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**Reflections on Intersections:
Searching for an Anti-Racist, Pro-Migrant Feminist Response to Sexual
Assault Committed by Migrants**

Amira Elwakil

In February 2016, a right-wing Polish magazine, *wSieci*, published a front cover featuring a white woman clad in the EU flag being assaulted by dark-skinned men. The title (in Polish) read: *The Islamic Rape of Europe*. This cover came as a response to the incidents of sexual assault that took place in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015/16, in which thousands of women were sexually assaulted by men racialised as "Arab or North African" (BBC News, 2016), fuelling the anti-migrant and Islamophobic narratives that had been gaining momentum in Europe and beyond. In the summer of 2016, a year that saw a referendum result in favour of Brexit in the U.K., the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, and the rise of far-right parties across Europe, further incidents of sexual assault in Germany and Sweden were incorporated into the same narrative. *wSieci*'s front cover image became supported by what was viewed as empirical examples of this purported "rape," calling for the protection of "white women" from "brown men" as part of a wider project of "taking back control."

Numerous international responses challenged and resisted these reactions. For the purpose of this essay, I would like to focus on responses from feminist activists and scholars working in and on Egypt. I choose this focus primarily due to my positionality as a British Egyptian feminist activist currently based in London, with a background in anti-sexual-harassment activism in Egypt and pro-migrant campaigning in the U.K. I also choose it because Egypt and the mob sexual assaults witnessed in the period between 2012 and 2014 were appropriated by the far-right narrative to "prove" a connection between Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern/North African contexts and sexual assault. Language was also a medium through which this was done, with right-wing tabloids such as the U.K.'s *Daily Mail* (2016) using "*taharrush gamae*,"¹ which it defined as "the Arabic gang-rape phenomenon."

In a contribution in *Jadaliyya*, Abdelmonem et al (2016) offer one of the most comprehensive responses to the xenophobia and Islamophobia appearing alongside the incidents, highlighting the discourse of othering embedded in them. In this discourse, men from "Allah's lands" (Daoud, 2016) were perpetrating these crimes as a form of expression of their "sexual misery" (ibid.). The "imaginative geography of West versus East" (Abu-Lughod, 2002:784) that is replete with orientalist notions was crucial in matching them to a specific geographical region, racialising them and making assumptions about their religious background. Abdelmonem et al's contribution also incorporates key elements of research into sexual harassment in Egypt, thereby historicising and contextualising it, while highlighting "indigenous" examples of sexual assault in the western European context. Their work is, therefore, crucial in a context of increased hostility towards migrant² communities, including spikes in hate crimes that have, in some instances, resulted in fatalities – particularly after political gains for the far-right such as the Brexit vote in the U.K. and Trump's election as U.S. president, which has legitimised such crimes. It is important to stress that the anti-migrant narrative propagated by the far-right is not only in narrative form; it is material, and Abdelmonem et al's response, therefore, is not merely discursive, but one that also addresses the material reality migrant communities currently face in this climate.

¹ The most widely used term to refer to mob or mass sexual harassment/assault in Egypt. This is not the only term used, however. For a discussion on this, please see: Kirolos, M (2016) "The Daughters of Egypt are a Red Line: The Impact of Sexual Harassment on Egypt's Legal Culture," in *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 2 (1).

² I use the term "migrant" instead of "refugee" as the latter is not the term of choice for many individuals to whom this status applies.

Nazra for Feminist Studies' official statement³ on the Cologne incidents adopted an approach that is rooted in its work on sexual harassment/assault in the context of Egypt. Centring the lived experience of women experiencing sexual violence regardless of geographical location, Nazra responds to what it suggests is a polarised debate between the far-right narrative and its counter-narrative. It proposes a need to address the difficult question of "culture" in analyses of the incidents, while maintaining a clear anti-racist and pro-migrant stance (although it is not clear how that may be actualised and how it would have a material outcome). It similarly criticises what appears to be a "prioritisation" of defending migrants at the expense of the lived experience of the women assaulted. Anti-migrant narratives are by their nature homogenising of the migrant, whose figure is framed as the dangerous "other," a "rapeegee" in that context. Nazra also highlights another problematic type of homogenisation of migrants in the counter-narrative, which sees them as "one block of victims and vulnerable persons" that cannot possibly be held responsible for offences committed.

As Al-Ali highlights (2016:3), there is evidently a "difficulty of addressing sexual violence and racism simultaneously;" these two responses to the incidents echo this. Abdelmonem et al's response focuses on migrant communities, while Nazra's, women's experience of sexual assault; both addressing a lived experience that encompasses harm. Is it possible, therefore, to centre these two material realities simultaneously in a feminist response to incidents of sexual assault involving migrants? As I write this I am following updates on Trump's "Muslim ban," as well as the U.K. government's position on Brexit that seeks to pursue the anti-migrant stances the Leave campaign had. I have been involved in campaigning to counter these positions, as well as other anti-migrant and Islamophobic measures the state in the U.K. has been implementing. I, therefore, find myself struggling more than ever in my attempt to answer this question. Given my current state of ambivalence, I wish to use this space instead to reflect on potential possibilities arising from these two responses. Using my current personal experience of working with migrant communities in London, I also wish to expand on Nazra's observation on the homogenisation, victimisation, and infantilisation of the migrant in the context of this discourse.

One of the most significant elements in Nazra's response is arguably its attempt to re-centre the agency of the migrant in question. In my work in a social centre for migrants and in my role as a teacher of English working with migrant communities (both in London), I am becoming increasingly aware of problematic "trends" experienced by migrants. These trends are carried out by individuals who would self-identify as pro-migrant: from using infantilising language to communicate with migrants, to responding to a migrant introducing themselves as Syrian with "I'm sorry;" from viewing socialising with migrants as a charitable act, to fetishising the migrant's trajectory of migration through the question "tell us how you got here." These trends collectively reinforce a homogenous image of the migrant as a vulnerable individual, an infant, and a victim, mirroring the pattern critiqued by Nazra in the context of the Cologne attacks. This type of engagement has a threefold problem: in relation to the context of sexual assault, as Nazra argues, it obscures the agency of the migrant, rendering it discursively impossible for a vulnerable subject to commit an offence⁴ or be held accountable for it, thus feeding a problematic apologetic narrative that sidelines the lived experience of women assaulted. Similarly, it counters homogenisation with

³ Nazra (2016) "From Egypt to Germany: Reflections about sexual violence from a feminist perspective in light of the Cologne attacks," Cairo: Nazra, <http://nazra.org/en/node/486> [accessed 10 July 2016].

⁴ While "the rule of law" requires problematisation, my interest in this context is to highlight that these approaches render it impossible for the migrant to be viewed in relation to it, in whatever form it may take.

homogenisation, only this way it homogenises migrants as vulnerable individuals, leading to a highly polarised discourse that is lacking in nuance and restricting the possibility to move beyond it. Lastly, it begs the question: how much does this view of the migrant lend itself to the discourse of the “eligible” or the “real” refugee, which has been central to arguments against migration on the far-right? How much do these issues, therefore, centre the far-right narrative and arguably even feed it? In other words, how much are they counter-productive?

My acute awareness and sensitivity to the far-right narrative leave me in a state of stagnation: I recognise the urgency in asking these questions but worry about the consequences of asking them in spaces that would allow for them to be appropriated by the far-right. I feel, however, that these are the only tools available at my disposal at this given juncture. More importantly (and more difficultly), I admit that I am also potentially sidelining women’s experience of sexual violence. As a follow on to this, I would argue, therefore, that neither Nazra’s nor Abdelmonem et al’s approach can exist independently; the two are inevitably forced to tackle this complex terrain simultaneously. Similarly, their activism has to be viewed as part of a continuum whereby different intersections are accentuated depending on geographical location and the audience addressed. Currently, recognition of different approaches to feminist issues in/on the Middle East appears to be entangled in “in-fighting” between feminists of different positionalities. Abu-Odeh (2015) best illustrates this through highlighting the three-fold “censure” she faces from within her own society, orientalist discourses, and attempts to “appease” postcolonial feminists located in the West. A politics of transversalism, as advocated by Yuval-Davis (2006), becomes a priority for feminists working on sexual assault (and beyond) in relation to the Middle East. Transversalism includes processes of “shifting” that allow for accommodation of different views (*ibid.*), and that allow them to coexist and be equally recognised as of value. With othering discourses that have physical harm as a real potential outcome, particularly to migrants and Muslims in Western contexts, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of discourse in the intersection of these identities with gender. Similarly, in addressing this, it is crucial not to sideline gender and harm from sexual assault, and not to re-centre the colonial gaze through engaging in what can be limited to reactions to its discourse, instead of attempts to move beyond it, with material realisation. How feminists working on these issues can adopt a transversalist framework, therefore, becomes as urgent as engaging with these discourses and lived realities. And in this framework I would hope that the question of agency that Nazra raises in its statement is examined more thoroughly, for it certainly will not stop resurfacing.

For anti-racist, pro-migrant feminists responding materially and discursively to this complex encounter with far-right narratives, it is undeniable that issues pertaining to the intersecting identities of gender and migration status will be difficult to approach. How can we as activists and/or academics create a space based on a transversalist framework that breaks the state of stagnation we are in? How can we incorporate nuance and break cycles of homogenisation of migrants and migrant communities without allowing for our narratives to be appropriated? How can we move beyond the colonial/white gaze in doing all of this? With the rise of the far-right and the material consequences this has had, these are extremely challenging questions to ask. However, perhaps the starting point is to acknowledge these difficulties and find ways for our various positionalities to work together to frame the debate, rather than allow it to be framed for us, and for us to unreservedly address sexual violence regardless of who the perpetrator is.

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