this change took place after a widely reported incident of sexual harassment that took place on campus, resulting in formal and informal pressure for the development of a policy, the establishment of a unit and the resourcing of it. The administrative and policy changes at Cairo University, are a form of top-down change that have enabled the bottom-up student awareness raising efforts to gain in confidence and backing. Having the combinations of high-level support and student-activism has fostered a positive enabling environment for change.

As Abdelmonem describes, HarassMap initially was driven by a theory of change that was entirely bottom-up, and focused explicitly on bystander engagement. This process, she argues, would “challenge and refashion long-held norms that make sexual harassment socially acceptable” (2015: 95). Afterward, in this vision for change, a sufficient segment of society would demand political and legal change to align with their emerging social norms. Influenced both by its organizational learning and the shifts in the political sphere, HarassMap began to also engage in top-down change, such as the university and corporate policies, as their ability to conduct street-based activity was severely restricted (effectively prohibited). While this process was not planned from the outset, it reflects the ability of the organization to adapt the mission and objectives of work based on emerging needs and changing circumstances. Having the combination of top-down and bottom-up pressure for change has proved to be effective and has opened new avenues for engagement, such as establishing more private sector partnerships. As the organization learned from its work, and responded to changing operational spaces, it has become highly adaptive. While responding to opportunities and constraints is important, it also poses a challenge that the organization is driven by external shifts rather than strategic action. How HarassMap grapples with this question is returned to in the final section of the article.

*Inspiring movements*

The success of HarassMap is not limited to Egypt. Since the launch of the map there have been individuals, groups and organizations from around the world seeking to replicate the crowdsourced map and explore engaging in similar offline activities. Some of these initiatives also created maps, others have not, opting for different forms of engagement. A few of these movements have been highly successful, while others have remained as ideas. Our focus here is not the impact of particular movements per se, but the way in which HarassMap has inspired movements around the world. Co-founder Rebecca Chiao has supported teams seeking to replicate and adapt the HarassMap model in places such as Morocco, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Pakistan, Turkey, India and Indonesia and has coached over 50 different groups (Abdelmonem, 2016). The innovative ideas and successes of HarassMap are reaching well beyond the population it sought to initially engage with, and has motivated others around the world to confront sexual harassment and work toward safer spaces for all, in all places. The global support and replication efforts are on-going and HarassMap continues to receive inquires and requests for guidance and support. The new web platform upon which HarassMap operates (for the crowdsourced data collection) has been made available for all others to utilize and adapt. In 2018, similar maps in South Africa and in Turkey have launched. In addition to the innovative work done by HarassMap, the donor support, awards and external promotion (e.g. a TED Talk) further enabled the success of the global replication activities.

*Enabling research*

There are hundreds of publications that reference HarassMap, most of which point to it as a modality of using information communication technologies and crowdsourced data for social change.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition to being a novel approach, HarassMap has inspired new research directions. One example of a new research direction that was enabled by HarassMap’s work includes research done by Mohamed and Van Nes (2017), who utilized HarassMap’s geospatial data to identify areas where sexual harassment is more frequent, conduct location-based analysis from an urban planning perspective, and recommend options for creating safer spaces in urban Egypt. While there are limitations to crowdsourced data, and specifically the modality used by HarassMap, a quantitative and qualitative study found “that the Map is an effective tool for data collection for sensitive issues” (HarassMap, 2014: vi). Other researchers have used this data to inform their work. For example, Henry (2017) utilized the data to inform research site selection. The new research is not only external – unplanned and unanticipated research directions have also emerged within HarassMap, most recently, the team has begun research on masculinities and media monitoring to better understand the broader environment that influences decision making.

**Discussion**

There has been a clear recognition that the operational space for civil society is limited by the state, which oscillates in its tolerance, co-option and repression of activism of this nature. This has multiple implications. One is that there is a need for contextualization regarding what can and cannot be safely done and when, as well as critical reflection on what is and is not considered ‘political’ in nature. Another is that it ought to be expected that activities, particularly community-based work, may change over time (from active to latent periods) in response to changing political environments. In 2018, activists in Egypt have experienced an oscillation to repression. While data was being collected for this research, in May and June of 2018, two prominent activists were arrested. Alternatively, in 2014, there were new opportunity spaces as the government passed new laws against sexual harassment and established a new police unit to address sexual harassment, which enabled opportunities for collaboration with civil society. Similarly, in 2015, HarassMap was permitted by the Governor of Alexandria to do community outreach work in the transit system around a festival date, but were not granted approval to the same in public spaces (which required approval from the Ministry of Interior). Due to shifts in the political sphere, it ought to be expected that activist groups such as HarassMap have moments when they move into latent periods, at least in the public sphere. In these times, however, the organization must continue to maintain its capacity and readiness. This includes engaging in those activities that are permitted, ensuring the public remains aware of the organization and its advocacy. Internally, the organization needs to have the resources to prepare for windows of opportunity wherein public activities can be re-initiated when a window of opportunity opens.

For external supporters and donors of groups like HarassMap, understanding this operational context and flexibility is key, lest organizations be expected to operate as if the political environment allowed for consistent, lineal positive change. A key success factor from the Ethiopian Womens Lawyers’ Association, which successfully advocated for the change of multiple discriminatory laws in Ethiopia, was that donor support was given in the form of core organizational support, rather than being tied to specific projects and activities that must be reported upon within set timeframes (Cochrane and Birhanu, 2018). In the Ethiopian case, this funding approach gave the organization the ability to respond to changing political dynamics as well as respond to emergent windows of opportunity. Akin to other examples of collective action, the anti-sexual harassment work undertaken in Egypt does not align with the donor or project cycle, nor the NGOization of short-term targets with predictable, measurable outcomes (Kabeer, Milward and Sudarshan 2013: 43-44). Realistic expectations within agreements should recognize the cycles of political change and the resultant windows of opportunities. In agreement with Andrea Cornwall, we see “the most important role for external actors – funders, as well as facilitators – is that of supportive accompaniment” (Cornwall, 2013: xi). Enabling the actors and activists who are most familiar with risks and opportunities to lead decision making.

**Future directions**

Despite new laws, strategies, media engagement and public awareness, women in Egypt continue to experience sexual harassment at extremely high levels. Changing norms and behaviors in society is a long-term task, and the goals of HarassMap cannot be achieved in short term activism. As the organization looks to the future, it is broadening its engagement space, analyzing the ecosystem that influences sexual harassment and identifying key entry points (Saleh, 2017). In navigating these decisions, the single greatest limitation it faces is the restriction of civil society, and thus their ability to work. This includes restrictions on funding, the requirement of permits for research or public activities, and even the potential of the government to regulate organizational direction and leadership (Zeid, 2017).

As a result of changes to the operational environment and uncertainty about where to focus efforts, the organization has begun revising its theory of change. The history of the organization has enabled it to become more aware of the complications and intersectionality of sexual harassment, patriarchal structures, power dynamics and gender-based violence. This has facilitated taking the discussion spaces that HarassMap opens with the public to engage with these deeper layers. HarassMap thinks of sexual harassment not in a vacuum, but within the broader umbrella of gender-based violence, gender equality and human rights. Thus, a focus on bystanders’ intervention for ending sexual harassment was not meeting these goals and the emergent lessons indicated that its needed to broaden its scope (which had effectively already occurred in its shifting activities). HarassMap has been quite flexible in its activities throughout the years and has been willing to change programs or introduce new ones. For instance, in 2015, staff members felt that messaging alienating men is counter-productive and therefore the team ran a few projects related to male engagement. This flexibility, however, needs to be better aligned with and reflected in an updated mission and theory of change.

From the stage of breaking the silence and creating the irreversible dynamic of contestation against the normalisation of sexual harassment, the steps forward of HarassMap will be adapting the change they want to make and the way they can contribute to it, based on the current context of public discourse. New approaches of tackling masculinities/femininities, consent, and power dynamics are examples of this. One of the major shifts they are considering is a more participatory approach in creating knowledge around the issue with the public. HarassMap previously depended on providing an open knowledge source around sexual harassment to the public, and delivering this knowledge in their trainings. However, the team started to realize the importance of co-creating knowledge with the public to reduce the resistance and create two-way conversations with the public (moving beyond the provision of information). To support this, a knowledge production unit is being established within the HarassMap structure to keep up with the latest debates and discourses of sexual harassment and the intersectional layers of gender-based violence. Moreover, this unit will be responsible for shaping a participatory approach and participatory methodologies for co-creating knowledge with stakeholders and the public.

HarassMap’s future direction includes re-establishing closer and direct relationships with their social base offline. They want to carry out joint and long-term activities with initiatives, CSOs and NGOs. The challenge for HarassMap work will be measuring the effect and the contribution of their work to their desired social change. Nonetheless, they are planning to build the capacities of the actors involved on using monitoring and evaluation tools. This includes establishing a stronger system to facilitate their documentation and reflection process on their daily activities and how it is linked to their objectives and mission. Due to legal changes, all data collection in Egypt has to be approved, and as a result the future of the open, on-going anonymous crowdsourced reporting via the map is uncertain.

One challenge for HarassMap is to have a message that fits their wide range of audiences. For example, working with corporate entities requires them to think about the profitable economic side which would encourage corporations to be a safer place for their employees. Approaching corporations from a social responsibility prospective is often not enough. Thus, HarassMap has been planning to expand their services and cooperation with companies to include combating any kind of gender-based violence or discrimination that these companies might need to tackle. This will have impacts on their objectives and mission as well as requiring them to develop clear pathways toward achieving the desired changes. What this looks like is uncertain, but given the adaptability of the organization in the past, there are positive signs it will continue to navigate these challenges. HarassMap has undergone dynamic changes over the years for both external and internal factors. The permanent and most challenging factor is the operational space influenced by the political sphere and the fragile context in which they operate. The constant uncertainty due to legal amendments and vague implications give them limited time for reflecting and learning about their daily work, which affects their organizational growth and long-term plans. Nevertheless, HarassMap continues to try to develop innovative approaches regarding combating sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence.

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**Conflict of interest**

The views expressed in this work are those of the creators and do not necessarily represent those of the International Development Research Centre or its Board of Governors and are not attributable to it as an organization.

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**Figure 1. Example from the ‘Myths Campaign’**

1. As of 17 May 2018, there were 458 publications referencing HarassMap, according to Google Scholar. The Web of Science database finds only three publications doing so. We attempt to bring the depth of practice-learning into the academic literature, as much of the discourse has occurred within ‘grey’ literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)