

# Can Sexual Violence Be Denounced Without Perpetrating Class Violence? Discussions on Sexual Harassment in Egypt

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### Abstract

Public sexual harassment in Egypt is a textbook case of how a public problem can be constituted and used against working class men, who are identified as the main perpetrators. In such cases, a gender issue is exploited for political and class purposes, to propagate a law and order rhetoric and reinforce control over the lower classes. Since sexual harassment is presented in isolation from other forms of sexual violence—ones which might incriminate men of other social classes—the manner in which it functions as a threat in a larger system of domination is also invisibilized. In order to overcome these pitfalls and comprehend sexual harassment intersectionally, we propose to employ the concept of the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly 1987) in our analysis.



#### Keywords

Public harassment, continuum of sexual violence, class-sex intersectionality, security politics, Egypt

#### Introduction

The problem of sexual harassment in public space, as it is formulated in Egypt today, seems to serve to govern working class subjects by contributing to their construal in terms of 'masculinities in crisis.' The problematization of sexual harassment—which can be understood foremost as a form of sexual violence aimed at renewing gendered social relations—in such classist terms cannot be regarded as adequate from a feminist perspective. How, then, can we avoid the trap of relativism? Or that of establishing a hierarchy between forms of violence and different struggles? What tools allow us to reflect simultaneously on social relations constituted by differences of class, and of sex?

We propose to answer these questions, arising from our fieldwork in Egypt, through the concept of the 'continuum of sexual violence' proposed by Liz Kelly (1987, 1988). This concept reveals, on the one hand, how sexual harassment in public space, because it embodies the threat of other types of violence, plays a central role in patriarchal domination. On the other hand, it invites us to connect this form of violence, conventionally associated with working class men, to other forms of socially crosscutting sexual violence (domestic or spousal violence for example), or indeed ones that are specific to the dominant classes (sexual violence perpetrated by workplace superiors, medical personnel, etc.). Before detailing the manner in which we propose to use this concept, this article outlines the ways in which sexual harassment has been acknowledged as a meaningful category and a social problem in Egypt and how it has been instrumentalized to promote the regime's law and order rhetoric, and serve class interests.

These reflections and the present article emerge from the authors' respective fieldwork in Cairo on topics related to public sexual harassment: women's self-defence practices (Lachenal 2015), and the introduction of women-only coaches in the metro (Tillous 2017). The first of these two projects analyzed the manner in which female combat practices emerged in Egypt in connection with the institutionalization of the struggle against sexual harassment. The possibility that female victims of violence could respond through physical force was first contemplated, institutionally speaking, in the early 2000s. At that time, classes in which women learned to kick and punch in order to defend themselves against would-be harassers began to proliferate in Cairo's wealthier neighbourhoods. By staging situations of violence focused on public space and the harasser's social alterity, the majority of these self-defence classes allow for the expression of socially and sexually situated anxieties oriented toward a figure who is understood to be male, working class, and dangerous (Lachenal 2014). In the metro, the harasser figure is also explicitly associated with the working classes. When coaches reserved for women were introduced in Cairo in 1989, the objectives were similar to those expressed in the press, two years earlier, with respect to the metro itself: to educate the working class and 'change the behaviour' of the 'normal Egyptian citizen' in order to 'civilize' him/her (Al-Gumhuriyya, 06.08.87). Women-only coaches were also supposed to offer more comfort to female passengers so as to encourage them to forego using cars, thus helping to reduce the chronic congestion of Cairo's roads. They were thus aimed at women who were sufficiently well-off to be able to access a car, who needed to be protected from what were supposed to be the disturbing behaviours of working class men (Tillous 2017).

#### Constituting 'Sexual Harassment' as a Meaningful Category in Egypt

The expression 'sexual harassment' initially appeared in the United States in the 1970s, in reference to a specific kind of power relation. The term was employed to refer to solicitations of a sexual

nature arising in a context of unequal power, of which the workplace is characteristic. Catherine MacKinnon, a feminist legal scholar, contributed to defining the 'sexual harassment' that affects women in the work environment (1979) as well as, in her subsequent work, the public sphere. Her scholarship laid the groundwork for the process that eventually led to 'sexual harassment' becoming a legally recognized category in the United States in 1986. The birth of 'sexual harassment' in the United States is of interest here as a reminder that the problem's public recognizion originally pertained to the workplace, and arose from a feminist perspective, two dimensions that have been progressively lost as the expression has circulated globally.

'Sexual harassment' has indeed proven itself to be a mobile expression that has moved across different national, political, economic and social contexts. Its extension from the North American context to other countries and progressive integration into international law in the late 1980s was facilitated by the institutional framework of the UN, where it was acknowledged as one among many forms of discriminatory behaviour. The category of 'sexual harassment' was for example incorporated, in 1989, into the recommendations for the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which the majority of UN member countries have ratified, including Egypt since 1981. The expression's institutionalisation and circulation continued in the 1990s through a series of international conferences: 'sexual harassment' was discussed at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, then at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing (Kreil 2012, 162-163). The manner in which it was progressively constituted as a public problem in Egypt is thus indicative of the country's clientelistic integration into networks connected to the UN (Kreil 2012, 162-181).

The expression—translated into Arabic as *taharrush ginsī*—was progressively constituted as a category of meaning in Egypt through several awareness-raising campaigns carried out by NGOs, among which the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) played a crucial role. This center was founded in 1996 in the wake of the Beijing summit and receives the bulk of its funding from the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), a branch of the UN apparatus. Combatting sexual harassment is one of its principal missions, and it initiated the first studies and publications on the topic in Egypt. In 2005, it launched an unprecedentedly large campaign against sexual harassment, called 'Safe streets for everyone,' which led to the term's consecration among Egyptian institutions and in the non-profit sector. In the wake of this campaign, a growing number of NGOs, both newly formed and long-established, began working on the diffusion of the newly translated category. The growth in the number of projects pertaining to sexual harassment is thus directly linked to the priorities of the international organizations financing them. Within a few years, 'sexual harassment' became one of the prisms through which development projects in Egypt were conceived. In Cairo, the expression, which resonated with residents' experience, gained increasing public visibility as it began to be seen in graffiti on walls, newspaper headlines, and protest banners.

As the following section will show, the Egyptian case is paradigmatic of the process through which the understanding of social problems is depoliticized as they gain in public visibility and are recognized as political priorities. This process is akin to what Pauline Delage describes with respect to the construction of 'conjugal violence' as a category of public action in France and the United States (2017), and the tensions arising from the process of institutional implementation of a feminist analysis. In both countries, the recognition of 'conjugal violence' in the 1970s was the results of years of feminist activism struggling to take gender violence occurring in the private sphere into account when problematizing oppression of women. As the topic gained visibility and entered political agendas, the initial feminist frame had to mutate, meeting with institutional constraints and justice and police apparatus. One of the consequences was the redefinition of the 'problem' in more cultural and individual ways rather than systemic and political ones.

The Egyptian case resembles a 'NGO-ization,' which is to say a process through which radical movements, such as feminism, are reformulated and channelled in a manner that serves, rather than resisting, neoliberal thinking (Lang 1997), or are progressively constrained as their capacity for contestation is funnelled (Jad 2004). Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi (2011) criticize the manner in which this sort of 'NGO-ization' has contributed, with major support from international funding, to the depoliticization of debates concerning the rights of women in Egypt. This process should not lead to the conclusion, however, that Egyptian NGOs devoted to women's issues, because of their status and the financial pressures to which they are exposed, are discredited as feminist actors. It is thanks to them, and a process of tireless advocacy, that a number of sensitive issues have been put on the national political agenda and been the topic of legislation, for instance spousal abuse, divorce, and female genital cutting. As the feminist activist and scholar Angie Abdelmomen argues (2015), depoliticization can sometimes be only a facade that is strategically maintained in order to obtain international funding and pursue feminist struggles without attracting suspicion from the state. In Egypt, as elsewhere (Bernal and Grewal, 2014), NGOs should not be treated as a monolithic whole but as a complex and diverse one: while navigating institutional, political and economic constraints, some NGOs collaborate with feminist grassroots, working to understand sexual harassment through an anti-patriarchal frame.

#### The Effects of the Official Recognition of 'Sexual Harassment'

It is essential when engaging in the history of sexual harassment not to overlook the power relations that underlie the definition of the 'problem.' This section's aim is to describe the manner in which feminist movements in Cairo were systematically repressed in parallel to the framing of social problems in terms of morality and respectability in a manner that invisibilized political and economic dynamics such as growing social inequalities, accentuated repression, and systematic police violence. The construction and instrumentalization of a collective and homogeneous subject bearing the name 'women,' understood outside of social relations and frozen in the role of a figure in need to be 'saved' (Abu-Lughod 2002) and protected appears to have legitimated—or at least to have permitted—a transition toward a rhetoric of law and order. Carol Lee Bacchi invites us to pay attention to what is left "unproblematic" in the ways social problems are publically represented and framed. Some representations of problems, she argues, "benefit the members of some groups at the expense of others" (2009, 44). The ways sexual harassment has been recognized in Egypt offer a good illustration of this dynamic: comforting security and morality rhetoric while undermining critical feminist approaches.

Since the 1980s media coverage of sexual violence in Egypt has crystalized around a series of 'affairs'<sup>1</sup> that reveal how the social status of the aggressors and the victims is critical to the way such violence is understood—and punished. One striking case was a gang rape that took place in 1985 in the upper class neighbourhood of Maadi. The assault was punished with unprecedented severity—two of the four aggressors were sentenced to death—and received very wide media coverage, in which rape was presented for the first time as a public problem. According to Aseel El-Dessouky (1997), the contrasting social status of the victim—a member of Cairo's bourgeoisie—and the perpetrators—lower class outsiders to the neighbourhood—was decisive in the assault's publicity. In another rape case, which took place in Attaba in 1992, it was the victim's piety—she was described as a veiled and 'respectful' young woman—that drew particular attention from the press. This case, in turn, provided an opportunity to denounce the moral decadence of Egyptian society and the loss of values on the part of young men. In October 2006, the press reported on a 'scandal' (*fadīha*) involving 'collective' acts of harassment that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For Elisabeth Claverie and Luc Boltanski (2007), the 'affair' plays an important role in processes of social change and the transformation of legal categories by inviting actors to position themselves morally within the registers of the just and the unjust, of normality and anormality.

took place on the evening of Eid in several streets of downtown Cairo. Enrique Klaus (2007) correctly underscores how, labelling the event the 'downtown scandal,' the Egyptian press emphasized the presumed origins of the aggressors, described as unemployed and frustrated men from the city's peripheral neighbourhoods with no business being 'there.'

Documents produced in the context of national campaigns aimed at raising awareness about sexual harassment in Egypt employ similar discursive strategies. Anchored in authoritative normative references, they denounce behaviours as 'deviant' and stigmatize those who engage in them. The opposition between developed/backward is revived as the denunciation of sexual harassment becomes a signifier of urban modernity and an implicit marker of social hierarchy (Koning 2009; Kreil 2012). The campaign's lexical and graphic tools, among other things, contribute to the process of exclusion. For example harassers can be compared to insects, like in a sticker published in 2007 by a group close to the Muslim Brotherhood where they are represented as flies swarming around a piece of candy, or a humorous video clip that compares them 'pests' and 'cockroaches' in order to promote a sonic device claimed to drive them away. Rania Kassab Sweis (2012) and An Van Raemdonck (2019) describe how similar dichotomies – modernity versus backwardness, 'good girls' versus 'bad boys' – are not only performed but reinforced through other NGOs campaigns in Egypt, like the ones they studied focusing on young Egyptian women from rural areas and the issue of FGM (female genital mutilation).

The harasser figure is presented as a target in need of being punished, educated, and 'civilized.' Marylène Lapalus makes a comparable point with respect to official public narratives framing female murder cases in Mexico and Costa Rica (2015). She argues that these illustrate combined processes of euphemizing and depoliticizing the crimes by making them appear exceptional, thus 'othering' them: the space in which the crimes occur is not the home but the street, the criminal is sick. Such discursive strategies obstruct any attempt to analyze violence against women in systemic terms. It is interesting to note that the women's self-defence courses, developed in the civil society sector in Cairo in the 2000s, treated the street as the only potentially dangerous space. The aggressor against which young women were invited to arm themselves is the stranger, the thug prowling in public transport. Teachers never mention the fact that the women might have to defend themselves against people they know. In its initial form, the practice thus failed to approach sexual harassment as the product of structural inequalities between men and women.

The manner in which the Egyptian government has tackled the problem is in fact a good illustration of the power issues at stake in the phenomenon's public recognition. Only once sexual harassment was understood in terms of social and moral deviance and all feminist claims were suppressed or ignored did the regime acknowledged it at the turn of the 2010s. The fact that the government got behind the issue cannot therefore be understood as a victory for feminism, as it was rather a form of law and order opportunism (Amar 2011): the fight against sexual harassment legitimized the persistence of massive arrests, political intimidation and the lower classes' eviction from downtown Cairo. Under the cover of protecting the respectability of young women downtown, state security is able to continue to freely perpetrate violence against certain young men, designated as deviants. And if the expression 'sexual harassment' finally entered the Egyptian penal code in 2014, assorted with severe jail penalties (BBC News, 05.06.14; Reuters, 16.07.14), it seems it was the authoritarian regime that first benefited from it (El-Rifae 2014). Over the summer of 2014, the newly 'elected' President Abdel Fatah Al-Sissi orchestrated several media performances regarding sexual violence against women, presenting himself as the father – tough but fair – of the Egyptian young women, devoted to protect them and their morality (Ahmed Zaki 2015).

#### Inscribing Sexual Harassment in the Continuum of Sexual Violence in Order to Link Social

#### **Relations of Class and Sex**

Claiming that sexual harassment in public space constitutes a problem formulated by Egypt's dominant classes in order to better control the working classes—defined yet again as dangerous (Chevalier 1973 [1958])<sup>2</sup>, and blamed once more for the crisis the country is going through—seems to lead inevitably to relativizing the problem and downplaying the violence of certain acts. There is no getting around the fact that in Maadi in 1985, Attaba in 1992, or downtown Cairo in 2006, women were raped. How can we acknowledge sexual violence without taking part in class violence? It is to overcome this difficulty that it appears useful to us to resituate, following Marylène Lieber (2008), sexual harassment in the framework of what Liz Kelly (1987) conceptualized as the "continuum of sexual violence".

Kelly, a sociologist, formulated the concept of the continuum of sexual violence on the basis of a study conducted with sixty women, half of which had been the targets of violence that they themselves defined as rape, incest or domestic violence. The term 'continuum' is used in its common meaning, referring to a series of elements—in this case events—that have a common fundamental character and cannot easily be distinguished from one another. She demonstrates that there exists both a continuum of *incidence*, since all women, irrespective of their social class, experience sexual violence in their lifetimes, and a continuum of *experience*: for an individual woman, all experiences of sexual violence are related to one another. Sexual harassment as it arises in public space is thus associated with other types of sexual assault, which in turn embody the threat of other forms of violence. Lieber regards this as the key principle on which public sexual harassment is based; she therefore refers to it as a "reminder of the sexual order" (2008, 65). The common fundamental feature on which the continuum of violence rests is the social control of women by men, which the patriarchal system is based on and through which relations of domination are renewed (Hanmer 1977).

How does this social control translate in practice into women's experience? For Liz Kelly (1987), in line with the work of Andrea Dworkin (1981) and Catherine MacKinnon (1982), the continuum of sexual violence is underpinned by the heterosexual order, which is to say the fact that a large proportion of heterosexual relations, and in particular conjugal ones, are based on force, coercion and abuse, the effect of which is to normalize violence and make it invisible. However, the framework of heterosexuality is not in our view sufficient to explain the way the continuum of sexual violence is translated into practice since, if it may encompass violence against lesbians and sexual dissidents specifically because of their dissent against heteronormativity, it sets aside sexual violence directed at non-white women because they are non-white.

Lieber (2008) argues that it is instead fear that plays the operative role in the continuum and links the different forms of violence to one another: "fear plays a non-negligible role since forms of violence that can initially appear trivial systematically suggest the potential for violence that the persons involved would regard as much more serious." This is why "gestures, words and impositions—starting with what is referred to as "just flirting"—regularly remind women that they could experience much more severe forms of violence" (2008, 61). In other words, to borrow from Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost's introduction to the book *Penser la violence des femmes* [Thinking Women's Violence] (2012), "the social

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>In a colossal study on the emergence of the working class in Paris in the first half of the nineteenth century, Louis Chevalier shows (1) how bourgeois opinion confused workers and criminals and built an image of working classes as dangerous ones, and also (2) how the working classes were made responsible for any form of crisis (sanitary, economic or political). The two major outbursts of cholera epidemics originated in the precarious living conditions of the new urban proletariat while causing a great number of deaths among the bourgeoisie –including the President of the Council, Casimir Perier, who died in 1832. Both outbursts (1832 and 1848), Chevalier notes, coincided with major political and economic struggles, leading the new bourgeoisie to consider the working class as being responsible for the crisis.

order is above all based on the asymmetric distribution of supposed powers and vulnerabilities." The fact that "men, in times of peace as in times of war, do not have to fear, whether in public space or at home, women raping and killing them, constitutes an important fact of the social order and its predictability. Inversely, the fact that women have completely integrated the fact that they must subordinate their freedom to speak and move to the fear of being raped and killed by men (and not by women), in times of peace as in times of war, is an integral part of that same order" (2012, 57, *our translation*).

In our view, there exists a third driver of the continuum of sexual violence: the suspicion of consent. Unlike other forms of violence or assault, for sexual violence to be recognized, the victim must not only demonstrate the guilt of her aggressor, but also that she did not consent to her own assault. There is a parallel here, on the microsocial level, with the suspicion of consent on the part of the dominated to their own domination, a notion that Nicole-Claude Mathieu (1985) criticized on grounds that "to give in is not to consent." This text is a response to the argument defended by, among others, the anthropologist Maurice Godelier according to whom "the stronger of the two components of power is not the violence of those who dominate but the consent of the dominated to their domination" (1978, 176, *our translation*). Nicole-Claude Mathieu challenges that claim, highlighting the context of oppression imposed by different means - notably physical or moral violence and by exclusion of the means to defend oneself. Within this context, to say yes is a way to ensure one's own survival and has nothing to do with consent.

The problem of public sexual harassment is formulated today in Egypt in a manner that does not inscribe it in the framework of the continuum, and it is in that respect that it appears to us to be flawed. The ECWR report (Abul-Komsan, Mohammed Hassan and Shoukry, 2008), which as mentioned previously constitutes one of the centerpieces of the category's construction, offers an illustration of this flaw. Not only does it reinforce the designation of an enemy of a certain class in the case of sexual harassment, but it also fails to connect different forms of violence against women.

On the basis of questionnaires administered to an equal number of men and women (1010 persons of each sex) in the Cairo area, it established that 83% of Egyptian women had been exposed to "sexual harassment", irrespective of their style of dress. It also establishes a sociological profile of the harasser: "Public opinion research showed that most harassers are young males, between 19-24 years old. In terms of occupation, the study showed that male microbus and taxi drivers are the most likely to be harassers" (2008, 7). Young "unemployed" men are also singled out as potential harassers, and the study suggests that the principal reason for the increase in harassment is "worsening economic situation and the spread of unemployment among youth"; low levels of education and "poor upbringings" are also incriminated. The study relies on a definition of harassment that corresponds principally to harassment in the street and, very peripherally, workplace harassment: "touching, noises (including whistling, hissing noises, kissing sounds etc.), ogling of women's bodies, verbal harassment of a sexually explicit nature, stalking or following, phone harassment, and indecent exposure" (2008, 6). It does not take into account harassment between two people who know each other, nor spousal violence. It also omits police violence, racist violence, especially against women from Upper Egypt or Sudan, as well as acts against lesbians.

Although rape and sexual assault are not among the types of harassment studied for the report, the title nevertheless includes them: "Clouds in Egypt's Sky' Sexual Harassment: from Verbal Harassment to Rape. A Sociological Study." Assault is invoked here not as an object of study, but to lend weight to the denunciation of harassment in public space. Detaching sexual harassment from the continuum of patriarchal violence excludes the possibility of a critique in terms of the domination of one sex by the other and opens the door to the possibility of social stigmatization. It amounts ultimately to separating women along the lines of social class, diminishing the importance of other forms of violence makes it possible to envisage it as a threat of graver forms of violence that could potentially also occur. By connecting different forms of sexual violence, irrespective of which social classes are most readily

positioned to exercise them, the continuum of sexual violence is a major conceptual tool for understanding harassment in terms of the intersection of relationships of domination (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Davis 1981; Kergoat 2009).

#### Conclusions

While feminist movements in the Mediterranean have become major political and social actors, as shown by the revolutions in North Africa and Middle East, 'women's causes' keep being rhetorically and practically used for other ends, sometimes repressive and authoritarian ones (Mikdashi 2017). The matter of 'women's causes' therefore questions the subversive and transformative potential of feminist critique. In Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme (1999) [The New Spirit of Capitalism], Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello observe that capitalism, in search of spiritual and moral motivations, succeeded in swallowing and adapting to the criticisms made of it. If a similar dynamic is at work with regard to patriarchy and feminist critique, then it is necessary to question the relationships between feminism and 'women's issues'. Our paper contributes to this project by investigating the Egyptian case. It shows that the formulation of sexual harassment in Cairo since the beginning of the 2000s has been based on a process of depoliticization that not only invisibilizes underlying class issues, but also, and at the same time, evacuates the possibility of a critique in terms of male-female domination. Those dynamics of what can be called 'ideological hijacking' are even stronger in an authoritarian context like Egypt. As Paul Amar suggests (2011), governmental anti-harassment policies appear to constitute laboratories in which repressive regimes develop and test their modes of governance. We argue that gender constitutes a strategic tool in this process: in Cairo, the awareness campaigns of the last decade, implemented by international institutions and myriad NGOs, turn out to have contributed to the stigmatization of the masculinities of the working classes as well as certain femininities judged to be 'questionable,' and to have contributed to justifying tighter policing of the city and public social life. The manner in which harassment is formulated in Egypt, by identifying a specific type of harasser and denouncing a specific type of violence against women, misses a whole series of types of violence, as well as the women who are subject to them. These 'others' - other types of violence, other women - are invoked in order to give weight to the denunciation of public sexual harassment of middle and upper class women, but are not conceived of as part of a continuum. In so doing, the violent acts of a whole category of men in economically and socially dominant positions are passed over in silence.

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