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Women's Bodies under Attack: Tahrir Square as a Site for Collective Abuse

Samir Ben-Layashi

The recent collective sexual assault against a British student journalist in Cairo's Tahrir Square was the third such case since November 2011. According to the official Egyptian discourse, the repugnant deeds were perpetrated by the *baltagiyya* (thugs) who "are sent by the ousted president Mubarak and his men to intimidate the International Press, and sully the name of the revolutionaries."[1] However, the popular discourse on Egyptian streets and in Tahrir Square itself placed the incidents within the broader context of sexual harassment (*taharrush jinsi*) in crowded public places, such as subways and buses, movie theatres, cafés, football stadiums, and even in lines in public offices. Many Egyptians attribute the phenomenon to the sexual frustration (*kabt jinsi*) of young men, a consequence of the fact that young people are compelled to indefinitely postpone marriage due to the high levels of unemployment poverty, and the cost of living.[2]

Western journalists Lara Logan (victimized in February 2011), Caroline Sinz (November 2011), and Natasha Smith (June 2012) brought their stories to the press. Unlike them, hundreds of Egyptian women who have been sexually assaulted by mobs have almost always refrained from speaking publically, and particularly to the media, about their experience because the Arab cultural context renders it taboo and shameful: according to prevailing norms, a "good" woman does not discuss her body, and an "honorable" woman would never be sexually assaulted anyway.

The media's silence has been endemic as well: neither the Egyptian media nor the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera TV have provided adequate coverage of the Tahrir Square sexual assaults. Egypt's Nile TV went even further in its "ostrich policy" when the camera happened to catch the violent assault of French journalist Caroline Sinz on one of its live reports in November 2011. The video depicts Sinz being groped and dragged by a mob of men, and security guards in fluorescent vests running to help her but unable to keep the mob at bay. The (female) news anchor presenting the video completely ignored the fact that what viewers were witnessing was a sexual assault against a woman. "It looks like a fight," she said, "well, we'll get back to you after we get more information about what's going on there," and calmly concluded the program.[3]

Sexual assault in crowded public places is not new to Egyptian society. The infamous crowded minibuses in Cairo in the 1990s – and even Cairo's subway cars today – were a nightmare for women commuters. The situation on these minibuses was not like that of Tahrir Square, in that the sexual assault was not accompanied by violent beatings. More typical was that a man would rub against a woman's body, touch her, pretending it was unintentional, and he would even sometimes end up ejaculating on the woman's clothes. The phenomenon was not a secret to anyone and was a common subject of men's conversations in cafés. Egyptian cinema and literature addressed it as well, but many chose to regard it as "a fantasy in the imagination of provocative writers and filmmakers".[4]

Matters pertaining to the body, especially a woman's body, constitute one of the most "sacred" taboos in the Arab-Muslim world. This stems not only from religious commandments that oblige women to conceal certain parts of their bodies in the public sphere, but also with the way that space (private and public, indoors and outdoors) is gendered. During the recent Egyptian Revolution, we have witnessed a transgression of the traditional logic of the division of public space. Tahrir Square—from which, in normal days, women were banned after 8-9pm (not by law but by the power of societal habits)—was crowded with women, young and old, around the clock. Some even slept in tents or in the open air, and mixed with the "opposite" sex in a manner never previously witnessed in Egypt. However, some young Egyptian men remained locked into the mindset that that "good" women stay at home at night

and only "bad" women go to Tahrir Square in the afterhours. Consequently, these men engaged in mob violence that took the form of sexual assaults. In addition to the "satisfaction" such actions provided, they were intended to intimidate women, chase them from the public space, and send them back home, "where they belonged."

Comparing the recent Egyptian experience to that of the Algerian war of independence (1954-62) may be instructive. In Algeria, the FLN invited women to take an active part in their struggle. Women transported weapons hidden under their clothes, and placed bombs in the colons' cafés, shops and cinemas, where Algerian Muslim men could not gain entry.[5] Interviews of Algerian women revolutionaries who took an active part in the conflict reveal a striking absence of instances of rape or sexual harassment by their male comrades.[6] However, once independence was obtained, women were asked by the FLN, supported by public opinion, to withdraw from the public space.[7] In the Egyptian case, by contrast, women were harassed and assaulted while they participated in the ongoing public struggle. At the same time, Egyptian women did not remain passive in the face of the assaults, but mobilized large scale protests against the phenomenon of sexual harassment in general, and the collective sexual abuse perpetrated in Tahrir Square, in particular.[8] One of their mottoes reflected the spirit of the original Tahrir Square protests which overthrew Mubarak: "We want to be in Tahrir Square as citizens and not as females."[9]

In conclusion, one may ask the following: Will the post-Mubarak Egypt, the Egypt of newly elected president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood and of the Tahrir Square revolutionaries who toppled Mubarak from power, deal with this problem in a meaningful way? While focusing their energies on traditional "high politics" issues such as "national identity" and the place of Islam in society, will they also begin addressing more specific and intimate issues, such as the desired norms regarding separation of the public and private spaces, and the need to create some socially acceptable contexts and spaces (even discursively) for youngsters to meet, to kiss, and even to engage in sexual relations before marriage? Many young people in their early twenties who dress in modern, Western style clothing and live residential neighborhoods such as Zamalik, Giza, Ma`adi, Muhandisin, etc., have never had a "French kiss", according to a recent French report.[10] Will the Revolution succeed in

"renovating" the Personal Status Law and revolutionizing public and private mores, forms and norms? Will the Egyptian Revolution initiate a sexual revolution? Will women be able to speak about their rights over their bodies, and about their sexuality itself, without reference to men? In the absence of such changes, the "Egyptian Revolution" of 2011, indeed, the upheavals throughout the region will prove to have had, at best, only superficial impact on their societies.

Samir Ben-Layashi is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of History in Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University and a junior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

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[1] Du`aa Khalifa, "Fi Shari`a…wa Suluk "Hiyya Fawdha?!" [In the street … and behavior. "Is it anarchy?!", *Al-Ahram 22* June, 2012< http://www.ahram.org.eg/937/2012/06/21/39/156599/219.aspx>

[2] See an interesting interview with an Israeli student Noga Malkin, who "was there"; studying Arabic at the American University in Cairo. Her testimony is a rich source for the Egyptian popular discourse on a number of issues, including sexual frustration and late marriage. Esti Ahronovich, "The Israeli Student who Watched the Revolution in Egypt Through a Window in Tahrir Square," *Haaretz,* 07/21/2010< http://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/1.1780129>

[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9ABhhmgwLY&feature=colike

[4] Ali Mahmud, *Mi'at `Am min al-Raqaba `ala al-Sinima al-Misriyya* ['One hundred years of censorship of Egyptian cinema'] (Cairo: Al-Majlis al-A`ala li al-Thaqafa, 2008), 15.

[5] Djamila Amrane, *Des femmes dans la guerre d'Algerie: Entretiens* [Women in the war of Algeria: Interviews], (Paris: Éditions Karthala: Paris, 1994), 16—18.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Michael F. O'Riley, *Postcolonial Haunting and Victimization: Assia Djebar's New Novels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 57—60.

[8] Al-Sonara, 07/07/2012, "Egyptian one demonstrate as protest against sexual harassment against them in Tahrir square,"< http://www.sonara.net/articles-139888.html>

[9] Ibid.

[10] http://envoye-special.france2.fr/les-reportages-en-video/egypte-la-revolution-va-t-elle-changer-la-condition-des-femmes-16-fevrier-2012-4232.html