

## 4 Gendered Noncompliance and the Breakdown of Discipline

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Severity with learners is harm upon them, especially in younger children. The learner raised in injustice and repression becomes overpowered, the vastness of his self is narrowed, its enthusiasm done away with. It brings him to lethargy, drives him to lying and cunning, which is to pretend other than what is in his conscience in fear of the outstretching of hands with oppression over him. As such, it teaches him craftiness and deceit, which become his habit and nature; and the meanings of humanity that he possesses are corrupted.

فصل في أن الشدة على المتعلمين مضرة بهم، سيما  
...في أصاغر الولد  
من كان مرباه بالعسف والقهر من المتعلمين، سطا به  
القهر، وضيق على النفس في انبساطها، وذهب  
بنشاطها، ودعاه إلى الكسل، وحمله على الكذب  
والخبث، وهو التظاهر بغير ما في ضميره، خوفا من  
انبساط الأيدي بالقهر عليه، وعلمه المكر والخديعة  
لذلك، وصارت له هذه عادة وخلقا، وفسدت معاني  
الإنسانية التي له.

From the “Muqaddima” of Ibn Khaldun<sup>1</sup>

What implications do the realities of lived citizenship shaped by violence and privatization (Chapters 1–4) have for student subjectivities and practices? What implications do everyday practices of punishment and surveillance have on the production and performance of gendered subjectivities? What impact do they have on forms of noncompliance and contestation in the schools? Are Egyptian schools producing obedient subjects who defer to figures of authority? Are students submissive or afraid of teachers, as expected in authoritarian education models? Are they disciplined into docile subjects by the techniques of modern schooling or into active citizens through the mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality? In contrast to depictions of authoritarian Arab schooling and its role in producing obedient submissive citizens, this chapter describes the collapse of this model of schooling and the kind of authoritarianism it implies in the case of Egypt. In contrast to obedience or submissiveness, it highlights pervasive forms of noncompliance and contestation, illusory forms of control over

<sup>1</sup> Arabic text cited in Sadiq (2010), English translation my own.

schools in the context of state withdrawal and de facto privatization. It expands the analysis of permissiveness and repression by bringing to the fore further aspects of school relations in terms of general noncompliance, failed disciplinary supervision and gendered contestation. It inquires into the dynamics around sexual harassment that represented daily concerns in the public schools and are critical for understanding the surveillance of sexuality, the circulation of violence in schools. The concluding chapter returns to the question of how these practices of violence and noncompliance shape our understanding of the school as a “disciplinary institution” in Foucauldian terms.

### **Authoritarian Schooling, Obedience and Noncompliance**

Arab commentators have long linked cultures of schooling to the maintenance of authoritarianism through their role in nurturing obedience and unquestioning acceptance of authority. Leading Arab intellectuals such as Hisham Sharabi (1975, 1987) and Halim Barakat (1984) have criticized Arab culture, child-rearing practices and schools as barriers to democracy. A diverse literature in the Arab states stresses that schools train students to become obedient and submissive by embodying these values in student–teacher relations (Watfa 1999). With particular reference to Egypt, students are characterized with obedience, passivity, fear and fatalism, as slaves to a text received from a higher authority, incapable of scientific thinking, experimentation, doubt, measurement, proof and criticism, and thus with a deadened capacity for discussion, dialogue or creativity, or a desire for change (Bilawi 2000, 178–9). The question of school cultures and democracy has been particularly prominent. Despotism inside schools is linked to a monopoly of decision-making processes, relationships of dominance and submission, and the negation of difference or alternative points of view. Studies have outlined the expected outcome for authoritarian schooling in terms of disinterest in or even hatred of the school, a tendency to rebel whenever possible, a spirit of cowardice, selfishness, passivity, hypocrisy and backstabbing among members of the school community, cultivated through a training in showing absolute submission to superiors, limits on innovation, discussion, scientific thinking and cooperation in solving problems (Radwan 1970). Abdul Hamid (2000) has argued that the dominant means of social control in Egyptian society are reflected in the means of control in the boys’ general secondary schools he studied in terms of a lack of dialogue, authoritarian relationships, the absence of freedom of expression and dissent, and forms of exclusion and symbolic violence against disadvantaged students. Based on an ethnographic study of

classroom and school culture in preparatory schools in Alexandria, Kamal Naguib concludes that “the public-sector school represents a microcosm of the authoritarian state” where “the values that dominate classroom culture – authoritarianism, dominance, control, suppression and submission – permeate school social organization, and society as a whole” (2006, 68). He concludes that schools clearly reproduce a despotic personality characterized by passivity, servility, fear, resentment, impotence, lying and cheating (Naguib 2006). These works point to a large array of traits and dispositions linked to authoritarian schooling, but a related set of propositions are particularly concerned with harsh punishment and its implications.

### *Harsh Punishment*

One of the lesser-known critiques of harsh punishment in education appears in a seminal sociological text by the Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun written in 1377. In the quote given at the beginning of this chapter, Ibn Khaldun suggests that harsh treatment of students undermines their appetite for learning, drives them to lethargy and deceit and leads to the general corruption of their character. Different bodies of literature in the fields of psychology and education have pointed to a host of traits – from depression, fear and anger to poor executive functioning – associated with harsh treatment and corporal punishment, especially in its severe and frequent forms.<sup>2</sup>

Corporal punishment has been associated with a variety of psychological and behavioral disorders in children and adults, including anxiety, depression, withdrawal, low self-esteem, impulsiveness, delinquency and substance abuse (DuRant et al. 1994, Goodman et al. 1998). With particular reference to corporal punishment in schools, most studies in the Global North underline the negative consequences of even the milder and more codified forms of corporal punishment practiced in some of these countries, especially the United States. A 2010 report on the impact of corporal punishment in the United States found that harsh physical punishments do not improve students’ in-school behavior or academic performance, some studies showing that they are in fact correlated with lower academic performance (HRW 2010). The report further highlights how children who have been subjected to hitting, paddling or

<sup>2</sup> While researchers agree that frequent and severe corporal punishment should be discouraged, some argue that there are cultural, age, class and individual differences in how mild and infrequent punishment is perceived and how its short- and long-term impact on children can be assessed (see Ripoll-Núñez and Rohner 2006).

other harsh disciplinary practices have reported subsequent problems with depression, fear and anger, and that they frequently withdraw from school activities and disengage academically. In contexts where corporal punishment may be more normalized, studies still note its negative effects on child development. A study of corporal punishment in four countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia has demonstrated its negative impact on academic performance (Ogando Portela and Pells 2015). A 2011 study comparing two private West African schools concluded that children in a school that uses corporal punishment performed significantly worse in tasks involving “executive functioning” – psychological processes such as planning, abstract thinking and delaying gratification – than those in a school relying on milder disciplinary measures such as time-outs (Talwar, Carlson and Lee 2011).

Psychological and educational research has therefore linked harsh punishment to four main areas of student discourse and practice: an increased propensity to engage in violence, an inability to internalize moral values, a negative self-image and increased noncompliance. The cultivation of negative self-image through derogatory treatment by teachers is detailed in Chapter 3, and its place in student discourses in Chapter 6. In this chapter, I focus particularly on noncompliance and on aspects of violence by students, in particular the issue of sexual harassment. I additionally discuss how school punishment represents attempts to discipline students in ideal femininities and masculinities. A key difference between studies of harsh punishment and Arab critiques of authoritarian schooling relates to obedience and submissiveness.<sup>3</sup> This difference suggests that the scale and nature of punishment has changed from the patterns earlier studies of Arab schooling had observed, where punishment may have been placed at the service of the disciplinary project of schools, whereas in the current research noncompliance emerges as a dominant feature of contemporary Egyptian schools.

### *Noncompliance*

As opposed to terms like misconduct or resistance, noncompliance is not necessarily meant to carry a normative value, but rather indicates behavior that does not comply with the expectations and structured activities of adult authorities in schools (Stevick and Levinson 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Submissiveness involves complying with requests to appease others, even though one doesn't want to, as the person perceives that the costs of resistance outweigh the costs of compliance. In their landmark research, Allan and Gilbert (1997) explain that submissive behavior includes escape, passivity and involuntary compliance, essentially designed to signal “no threat” (to the dominant person) and avoid escalation of conflict.

Literature on school discipline suggests that forms of student noncompliance may develop when teachers use harsh or arbitrary punitive measures, maintain extreme social distance because of classroom size or teacher personality, or use arbitrary criteria in judging students' work (see Woods [1990] for an overview). Furthermore, D'Amato (1993) has argued that, in the absence of either compelling structural returns to education in respect of improved social standing, or situational rewards in respect of interest in material and positive classroom relations, student frustration often escalates into more volatile forms of noncompliance.<sup>4</sup> Such a process can help students establish and modify their understandings of material in a way that is meaningful for them. Davidson (1996) has argued that a number of factors contribute most to student alienation, and hence noncompliance, including educational tracking, negative teacher expectations, differential treatment of students, enforcement of hierarchy and status divisions, and withholding or making inaccessible knowledge that students need to succeed. These elements of low returns, poor learning, tracing, arbitrary treatment and assessment, teacher shirking, and punitive and disparaging teacher behavior define the realities of most contemporary Egyptian public schools and many private schools as well (Chapters 1–3). In 2007, a study by the Egyptian Center for the Right to Education linked rising violence by students and teachers alike to critical patterns of school governance, resources and pedagogy, including the focus on memorization, abuse and physical punishment by teachers, weak oversight over education, high class densities, a lack of school activities because of short school days and multiple shift schools (Yunus 2009).

Noncompliance has been a subject of considerable debate in the sociology of education. An important current in the sociology of education sees noncompliance as a fundamental feature of working-class education. Scholars such as Willis (1977), Foley (1990) and Holland and Eisenhart (1990) have argued that, contrary to top-down models of the imposition of unequal social relations, educational institutions are one of many social sites within which specific populations actively reproduce their own subordinate status. Status negotiations within and between peer groups, conscious and unconscious strategies of resistance

<sup>4</sup> “Structural rationale” refers to students’ perceptions that doing well in school will help their career opportunities, social status and economic mobility. That is, education will have the “extrinsic value” of improving their position in the broader social structure. “Situational rationale,” however, also refers to students’ perceptions that doing well and participating diligently may be a “means of maintaining valued relationships with teachers and peers and of gaining access to experiences of mastery and accomplishment” (D’Amato 1993, 191).

to institutional authority, and the realistic perception of often limited employment opportunities after leaving school life are assumed to channel the creative interactions of students themselves toward the reproduction of standing relations of power. From Willis' Hammertown "lads" to Eckert's (1989) Detroit "burnouts" to McLaren's (1999) Toronto "cool guys" and Macleod's (1987) US Northeastern "hallway hangers," resistance researchers identify rebellious subcultures and trace them to the culture of the working class. They argue that these young people learn a discrete culture in their local milieu – family, neighborhood and peer group – that clashes with a middle-class oriented school system. This is thought to activate a rebellion characterized by truancy, delinquency, disinterest in school and troubled relations with teachers, thereby leading to poor grades and streaming into nonacademic tracks. In rejecting school, these youth rebuff irrelevant school qualifications and eagerly anticipate the "real world" of employment (Davies 1995, 663). In relation to gender dynamics, Paul Willis' (1977) argument was that by contesting schooling, working-class youths reproduce themselves as future manual laborers and homemakers. It is therefore argued that a defiant masculine ethos propels school rejection, whereas female opposition to school is less confrontational and disruptive and lacks the bravado that the "lads" supposedly expressed (Ohrn 1998, Davies 1984, Griffen 1985, Anyon 1988).

Based on his work on Canadian high schools, Davies (1995) challenges the argument that misbehavior is a conduit for differential class outcomes, but agrees that gender traditionalism rather than class background is a more durable source of cultural reproduction through school underachievement. Several studies have indeed suggested that, among less successful students, male and female roles become polarized over time (Davies 1984, Holland and Eisenhart 1990). It has been argued in different contexts that working-class girls' opposition to school is articulated through different forms of "gender traditionalism" (Weis 1990, Lees 1986, Griffen 1985, Davies 1984, Gaskell 1985). This means that girls accentuate their femininity in exaggerated displays of physical maturity and hyper-concerns with romance on the one hand, while prioritizing domestic roles such as marriage, child-rearing and household duties over schooling on the other. This arguably provides students with alternative identities from which they can repudiate school-sponsored middle-class ideals of femininity such as diligence and passivity (Davies 1995). Yet this opposition is also thought ironically to trap girls into early marriage and motherhood, thereby reproducing their positions as working-class wives and mothers. We will see that for girls across the schools, a considerable proportion of their noncompliant behavior

indeed revolves around expressions of femininity. Female students engaged in other forms of noncompliance during class time: talking to friends, using mirrors to fix their headscarves or makeup, listening to music or religious sermons on mobile phones, and displaying a general disinterest in the content of lessons. It is not difficult to see why the majority of girls in the technical school, and many girls in the public general school, valued marriage and relationships over work, given high unemployment, underemployment, very low wages and sexual harassment in the sectors in which they are most likely to find work.

Clearly, however, noncompliance in Egyptian schools is also a symptom of the dysfunction of public schooling and its de facto privatization. The scale of noncompliance is also a testament to the growing exclusion of most of the middle classes. Not only the working classes but also the majority of young people are implicated in these patterns of exclusion and gender traditionalism. Furthermore, while many students may be fully aware of the empty content and illusory promises of their education and be resentful of school authorities, confrontational behavior is only one way of expressing this awareness. The choice of noncompliance is also shaped by the link between social background and vulnerability to arbitrary punishment, as described in Chapter 3. Some of the most vulnerable or disadvantaged youth might not feel empowered to display noncompliance at all, if they are unable to rely on social or familial resources that could temper punishment by teachers. Forms of noncompliant and challenging behavior in the schools were also exacerbated by perceptions of the unfairness and extralegality of practices that pervade the public schools. In this light, noncompliance in Egyptian schools cannot be seen only as a working-class phenomenon but is a fundamental symptom of the informal privatization and breakdown of secondary education in Egypt. Other factors frame noncompliance and permissiveness in the schools in terms of the institutional setting, including poor resources and officially sanctioned cheating, the conditions and incentives of teachers, and, as they frequently noted, the tools available to them to deal with noncompliant behavior or to maintain any semblance of discipline in the schools.

### Gendered Noncompliance and Contestation

They taught us by the cane  
 And breastfed us fear  
 They taught us in school  
 The meaning of the words: "All Rise"  
 They taught us to fear the principal  
 So that all talk is suppressed

علمونا بالعصاية  
 ورضعونا الخوف رضاعة  
 علمونا في المدارس  
 يعنى إيه كلمة قيام  
 علمونا نخاف من الناظر  
 فيتمنع الكلام

They taught us how to fear	علمونا اِزاي نخاف
And how to cower	واِزاي نكش
But they forgot to teach us respect	بس نسبوا يعلمونا الاحترام
So don't be upset	فمتمز علوش
If I do not listen to what you say	لما ابقي مش باسمع كلامكم
And don't be upset	وماتمز علوش
If I'm out of order [or: against the system/regime]	لما ابقي خارج عن النظام
What do you expect from a child they raised by scolding	مستني ايه من طفل ربوه بالز عاق
Other than trouble and fighting?	غير المشاكل والخناق

From the 2010 poem *Juha* by Hisham El-Gakh<sup>5</sup>

Contestation and noncompliance were prominent features of school relations in all the schools. In fact, it should not be very surprising that harsh and repeated beating did not produce the desired classroom compliance. Since the time when it was first prescribed in British teaching manuals, the excessive use of corporal punishment has been understood to produce what educational psychologists referred to as the “hardened offender,” who believed that he (or she) was “an ill-used person,” suffering punishment merely because the teacher was “in a position arbitrarily to exercise a coercive authority” (Middleton 2008, 269). This explains students’ nonchalance in the face of the prospect of being beaten. It explains why in many classes students simply did what they pleased, regardless of the likely response in terms of humiliation or physical punishment. More broadly, however, the school’s directives, rules and regulations were violated in fundamental ways. Regulations around attendance were systematically violated, as described in Chapter 3. Rules and expectations of good behavior and appropriate attire were scarcely observed across the schools. Nevertheless, especially due to pervasive extralegal practices, students and parents have indeed become more assertive in making complaints, threatening escalation to higher educational authorities and, in some cases, filing police complaints. Students displayed keen awareness of the arbitrary repression to which they were subjected. Many voiced their opinions and challenged the teachers’ decisions, despite the harsh consequences.

Noncompliance and challenging behavior were most consistently apparent among the boys at the different schools. I experienced the technical boys’ school especially as a volatile and violent space in comparison with the other schools (although it was not as violent as some schools that have received press coverage). Despite – and arguably because of – the use of physical punishment by teachers, students frequently engaged in confrontational behavior. In almost every class in the boys’ technical school, one or more students engaged in behavior that

<sup>5</sup> For the full poem, see Al-Gakh (2010), English translation my own.



was guaranteed to elicit verbal humiliation and physical punishment from the teacher. Indeed, if the frequency and extent of their noncompliance is a good measure of a lack of fear, docility or submissiveness, boys in the technical school were the least docile, though boys across all the schools were generally assertive. They also engaged in ridicule, pranks or other retaliation against teachers. In fact, on one of my first days of fieldwork in the boys' general secondary school, a car belonging to one of the teachers had disappeared. Students had apparently arranged for it to be removed from the vicinity of the school, and the teacher had to leave the school and frantically search the neighborhood for it. While I witnessed far less challenging behavior in the girls' schools, female students were more engaged in direct contestation, usually in the form of complaints related to rectifying educational injustices. Boys seemed to resort to retaliation, challenging behavior or generalized non-compliance rather than filing complaints or openly protesting teachers' decisions. Indeed, other studies have shown that girls seem more invested in educational justice, which boys may see as hacking at meaningless detail (Ohrn 1998).

Although girls were more active in contesting teachers' decisions within the rules of the game, their attempts were typically aborted by provoking them into breaking those rules, or falsely accusing them of doing so. In a typical authoritarian tactic, a student who contests a teacher's decision as unjust is insulted and provoked until she either backs down or raises her voice and responds with inappropriate language of her own. It often starts with comments on the student's demeanor or the typical retort: Don't look at me like this. Any change in the student's tone of voice or body language is articulated as evidence of the student's poor character and behavior and grounds for her to be punished and maligned instead of her own grievance being addressed. In rare cases, if the student cannot be provoked nor backs down, the grievance is heard but the outcome may still not feel positive to the student. The following example from the girls' technical school shows some of these patterns at work.

A diligent student who sat in the front row in a first secondary class recounted an incident when she protested against an exam result in which most students had failed or had scored very badly. The exam questions covered material that the teacher had not covered in class, nor had she indicated that it would be covered in the exam. The student objected in class, was harshly rebuked and was sent to the principal's office for punishment. There, she was further rebuked and humiliated until she entered into a crying fit. She later managed to secure the support of her friends in upholding her claims and got other teachers to vouch for her, as her own reputation was now in question. Since she was a serious and well-

behaved student who had been treated very harshly, she did receive support from both students and teachers. In the end, some remedial action was actually taken. The scores for some exam questions were cancelled. She seemed, however, to have been deeply hurt by the experience. The educational injustice had partly been mitigated, but her humiliation in the process was left unaddressed. Her right to object, her justified grievances and her dignity were not fully acknowledged, nor respected. Such dissent had some chance of success if it came from individuals who were able to gain wider support through the social capital of being a diligent student, or other forms of capital and clientelism. In most cases, however, the emotional and practical costs are very high. In fact, based on his fieldwork in a public preparatory school, Naguib (2006) observed that those who confront the power of the school – through police complaints, for example – eventually lose and even drop out of school.

In some cases, students and their families resorted to direct violence or threats of violence against offending teachers. Since the beginning of the 2000s, news reporting and media portrayals of Egyptian education, including at least two popular feature films, also paint an image of a rising violent, assertive and confrontational attitude among students. These reports especially highlight students' (especially male students') verbal abuse, intimidation and physical aggression against teachers. These patterns are reflected in the discussion on Minister Badr's notorious statements on school punishment in the Conclusion chapter. The focus of the media attention is typically on the relatively more privileged general secondary students, the main locus of middle-class interest. Age is also critical, as secondary students cannot easily be compared to primary students in terms of their propensity to dissent, fear and submissiveness. Naguib (2006) has noted that students in preparatory schools displayed an extremely aggressive and confrontational stance toward the school system to an extent that was unparalleled in the history of Egyptian education. He describes a new wave of student violence in schools, which includes damaging school property, beating teachers, infighting and smuggling soft weapons such as blades and knives into school.

### **Permissiveness and the Semblance of Discipline**

Accompanying and facilitating these forms of noncompliance was the fact that official disciplinary procedures, such as grade reductions for poor behavior, detention or temporary dismissal, had progressively become more complex or obsolete. Teachers often commented that they had no measures either to hold students accountable for their behavior or to incentivize them to study. Teachers emphasized that, in effect,

students could not be penalized or expelled for tardiness, absence, poor academic performance or classroom disturbance. Teachers' powers in this regard had been curtailed precisely because of the potential (and reality) of the abuse of such powers in order to extract resources from students through rewards and punishments relating to tutoring enrollment. This has meant, however, that some of the teachers who had used marks to extract resources from students would now resort to physical and verbal intimidation. The informal withdrawal of the state from public service provision had therefore contributed to the rise in both permissiveness and violence. Teachers and students agreed that dismissing a student from class, as opposed to verbally or physically punishing them, was a reward, not a punishment, because they could then roam the school, chat with other dismissed students or simply be happy to escape the stifling classroom environment. However, this means that the problem is not that formal disciplinary powers have been withdrawn from the teachers. It is first and foremost a result of the poor state of education, the displacement of classroom instruction by tutoring, students' diminished motivations, given the low returns to their education.

Most teachers do not find it easy to deal with these realities. The resentment and reluctance of principals and teachers to give up disciplinary control is reflected in their continued investment in a semblance of observation and normalization. Teachers and administrators across the schools continued to threaten students with grade reduction or suspension for absenteeism. They resorted to (arbitrary and reversible) dismissal letters in order to maintain a semblance of discipline. Teachers warned students that "this year is different" and that they really will get expelled this time if they exceed the absenteeism limits. This, however, contributes further to the sense of the arbitrariness and informality of state regulations and their poor enforcement. As detailed in Chapter 2, the general institutional setting also informed extralegal, permissive teacher practices that undermined various facets of discipline, such as the facilitation of cheating, the presentation of inaccurate attendance data and other reporting on activities and formalities that were only intended to appease supervisors and inspectors. Just as teachers dutifully collected attendance records in each class (although rampant absenteeism does not always show up in official school records submitted to the Ministry), principals and administrators continuously filled out reports verifying the smooth functioning of the school.

Administrators are of course fully complicit in regularized games of pretend discipline in the schools. Even though principals have substantial power over their schools, they are subject to continuous monitoring and supervision from higher educational authorities, and their work is

regulated by ministerial orders pertaining to every minute detail. Punishment and harsh penalties are the fate of dissenting principals who fail to implement the regulations and instructions coming from above (see Naguib 2006). District and central Ministry supervisors – sometimes two or three visiting a school per day – constantly collect data about various aspects of school performance. Supervisors have little real power to assist schools, however, and are usually accused of monitoring the most superficial and least important aspects of school or classroom life, especially cleanliness and maintenance, issues over which the school in fact has little control due to centralized hiring and resource decisions and other limitations on school spending. Some also monitor the morning assembly and report on the presence or absence of the president's photographs in every classroom. Many are aware that they are monitoring issues over which neither they nor the schools have any real power and keep their visits brief and focused on fulfilling the minimal formalities that complete the required paperwork. As respondents frequently noted, this has led to a situation where most schools maintain excellent records and most teachers across the system receive "excellent" annual appraisals, in stark contrast to the realities of the schools.

A set of dynamics is therefore in place that renders an elaborate system of educational supervision, as a disciplinary technique, meaningless. Similar to the manner in which beating and punishment were conducted in the schools, harsh rebukes may be meted out to the teacher, even in front of the students, but little formal disciplinary measures are taken (or effective remedial program implemented) that could structure teacher incentives to alter their behavior. In fact, many subject supervisors who are meant to monitor and advise teachers with regard to their teaching performance do not even enter classes. They sign their attendance in the main visitors' register in the principal's office, stay for tea and a chat, and may look at the teacher's preparation notebooks. In remote areas of the country, where transport to the school may require a few hours and the transport allowance is a negligible fraction of the actual costs, supervisors may call the principal or teachers by phone in lieu of a visit. When supervisors are known to enter classes, teachers are alerted and attempt to prepare the class beforehand so that the final performance is a satisfactory one. This is often accomplished by explaining a lesson and coaching the students on the answers and then explaining the same lesson once more in the presence of the supervisor, and even then only allowing the best students to raise their hands and picking them to answer. The disciplinary technique of supervision is further disrupted by the realities of informal privatization. It is very difficult to attribute student familiarity with the material to the class teacher in the first place.

Student competence is equally likely to have been developed in private tutoring, a fact that is well known to supervisors.

### **Gender Surveillance and Contestation**

The breakdown of discipline was particularly visible when it came to female modesty, bringing to the fore the role of schools in the construction of ideal femininities and masculinities. Different projects of coolness and distinction competed with the schools' conservative ideals of gender behavior and led to constant struggles around modesty, dress and sexual harassment in the schools. Although girls were subjected to corporally less-severe forms of punishment than boys, they endured an additional form of surveillance and punishment relating to their adherence to standards of modesty. If school relations effectively accentuated aspects of violence in constructions of masculinity, they highly sexualized girls in the emphasis placed on their modesty and comportment. Ideals of modesty and femininity, however, were articulated and enforced differently across the schools. Constructions of modesty and the control of related behaviors overlapped with constructions and embodiments of social class, distinction and coolness; and this was critical to the daily struggles around the attire and behavior of girls across the schools.

In the technical and general schools, girls were monitored and harshly rebuked on a daily basis for violations of the codes of modesty and ideal femininity. These practices were directly countered and strongly disputed by the students. As one student in the girls' technical school put it, "they talk about things that should not be said. They are always making insinuations about 'girls who stand at street corners' or at the bus stop. They assume you must be waiting for a boy. They always talk harshly." In fact, one of the most contentious issues in the general public school was the girls' desire to layer their headscarves, that is, adding scarves of different colors or patterns under the permissible white or navy blue scarves. There were disputes about scarves almost every day in the school. Girls were rebuked and threatened that the unacceptable scarves would be confiscated and cut up with scissors, even when less than a centimeter of the colored scarf was showing, or if the white scarf had any pattern. Students perceived this as unreasonable and cruel. It was also very unevenly applied. Such disputes frequently escalated if students contested teachers' statements or practices. They quickly became framed around the impoliteness and poor upbringing of students, as with other forms of contestation in the public schools. Students especially resented the associated implication – and often the explicit accusation – that they only wore the colored scarves to attract the attention of boys, or because

they were planning to meet with boys after school, before which they would remove the mandated plain white scarf to reveal the more appealing colored layer (and perhaps even remove the school uniform to reveal a matching outfit worn underneath it).

Importantly, control over female modesty was neither codified nor formalized; it was diverse, diffuse and extended outside the school walls. Tearing up unacceptable scarves with scissors and pulling girls by the scarf are not of course decreed by official codes of punishment. Nearly any teacher or administrator could rebuke and humiliate students in the school, around the school or indeed elsewhere in the neighborhood. While most teachers and administrators felt they had the right to enforce standards of modesty, they also differed greatly in their interest and willingness to exercise this entitlement. The practices of school authorities not only implied enforcement of the wearing of the hijab and of austere and unadorned uniforms; it also meant the enforcement of more conservative ideals, such as the prohibition on wearing trousers (commonly held to be contrary to Islamic edicts in popular quarters in Cairo and the rest of Egypt), even when trousers are sanctioned under Ministry guidelines. In fact, the headscarf itself was approved as an acceptable part of public school uniform after its pervasive and *de facto* incorporation into student attire, and after many cultural and security struggles (see Herrera 2006). The role of the Ministry was only to organize and formalize its use by identifying acceptable colors that match school uniforms.

The actual practices of girls, their dress and behavior, and their relations with boys were almost completely divorced from the control the schools attempted to assert. The rules, reprimands, threats and maligning were ignored and subverted on a daily basis. The harshness of sustained attempts at surveillance, normalization (through humiliation), control and punishment partly indicate a failure of the desired disciplinary role of the school. Like the physical beating of boys, it did not seem to deter noncompliance, but rather indicated a failure to discipline. Girls regularly violated the modesty ideals promoted by the school authorities and did in fact reportedly engage in frowned-on contact with boys.

School rules therefore clashed with the girls' desires not only to meet boys and find their life partners but also for greater social distinction. For many but not all girls, the ideal of conservative femininity promoted by the schools was not seen as cool.<sup>6</sup> Appearing cool and projecting higher

<sup>6</sup> Other work on femininities and masculinities within the sociology of education has suggested that schools not only reinforce dominant social gender roles but also "enforc[e] a set of sex and gender roles which are more rigid than those current in the wider society" (Delamont 1990, 5).

social status was seen as demanding less conservative dress and behavior. The way the girls dressed when I met them outside school or when they came to school for revision sessions after the end of the school year was telling of the vast gulf between the school ideal and their everyday styles. Although virtually all the Muslim girls wore a headscarf, a majority seemed to prefer close-fitting and very colorful clothing. Teachers were obviously aware of this, and many did not particularly disapprove. Teachers therefore seemed equally divided or torn between these conflicting ideals and desires. In one instance in the middle of a rather relaxed philosophy class in the girls' general school, a student brought out recently taken professional photos to show to the small group – not only to classmates but also to the teacher and to me. The students loved the photos, and the teacher commented in a rather neutral tone: “flirty and all” (*dallu'a wi kulu*). The student was indeed striking a flirtatious pose in the photos, sporting tight and colorful clothing, with heavy makeup and an elaborate scarf style. Another girl then showed me her own professional photo. This was in fact in the form of a business card with the word “hot” and other English words on a colorful embossed background. She was also in colorful, tight-fitting clothes and struck a flirtatious pose. In addition, she was not wearing a headscarf in the photo, and it was a full body shot. I thought the picture would be considered scandalous, but again, there was approval from students. In response to my expression of surprise at how “different” the girls looked in the pictures, the response was “Of course, in the photos we become *wilad nas*,” a term that connotes, among other meanings, higher social status. Being flirty and feminine was desirable and cool across the different schools and seemed to successfully override and disrupt school attempts to promote more conservative ideals.

Finally, there seemed to be less zeal and vigor in monitoring and dealing with violations of norms of modesty in the technical girls' school than in the general schools. Three factors may have driven this difference. First, the principal was not as strict on this matter as the principal of the general secondary school, indicating how idiosyncratic factors shape informal gender surveillance in the schools. Second, she was not forced to become as involved in the issues surrounding the sexual policing of girls that emerged due to the proximity of boys' schools to the general secondary girls' school and the resulting struggles around sexual harassment in which the school had to become involved. Third, different expectations may have been placed on girls in general secondary. In a concrete sense, technical school girls were closer to their expected age of marriage and were actively searching for life partners, whereas general schoolgirls are generally not expected to marry except

during or after university and are seen as being more likely to be taken advantage of in relationships without a viable prospect of marriage.

In private schools, there is also considerable variation in the monitoring of female behavior, depending on the neighborhood, the school's proximity to boys' schools, the tradition of the school and the current administration. Many parents seek and value schools that control and monitor female sexuality, mobility and gender-mixing. Most private language schools do monitor quite intrusively various details of student dress – nail polish, hair coloring and styling, the style of trousers, the length of skirts and the height of socks, for example – in an effort to foster and preserve a certain image and reputation for the school. The purpose varies from projecting a conservative or Islamic image to a more modern and cool image in higher-end and mixed schools. In the two private schools, control of dress was more formal, rebukes far less humiliating, and dissent less prominent. Students, both boys and girls, in different private and public schools still complained of school rules and the control of personal expressions of style. This is not surprising, given that the rejection of school rules and guidelines on dress pervade almost all schools that enforce any kind of dress guidelines (Thornberg 2008).

The response of school authorities in the private schools to violations of these codes was typically a strict but brief rebuke. Further punishment could consist of making offending students stand outside the principal's office for some time. In some cases, this was followed by a formal warning sent to the parents for acknowledgment. This could be followed by further measures (e.g. after a certain number of warnings), where parents would be summoned to the school or the student could be temporarily suspended. Such escalation was relatively uncommon. In the private girls' school, which was adjacent to a boys' school, in addition to enforcing rules on dress, one of the school's principals reportedly patrolled the area around the school after the end of the school day to see if girls were talking to boys. This zealous behavior was mocked by several students, even those who were critical of the girls' behavior. The relaxed attitude in high-end schools arguably exerted significant pressure on traditional schools to liberalize, as students pressed for a change in uniform and fewer restrictions on style. Like the public school girls, many private school students felt that these restrictions were not cool and therefore undermined their quest for social distinction and their class image compared to a far more liberal elite. They sometimes succeeded, however, in bringing about change to the rules, instead of subverting them in a constant process of contestation. For example, the students and principal of an ex-missionary school explained to me the process by which girls were given a choice over the school uniform and voted for a



change in its colors, with less-conservative styles and permissions to wear trousers, instead of the traditional dress or skirt.

The dynamic around such contestation was very different in the mixed school and featured much less prominently in school dynamics. Dress regulations were less restrictive to start with, and most disputes arose around new or eccentric styles worn by both boys and girls; most notably among boys growing their hair long or out in an Afro style or wearing chokers or bracelets. Gender-mixing was allowed by definition, although a girl and a boy sitting alone in a secluded area of the school was not permitted. Students in mixed schools are typically afforded far greater liberties by their own parents to mix outside the school in social clubs, private tutoring or at birthdays and arranged gatherings. The private schools therefore found ways to better accommodate changing gender norms and were not engulfed in daily disputes over these matters. However, this may have been partly due to the fact that they did not confront the additional layer of disempowerment implied in the lack of public safety in popular neighborhoods.

### **The Loss of Public Safety: Sexual Harassment and Moral Blame**

One morning, as I was entering the girls' general school, a male teacher was hurling curse words at a girl and accusing the girls more generally of lacking in manners and modesty and being the ones who run after boys and flirt with them. The girl was angry and was arguing with him. There seemed to be an especially tense atmosphere in the school that morning. I was eventually informed that a girl had just been attacked outside the school by a boy who injured her hand with a razor. The principal had left the school, probably to talk to the principal of the adjacent school and attempt to find the perpetrator. It was repeatedly emphasized, by the girls and the teachers, that the girl was a model student who dressed very modestly. It was noted that she wore the long scarf that falls from the top of the head to below the waist (*khimar*), that she was a good student, that she attended religious lessons regularly, was proficient in the proper recitation of the Quran and was sometimes asked to speak on the school radio. While this highly modest profile obviously did not protect this girl from being harassed, teachers still took this opportunity to level abuse at the girls in general and accuse them of bringing about their own harassment through their immodest dress behavior.

Blaming assaulted woman is of course quite common in Egypt as elsewhere, although sexual harassment is endemic in Egypt. One survey of sexual harassment conducted by the Egyptian Centre for Women's

Rights (ECWR) found that 83 percent of women (most of them sporting headscarves, and many wearing the *niqab* or more conservative forms of veiling) reported experiencing sexual harassment. In the survey, male as well as female respondents said that harassment was caused by women being immodestly dressed, with the police typically ignoring and reluctant to investigate harassment cases (see Abdelhadi 2008, Mayton and Ammar 2008). As Ismail has observed in her study of a popular neighborhood in Cairo, the headscarf was not taken as a guarantee of modesty by many young men, and stories about its use “as a cover for compromising conduct” were invoked to undermine women’s claims to modesty (2006, 109). Indeed, it was typical for boys in the schools to dismiss all girls as having a bad reputation or for being immodest. They would discuss certain schools and make some distinctions or hierarchies of modesty, but essentially they expressed the same views of the girls.<sup>7</sup> It seemed to be a much more encompassing (generational) observation than one targeted at any specific category. Islamic injunctions are often implicitly or explicitly deployed in attributing moral blame to female immodesty. However, girls are blamed for sexual assaults on themselves in various other contexts, especially where this is a widespread phenomenon, as in disadvantaged areas in countries of the Global South. Sexual aggression by male teachers and boys is often dismissed as “just boys being boys,” while girls are blamed for “asking for it” (Pinheiro 2006, 112).<sup>8</sup>

The control of sexuality and female mobility can also be intense and harsh in contexts where girls might face insecure conditions and sexual predation. In her powerful ethnography of impoverished families in a *favela* in Brazil, Goldstein (2003) observes that the survivalist ethos of many of the mothers who have to cope with a harsh world leads, in turn, to some rather harsh forms of discipline and punishment. Goldstein observes that mothers greatly fear that some of their children will find the street more attractive than their crowded, destitute and sometimes

<sup>7</sup> Many of the girls also made references to the “reputation” of the school, either when I asked them about it or organically within their discussions. By the school’s “reputation,” they almost always meant not its educational profile but how “loose” the girls in the school were perceived to be, which had an impact on their own reputations as members of that school community.

<sup>8</sup> In studies in West and Central Africa, teachers justified the sexual exploitation of female students by saying that their clothes and behavior were provocative and that the teachers were far from home and had sexual needs (Pinheiro 2006, 119). In the Middle East, sexual harassment of girls is not commonly reported, perhaps because girls are commonly separated from boys in schools and because girls are reluctant to speak out; but a study in Ethiopia, for example, found that students attributed the sexual harassment of girls to the way the girls dressed, and not to boys’ attitudes toward girls (Pinheiro 2006, 119).

contentious households. These women often initiate harsh, even brutal or degrading forms of discipline in the hopes of keeping their children in line and off the street. This applied to boys as well as girls. Girls who spent too much time on the street were seen as girls “of the street,” without the protection of a man or a family, and thus open to sexual predation. Despite significant differences between this context and the research sites, these dynamics recall the strict limits teachers placed on students’ presence in potentially dangerous streets around the public schools and their vulnerability to various forms of deceit, harassment or sexual assault. They highlight the relationships between poverty, harsh punishment and gender surveillance that can become central to school relations.

Therefore, while the surveillance of modesty in public schools may have been extensive and the punishment it generated humiliating, it had a complex and mutually reinforcing relationship with patterns of sexual harassment around the schools. After all, the justification that is almost always given for harassment is that girls dress and act provocatively. Sexual harassment is an issue that many schools constantly have to deal with. This was especially true of the girls’ general public school, which was directly adjacent to both the boys’ general secondary school and another boys’ preparatory school. This meant that the school authorities had to deal with harassment issues almost on a daily basis. Some parents simply did not want to take their girls to school because of the constant harassment. Many girls resented, feared and were deeply hurt by the harassment they encountered, which did not only involve cat-calling and flirtatious approaches, but often involved forms of intimidation and aggression. Disrespectful harassment and hostility ranged from empty bags of chips being thrown at girls to a whole range of verbal sexual harassment, which was often rude, insinuating, ridiculing or insulting, rather than flirtatious, admiring or courting. The younger preparatory school boys, who did not have serious prospects of courting the older girls, constantly attacked and intimidated them nonetheless. They tried to push against them or fake attempts at physical contact in ways that seemed to occupy an ambiguous space between attempted sexual contact and bullying.

Beyond this everyday verbal and physical harassment, incidents of sexual assault were also not uncommon, including a case of assault recounted to me in the school. Students explained how a student had arrived in school in torn clothes and a hysterical state after being assaulted by one or more boys, and was locked in the toilet by the principal until her father and brother came to collect her. In response to my shock at the story, students commented that this was “normal.”

Several other stories were referenced of girls from nearby schools being assaulted. This was a heavy topic and the girls did not want to discuss the incidents in any detail. As discussed further in Chapter 6, the theme of physical vulnerability, sexual harassment and the lack of public safety constituted a distinct element of citizenship disempowerment as constructed by female students in particular.

Chapter 3 has already suggested that harsh punishment by teachers is reproduced and circulated in violence by students, especially boys. In her work on the enactment of masculinity among Palestinian youths, Peteet highlights how some men who were subjected to beatings and torture during detention in the occupied West Bank prisons return home and inflict violence upon women (1994, 45). In exploring the relationship between dominant constructions of masculinities and the sexual harassment of young women in Australian secondary schools, Robinson (2005) highlights the ways in which sexual harassment is integral to the construction of hegemonic heterosexual masculine identities; the importance of popularity, acceptance and young men's fears within male peer-group cultures; and the utilization of sexual harassment as a means through which to maintain and regulate hierarchical power relationships, not just in relation to gender but also in how it intersects with other sites of power such as race and class.

Finally, despite the humiliating punishment and the rhetoric of morally blaming girls, school actors did in fact make concerted attempts to rectify the public safety situation for girls. Girls themselves tried different strategies to avoid the twice-daily ritual of harassment when arriving or departing from the school. Some tried to walk out of school accompanied by teachers, many made sure they walked out in groups or with at least one other student, and a few carried small self-defense tools such as pepper spray, a pin or a small knife. The most effective strategy unfortunately was not to come to school at all.<sup>9</sup> At one point, teachers and students began to access the school from another gate that was not adjacent to the boys' schools, but that gate was eventually blocked because local residents used the area outside it as a waste dump, and the educational and local authorities could not prevent them from doing so. The school authorities attempted to implement different strategies, such as changing the timing of the start and end of the school days for each school, having teachers patrol the area around the school, or

<sup>9</sup> The risk of sexual harassment is recognized as a key barrier to schooling and an important determinant of school dropout rates in many parts of the world, especially in rural areas where students must travel significant distances to get to school (see Pinheiro 2006).

preventing (male and female) students from lingering outside the schools. It was largely in vain. The principal of the school had also tried to convince the district educational authorities to switch the newly built schools so that the girls' school could be the one on the main street instead of being in the middle, between the two boys' schools and only accessed by a small passageway. This proposal was rejected. A delegation of parents and teachers went to the head of the local police station to ask him to assign a policeman to the area to prevent harassment. He reportedly refused their request unless the parents paid the police officers themselves. The efforts of school actors were therefore especially fruitless as they encountered a weak and informally privatized state apparatus that was increasingly unwilling to serve less-affluent citizens. As middle-income parents and teachers who were supported by an affluent patron, they were spared the humiliation that the poor encounter in police stations, but they were denied the protection they sought and were confronted with the expectation that they should directly cofinance the state's provision of the basic collective good of public safety.

### **Impossible Femininities and Injured Masculinities**

The attitude of girls around sexual harassment reflected a number of critical tensions around violence and physical vulnerability for both girls and boys. Their distanced reaction to sexual assault reminded me of the mix of distance and indignation with which boys reacted to the issue of physical assaults by teachers. Boys often wanted me to record the beatings and insults, urging me to document them and gesturing to me to write it down in my notes; checking with me, "Did you write that one down, Miss?" After describing regular practices of beating and humiliation, one student declared, "I'm talking to the minister from here and saying this. We are suffering, Miss." There was a desire to shame the teachers, to expose them or to exact a measure of justice out of them. There was a clear sense of grievance and a desire for accountability.

However, many students refrained from decrying the violence as directed to them personally, and many maintained a matter-of-fact or even a playful attitude, not one of pain and indignation, but rather one of wanting to expose, mock and debase the teachers. For both boys and girls, there was a resigned or matter-of-fact attitude that this was a reality with which one had to live. In a sense there was nothing to do about it, nothing other than what most girls normally do: try to stay in groups, hope that a male relative, teacher or neighbor can escort them through empty or very crowded streets, and hope to be lucky. For girls, deepening the discussion around sexual assault risked bringing up the usual

narratives of blaming the victim. If a student was attacked on the way to school, she had probably been walking alone to school. It may then be asked, but why would she do that, or why do her parents allow this; what kind of family is she from? That is, I understood the reluctance of the girls to elaborate on this matter, despite their usual openness, to stem from a deeply ingrained awareness that any discussion of sexual assault would inevitably bring blame onto themselves: not only onto the victim in question or her family but onto all girls, and especially those who may engage in the same behavior, including something as simple as walking to school un-chaperoned. The reality of sexual assault and the moral blame connected with it had direct implications for the spaces of freedom girls try to carve out for themselves.

Avoiding these realities indicated complex desires and fears – the desire to enjoy their limited margins of freedom, and the fear that these spaces may be lost. Incidents of sexual assault give legitimacy to strict family and school surveillance, the monitoring of girls and the various restrictions on their mobility. Implicit in this relative silence is an acute realization of the limited and fragile legitimacy of their presence on the street, the lack of protection by the state, the legitimization and impunity of transgression against female bodies, and possibly a suspended appropriation of the assessment of their deviance from ideals of modest femininity. The very presence of (young) women in the public space, especially in the street as its epitome, could be incriminating and open them up to violation and accusations of moral failing. Girls already had to try to be as un-present as possible on the street. As one girl put it, “In order to walk in the street, a girl is expected to be deaf and blind ... and mute too”. This “demure femininity, rooted in the notion of a closed, contained body moving toward a clearly defined destination through public space, both enables and constrains a woman’s presence in public” (Lukose 2005, 514).

Similarly, to understand the boys’ sometimes nonchalant reactions to physical assault by teachers, it is essential to appreciate that being beaten could be construed and experienced as an assault on masculinity, which it is not pleasant to confront, highlight or dwell on. Being beaten can represent a distinctly masculine shame, intimately linked to income, power and social status. Given the dynamics of punishment described in Chapter 3, the assumption would be that if a boy is better built or more aggressive, he would not receive as many strikes from teachers. If he has enough money to pay regularly for private tutoring, he will be spared the related harassment from teachers. If he has a family that could deter or intimidate teachers, he could be among those standing by the side of the classroom while others swept the floor. As such, being subject to physical

punishment represents an injury to masculinity in exposing physical and social vulnerability, confirming the degraded citizenship of the less advantaged. Downplaying physical punishment could allow male students to more successfully embody masculine ideals.

### **Conclusion**

The forms of noncompliance and the breakdown of discipline and supervision described here, coupled with cheating and teacher shirking in Chapter 3, are key manifestations of the “permissiveness” that I argue is a primary feature of the lived citizenship of the majority of Egyptians (Conclusion chapter). The term “permissiveness” as applied to lived citizenship is inspired by parenting literature. The literature on parenting and teaching styles often refers to authoritarian, authoritative and permissive adult styles in describing approaches to discipline (see Baumrind 1971, 1991, Maccoby and Martin 1983, Firmin and Castle 2008). Authoritarian parents are controlling, rigid and cold. They are strict and demand unquestioning obedience from their children. Above all, children of authoritarian parents are not allowed to question or disagree with their parents. Permissive parents, on the other hand, provide lax and inconsistent feedback to their children. They are typically less involved in their children’s lives than other parents and place fewer limits on their children’s behavior. Authoritative parents are firm and set clear limits on their children’s behavior while allowing interaction and dialogue with their children. The withdrawal of the state from providing a range of protection and provision and participation rights encompass some of the meanings that parenting literature sometimes refers to under a fourth neglectful style, where parents are not responsive to children’s needs, do not show them care and have few expectations about their behavior or achievement. While neglectfulness is applicable to many of these patterns, the term “permissiveness” signals a wider array of related phenomena, including informality, precarization and corruption, as well as the acts of legislation and allocation of resources involved in the creation of these phenomena. Applying these categories to modes of governance and lived citizenship is not meant to suggest a paternalistic portrayal of the role of the state. Permissiveness is meant to signal the deliberate breakdown of the rule of law that encompasses all of these phenomena. It is about the withdrawal of the right to protection under the law that is fundamental to the “lived social contract” (Sobhy 2021).

The forms of noncompliance described here stem from alienation from school relations and declining returns to education, which are premised by the withdrawal of provision rights (of good quality education

for all) by the state. The dynamics of contestation and noncompliance around gender norms do not only reflect competing gender norms. They critically reference the withdrawal of rights to protection and public safety. The weakening and corruption of the protective functions of the state meant that public school actors, even in the relatively more privileged general secondary schools, could not call upon the police or rely on other institutions of the state to deter sexual harassment or control drug-dealing and violence around the school premises. Islamist discourses served to define and emphasize the limitations on female modesty. As such, they partly obscured the withdrawal of the state from its protective functions and enabled the framing of the failure of public safety as a personal or social failure stemming from the improper conduct of the citizen. Perhaps in this sense, they offered school actors a semblance of control, causality and even agency to draw upon in situations they had failed to tackle in practical terms. Finally, student silences around harassment and beating seemed to point to how untenable the hegemonic ideal femininities and masculinities were for poor students, within the prevailing neoliberal and Islamist frameworks. The ideals they were meant to embody were not compatible with the resources the system granted them. These gendered implications of dominant governance strategies are crucial for understanding everyday lived citizenship and student discourses on national belonging covered in Chapter 6. First, however, Chapter 5 explores how these modes of lived citizenship are implicitly legitimized through official narratives of citizenship and belonging in nationally unified textbooks.