

Sexual violence and state violence against women in Egypt, 2011-2014

Egyptian women were crucial to the movement that overthrew Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in the 2011 revolution. However, both in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period women have also become targets of sexual violence, including by the state. This CMI Insight will analyze how we can understand sexual assaults of women in the context of political unrest in Egypt.

Heather McRobie,

PhD candidate,
Oxford University

CMI CHR.
MICHELSEN
INSTITUTE

Sexual violence in Egypt since the 2011 revolution that overthrew the authoritarian regime of President Hosni Mubarak has been described as an “epidemic.” Within the first weeks and months of the mass political gatherings in urban areas such as Tahrir Square, reports began to emerge of sexual assaults and sexual harassment of women – frequently committed by groups of men. In its report on sexual harassment in Egypt from June 2014, Human Rights Watch estimated that at least 500 women were sexually assaulted by mobs in Egypt between 2011 and 2014. Although sexual violence can be perpetrated against someone of any sex or gender,

the predominant social phenomenon in Egypt is sexual violence by men against women. Moreover, a notable element of the patterns of sexual violence against women in Egypt since the revolution has been the involvement of state actors: the military, groups and armed mobs ‘representing’ or ‘acting on behalf of’ first the Mubarak and then the successive post-revolutionary regimes, and the police, have all committed sexual assaults on women. As such, the epidemic of sexual violence in post-revolutionary Egypt must also be understood in part as state violence upon civilians with gendered dimensions, as ‘state violence against women’.

Before the revolution

Since the ‘epidemic’ of sexual violence and sexual harassment in post-revolutionary Egypt, women’s rights activists working on the issue have sought to clarify that the ‘pre-revolutionary’ period also had a societal-level problem with sexual harassment and sexual violence towards women, as well as related gender inequalities in both the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres.

A 2008 survey by the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights found that 83% of Egyptian

women said they had been victims of sexual harassment, and as many as 46% experienced it on a daily basis. (Although, as women’s rights activists emphasise, the fault of sexual harassment or assault lies entirely with the perpetrator and is not dependent on the behavior of the survivor of the harassment or assault, it is worth noting to mitigate against potential stereotypes that the 2008 study found that women’s clothing choices had no bearing on whether they were harassed or assaulted, and the majority of the women who were sexually harassed or assaulted were veiled).

Mona Eltahawy, a prominent Egyptian feminist activist and writer who has spoken about her own experience of sexual assault by riot police officers during the 2011 revolution, noted in the New York Times in June 2014 that the post-revolutionary sexual violence ‘epidemic’ is a continuation of the authoritarian Mubarak era, noting in particular an incident in 2005 in which Egyptian human rights organisations documented the use of pro-regime vigilantes by the Mubarak regime to sexually assault female journalists and activists.

It is also worth contextualizing the ‘sexual violence epidemic’ of post-revolutionary Egypt in the pre-existing social conditions and social structure of Egypt. Egyptian women’s rights organisations have noted how patriarchal conceptions of gender roles in Egyptian society in both the public and private spheres contribute to the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault through the societal-level ‘policing’ of women’s behavior and the prevalent idea that women who survive sexual harassment or assault are ‘dirty’, ‘shameful’, and at least partly to blame.

The 2011 revolution and SCAF

The February 2011 revolution that overthrew the regime of President Hosni Mubarak after almost 30 years of authoritarianism saw mass protests in urban areas on an unprecedented scale in Egypt. This mass movement of citizens demonstrating against the regime was central to forcing Mubarak to finally relinquish power. However, as sociologists of urban space in Egypt have noted, the dynamics of mass protest, and the mass movement of civilians in the city, also disrupted pre-existing understandings of how public space is used, and what is permissible.

It is perhaps worth distinguishing between the two types of sexual harassment and assault that were taking place during this period. Citizen-run organisations and initiatives such as Tahrir Bodyguard, which worked through the revolution to prevent sexual harassment and assaults and help survivors of assaults, were emphatic that much of the harassment and sexual violence was opportunistic, due to the sudden presence of large numbers of people of both genders on the streets in urban areas, particularly Cairo and Alexandria. These opportunistic predators were apolitical, taking advantage of the (now often overlooked) fact that Egyptian women were at the front-line of organizing the revolutionary demonstrations from the start.

Throughout 2011, however, as Mubarak’s resignation led to the temporary rule of the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces (SCAF), it became increasingly clear that sexual assaults and harassment were also coordinated.

In the months after Mubarak’s resignation there were a number of gang rapes in and around Tahrir Square which coincided with protests that women ‘leave the demonstrations’, and were seen as an attempt to forcibly drive or scare women away from protesting. Moreover, as tensions developed between the revolutionary activists (such as students and supporters of the spear-heading April 6th Youth Movement) and the army that held ‘interim’ power through 2011, there were a series of sexual assaults committed on women by the armed forces and riot police.

One notable instance during this period in which the Egyptian state perpetrated sexual violence against women happened in March 2011, in which the military detained 17 women at a protest and subjected them to forced “virginity testing.” Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, the head of military intelligence at the time, defended this action by the army on the ground that ‘proving’ the women were virgins would protect the army against ‘false’ accusations of rape (operating on the faulty logic that only virgins can be raped, an idea bound up with patriarchal conceptions of female ‘purity’).

Protests in public spaces intensified and fractured during the build up to the first post-revolutionary Presidential elections, and were frequently accompanied by sexual violence including gang rapes.

2012-2013: Morsi’s rule

The election of Mohammed Morsi, the Freedom and Justice Party candidate seen as aligned to the Muslim

Brotherhood, in 2012, came as mass sexual violence attacks in urban areas were increasing – and as activists had begun to confer and mobilise against the problem. In a bitter illustration of the climate at the time, on June 8th 2012 activists organized a demonstration to ‘stop sexual harassment in Tahrir’, which ended in several mass sexual assaults, despite the fact the women organizing the march had demonstrated deliberately surrounded by sympathetic men who were in solidarity with their protest.

The citizen-led organization Banat Misr Khatt Ahmar (The Girls of Egypt Are a Red Line) was founded in this period to raise awareness among citizens of that damage caused by sexual harassment, largely addressing the widespread ‘opportunistic’ sexual harassment and assault. However, Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment, another citizen-led organization founded in late 2012 to both combat and document sexual harassment and assault in public space, took the position that at least some of the assaults, particularly gang rapes by large groups of men against a single woman, were pre-planned and politicized attacks. Such attacks either targeted women in an attempt to drive ‘all’ women, whatever their allegiance, back

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out of public space, or partisan assaults in which women were sexually assaulted as ‘punishment’ for their particular political allegiance.

As the divide grew between secular revolutionaries and Muslim Brotherhood supporters, Tahrir Square and other major sites of protest became contested sites for opposing groups claiming to represent the revolution, and sexual violence became part of these clashes. On the level of political discourse, Morsi’s regime alienated women’s rights activists by their response to a 2012 UN declaration that called for an end to violence against women, which the Muslim Brotherhood to which Morsi was aligned claimed would lead to “a disintegration of society.”

The citizen initiative Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment criticized Morsi’s government for failing to improve the criminal justice system so that the increasing numbers of sexual harassment and assaults could be properly prosecuted, and documented that the police response to reports of harassment and assaults was frequently apathetic.

In November 2012, President Morsi gave himself controversial new Presidential ‘powers’ in order to push through the troubled post-revolutionary constitution, which many civil society groups saw as too ‘Islamist’. This move led to widescale protests, and clashes between the military and riot police, organized groups of Morsi supporters, and those protesting against Morsi’s move and the new constitution. By December these clashes had grown deadly, and Egyptian human rights organisations documented sexual assaults committed by riot police, and by civilian Muslim Brotherhood supporters who appeared to be targeting ‘enemy’ women in an attempt to drive them away from demonstrations.

In December 2012, academic Zoe Holman documented the arguments made by civil society activists that there was state complicity in sexual assaults under both the SCAF (2011-2012) and Morsi (2012-2013) periods, signified by the coordinated nature of the assaults, in which women were surrounded by men moving together as if in a practiced tactic to isolate and assault the woman. Indicative of the prevalence of sexual violence in the post-revolutionary period, a UN report was published in April 2013, calling on Egyptian authorities to address sexual violence as a matter of urgency, and claiming that 99.3 percent of women and girls had been subjected to sexual harassment.

Morsi’s fall and Sisi’s rise: volatility and political violence

Mohammad Morsi’s regime never recovered from the decisions made in late 2012 to grant himself extra constitutional ‘powers’. Tensions increased between pro- and anti-Morsi supporters, and women’s bodies were frequently on the front line of these clashes. On January 25 2013, the second anniversary of the fall of Mubarak, Tahrir Bodyguard and Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment documented twenty-five gang rapes or gang sexual assaults on women at demonstrations, including

a sexual assault of the Egyptian journalist Hania Moheeb. Moheeb maintained that she was assaulted on the basis of both her profession and for her opposition to the Islamist government’s actions. Yet shortly afterwards, in February 2013, Egypt’s Shura Council’s ‘Human Right Committee’ issued a statement saying that women must “bear the responsibility” for harassment and assaults if they attend protests in Tahrir Square.

As anger at President Morsi increased, the revolution took a dark turn: civilian and often secular protests against Morsi calling for a ‘second revolution’ led to the army turning against Morsi in the events of June 30th, 2013, which have been read variously as a ‘restoration’ of the revolution after Morsi’s 2012 Presidential ‘decree’ – or as a coup d’état. In the weeks that followed, as the army reclaimed control, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood staged a protest in Rabaa Al-Adewiya that ended in what Human Rights Watch has documented – in a report released one year later in August 2014 – as a ‘massacre’ of at least 800 and up to 1,100 people. Citizen organisations working against sexual violence documented gender-based violence against women through the June-August 2013 period committed by both Morsi supporters and the army, although in the volatility of Morsi’s removal from power documentation became more difficult and contested, as both ‘side’ accused the other of acts of violence. Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment documented 91 sexual assaults on women in a four day period in the week after Morsi was removed from power, while Human Rights Watch reported that perpetrators of sexual violence had impunity to commit crimes while rule of law broke down during the chaos of the overthrow of Morsi.

Sexual violence under Sisi: ambivalent messages

After President Morsi was removed from power, a three month curfew followed, with increased ‘security presence’ on the streets throughout the evening. The nominally-civilian interim President Adly Mansour – chosen by the leader of the armed forces, Sisi – approved a law that, for the first time, specifically defined and prohibited sexual harassment. Women’s rights campaigners, however, argued that the law did not go far enough in facilitating the prosecution of sexual assaults and harassment, particularly through the law’s stipulation that a woman must bring two ‘witnesses’ with them when reporting the assault, which is particularly problematic given the well-documented high level of social acceptance of sexual harassment amongst men in Egypt.

Academics working on gender in Egypt have noted that ‘sexual violence’ became a politicized subject for the post-Morsi powers to criticize the Muslim Brotherhood, ignoring the fact that state actors including the police and military had been responsible for, and negligent in responding to, sexual violence in the post-revolutionary period.

Sisi assumed the powers of President in June 2014 after an election in which he claimed a landslide victory, but which was criticized by international election monitors. Under Sisi’s

Presidency, the issue of sexual harassment and assault has changed its contours: the introduction of a new law restricting public protest – although itself a source of protest by some activists – means mass movement of citizens in public space no longer occurs in the same manner it did during the 2011 revolution.

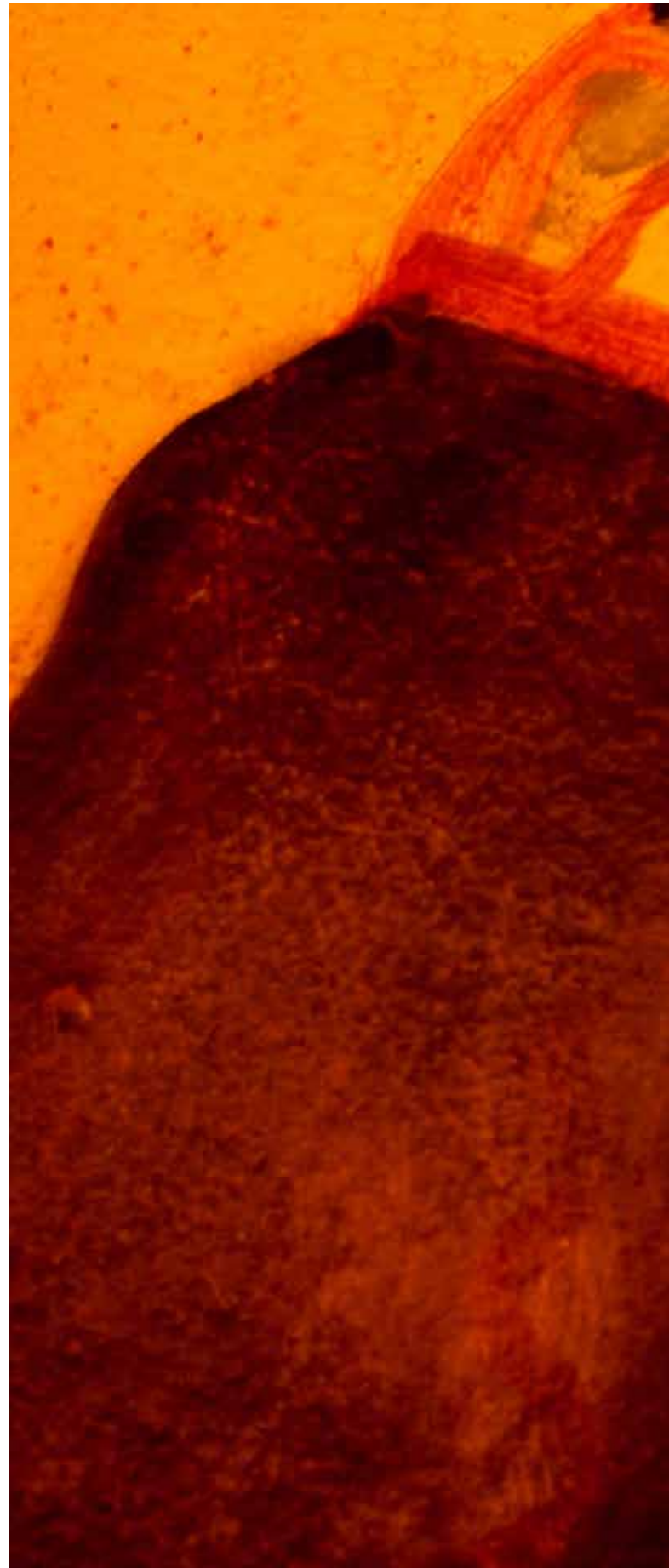
Nonetheless, sexual assaults continue to occur at public gatherings: at a celebration for Sisi's inauguration in June 2014, at least five women were assaulted, with one assault caught on video causing widespread outrage as it went viral online. Sisi made a point of visiting the woman who was assaulted while she was in hospital, and made a public commitment to tackling impunity towards sexual violence and harassment in Egypt. But women's rights campaigners and civil society activists have expressed skepticism at Sisi's adoption of the cause of 'stopping sexual violence'.

Firstly, it has been noted that Sisi has politicized the issue to imply that the sexual violence has solely been perpetrated by the Muslim Brotherhood during the post-revolutionary period since 2011, rather than an epidemic in which the police, the military, and the judiciary (through widespread failure and willingness to prosecute) have all been complicit. Secondly, women's rights campaigners note that it was Sisi that had been responsible for the forced 'virginity tests' when he was head of military intelligence during the post-Mubarak SCAF period in 2011. Thirdly, there have been allegations that, since the overthrow of President Morsi in 2013 and Sisi's rise to power, Muslim Brotherhood women have been targeted for ideological reasons, and subjected to forced virginity tests. As Egyptian writer and activist Mona Eltahawy wrote in the New York Times in June 2014, "it does not matter where you stand on Egypt's political spectrum: if you are a woman, your body is not safe."

Conclusion: an end to impunity?

The law introduced in 2014 that criminalised sexual harassment for the first time, was criticized by activists such as the 'I Saw Harassment' campaign, for not going far enough in its sanctions against harassment, and not being practicable. In another sense, activists are more concerned by who will be prosecuted under the new law: namely, that it will be deployed to make sexual harassment and sexual assaults 'apolitical', by punishing the crime when it is committed by civilians but not providing oversight to ensure apparatus of the state such as the police and the military do not, themselves, also commit sexual violence and harassment.

With the new anti-protest law, the mass mobilisations in public space that marked the revolutionary period are over, and this was arguably one of the conditions that contributed to the surge of harassment and assaults against women to 'epidemic' levels. However, unless adequate institutional and cultural change can be brought about in which sexual harassment and sexual violence is fully recognised, combatted, and prosecuted, the phenomenon will continue to mark Egypt's post-Mubarak era, even as the revolution itself fades.





CMI (Chr. Michelsen Institute)

Bergen - norway

Phone: +47 47 93 80 00

E-mail: cmi@cmi.no

www.cmi.no

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