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POST RELIGION

## When Women Fear to Tread: Sexual Violence and the Egyptian Revolution

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The body politic is at risk in Egypt. On the second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution -- Jan. 25 -- in a demonstration in Tahrir Square, a woman protester was violently set upon by a mob of men who grabbed at her private parts, pulling and pushing her from person to person until she was finally and with great difficulty rescued by teams of anti-harassment male activists. The roiling crowd circling around its prey was [captured on video](#).

She was not the only victim that night: Eighteen other incidents were also reported. And this was not the first time women protesters -- and reporters -- have been attacked by crowds of men in such demonstrations, their clothing ripped off, men's fingers reaching inside their underwear.

When the masses brought down Hosni Mubarak's regime two years ago, women who played a crucial role in the demonstrations that led to the fall of the regime marveled at the safety they experienced in the squares. In February 2011, a young activist woman named Samar Osman reported to Radio Free Liberty: "The days of protests was utopia because not one man looked at me in a sexual way at all. Actually they were very, very protective of us."

Then, immediately after Mubarak's fall, sexual harassment returned with a vengeance. The message was clear: Women had been needed in the revolution against Mubarak, but now that Egyptians were building a new society, women should leave the political sphere to men. A recent petition to President Morsi by women's rights organizations denounced "[t]he trend of targeting female activists, to punish them for participating in the public sphere and to exclude them from political life." (AMEWS, February 2013).

In response a group of courageous Egyptian men and women have formed Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment or OpAntiSH. Armed, sometimes armed with batons and blow torches, male supporters of OpAntiSH put themselves on the front lines to save women from being attacked and raped. The organization recently released a statement:



There are rumors that the [instigators are armed and paid](#). The violent practices they describe are extreme, apparently organized tactics of war in which women are sometimes stripped naked and gang raped, often with fingers, while the police indifferently stand by. The Mubarak regime used similar tactics to intimidate budding public resistance in 2005.

The mentality and the practice they describe, however, are not just the animalist tactics of counter-revolutionaries. Political tactics are built out of the deep tissue of a social order. In Egypt such tactics reflect a society where women's sexual safety is routinely at risk, manifested here in the failure of

thousands of men to do anything to help the victims being assaulted right in front of them. It reflects a world where a woman becomes a sexualized target when she moves -- particularly unaccompanied by husband or brother -- into public space.

In the first half of 2012, under the auspices of the Survey Research Center of the University of California, Santa Barbara, directed by Paolo Gardinali, we surveyed the so-called Facebook generation of Egyptians through banner advertisements that took respondents to a website where they could answer questions about gender and love. Their answers were completely anonymous. Thousands of young, highly educated Egyptians, most between 18 and 25, answered.

We found that a large percentage of the women, more than a quarter, had been sexually propositioned in a public place like a bus or park, and almost as many men admitted to have propositioned such women. It is one thing for a man to make verbal advances to a woman in public. It is another thing for him to get physical with her.

The shocking thing was how many women had been sexually molested -- touched, grabbed, groped -- by men in a public place. Two-thirds of the women said it had happened to them. (The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights found the same percentage in their survey in 2008). And an even larger percentage of men admitted to having done it.

Type of Harassment	Women		Men
Has Been Sexually Propositioned in a Public Place	29%	Sexually Propositioned a Woman in a Public Place	21%
Has Been Sexually Molested in a Public Place	67%	Touched a Woman's Body in a Public Place	78%
	No. of cases =780		N=786

To get a sense of how high that percentage is, we had asked over a thousand students at our university here in California whether they had been "touched or grabbed in a sexual manner when it was not invited" during the last 12 months. That includes both public and private settings. American campuses have a notorious reputation for high levels of casual, often drunken, sexual encounters where a lot of aggressive male sexual

behavior takes place. You would expect the proportion of reported sexual molestation to be just as high, or even higher. It is not: Thirty percent of the women said this had happened to them.

The relationship between the sexes is at the core of Islamist politics. The same is true for religious conservative politics everywhere, be they Christian, Jewish or Hindu. Calls for public modesty of women by the Muslim Brotherhood often include guidelines and regulations for various forms of gender segregation. Egyptian women who are subject to such attacks are often blamed for their plight for having been dressed immodestly. Islamist women, many from highly conservative families, claim that wearing a hijab, the head-covering that is today interpreted as a mark of piety in Muslim countries around the world, allows them to move in public, to go to school and to work, without concern that they will be thought immodest, still less harassed or even flirted with, because it sends a signal not only that their purity is a sacred obligation, but that anybody that tries would face the ire of their masculine co-religionists.

The question is: Does wearing a hijab protect women from harassment? Women who think all women should cover their hair, and so presumably observe the hijab themselves, were just as likely as those who don't think so, to get molested in public

**Does The Hijab Protect Women Against Molestation? Egypt, 2012**  
Do You Believe That Women Should Wear the Hijab?

Have You Been Sexually Molested in a Public Place?	Yes	No
No	35%	35%
Yes	65%	65%
Number of Cases	N=519	N=75

Wearing a headscarf doesn't protect women. One would assume a woman who is a supporter of Islamism has the support of fellow Islamists in social gatherings, neighborhood and mosque networks, whom she can count on to come to her aid, to retaliate against any assault to her honor. Such affronts to a woman are not just civil crimes, they are offenses against the faith. One would expect Islamist women to be less likely to get hassled or molested. Is it the case?

In our survey we asked people their opinion about the proper relation between Islam and the state, ranging from those who believe there should be complete separation, those who think Islam is an essential component of national identity, those who think Islamic law should be one basis for the making of state law, and those who think Islamic law should be the basis of law-making.

Our respondents are not secular. Most are religious. They overwhelmingly fast and pray; the majority thinks Islam should be a basis of law. If you look at the proportions of women who have been sexually molested in public and break them down by their political positions, the result is the opposite of what we had expected. Islamist women are significantly more likely to have been sexually molested. In fact two-thirds of women who believe in the strict application of Islamic law have been groped or molested at some point.

**Sexual Molestation and Political Islam: Egyptian Women, 2012**

**How Would You Define Your Political Position**

	Islam and State Separate	Islam a Basis of National Identity	Islam a Basis of Law, Particularly for Family Issues	Islam the Basis of Law
Sexually Molested in a Public Place				
No	43%	39%	27%	33%
Yes	57%	61%	73%	67%
Number of Cases	N=96	N=170	N=161	N=156

So who is molesting these women? When we broke down who touched a woman's body in public by the political position of men, we found that Islamist men were just as likely to engage in such practices. Three quarters of male respondents who believe Islam should be the sole basis of law admit to having molested a woman in public. The practice of wearing the hijab first appeared in college campuses of Egypt and then spread to the rest of society. So many of these Islamist women, the very women who are seeing such high rates of molestation, are also college-educated. They go out unaccompanied by

men to campus and to work (and now to demonstrations), which makes them vulnerable to molestation by men from their own political community for whom an unaccompanied woman is still an alluring and legitimate target.

**Touching Women's Bodies in Public and Political Islam, Egyptian Men, 2012**

	Islam and State Separate	Islam a Basis of National Identity	Islam a Basis of Law, Particularly for Family Issues	Islam the Basis of Law
Sexually Molested in a Public Place				
No				
Yes				
Number of Cases				

Sexual molestation of Egyptian women is not something that happens just to women

<b>Touched a Woman's Body in a Public Place</b>	<b>Islam and State Separate</b>	<b>Islam a Basis of National Identity</b>	<b>Islam a Basis of Law, Particularly for Family Issues</b>	<b>Islam the Basis of Law</b>
No	29%	20%	9%	26%
Yes	71%	80%	91%	74%
<b>Number of Cases</b>	<b>N=124</b>	<b>N=186</b>	<b>N=121</b>	<b>N=264</b>

who do not wear the mark of modesty. It is not something that happens disproportionately to women without hijab or those who want a separation of religion and state. It happens to all women, those who think Morsi's party has stolen the revolution and those who support the Muslim Brotherhood and think that secular and socialist street mobs are trying to steal it.

What we are seeing now in Egypt's squares is much more than ordinary harassment by individual men. Sexual harassment has become a weapon of war against women. The attacks are reportedly coordinated, the men operate as a mob, and the police nearby refuse to intervene.

Protecting women's rights is, and ought to be, something that brings together all political forces: not only the opposition in Tahrir Square, but Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood regime as well. The Muslim Brotherhood gained millions of supporters in part because it appeared as a defender of women's honor. The organization offered women segregated buses, teaching institutions and social gatherings. It gave them free hijabs and modest clothing. It did so in order to protect the honor of Muslim Egyptian women. Yet now that the Muslim Brotherhood is in power we see no squads of Brothers in the streets to protect women from mob violence. It is reminiscent of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime in Iran, which came to power in 1979 with the support of millions of Iranian women, but which immediately did its very best, with aid of shadowy vigilantes, to push women out of the public sphere. In Iran the government forcibly imposed the hijab. In Egypt a majority of Egyptian women already wear the hijab. Whoever is stripping women naked and raping them in public is sending exactly the same message to all women: Leave the politics to us.

Women's rights are not just about secularism and Islamism. They are about the right to be human, which men and women everywhere should guard fiercely.

*The authors' next post will be on a happier subject: the rise of romantic love.*