

Egypt: A Few Steps Forward in Countering SGBV¹

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Violence against women takes different forms; domestic violence includes assaults on women committed by their relatives or partners within the family space, female genital mutilation as well as depriving females from education, work and inheritance or forcing them into arranged marriages. As for the violence against women in the public sphere, it occurs mostly in the streets, public transportation, work or education facilities. Yet, sexual harassment is the most visible form of violence as it is widely spread and unexpectedly affects women in public spaces. Therefore, the State has recently focused on fighting this type of violence against women due to its prevalence in public spaces especially in huge protests in the post 2011 era.

Measuring the level of SGBV

It is extremely difficult to assess the exact level of SGBV in Egypt. Despite the wide range of reports trying to grasp the exact numbers of assaults, they are unable to present the real picture. Most of the reports rely on wide surveys that depend mainly on the survivor's ability to report the assault, yet usually a considerable tranche of survivors cannot immediately report what they have faced. Therefore, when dealing with the current data of SGBV in Egypt, we must understand that these numbers are only showing part of the reality. The actual situation might be much more complicated than the statistics suggest. According to the survey of the economic cost of gender-based violence in Egypt in 2015², 7.8 million women and girls were subject to different forms of violence in the previous year, both in the public and the private sphere. 1.7 million women and girls were subject to sexual harassment on a constant basis in public transportation during that same year. Meanwhile, almost 139 thousand working women faced some sort of violence in their place of work, which constitutes 3.7 % of the female working force. And almost 16 thousand girls, aged 18 or over, were subject to sexual harassment in their place of education (schools or universities) which corresponds to 1.3% of all female students for this age segment; while 2.5 million women and girls faced sexual harassment from strangers on the streets in the same year. Also, in 2015, 75 thousand women and girls reported to the police for crimes related to SGBV. Comparing this reporting rate with the approximate numbers collected from the above mentioned official nationwide survey, we realize that the degree of reporting to the police for SGBV crimes is not that high. Hence, there is a reporting gap that needs to be filled with trust and firm procedures in order to encourage survivors to report and facilitate the prosecution of offenders.

Moreover, when economic costs of violence against women were measured, very alerting findings popped up. Total cost of all types of SGBV on the economy amounted to 312.5 million USD in 2015

¹ An adjusted Arabic version of this article was published in the social periodical magazine adjunct to Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies "Egyptian Affairs"/"Ahwal Masriya", January 2021, issue # 79.

² CAPMAS and NCW. (2015). *Survey of the Economic Cost of Gender-based Violence in Egypt*. Available at: <http://www.enow.gov.eg/ReportDetail/38>

which corresponds to 0.1% of GDP of the same year. This number includes the direct and indirect costs of SGBV repercussions, namely the extra time and cost women and girls spend in order to take alternative routes to and from work and school; they opt for alternative private transportation to avoid public transportation, and the number also takes into account the costs of medical and psychological care after the occurrence of the SGBV incidents. All these statistics are based on the nationwide survey of the population that took place in 2014, hence, there is a solid possibility that the actual numbers have increased during the past six years. Therefore, the national institutions were urged to formulate several strategies to deal with this growing danger and address its roots.

Political Response to the SGBV

On the political level, the State has put the protection from SGBV at the top of its national agenda to promote women's rights. Taskforces within the government were formed to study the root causes of SGBV and the needed reforms in policy and legislations to counter its spread.³ New units to promote gender equality were established in different ministries especially in the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Interior. Dedicated units to fight SGBV were also established in Egyptian universities in order to provide early alerts of incidents taking place among students. The National Council for Women (NCW) has led a series of workshops with UN agencies, official institutions and local civil society in order to formulate national strategies addressing the main challenges facing women's rights and safety. The National Strategy to counter the violence against women was developed in June 2015. And in 2017, the government developed a national vision for 2030, where an entire chapter was dedicated to women empowerment in fulfilling the sustainable development goals. This vision promised to lower most of the statistics of SGBV to reach almost 0% by 2030.⁴ The 2030 vision reflected the State's commitment to motivate all of its resources in order to change the social, structural, and legal contexts that stimulated violence against women in the first place.

On the legal level, an amendment to the criminal law (306 a, b) was approved in 2014 to maximize the punishment to SGBV perpetrators of incidents occurring in real life or virtually.⁵ This legal reform came as a direct result of the fatal assault that occurred in Tahrir Square amongst a large crowd of people celebrating the results of the presidential elections in 2014. Hence, the president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi promised, whilst visiting the survivor at the hospital, to take all the required protection measures to prevent the reoccurrence of these assaults in the Egyptian streets. Since then, dozens of perpetrators of SGBV were prosecuted according to this newly amended law.⁶

The missing link

A huge gap existed between the State policies for countering SGBV and the society's engagement in this regard. Despite all the measures taken by the NCW to engage with the society in promoting awareness for women's rights and protection, the problem remained and the level of reporting for related crimes is still very low compared to the reality. The complaints office adjunct to the NCW has received

3 National Council for Women. (2015). *National Strategy to Counter Violence against Women*, p.15.

4 National Council for Women. (2017). *National Strategy for Empowerment of the Egyptian Women 2030*. Available at: <http://ncw.gov.eg/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/final-version-national-strategy-for-the-empowerment-of-egyptian-women-2030.pdf>

5 Ver el marco legislativo para los delitos de violencia contra la mujer publicados por la NCW. "El marco legislativo penal egipcio para los delitos de violencia contra la mujer más importantes" Disponible en: <http://ncw.gov.eg/>

6 France 24. (2016). "Contrarrestar el acoso sexual en Egipto: victoria tras años de resistencia" en Árabe. Disponible en: <https://www.france24.com>

only eight thousand complaints in 2018.⁷ Yet the NCW has successfully reached out to almost 17 million women and girls over three years through door-to-door awareness campaigns in local communities. However, given the cultural context disfavoring women, a serious problem such as SGBV cannot be easily addressed within the limited timeframe mentioned in the related national strategies. Civil society's initiatives should be a key player when it comes to vitalizing the already established legal framework and official policies. But since the civil society organizations are challenged by several problems regarding their existence and legalization, its mission regarding women protection is not ideal.

Yet, in summer of 2020, the missing link was amazingly created when a public account on Instagram platform started to post dozens of stories about a serial perpetrator of sexual assaults against his female colleagues at school and university. The Instagram account that took the name of "Assault police"⁸ received complaints from dozens of girls who survived different degrees of sexual assault over the course of several years, whether in real life or through online blackmailing.⁹ These incidents, that amounted to almost a hundred, were committed by the same person and all occurred in a school, a university and a compound ranked among the most expensive and privileged in Egypt. And the assaulted girls belonged to the most favored and protected social class in Cairo. Therefore, these stories revealed the low degree of safety and protection that girls endured despite their social and education level. One would imagine that girls coming from low-income families would be more likely to endure more assaults and incidents of harassment of that kind.

This campaign launched by the above-mentioned Instagram account revealed multiple facts about SGBV in Egypt; when survivors are confident that their identities will remain confidential, they are more encouraged to report the violence they have faced even years ago. The account run by young girls and boys in their teens and early twenties aimed only at beginning to expose that specific perpetrator in order to prevent repeat offences and protect potential victims in the future. But the range of outreach this account created has expanded and attracted the attention of the international media and the local authorities.¹⁰ Therefore, the bureau of the general attorney (BGA) investigated the testimonials published on the social media and ordered the arrest of the perpetrator. Afterwards, the BGA issued public statements encouraging the assaulted girls to file official complaints so that the perpetrator can be prosecuted. To this end, a new law was issued in July 2020 to guarantee the complete confidentiality regarding the survivors' identities to prevent any further pressure or harassment they might face if their identities were disclosed to the media.¹¹ This new law granted survivors the protection they needed against the demonizing campaigns they usually face when reporting about sexual assaults. In a social context, where survivors are usually blamed for their own assaults, confidentiality plays an important role in encouraging them to report and prosecute their offenders. Moreover, the complaints office of the NCW backed the survivors and offered legal and psychological support throughout the process of reporting to the BGA.

Additionally, the new law encouraged other survivors to file complaints against their offenders and urged the BGA to investigate old incidents that dated back at least seven years. Accordingly, the ac-

7 Consejo Nacional de la Mujer. (2020). "El esfuerzo de Egipto para empoderar a la mujer egipcia 2014-2020", Disponible en: <http://ncw.gov.eg>

8 Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/assaultpolice/>

9 Laila Mohammed. (2020). "Sexual Harassment in Egypt a crisis searching for a cure", in Arab news. Available at: <https://arab.news/6fgs6>

10 Sudarsan Raghvan. (2020). "Egypt's Women Are Rising up Against Sexual Violence Others Are Still Being Jailed for TikToks", *The Washington Post*, July 30th. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/egypts-women-are-rising-up-against-sexual-violence-others-are-still-being-jailed-for-tik-toks/2020/07/30/8514c3ba-c78e-11ea-a9d3-74640f25b953_story.html

11 Hesham Kamel. (2020). "A new legal amendment to guarantee the confidentiality of victims' identity in crimes of rape and harassment", *Legal Agenda*, September 9th (in Arabic). Available at: <https://legal-agenda.com>

count “Assault Police”-which reported new incidents and exposed new perpetrators- was targeted and shut down several times by people supporting the perpetrators. The identities of the young administrators of the account were disclosed in order to put pressure on them and urge them to stop their campaigns. Nevertheless, the account was recreated again and expanded its outreach and developed its agenda to include all aspects of SGBV.

The inspiration that this account has created and the positive interaction it initiated with the authorities has largely impacted the public debate about SGBV in Egypt. It created a wave of new reform in favor of women’s rights and protection. Religious institutions issued several statements to back the survivors and encouraged them to file complaints and fear no shame in this regard. Educational institutions published new guidelines of protection and code of conduct regarding SGBV.¹² A new generation of defenders of women’s rights were born due to this Instagram campaign which was considered to be the Egyptian chapter of the worldwide campaign “Me too”. Yet, more challenges remain standing and impeding the improvement of women’s conditions in Egypt, especially when it comes to family and personal status laws and domestic violence. The social debate about these issues is still on-going and extending to new spaces and women’s rights are still at the top of the political agenda nowadays.

¹²BBC . (2020). “*Egypt Sex Attacks fuel Feminist Revolution*”, October 26th. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54643463>

Responses to Domestic Violence and Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Latin America, MENA and West Africa

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