

## ROUNDTABLE

**After the “Spring”: New Patterns of Grassroots Politics?****Women’s Rights Movements during Political Transitions:  
Activism against Public Sexual Violence in Egypt****VICKIE LANGOHR**Department of Political Science, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester,  
Mass.; e-mail: [vlangohr@holycross.edu](mailto:vlangohr@holycross.edu)doi:[10.1017/S0020743814001482](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743814001482)

The most famous demand raised by protesters in the “Arab Spring” was “*al-sha‘b/yrīd/isqāt al-niẓām*” (the people/want /the fall of the regime). Three years later, little progress has been made—outside of Tunisia—in permanently replacing authoritarian regimes with the formal institutions of democracy. However, new forms of activism have emerged that increase citizens’ ability to directly combat pervasive social problems and to successfully pressure official institutions to alter policies. The evolution of activism against public sexual violence in post-Mubarak Egypt is a concrete example. Sexual harassment of women on the streets and in public transportation, widespread before the 25 January uprising, has likely since increased.<sup>1</sup> Many women have been subjected to vicious sexual assault at political protests over the last three years. But activism against these threats has also expanded in ways unimaginable during the Mubarak era. Groups of male and female activists in their twenties and early thirties exhort bystanders on the streets to intervene when they witness harassment, and intervene themselves. Satellite TV programs have extensively covered public sexual violence, directly challenging officials for their failure to combat it while featuring the work of antiharassment and antiassault groups in a positive light. These new practices facilitated two concrete changes in the summer of 2014: amendments to the penal code on sexual harassment, and Cairo University’s adoption of an antiharassment policy which was developed by feminist activists.

Sexual harassment in the streets and on public transportation has long been widespread in Egypt. A UN Women poll of over 2,000 girls and women in Cairo, Alexandria, and five other governorates published in 2013 found that 99 percent had experienced verbal or physical harassment.<sup>2</sup> One month before the 25 January uprising, HarassMap, a group formed months earlier, began sending teams of volunteers to neighborhoods to encourage doormen, shop owners, and others consistently on the streets to intervene if they witnessed harassment. In 2012, three major groups emerged that went beyond such efforts to intervene directly against harassment, initially during Eids, when crowding in shopping areas and public spaces facilitates harassment and in some cases sexual assault. In Eid al-Fitr 2012, members of the newly formed group Basma focused their efforts on men riding in the car reserved for women in each metro train, providing women—at least

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in theory—with a harassment-free space. Donning yellow and orange phosphorescent vests to give themselves an air of official authority, Basma volunteers stood on the platform next to women-only cars and urged men to exit. After initially denying that harassment occurred in the metro, station police later worked with the volunteers. In Eid al-Adha two months later, members of Basma and another new group, Didd al-Taharrush (Against Harassment), patrolled the Tal‘at Harb area, where a high concentration of shops and cinemas has historically facilitated harassment. They intervened physically to block groups of men pursuing women and assisted survivors in filing police reports. A third group, Shuft Taharrush (I Saw Harassment) also started Eid patrols. These groups have since expanded their work to include initiating discussions about harassment with public transportation passengers and conducting university workshops.

The activities of these groups differ significantly from Mubarak-era efforts against harassment. In 2008, the teen magazine *Kilmitna* initiated a campaign that included a concert at ‘Ain Shams University during which famous pop singers denounced harassment. Volunteers engaged shop owners and bus drivers about harassment and posted antiharassment stickers in their stores and buses. This focus on changing popular attitudes resembles some post-2011 activism, but *Kilmitna* soon moved on to other issues. By contrast, the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR) worked on the issue for several years, producing the first large-scale survey of harassment in 2008. But ECWR’s efforts focused largely on developing new laws and encouraging greater police presence at major events—a sharp contrast from the direct street intervention of today’s movements.

Before HarassMap was founded in late 2010, no group had focused solely on harassment. Now there are many such initiatives, which interact and overlap. Some members of antiharassment groups volunteer with Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault (OpAntiSH), a group founded in November 2012 to extract women from the violent mob assaults that have increasingly characterized post-Mubarak protests.<sup>3</sup> As Dalia Abdelhamid and Hind Mahmoud suggest, these anti-assault and harassment groups could be said to constitute part of “an independent social movement numbering hundreds, if not thousands, of young men and women who have chosen to stand up to violence using extremely diverse methods and tools.”<sup>4</sup>

Antiharassment and assault groups have been covered widely on satellite TV, both on talk shows (including one on Misr 25, the now-canceled Muslim Brotherhood channel) and on popular entertainment programs such as Bassem Youssef’s *al-Birnamig* and *Hukumat Nisf al-Layl* (Midnight’s Government). These TV appearances serve as a “force multiplier” for groups’ messages: the members being interviewed are asked questions that allow them to expose common misconceptions about harassment, such as the idea that only “improperly” dressed women are harassed. Shows examining harassment more generally have also proliferated. The hosts of these programs take the ubiquity of harassment to be a fact and condemn it as shameful, and some even lacerate government officials and powerful social institutions. A November 2012 episode of *al-Sura al-Kamila* (The Whole Picture) asked, “are men of religion responsible for harassment?” Host Liliane Daoud confronted Sa‘d ‘Amara, a member of the high council of the then-ruling Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party, with statements by high-ranking Freedom and Justice Party members justifying harassment. Such confrontations sometimes produce results. In March 2014, video of a Cairo University student subjected to mob harassment was circulated by the group Shuft Taharrush

and broadcast on several shows. After Cairo University's president Gaber Nassar extensively criticized the survivor's dress on one program, Shuft Taharrush coordinator Fathy Farid appeared on the same show and responded with biting criticism. Nassar subsequently backtracked from his comments, and Farid and Nassar announced on-air together plans for Shuft Taharrush to work on campus. This cooperation did not materialize, but it is likely that the media firestorm helped motivate the university to adopt a new antiharassment policy developed by feminist activists and professors, which will see students' complaints investigated by a female-majority committee. In June 2014, after host Lamis al-Hadidi excoriated the minister of health for an emergency room's denial of treatment to a woman who had been sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square during celebrations of President al-Sisi's inauguration, a new ministerial decree ordered that hospital emergency rooms would admit all patients and provide them care free of charge for forty-eight hours. Successfully deploying media pressure to achieve such policy shifts was much less likely in the Mubarak era.<sup>5</sup>

New forms of women's rights activism have often emerged during periods of struggle against authoritarian regimes, but the Egyptian antisexual harassment and assault initiatives differ from these in ways that raise interesting cross-national questions. Women's rights groups formed during political transitions in other regions are typically made up almost exclusively of women, often mothers enacting what Sonia Alvarez, writing about Brazil, calls "militant motherhood."<sup>6</sup> During military rule in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s, demands for state-subsidized day care to enable mothers to work began in apolitical "mothers' clubs" and grew into a major national movement for day care. One of the first in a series of protests that brought down President Suharto in Indonesia was organized by the Voice of Concerned Mothers, whose members occupied a major intersection in Jakarta to protest the effects of rising prices on mothers trying to feed their families. By contrast, Egyptian antiharassment and assault groups do not mobilize around issues in which motherhood is salient, and they include large numbers of young men. Even when women's rights activism in other authoritarian and postauthoritarian contexts has not been framed in terms of "mothers' rights," members of those groups have typically been older than Egypt's antiharassment workers, who are generally under thirty and often in their early twenties. According to Valerie Sperling, women's rights activists in Russia in the initial post-Communist years were largely in their forties or fifties<sup>7</sup>; only eight of sixty-six activists whom she interviewed were thirty-five or younger. Is the influx of youth into Egyptian antiharassment activism simply part of a cross-national phenomenon of increased youth activism on a host of issues? What accounts for the large numbers of men in these movements? Through my interviews, I found that some men joined because of the negative ramifications of close friends or family members being harassed, but others joined for different reasons.

Some observers would argue that Egyptian antiharassment groups are too dissimilar from women's rights groups in other countries to be fruitfully compared with them, or question whether they are "women's rights groups" at all. Feminist scholars have critiqued earlier Egyptian antiharassment efforts as lacking a sophisticated analysis of the subordination of women that enables sexualized violence. Analyses of the causes of harassment do vary among contemporary groups and their members. A founder of one antiharassment initiative told me that when members of the group speak in public

on the group's behalf, they take the position that women are in no way responsible for their own harassment. However, convincing all group members that women's dress plays no role in causing harassment has been a long-term project that is still not fully accomplished.<sup>8</sup> One could argue, borrowing Maxine Molyneux's formulation, that for some activists ending harassment is a practical gender interest, one which arises as "a response to an immediate perceived need" (such as the need to be able to get to work without being harassed) and "does not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality."<sup>9</sup> Other activists explicitly seek what Molyneux calls "strategic gender interests," "derived . . . from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist."<sup>10</sup> While antiharassment activists do not all explicitly connect harassment to gender inequality, they do all articulate a commitment to a woman's right to safety and dignity in the public sphere, which is central to other women's rights, such as attending university or influencing politics through protest. It is also clear, as Wi'am al-Tamami has described in the case of antiassault work, that "learning" takes place within these groups and that some male activists in particular have moved away from more traditional understandings of gender roles.<sup>11</sup> Activists who do not currently situate harassment within a wider critique of inequality may change their ideas, as have members of earlier movements in other regions of the world. Alvarez calls many of the groups advocating for women's rights in military-ruled Brazil "feminine but not feminist," and notes that "initially, the demands of these feminine movements did not challenge prevailing gender power arrangements . . . but by the late 1970s many feminine movement participants had begun questioning their unequal status as women."<sup>12</sup>

The amplification of antiharassment activists' engagement with the media may also strengthen women's rights by "normalizing" the image of those who seek them. The work of these activists is covered very positively; as Bassem Youssef framed his discussion with antiassault activists, "we want to have a dialogue with people who are really making a difference in society."<sup>13</sup> This coverage undermines an insidious discourse, widespread both during and after the Mubarak era, that caricatured women's rights activists as inauthentic Egyptians, more attuned to the concerns of Western funders and international organizations than to those of the Egyptian "street."

As Jeannie Sowers documents in her contribution to this roundtable, the new heights of repression reached under President 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi pose a grave challenge to grassroots work. Antiharassment and antiassault activism is not immune to these challenges, but room to maneuver still remains. Fears of arrest have already limited some groups' activities, but some activists involved in the campaign against Eid harassment report an increased willingness of policemen to cooperate with them even after Mursi's overthrow, and antiharassment groups operated successfully during Eid al Adha in October 2014. Satellite media professionals now almost universally toe the government line, but accountability for mishandling of harassment may remain possible when it occurs outside frontline government institutions, such as in universities. Formal institutions of democracy are yet to emerge in an enduring form in postuprising Egypt. But focusing on street-level activism and changes in media practices in particular policy areas illuminates new ways in which increased levels of accountability have episodically emerged through mechanisms that could not have been deployed before the 25 January uprising.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In focus groups with women in five governorates in March 2013, Mariz Tadros found that participants unanimously reported large-scale increases in harassment since Mubarak's overthrow. Mariz Tadros, "Politically Motivated Sexual Assault and the Law in Violent Transitions: A Case Study from Egypt," Institute of Development Studies, June 2013, [http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2950/ER8%20final%20online.pdf?sequence=1&utm\\_source=idswebsite&utm\\_medium=down-load&utm\\_campaign=opendocs](http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2950/ER8%20final%20online.pdf?sequence=1&utm_source=idswebsite&utm_medium=down-load&utm_campaign=opendocs), p. 21 (accessed 13 October 2014). In contrast, *The Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt* conducted by UN Women found that only 48.9 percent of its respondents said harassment had increased in this period. "Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt," UN Women, April 2013, [http://harassmap.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/287\\_Summaryreport\\_eng\\_low-1.pdf](http://harassmap.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/287_Summaryreport_eng_low-1.pdf), p. 8 (accessed 13 October 2014).

<sup>2</sup>"Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt."

<sup>3</sup>Vickie Langohr, "This is Our Square: Fighting Sexual Assaults at Cairo Protests," *Middle East Report* 13 (2013): 18–25.

<sup>4</sup>Hind Ahmad Zaki and Dalia Abd Alhamid, "Women as Fair Game in the Public Sphere: A Critical Introduction for Understanding Sexual Violence and Methods of Resistance," *Jadaliyya*, 9 July 2014, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18455/women-as-fair-game-in-the-public-sphere\\_a-critical](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18455/women-as-fair-game-in-the-public-sphere_a-critical) (accessed 10 October 2014).

<sup>5</sup>Vickie Langohr, "New President, Old Patterns of Sexual Assault in Egypt," *Middle East Report*, 7 July 2014, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero070714> (accessed October 13, 2014).

<sup>6</sup>Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 83.

<sup>7</sup>Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34–35.

<sup>8</sup>Author's interview, Cairo, Egypt, 26 May 2014.

<sup>9</sup>Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11 (1985): 233.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>11</sup>Wi'am al-Tamami, "To Willingly Enter the Circles, the Square," *Jadaliyya*, 30 July 2013, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/13273/to-willingly-enter-the-circles-the-square> (accessed 10 October 2014).

<sup>12</sup>Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy*, 108.

<sup>13</sup>*Al-Birnami*, 15 March 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oE1msB3Hu7g>.