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## **A Counternarrative of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Egypt: Mobilization by and for women**

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## البيانو، والعنف والهيمنة

"أنا تعرّضت للتحرش!"

أنا تعرّضت للتحرش

أنا تعرّضت للتحرش مثلي مثل أكثر من ٩٠ بالمئة من البنات والسيدات في مصر. كانت أول مرّة أصطدم فيها بوقع الجريمة وكمالها من قبل الجميع. فهي الجريمة المثالية... يوجد ضحايا، لكن لا يوجد مذنبون. اليوم أوجّه أصابع الاتهام للمجتمع والدولة. كنت طفلة أحبّ الموسيقى وألعب على البيانو من سنّ الرابعة وكان لي مدرّسون عدّة على مرّ هذه السنوات، أفضلهم هاجر مع موجة الهجرة إلى كندا في أوائل التسعينات وأخرى تزوجت ثم أنجبت، ما جعل استكمال الدروس مستحيلاً. فبدأت الذهاب إلى معهد الموسيقى في الزمالك حيث فُسمت الدروس إلى قسم نظريّ أيام الجمعة والسبت وقسم عمليّ لمدة نصف ساعة مع المدرّس وحدنا في غرفة فيها بيانو. كان المدرّس أعرجاً وله شنب وهذا كلّ ما أذكره من شكله. وضع يده على فخذي: "أنتِ تعزفين كويس جداً، مثل الكبار". فرحنت من هذا الإطراء لكن يده ظلّت على فخذي حتى دخل إلى الغرفة فرّاش (عامل) ينقل معلومة من شخص آخر. قال لي المدرّس بعدها إن هناك مكتبة بالجوار يجب أن نذهب إليها لتصوير النوتة اللوالب المنزلي. ذهبت معه عبر الشارع لكن قبل أن ندخل العمارة كانت هناك ماكينة تصوير في كشك أمامي فسألته لو ممكن نقوم بالتصوير هنا، لكنّه قال لي إن "الكشك ده غالي". لم أوافق وقلت له إنني لن أذهب معه وإنه يمكنه الذهاب وحده لتصوير الأوراق. عندما جاءت أمي لتقلني أخبرتها ما حدث فقالت لي إنني لن أذهب هناك مرة أخرى. وكان هذا كل ما تمّ بخصوص هذا المتحرّش. كرهتُ البيانو وكرهتُ كلّ ما يرمز إليه من واقع نعيشه لكن لا نتحدّث عنه. البيانو رمز القمع والعنف والهيمنة ورمز لصوتٍ مكتومٍ لآلةٍ وُجدت لتتكلم. كان الأول وليس الأخير، تلاه التحرش اللفظي في الشوارع ولمسات مدرّب التجديف الكهل لصدور الفتيات... إلخ.

العزلة الناتجة عن الفيروس المستجد كوفيد-١٩ جعلت أصواتنا الداخلية تتكلم وتحدّثنا عن كلّ ما غضضنا عنه البصر "كأنّه مش موجود... كأنّه ما حصلش". عندما رأيت النساء والفتيات يتقدّمن باعترافات على صفحات التواصل الاجتماعي ضد أحمد بسام زكي أو جريمة الفيرموت وغيرهم على المدونة، كان واضحاً من التفاعلات ومن خلال ردّ الدولة والمجتمع على هذه الاعترافات من تعرّض لتحرش أو اغتصاب، أنّ الجريمة هي الرائد والمهيمن. والآن بعد أن نجا كلّ الفاعلين بفعاليتهم، هل كان لكلّ الحشد حول قضية التحرش غرض؟ ماذا بعد؟

Over the past year in Egypt, numerous women shared their testimonies of sexual harassment and violence on social networks, including *al-Modawana* and Assault Police. These testimonies triggered a series of affects: feelings of disgust, resentment, and oppression echo those inflicted by every passerby and every silent voice. "A perfect crime" is a relevant description of the collaborative workings between the Egyptian state, society, and religion, as they silence and brush off the everyday ordeal of being socially read as "woman." Since 2020, online campaigns to counter sexual harassment against women highlighted several prominent cases of rape and assault. However, the tripartite agreement between state, society, and culture does not seem to be working in the same direction. Declarations and arrests – and an eventual liberation – of the perpetrators were carried out by the Public Prosecutor. If our current status as second-class citizens and reduced access to public space are controlled, how are women

mobilizations against sexual harassment outlining the collaborative collective violence by the state, society and culture against women in Egypt?

Assault Police,<sup>1</sup> *al-Modawana*,<sup>2</sup> and Speak Up,<sup>3</sup> among other online platforms, provided women in Egypt with space. This online space enables survivors to call out perpetrators of violence and/or sexual assault in different forms. By doing so, it allows women to voice their grievances while archiving them away from the attacks of patriarchal hegemony and social and religious norms, at least to a large extent.

### Testimonies as Archives, Narratives and Counternarratives

*Al-Modawana* or *Daftar Hekayat al-Modawana* is a blog that shares testimonies of survivors of sexual violence while allowing complete anonymity. The importance of anonymity was supported by the Prime Minister who passed a law that further protects the survivors' identity in June 2020, which provides an indication as to why sexual assault survivors do not resort to the state with their testimonies. This law is not to be considered a milestone or measure of advancement regarding sexual assault in Egypt because of the double standards systematically practiced by the state, which will be illustrated further with the presented cases in this article. This anonymity is also used by the Instagram page Assault Police, which was initiated in 2020 to expose Ahmed Bassam Zaki (ABZ), an ex-member of the American University in Cairo (AUC) community and a serial predator. Other pages and blogs, such as Speak up, follow the same mode of providing space with guaranteed anonymity to expose perpetrators of violence. These pages, behind which are administrators making their continuity possible, became more prominent and shared more widely in the recent years (2020-21). The mobilization of women through these pages in Arabic language and relative to the case of Egypt – as they are similar pages in other countries – brought about several changes and benefits to women's struggle against state, society, and culture.<sup>4</sup>

First, the shared testimonies on the various outlets constitute an archive, or more accurately a counter-archive, of acts of violence against women in a more accessible form, away from the scrutiny of the triangle state-society-culture. The availability of this counter-archive and documentation of cases resonate with what Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani referred to as a form of identification through the stories being told (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). The stories of survivors of sexual violence created a community of women as survivors in Egypt, unified by a common grievance endured in spaces occupied by men.

Second, the creation of a counternarrative shifts the blame away from women-survivors, while shaming the perpetrators. Not only did the testimonies expose certain men, but they created this form of counternarrative that believes and acknowledges the survivors rather than shames them via an array of trivial reasons (dress code, habits, their mere existence), like the despicable trio often likes to do. A counternarrative places the liability on the perpetrators, and thus becomes the first line of efficient mobilization and continuous change.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/assaultpolice/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://elmodawana.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/speakup.00/>

<sup>4</sup> State, society, and culture from here on referred alternately as the despicable trio.

Finally, following through with Della Porta and Diani's analyses regarding mobilization and collective action in the case of sexual violence in Egypt, the testimonies put forward the many grievances of women when it comes to their bodies and the different types of violence inflicted on them. The stories of women became the lost and found voices of generations of survivors who were unable to speak out of fear, shame, and loneliness. So, as these pages gave Egyptian women the needed safe space to make their voices heard with no further consequences to them individually ... it turned out that we were many! The isolation strategy of women survivors is failing through the founding of this collective "we" and "us:" survivors of sexual violence in all its forms. We became a collective, mobilized "we" (نحن) with our own space to voice our grievances independently from any institutionalized entity that meddles with the despicable trio. How and why should these acquired spaces be safeguarded and grown?

### **Cases, Hegemony, and the Legal System**

Having space is grand! Having space and a voice is even better! But having the state, society, and culture change as a consequence of the grievances voiced without any discrimination is a whole other story. As Lila Abu-Lughod stated in her work, the legal system should not be considered as a benchmark for women's freedom (Abu-Lughod, 1998), but rather a facilitator. In fact, state-society-culture marginalizes and applies a double standard when it comes to women's rights, or in this case even the archiving and documentation of violence against women.

ABZ was initially named on a Facebook group called "Rate AUC Professors" in 2018, when several women reported having been sexually harassed by him. The post got thousands of comments and other testimonies by both men and women who were sexually harassed by ABZ. However, in 2020, the post was deleted and ABZ left for Spain to study at an elite university, before returning to Egypt. Nadeen Ashraf created then Assault Police to document and gather the testimonies of the survivors of ABZ's violence, but other cases manifested themselves as well, making the platform more visible and of significance. ABZ was arrested one week after the creation of the Assault Police page and his exposure. After months of being on trial, ABZ received an 8-year prison sentence in April 2021 for sexual assault. It had taken years for the survivors to be able to psychologically and logistically – anonymously and without exposing themselves – come forward. The bulk of the work fell on the survivors and those who mobilized in order to create pressure on the Public Prosecutor to take action, which could also be traced through their page on social media. Also worthy of note is that ABZ is part of an elite hegemonic community, and his victims/the survivors are of this very community.

In parallel with ABZ's case, the gang rape that became known as the Fairmont Case gained a lot of media attention. In 2014, a young woman was gang raped by four men at the Fairmont Nile City Hotel. The criminals were arrested while trying to flee to Lebanon in 2020, and the case was put forward to the Public Prosecutor. Despite the 39 witnesses – two of whom were imprisoned upon arrival to testify – and a video, all the defendants were released on the account of "insufficient evidence" nine months into the trial. The rapists had carved their initials on the survivor's body and were apparently proud of what they did since according to several testimonies, it was them who had circulated the video to compete with another group of gang rapists. Could the circulation of this kind of information provide a mirror to society,

the state, and culture around sexual violence against women in Egypt? How do criminals know that they will get away with their crime? The men who are implicated in the Fairmont Case are now known by name to the public despite the ruling and thus, proves Abu-Lughod's point even further regarding the inadequacy of the legal system as a benchmark for rights and freedoms of women.

The legal system in Egypt is not for everyone, and neither does it work for everyone in the same way. In 2020, I spoke to Beta, a lawyer who works with African refugees and organizations defending their rights in Egypt. I had contacted them for research purposes on sexual assault and anti-black discrimination in Egypt, and we had several informal conversations. Beta stated that women refugees do not go beyond making a complaint at the police station out of fear of being deported. They are also unable to financially follow through with a solid case. Also, Assault Police and the different platforms are only accessible to those who have internet access and the ability to use technology efficiently; therefore, an important segment of the "non-citizen" population is marginalized within those same spaces. Beta argued that the cases of sexual violence and rape are undocumented and unspoken of, but they usually fall under two main categories: the survivors of interfamily sexual violence, or assault by a family member; and those who are assaulted and abused by their employers because of the stigmatization around "black women" in Egypt. If there is any chance for the current women's mobilization against collective violence against women in Egypt to survive, then no one should be left behind. Meanwhile, this mobilization makes it necessary to find a strategy for outreach and development of other spaces that are not hegemonized by a certain class, sex, race, religion, or political orientation.

Another point relevant to the Egyptian legal system is that of "legal" forms of sexual violence against women. These forms range from Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) – which was only outlawed and criminalized in 2008, and the law was toughened in 2021 to make the penalty more severe – to virginity tests and marital rape. This criminalization of FGM results in the increase (and continuity) of underground practices and more dangerous circumstances for women, which could be explained by the lack of legitimacy, protection, and the threat that these laws produce (Boutros, 2018). This "legal cynicism" is outlined by Magda Boutros with regards to sexual harassment in Egypt and in turn explains the form of the current mobilization of exposing and diffusing information rather than resorting to legal action as a first step (*ibid.*, 397). Virginity tests and marital rape remain permitted under Egyptian Law and by the state, with the addition that marital rape is also supported by society and religious discourse/culture. Virginity tests are a common legal practice, and it is the state itself that carries them out. In 2011, women protestors in Egypt underwent virginity tests, which took place in the presence of members of one of the security apparatuses (army or police) and medical staff. In 2020, four Egyptian women were arrested for making video content on TikTok and were accused of harming the "Egyptian family values." They were forced to undergo virginity tests as part of the procedures during their questioning and imprisonment awaiting trial.<sup>5</sup> The inability to recognize the violence involved in this practice performed by the state makes it even clearer the injustice of any "justice" carried out by the state in other sexual violence cases and the double standard involved when it comes to who is inflicting the violence.

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<sup>5</sup> Two of them, Haneen Hossam and Mawada al-Adham, were sentenced to ten and six years in prison respectively for "human trafficking;" the initial debauchery and "Egyptian family values" accusations were dismissed.

Finally, “there is no rape in marriage ... the angels will curse [the woman who does not want to have sex with her husband] all night ... rape is rape, why call it marital rape?!” are among the most prominent – and most recently used – arguments around marital rape. They summarize the problem of decriminalizing marital rape under a religious and sacred pretext, which includes the eternal slogan of “*el-beyout asrar*” or what could be translated into: what happens at home stays at home! Therefore, why involve the Egyptian legal system and the state in the private bedroom affairs? Yet, the Egyptian legal system can order medical staff to sexually violate women through “tests” as legal practice; the newlyweds’ family members can wait for the sex to happen to see proof of pre-marital virginity (blood on the sheets) as social practice; a sheikh can explicitly state that married women who refuse their husbands “deserve a beating.” Then there is nothing wrong with community intervention between a husband and a wife when violence and/or sexual violence (rape) are involved, as meddling is common practice by the despicable trio.

### **How not to be stuck in between: “what was she wearing?” and “not all men!”**

There must be a special place in hell for those who use either sentence. Surely not all men masturbate on public transportation, like Doctor Abdel Rahman Mahdi, who came to be known as the Bus Harasser. In 2020, he sat next to a woman on a bus and started masturbating; she filmed and reported him. As a result, he received a suspended one-year prison sentence. However, a lot of people, including his fellow doctors and colleagues, did step up and try to forge information about his mental health or inability to “hold himself” because of a medical condition, while praising him and his morals. Never mind that he was filmed, that other people had witnessed his acts, that semen was on his shirt: since “not all men” do it, then the punishment should not be so severe, or “he could apologize to the girl.”

Sometimes apologies are not enough, like in the case of the 7-year-old girl who was led into a building’s hallway by an adult man in Maadi, Egypt, where he tried to harass her. Caught on camera, Mohamed Gawdet was stopped by a woman working at a nearby office and later arrested. He was trialed and received a 10-year prison sentence according to the Speak Up page on Instagram. But would such a sentence provide protection against sexual assault and alleviate the threat, or does it merely serve, instead, to legitimize the Egyptian state? During his trial, Gawdet stated that he “performed the pilgrimage,” implying that he is of a higher religious status and therefore should benefit from some kind of leniency or exemption! Unfortunately, people believed he deserved special treatment: there were numerous posts and comments on social media sympathizing with him, going as far as stating that the “girl is used to it ... she’s off the street ... they all do that.” These comments provide insight to the limitations of state actions without social acknowledgment of accountability and justice as the missing elements, and the importance of continuous mobilization against sexual harassment and/or assault in outlining this.

“The 12-year-old actress was harassed while filming on the street,” stated Tara Shehata, an Egyptian woman filmmaker during our online interview about her short film *The Shadow of Cairo*.<sup>6</sup> In this film, the 12-year-old Egyptian girl protagonist decides to do something about harassment and starts wearing a

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<sup>6</sup> The interview was conducted for a conference presentation on mobilization against sexual assault in Egypt.

superhero outfit to fight harassers by spraying them in the eyes with an aerosol. As Tara explained the magnitude of the problem of harassment in Egypt, she told the story of the actress being harassed by passersby, to show the extent of the shaming of survivors for their dress code. The hegemony of the cultural fallacies and their accompanying discourse are part of the limitations that the current women's mobilization is trying to overcome and discredit, while gaining support sometimes from either the state and/or religious authorities in outlining on whom the accountability falls when it comes to sexual harassment and assault. The support *à la carte* (or the double standards) by the state or religious institutions that only do so whenever it fits their respective agendas, acts as a pacifier while deceiving public opinion and representing this support as a cause for celebration. Also, this conditional "support" enables and affirms a double standard within society as well. For instance, al-Azhar's, the highest Islamic religious authority, declared its support for survivors of sexual harassment and assault, and highlighted that dress code has nothing to do with the crime of harassment.

To provide further examples of the hegemonic cultural fallacies when it comes to violence against women and/or sexual assault in Egypt, and without going all the way back to most of Adel Imam's cinematic productions, I turn to Tameem Youness' song *Salmonella*. Released in 2019, the song is about a man making advances to a girl who refuses him. As a result, he wishes upon her to catch salmonella, an invasive and potentially deadly bacterium, in order to teach her a lesson for saying "no" to him. The lyrics were criticized by many women online, but others did not see what was wrong with the song's incitement to violence against women or against a woman saying "no." Despite pleas for the song to be removed, it was not, and Youness continued to be a vibrant and accepted member of the media community with many influencers or online bloggers working with him. This acceptance and hegemony of a culture that supports harassment and violence became even more problematic when Youness' ex-wife disclosed having been raped by him during their marriage. Her testimony was widely shared on social media. The case of Youness and *Salmonella* is only an example, and his sexual crime against his wife at the time makes it clear that public support for these ideas cannot be separated from practice.

Another way not to be stuck between "what was she wearing?" and "not all men" is to not exist at all. Numerous daily cases of sexual harassment in Egypt remain undocumented and/or legal, and socially and culturally acceptable. The online testimonies and counternarratives are still reserved to those who can access them, which intensifies the need for accountability, continued resistance, and the willingness to take on what Elsa Dorlin refers to as "dirty care" (2017, 174). The term, inspired by a novel by Helen Zahavi, outlines the need to reinforce our power to act and take initiative rather than having other actors take care of us on our behalf (ibid.). Acting from within systems of violence could at the very least start by us offering sex education, awareness, and readiness to confront the violence that could accompany it in Egypt for "ordinary girls" and the "average" Egyptian woman, including those who might not be on social networks. In order not to marginalize the marginalized, our mobilization and movement need to make space for them to safely express themselves and act on their own behalf.

## Conclusion

Beyond politics of hope, and the culprit of learned helplessness around sexual violence in Egypt, we should acknowledge that they represent a phenomenon and a consequence. They are a consequence

of the entangled reasons illustrated in this piece, which range from the hegemonic narrative – including state narrative – around sexual violence and its survivors in Egypt to the cultural hegemony that socially consents to this violence. Already with the exposure of perpetrators and the anonymization of survivors, the narrative is changing and a counternarrative is rising, shaming the criminals and not their survivors through the online space, which all provide both Arabic and English content.

The common space between state, society, and culture (including religion) represents the main area of exercise of power and limitations on the current mobilization against sexual violence in Egypt. The intersection between the trio is the main challenge towards further substantial change with regards to sexual violence and how to counter it in the respective spaces and in where they overlap. For this perfect crime to become an exposed crime, the weaker links in the entangled state-society-culture needs to be identified and stressed upon.

Finally, between Egyptian women's grievances when battling sexual violence, and the state's practices exists a significant margin of "lost in translation." While there have been recent developments on the part of the state, there is still a lot to be done in order for women to be able to occupy and own their place as citizens with the ability to exercise their rights. We do not want this change in women's mobilization to become another way of translating ourselves to the state, society, culture or other bodies that might have interests in it.



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