La création d'une communauté mobilisée pour les droits des femmes : la campagne contre le harcèlement sexuel en Égypte

Creating community around women's rights: the anti-sexual harassment campaign in Egypt

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ema/3024>

DOI: 10.4000/ema.3024

ISSN: 2090-7273

Publisher

CEDEJ - Centre d'études et de documentation économiques juridiques et sociales

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2012

Number of pages: 137-150

ISBN: 2 905838-48-5

ISSN: 1110-5097

Electronic reference

Helen Rizzo, "La création d'une communauté mobilisée pour les droits des femmes : la campagne contre le harcèlement sexuel en Égypte", *Égypte/Monde arabe* [Online], 9 | 2012, Online since 31 December 2012, connection on 07 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ema/3024> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ema.3024>

RÉSUMÉ / ABSTRACT

LA CRÉATION D'UNE COMMUNAUTÉ MOBILISÉE POUR LES DROITS DES FEMMES : LA CAMPAGNE CONTRE LE HARCELEMENT SEXUEL EN ÉGYPTÉ

Pour beaucoup de femmes vivant en Égypte, particulièrement dans les villes surpeuplées du Caire ou d'Alexandrie, marcher dans la rue ou prendre des transports publics comme les bus, le microbus ou encore le métro c'est s'exposer également au harcèlement sexuel de manière quasi quotidienne. A la fin de l'année 2005, une association cairote de défense des droits des femmes, l'Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), a décidé (après avoir entendu, de la part de leur équipe et de connaissances, de nombreuses histoires relatives au harcèlement sexuel) de lancer une campagne contre le harcèlement sexuel dans les espaces publics. Une part importante de leur travail a été de documenter l'extension du harcèlement grâce à des rapports et à des groupes de surveillance. Leur rapport le plus récent, réalisé en juillet 2008, portait sur un échantillon de 1000 hommes et femmes égyptiens, ainsi que 109 étrangères. Le résultat est que 83 % des égyptiennes et 98 % des étrangères rapportent avoir été harcelées, tandis que 60 % des hommes admettent harceler les femmes essentiellement verbalement ; ce qu'ils ne perçoivent pas comme un comportement offensant. Quand on leur demande les raisons, les hommes reprochent aux femmes la façon dont elles sont habillées, alors que 70 % des femmes interrogées ont affirmé porter le voile.

Donc, cette campagne multiforme a renforcé l'idée d'ECWR que la question clé devait être la sensibilisation des hommes pour qu'ils changent de comportement. Plus spécifiquement une part importante de la campagne a consisté à convaincre les hommes de la nécessité de protéger les femmes du harcèlement sexuel et à influencer sur l'opinion publique, de sorte que le harceleur soit celui qui est stigmatisé et qui est considéré comme commettant un acte honteux, de manière à encourager les témoins de tels actes à intervenir. Nous avons déjà insisté, dans de précédents travaux, sur le fait qu'ECWR a intitulé sa campagne « Rendons nos rues plus sûres pour tout le monde », de manière à toucher une audience plus large que ceux qui se sentent habituellement concernés par le droit des femmes. J'avance ici que

la campagne d'ECWR invoque également la notion de communauté, afin de convaincre les hommes en particulier, de leurs obligations de prendre en charge ces questions sociales.

CREATING COMMUNITY AROUND WOMEN'S RIGHTS: THE ANTI-SEXUAL HARASSMENT CAMPAIGN IN EGYPT

For many women who live in Egypt, particularly in the crowded cities of Cairo and Alexandria, walking in the streets or using public transportation such as buses, minibuses, the subway and even taxis, exposes them to various forms of sexual harassment (including staring, verbal comments, sexually aggressive language, touching and groping) on an almost daily basis in some cases. Near the end of 2005, a Cairo-based women's rights organization, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), decided to launch a campaign to tackle the problem of sexual harassment on the streets and in public spaces after hearing a multitude of stories from their staff and acquaintances about the problem. Part of their campaign was to document the extent of harassment through surveys and focus groups. They released the results of their most recent survey of about 1,000 Egyptian women, 1,000 Egyptian men and 109 foreign women in July 2008. In their samples, 83% of Egyptian women and 98% of foreign women reported being exposed to some form of harassment, while over 60% of Egyptian men admitted to harassing women, mostly verbal harassment, which they did not see as offensive behaviour. When asked why they harass, the men in the sample blamed it on how women were dressed, while over 70% of the victims in the sample reported wearing a veil.

Thus, in their multifaceted campaign against harassment, these results provided further evidence for ECWR that raising men's awareness of the problem and changing men's behaviour had to continue to be a key focus of the campaign. More specifically, part of the aim of this campaign has been to convince men of the need for them to protect women from harassment and changing public opinion so that the harasser is the one who is stigmatized and seen as committing a shameful act, in order to discourage men from doing it and encourage witnesses to intervene. We argue in previous work that ECWR called its campaign: "Making Our Streets Safer for Everyone", in order to appeal to a broader audience than only those concerned with women's rights. I argue here that ECWR's framing of the campaign also invokes the notion of community in order to convince men in particular of their obligations in dealing with this social problem.

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CREATING COMMUNITY AROUND WOMEN'S RIGHTS: THE ANTI-SEXUAL HARASSMENT CAMPAIGN IN EGYPT

INTRODUCTION

Near the end of 2005, a Cairo-based women's rights organization, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), decided to launch a campaign to tackle the problem of sexual harassment on the streets and in public spaces, after hearing a multitude of stories from their staff and acquaintances about the problem. Part of their campaign was to document the extent of harassment through surveys and focus groups. They released the results of their most recent survey of about 1,000 Egyptian women, 1,000 Egyptian men and 109 foreign women in July 2008. In their samples, 83% of Egyptian women and 98% of foreign women reported being exposed to some form of harassment, while over 60% of Egyptian men admitted to harassing women, mostly verbal harassment, which they did not see as offensive behavior. When asked why they harass, the men in the sample blamed it on how women were dressed, while over 70% of the victims in the sample reported wearing a veil.

Thus, in their multifaceted campaign against harassment, these results provided further evidence for ECWR that raising men's awareness of the problem and changing men's behavior needs to be a key focus of the campaign. More specifically, part of the aim of this campaign has been to convince men of the need for them to protect women from harassment; and changing public opinion so that the harasser is the one who is stigmatized and seen as committing a shameful act, in order to discourage men from doing it and encourage witnesses to intervene.

We argue, in previous work, that ECWR has called its campaign: "*Making Our Streets Safer for Everyone*", in order to appeal to a broader audience than only those concerned with women's rights (Rizzo,

Price and Meyer 2011). I argue, here, that ECWR's framing of the campaign also invokes the notion of community, in order to convince men in particular of their obligations in dealing with this social problem.

The analysis of the use of community in the framing of ECWR's anti-harassment campaign is based on two years of fieldwork with the organization, that began in November 2006. Data comes from several sources: participation observation of the campaign for one year (2006-2007); interviews and e-mail correspondence with ECWR staff members involved in the campaign (2006-2009); and a content analysis of ECWR's literature from 2006-2009, including staff members' notes on the campaign and meeting minutes.

Based on my field work thus far, I am finding that the messages that are directed towards women are clear and consistent with the organization's feminist goals. However, deciding on messages that will convince men to change their behavior and will change public opinion in general has been more of a struggle.

MEN AS THE TARGET AUDIENCE OF THE CAMPAIGN : TAKING ON MASCULINITIES

To engage men and challenge current conceptions of masculinity in Egypt, ECWR has been trying different strategies and framings in their campaign through their workshops, awareness days, public service announcements and other media outlets. They are trying to develop tactics and strategies in this campaign that will engage men, while at the same time trying to convince men to change their attitudes and behaviors toward women on the street.

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that women's rights NGOs in Cairo do not have much experience engaging men directly in order to change their behaviors and/or conceptions of masculinity. Even the scholarly literature on gender and masculinities, particularly in the Middle East and Muslim societies, is relatively recent; let alone work being done on the ground by social movements, civil society and NGOs in terms of taking on men and masculinities directly.

Thus, ECWR is entering uncharted territory in their campaign's attempts to deal with men's behaviors and conceptions of masculinity. First, let me discuss briefly the history of masculinities as a theoretical concept; then, how it is employed in public discourse in Egypt, particularly as it relates to harassment; and finally, I will discuss ECWR strategies in trying to engage and change conceptions of masculinities.

To give a very short history, masculinities studies began in the US in the mid-1980s, influenced by women's studies and queer studies approaches to sexuality. The onset of AIDS increased research on men

and sexuality. Studying men as gendered subjects, in other words 'men as men', is more recent and was heavily influenced by feminism for those doing research on masculinities in Latin American studies (for example Gutmann 1996). In the 1990s, case studies from around the world led by Connell (1995) began to see men as marked and masculinities as problematic, no longer the assumed and taken-for-granted norm. Finally, since the mid 1990s and particularly in the 2000s, we have seen more and more work addressing masculinities in the Middle East and Muslim worlds (see Abdalla 2007; Ali 2002, 2003; Armbrust 2000; Baobaid 2006; Gerami 2005; Ghoussoub and Sinclair-Webb's 2000 edited volume; Ilahi 2009; Inhorn 2003; Kandiyoti 1994; Ouzgane's 2006 edited volume; Pavljuk 2008; Peteet 2000; Wassef and Mansour 1999).

A major contribution of this literature has been the recognition that masculinity in the singular does not exist. On the contrary, there is plurality with competing/contradictory masculinities operating in and influenced by particular cultural contexts. Early on in the study of masculinities, Connell coined the term hegemonic masculinity to capture this plurality. Building on Gramsci's arguments describing hegemonic culture, Connell (1995) argues that masculinities have a material and institutional base. Because men control the institutions of power within a society – the state, workplace and family – these institutions, Connell contends, promote and sustain hegemonic forms of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinities are defined as those that make a man "successful at being a man" (Pavljuk 2008). Moreover, *"hegemonic masculinity is not just the form of masculinity that is culturally dominant, signifying a position of authority, leadership, success and being in control, but is the 'expression of the privilege men collectively have over women' "* (Connell 1996: 209 quoted in Robinson 2005: 22). Connell (1995: 76) warns, however, that hegemonic masculinity *"is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable"*. Thus there are alternative or subordinate/subaltern forms of masculinities that are often seen as lacking or inferior. Pavljuk (2008: 17) illustrates that in some contexts: *"For example, sexual prowess is to hegemonic masculinity as impotence is to its subordinate variant. Heterosexual is hegemonic, and homosexual is a subordinate masculinity."*

While scholars like Gutmann (2009) argue that we need to move away from the discourses of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities and focus research on the actual social practices of men, there is still room for discussing hegemonic masculinities when examining issues of power. Butler's research on gender performance is crucial because she examines actual social practices and how they relate to issues of power. Thus as Robinson (2005: 23) argues, citing Butler (1994), *"the*

performance of hegemonic masculinity constructs and reconstructs the hegemonic masculine subject. That is, how and where hegemonic masculinity is played out, culturally and historically, is the way in which hegemonic masculinity gets established, instituted, circulated and confirmed". Thus, examining both the discourses on and the performances of masculinities, particularly hegemonic masculinity, is important to understanding sexual harassment. However, I will focus on the discourses of hegemonic masculinity in the Egyptian context because ECWR's campaign to target men is influenced by these discourses in the hopes of changing performances of masculinities in regards to street harassment.

In terms of examining the discourses and discussions on what causes street harassment in Cairo, hegemonic masculinity is an important component of this discourse as produced by the media, scholars, public officials and NGOs in Egypt. As Pavljuk (2008), Ilahi (2009) and Ali (2002, 2003) demonstrate in their research, important ingredients of hegemonic masculinity in the Egyptian discourse are marriage (enabling a male to become an adult in the Egyptian context and to engage in sanctioned sexual relations) and employment (enabling him to assume financial responsibility for his family). As illustrated by a respondent in Ilahi's (2009) work, Rami, an unemployed, thirty-year-old, working class Egyptian man describes what it means to be a man:

As a Muslim man, I have to be able to provide for my family financially, meaning I have to work, and it's a sign of weakness if I have to ask for help from another. It would be humiliating for me to ask for help from my father for he would hold it against me. In our culture if you can't provide for your family, you're not a man.

Ali's (2002-2003) work on Egyptian men's sexuality and its relationship to family planning, further illustrates the power of this discourse. Because of economic stagnation, lack of employment opportunities and structural adjustment policies, many men in Egypt do not have access to stable employment and, for younger men, it often means delaying marriage because they cannot assume the expected financial responsibilities for marriage and family. Because of this undermining of masculinity, Ali argues that Egyptian hegemonic masculinity is an unstable category. Thus, the ideals of honor and pride associated with hegemonic masculinities are being replaced with feelings of humiliation and impotence for the many men who now experience subordinate forms of masculinity. Pavljuk (2008: 22) further contends citing Ali that maintaining masculinity as something so essential to the self, that deprivation to resources which enable masculinity to flourish results in a certain form of violence – alienation and a loss of dignity.

While marriage and work mean adulthood, responsibility, and the ability to fulfill the patriarchal gender contract for men in the Egyptian context, the discourse on men's sexuality and violence sends a contradictory message. While men's privileged access to the public sphere is justified by their strength, rationality and the ability to control emotions, discourses on hegemonic masculinity in terms of male sexuality and violence argue that men's – assumed heterosexual – sex drive is uncontrollable and insatiable, particularly that of young single men. As a result, behaviors such as sexual harassment are excused as "boys will be boys". The belief that uncontrollable sexuality and violence is part of boys'/men's nature or is somehow "natural" is often used to excuse sexual violence by removing responsibility/blame from men (Robinson 2005; Guano 2007) and placing it on the female victim. Thus responsibility for "controlling" male sexuality is placed on women. Women must dress and act modestly or stay in the private sphere in order not to tempt men who may respond violently.

Thus, in examining the discourse in the media by pundits, scholars, public officials and NGO staff members on why men engage in sexual harassment in public spaces, many blame lack of marriage and employment opportunities because they threaten the ability of men to perform certain aspects of Egyptian hegemonic masculinity. Being barred from these key institutions of successful manhood then influences their performance of masculinity and sexuality on the street, an avenue of hegemonic masculinity that is still open to them. Kate Pavljuk (2008) provides an example of this discourse in her analysis of an opinion piece in the *Al Ahram* newspaper in 2006 by Dr. Mahmoud Abdul Galad. He argues that flirting with women or trying to get their attention on the street is a way for men to prove their manhood. "*It is considered an expression of the bravest*" (quoted in Pavljuk 2008: 93). Even when others try to chastise this behavior by arguing that it is religiously prohibited, the men Dr. Abdul Galad spoke with dismissed the argument with jokes—that men who do not harass were weak and not manly. Thus, according to this discourse, sexually harassing women in public spaces is a way for men to demonstrate their manliness, especially to other men, particularly when the other avenues of hegemonic masculinity – employment and marriage – are difficult to achieve.

However the ECWR survey of Egyptian men provides some empirical evidence for why men harass and what they see as potential solutions to ending harassment. The results give some evidence that harassment is an expression of masculinity, with over 60% of men answering that harassing women makes them feel either: "satisfied sexual desire", "more of a man", or "that they are strong and women are weak" (Pavljuk 2008: 94). Interestingly though, when asked "In your opinion, *what is the solution to end harassment in Egypt?*",

about 40% of the male respondents in ECWR's survey choose responses that reflected the economy and employment: "to improve and develop economic conditions" and "to create opportunities for work and decrease unemployment"; while another 20% chose "increase religious consciousness". Thus, while the majority of harassers blame harassment on women's dress and behavior, the solutions they suggest relate to their access to employment, which would allow them to financially provide for their families – the hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity in this context (Pavluk 2008: 92-93).

So given these discourses on hegemonic masculinities in Egypt, what are ECWR's strategies and tactics for engaging men in their campaign? In terms of framing, ECWR chose to call its campaign against sexual harassment in public spaces, "*Making Our Streets Safer for Everyone*". It is a message that everyone is responsible for making the streets safer. It is a way of invoking community responsibility for solving the problem and moving the discourse away from seeing harassment as only a "woman's problem".

However the difficulties come in when trying to direct this message to men. Marketing Markets (a marketing research firm in Cairo), who volunteered to develop public service announcements for ECWR in the early stages of its campaign, met with focus groups to discuss some of their ideas. At that time, the proposed messages for the PSAs (Public Service Announcement) asked men to "protect" women from sexual harassment in public spaces. Thus, these messages seemed to appeal to certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity to invoke community responsibility. More specifically, in one focus group of foreign and Egyptian-American women that I attended in the spring of 2007, sponsored by ECWR and led by a staff member from Marketing Markets, we discussed a proposed public service announcement appealing for men's protection and respect by asking men to see all women as their mothers, wives, sisters and/or daughters. Its goal was to stop men from harassing and to intervene if they see a woman harassed because she is someone's relative. Many of us in the room felt uncomfortable with the ad campaign because of its use of protection and implied physical weakness of women to protect themselves. The aim of the PSAs was to convince Cairene men that all women needed protection from harassment. By using kinship terms to evoke hegemonic masculine responsibility, men would realize that harassment was inappropriate and not do it, as well as intervene when they saw other men engaging in this behavior. While we understood that the goal was to find a message that would resonate with men and appeal to masculine responsibility to protect any woman from harassment, like they would a family member, we also feared that this tactic could backfire. While the proposed PSA never questioned a woman's right

to access public space, some of us feared that appealing to protection would imply that women are weak and cannot defend themselves, thus undermining women's struggles for equality across the public sphere.

Similar sentiments were also expressed at a focus group of female American University in Cairo students, mostly Egyptian. They argued that a message that women should be protected like one's sister sent the message that women are not equal or empowered. They also argued that the sister image will not work because men claim that they only harass women who are dressed or behaving inappropriately and that their sisters are respectable. They wouldn't harass women who behave and dress like their sisters.

While the PSA messages seemed to encourage one form of hegemonic masculinity, men as the protectors of women, it was definitely condemning another form: that men have uncontrollable and insatiable sex drives that absolves them from responsibility for harassment and other forms of sexual violence. What originally attracted me to this campaign was that it was one of the first organized voices to argue that men who harass were responsible for their own behavior and needed to be sanctioned. Their argument that harassment was not the problem of individual women who supposedly dressed or behaved "inappropriately" but symptomatic of a larger social problem where men need to be stigmatized for engaging in harassment; that harassment should not be accepted as "natural" or "normal" expressions of masculinity and heterosexuality.

Thus, I believe the framing "*Making Our Streets Safer for Everyone*" has the potential to radically reconceptualize "community". Traditional conceptualizations of community imply homogeneity, harmony, consensus, solidarity and a sense of shared identity. However ECWR's campaign is contesting this traditional conception by claiming that everyone is part of the community and has a right to use public spaces and be guaranteed some measure of safety in those spaces in Egypt. It invokes a more cosmopolitan sense of community, rights and citizenship that is not based on nationality, gender/sex, ethnicity, tribe, religion, social class, citizenship status, etc... When its campaign asks men to see ALL women as deserving of respect and to see ALL people as deserving of safety in public spaces it takes the onus of responsibility for men's sexual behavior off of women.

So can ECWR's campaign and other women's rights organizations' campaigns that target men's behavior engage men through appeals to masculine responsibility without reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy? To be honest, I am not sure. Maybe it is too soon to tell. However, I would like to think that, in using responsibility and community to engage men and to get them to critically think about harassment

and about their own attitudes and behaviors, social change is possible. Perhaps this is the first step in convincing men to alter their conceptions of masculinity. As Jill Nagle writes in the introduction to *Whores and Other Feminists*, using the martial arts of Karate and Aikido as metaphors for resisting oppression: "Karate is a 'stop' martial art in which students are trained to ... [disable] the attacker so that they will not be able to inflict harm on anyone else. Karate aims to meet, destroy and overpower oncoming energy with greater, more effective energy, for the safety of all". (Nagle 1997: 6).

On the other hand:

"Based on an ostensibly opposite philosophy, Aikido teaches escape from harm with as little damage as possible to the attacker... To achieve this, Aikido technique involves first going with, rather than against the energy of the attack, and then using the attack's own energy to deflect the attack and escape... An Aikido response to sexist oppression might appear complicit with the violence. But part of Aikido's lesson is the paradox that sometimes, to get beyond something, one must first enter into it with benign intention. In the successful Aikido defense, the attacker, too, is transformed". (Nagle 1997: 6-7)

As Kinoti (2009: online) points out, "[i]t might seem counterintuitive to use the oppressor's weapons to fight oppression." However, by engaging men through masculine responsibility, hopefully ECWR's and other campaign will eventually promote alternate conceptions of masculinities as a way to eventually eliminate street harassment, patriarchy and hegemonic forms of masculinity.

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