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When Sexual Harassment Becomes a Barrier to Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most recent reports on sexual harassment in Egypt draw a dim picture of women's status not only in that country, but also in most parts of the region. Specifically, a recent study by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women revealed that 99.3 percent of Egyptian women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the past year, primarily in the form of physical harassment. A recent public opinion survey conducted by the Egyptian National Council for Women (ENCW), which interviewed 13,500 women across the country, showed that 85 percent of Egyptian women agree sexual harassment is the most urgent problem facing women and girls in transitional Egypt, despite the prevailing political and social instability in the country. Looking closely at these statistics, it is evident that sexual harassment is becoming not only a repugnant social phenomenon or political tool used by the regime to suppress women's participation in the political and public spheres; it is also progressively becoming a barrier for women to play an active role in society and enjoy equal citizenship rights in their own country. Most importantly, harassment has become an impediment for both economic and social development in the country—a critical issue that requires immediate attention from policymakers, legislators, and society as a whole.

Egypt is currently at a major crossroads, not only on the political level, but also on the societal and ideological levels. Since the onset of the revolution on January 25, 2011, Egypt has been witnessing unprecedented ideological and political polarization. Although the revolution has brought new hopes and aspirations for genuine change and a better future based on parity and equal citizenship for women across the country, the first uprising in Tahrir Square led to one of the most massive outbreaks of violence against women in the square and throughout the country. Sadly, the same scenario recurred when at least 91 women were sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square over four days

of protests that began on June 30, 2013, according to Human Rights Watch. Despite the fact that NGO-led initiatives to combat sexual harassment have increased significantly over the last few years, these organizations have made minimal progress toward ending violence against women due to political instability and deteriorating levels of security in the country, and societal apathy toward the issue. Women in Egypt are still pursuing stricter measures to protect their rights and dignity in their own society; eliminating all forms of violence against women should be one of the first priorities for the newly established Constituent Assembly. Although

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only five out of the 50 assembly members are women, they should be able to initiate change by spearheading desperately needed legislation.

THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM

As previously mentioned, the latest report by the UN estimated that 99.3 percent of Egyptian women and girls have experienced some sort of sexual harassment over the past year, and more than 50 percent of women stated they experienced harassment on a daily basis—mostly while using public transportation and in the streets. According to UN Women, physical harassment, such as touching women's bodies and verbal abuse, has topped the list as the most frequent acts of harassment. In addition to these individual cases, group assaults—which often occur in heavily crowded areas during holidays and festivals—are another dismal illustration of violence against women that has been occurring in Egypt over the past few years. Notable examples of this pattern have transpired during heavy days of protesting in Tahrir Square, where groups of men circle women while ripping off their clothes or sexually assaulting them.

Another study conducted by the ENCW showed similar results: Almost 83 percent of women in Egypt have been victims of some form of physical or verbal harassment. Participants of the study agreed the main reason for the increasing levels of violence against women in Egypt is the absence of moral values, followed by deteriorating security conditions in the country since the revolution. The majority of surveyed women also agreed sexual harassment is the most pressing problem facing post-revolutionary Egypt, and rules deterring harassment should be strictly enforced to put an end to these flagrant attacks on women's rights.

Unfortunately, sexual harassment has become almost a cultural norm for Egyptian youth, even among children. According to the "I saw a harassment" initiative—which comprises a number of civil society organizations and women's rights groups

with the common goal of ending harassment in Egypt—the majority of active harassers are minors, a finding confirmed in the UN Women report. Furthermore, the majority of harassment victims have reported they received no help from bystanders, who either stayed away from the scene or pretended they had not seen the violation. More than half of victims did not take any legal action against the abuser, while the other half was not even aware there is a law that criminalizes harassment.

Sexual harassment has become a pressing problem facing Egyptian women daily and, more and more, is becoming a formidable obstacle for development in the country. Besides being sexually attacked in the streets and public areas, more than 60 percent of Egyptian women are also harassed at their place of work (reported instances include being asked to stay late without reason and male coworkers insisting on taking their female counterparts out despite repeated refusal). Surprisingly, no laws address harassment at work in most of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region; Algeria and Morocco are the exceptions. As a result, victims have reported lower productivity rates, lower levels of social trust, and an overwhelming fear to go out on the street after being violated, according to a UN Women report.

MYTHS ABOUT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

While the past few years have brought an apparent increase in sexual harassment incidents in Egypt, the surge can be partly attributed to the fact that harassment went largely unreported in the past, as reporting cases of harassment to authorities was considered taboo. According to a 2013 UN Women report, the majority of cases in Egypt have remained widely undocumented for a variety of reasons, ranging from women's belief that this is a normal occurrence to being scared of hurting one's reputation or of being molested by police officers if they report the incident. For years, Egyptian society blamed women and girls for their own plight.

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Among the most prevalent sexual harassment myths in the MENA region in general, and Egypt in particular, is that women and girls are sexually attacked primarily because of the way they dress and behave. Until recently, wearing modest Islamic clothing (i.e., conservative attire) was typically regarded as a shield for women against different sorts of harassment. However, this assumption has been refuted by many recent studies as well as by real-world incidents. For instance, a study conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of California, San Diego, showed that higher levels of religiosity and education among females did not actually correlate with fewer incidents of sexual assaults. A similar finding was confirmed by the most recent ENCW report on harassment, which showed 91 percent of female respondents said that the way a woman dresses or walks in the street do not relate to her chances of becoming a harassment victim.

Furthermore, it is increasingly clear that the widespread attacks on women in Tahrir Square during the last two years had little to do with how they were dressed or posed. Particularly in these cases, violence against women was orchestrated and politically manufactured to force women to retreat to their traditional roles in society. Women were greatly deprived of their rights to express their political views and to participate in deciding their country's future.

EFFORTS TO COMBAT HARASSMENT IN EGYPT

The ENCW undertook one of the earliest of the government's rare efforts to end sexual harassment. The council, which was established in 2000 under the auspices of Suzanne Mubarak to focus primarily on major issues facing Egyptian women, has taken a number of nationwide initiatives against sexual harassment. For example, the council has established special offices and hotlines to receive complaints of harassment, drafted bill proposals for stricter enforcement of existing laws,

launched public awareness campaigns on the issue, and pushed for societal change. In 2005, the council launched the "Safe Streets for Everyone" campaign to combat harassment across the country. Unfortunately, the work of the council was interrupted due to its dissolution and restructuring after the revolution, before it could establish legislation criminalizing harassment of all forms and varieties. More recently, following mounting pressure from women's rights activists to protect women in Tahrir Square, the Egyptian government agreed to form a special unit of female police officers to monitor and deal with violence against women during protests in the square. However, human rights observers widely see this move as a remedy for the symptoms of the problem rather than an enduring solution.

On the other hand, the past few years have witnessed the rise of many NGO-led initiatives to combat harassment by assisting victims, raising societal awareness, and actively advocating for harsher punishments for assailants. For instance, Harassmap is a grassroots initiative established in 2010 to put an end to harassment by raising awareness among the general public. The organization also provides an online interactive map that tracks sexual harassment across Egypt. Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment (OpAntiSh), established in 2012, is another grassroots organization working to put an end to sexual harassment. OpAntiSh adopts a different approach: a victim hotline provides immediate assistance for women to help stop the attacks once they have been reported. The organization also offers psychological and medical support to women victims of sexual assault. Meanwhile, the Tahrir Bodyguards—volunteers known for their bright neon vests in Tahrir Square—offer assistance to assaulted women throughout the square, especially during heavy protesting days.

Egypt must set an example for other Arab countries already in transition by building a fair and just society that guarantees basic rights and freedoms for all citizens.

LOOKING AHEAD

Sexual harassment has become an epidemic in many Arab societies and an abhorrent social phenomenon that requires immediate attention—both on the societal and governmental levels. At a recent conference in Cairo, representatives from 17 Arab countries voiced their concern that sexual harassment is forcing women and girls to stay home to avoid verbal and physical attacks, even in the most conservative Arab societies, such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Keeping women at home and out of the public sphere has many repercussions on both the societal and economic levels, as more than half of the country's human capital is reluctant to step outside their front door for fear of being sexually attacked.

Despite NGOs' concerted efforts to combat sexual harassment in Egypt, change must simultaneously take place on societal and legal tracks. On the societal level, increased public awareness programs coordinated and administered by the government are critical to uprooting all forms of violence against women. These initiatives should include programs that inform women about their rights as well as laws criminalizing harassment and teach them how to protect themselves from assault. In order to combat sexual harassment, attitudes as well as actions must be adjusted. As the youth of Egypt have the opportunity to change their society for the better, efforts should be geared toward raising awareness on the issue—especially among minors—in both educational and religious institutions.

On the governmental level, harassment has to be clearly defined, and strict laws have to be issued and enforced. Lawmakers should give precedence to legislation that will help women feel secure in public places and at work. Despite current political instability in Egypt, it is essential to prioritize a legal solution for the issue of sexual harassment. Egypt must set an example for other Arab countries already in transition by building a fair and just society

that guarantees basic rights and freedoms for all citizens. If harassment continues to occur at terrifying rates in different parts of the Arab world, women will continue to be marginalized from the public sphere. This marginalization would lead to a multitude of undesirable social consequences. Most importantly, sexual harassment of women is a major impediment to economic and societal development in the Middle East and North Africa region.

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