Networking on Anti-Sexual Harassment Efforts across Egyptian Universities

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March 2021

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Led by the Institute of Development Studies, A4EA is being implemented by a consortium which includes: the Accountability Research Center, the Collective for Social Science Research, the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, Itad, Oxfam GB, and the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research. It is funded with UK aid from the UK government (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office – FCDO, formerly DFID). The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official policies of our funder.

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Summary

This paper explores efforts across Egyptian universities to enhance responsiveness and accountability for addressing and mitigating sexual harassment on campus. Though not a new phenomenon, harassment in Egyptian universities differs from other places in terms of scale, frequency, aggressiveness and the characteristics of perpetrators and survivors within the university settings. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part unpacks the research question and tries to build the relationship between the main concepts of collective action, accountability and networking. The second part presents the methodology with a particular focus on action research. The third part analyses the findings of the research.

Keywords

Sexual harassment, universities, action research, Egypt, collective action, accountability, empowerment, anti-sexual harassment units.

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Executive summary

This paper discusses a study into accountability for sexual harassment in Egyptian universities that was undertaken between April 2017 and December 2018 as part of the first research phase of Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA). A4EA is an international research programme that explores how social and political action can contribute to empowerment and accountability in Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan. The paper considers efforts taking place in Egyptian universities to promote and enhance responsiveness regarding sexual harassment on campus. It relies on action research as the methodology driving the research and activities. Although action research is a relatively new methodological tool in social sciences in the Middle East, it allowed a deeper level of understanding and analysis of the research question relating to networking and its effects on collective action for institutional accountability within Egyptian universities.

The researcher planned and conducted a number of activities and meetings with university professors engaged in institutionalised efforts to counter sexual harassment on campus. Selected universities included the University of Alexandria, University of Beni Suef, University of Helwan and University of Fayoum. Meetings and activities took place over the course of the first semester of the academic year 2017/18. Applying action research meant involving the researcher within the research community to plan, conduct, evaluate and reflect on actions and activities, and repeating this cycle in order to reflect the development of the research and the research community in the four universities.

Within the context of this paper, accountability relates to the ability of university professors engaged with anti-sexual harassment efforts to convince their respective universities to: (a) recognise the problem of sexual harassment on campus; (b) support efforts to launch new anti-sexual harassment units; and, (c) provide support for the units once they are established. The findings showed a recognition of the importance of collective action to maintain and sustain the existence of the anti-sexual harassment units within the respective universities.

Yet, maintaining the anti-sexual harassment units called for a redefinition of accountability. To the research community at large, taking into consideration these units' struggle to survive, accountability means the ability of different units to convince university administrations to recognise sexual harassment as a problem; to recognise the efforts to institutionalise the units; and to guarantee a place for this institutionalisation within the university structure. Accountability in this sense is unachievable without building alliances with other universities and with external influential actors such as the National Council for Women. It is important to build strategic alliances at different levels: at the local level with local

NGOs, at the national level with the National Council for Women, and at the international level with universities and donors that are willing and capable of assisting in the cause of fighting sexual harassment on campuses. Finally, we cannot underestimate the importance of understanding the different power dynamics within the units and the intersectionality of these dynamics with gender, political and economic marginalisation.

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Acronyms

A4EA	Action for Empowerment and Accountability
AR	action research
FGM	female genital mutilation
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
MOU	memorandum of understanding
NCW	National Council for Women
NGO	non-governmental organisation

1. Introduction

This paper explores efforts across Egyptian universities to enhance responsiveness and accountability for addressing and mitigating sexual harassment on campus. Sexual harassment has been a pervasive problem in Egypt since the late 1990s; but it is not a new phenomenon, it is as old as the patriarchal system itself. Yet, a number of elements make it a new and more pressing issue. First, the recent scale of harassment is completely different. Previously there were areas associated with limited occurrences of sexual harassment, in particular traditional and more conservative neighbourhoods. This is no longer the case. Sexual harassment is spread across the Egyptian map, with high intensity in certain areas, yet no areas are completely 'free' of it.[1] Second, the frequency is different. A recent UN study states that more than 90 per cent of Egyptian women have been subjected to harassment at least once in their lives.[2] Third, there are increasing levels of verbal and physical harassment. Formerly tolerated flirtatious comments have shifted into more aggressively sexual comments.[3] Fourth, there is a change in the age group of both the perpetrator and those being harassed. Sexual harassment is being seen across the age spectrum from younger to older perpetrators and survivors.[4] Discussions of the phenomenon over the last decade have been taking place among women's groups, human rights activists, policymakers, religious groups and the general public. In 2014, legal and human rights discussions as well as mobilisation of women's rights groups led to the approval of amendments to legislation that criminalises sexual harassment and increases penalties.

In universities, feminist professors saw a political opportunity to mobilise following a case of sexual harassment on the Cairo University campus in 2014. The case involved a group of students sexually harassing a female student. Though the incident itself might not have been novel to campus, the coverage

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[1] In a poll conducted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, Cairo was ranked among the worst places for women. For a report on the poll, see France24 (2017). It is notable that this poll is highly contested by state officials, especially the National Council for Women (NCW) who criticised its approach and methodology. For statements by Maya Morsi, president of the NCW, see BBC (2017).

[2] Though there are no official statistics for the number of victims of sexual harassment in Egypt, a 2013 study by the UN reports that 99.3 per cent of Egyptian women have been subjected to sexual harassment. The number is debatable, yet it indicates the magnitude of the phenomenon. For more details on the study, its methodology and results, see UN Women (2013). A more recent study conducted by UNFPA in association with the NCW on the economic cost of gender-based violence is also of importance. The study has detailed data on the numbers of victims of gender-based violence in general and sexual violence in particular. For further details, see UNFPA Egypt (2015).

[3] During the 2011 revolution and its aftermath, there were a number of reports of sexual assaults and sexual attacks on women in public spaces. The attacks were many and violent compared to earlier cases. For further details, see Nazra (2013).

[4] A number of initiatives working in Egypt to monitor the phenomenon have documented that during peak times (holiday seasons and public celebrations) there have been reports of perpetrators as young as eight years old.

and debate were so huge that attention was drawn to it. Lobbying by activists and women's groups of the university president led him to change his initial position of blaming the girl for the way she dressed. After much criticism, the president finally issued a press release condemning the act and apologising for his previous statements. In a move to show commitment to fighting sexual harassment on campus and supporting female students within the university community, the anti-sexual harassment and violence against women unit was launched in June 2014 – the first in any Egyptian university and marking a new shift within the university community.[5]

Following the establishment of the unit at Cairo University, a number of other Egyptian universities initiated similar units with relative success. Some have managed to launch official units and start activities, while others continue to petition university boards and communities about the importance of the initiative.

This paper focuses on a study examining efforts for countering sexual harassment collectively for gender empowerment through multiple accountability that was part of Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA), an international research programme which explores how social and political action can contribute to empowerment and accountability in Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan. The paper argues that networking between university anti-sexual harassment units and other key actors such as the National Council for Women (NCW) in Egypt has the potential to enhance the work of these crucial units. While it finds that power issues still play out in networking, the networks also prove to be places in which individual members can find support to overcome challenges of power, resources and negative discourse, and can achieve a measure of accountability. Accordingly, the research question informing this paper is: how does networking strengthen or hinder collective action for institutional accountability in the case of anti-sexual harassment efforts in Egyptian universities?

The paper is divided into three parts:

The first part (sections 2, 3 and 4) unpacks the research question and tries to build the relationship between the main concepts, i.e. collective action, accountability and networking. It will explain the choice of universities for the study and discuss the background and the context of collective action.

The second part (sections 5 and 6) presents the study's methodology with a particular focus on action research. This methodology is relatively new to Arab

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5   For more details on the incident and different reactions around it, see Genderation (2014) and Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2014). The source was also a meeting with Dr Maha El Said, founder and director of the Cairo University Anti-Sexual Harassment Unit, at her office on campus on 25 September 2017.

and Egyptian academia; accordingly, there is a need to explain and discuss the approach and the possibilities it provides for feminist research in such contexts.

The third part (section 7) analyses the findings of the research. Research activities took place over the course of the first semester of the 2017/18 academic year. Efforts to launch the network are still work in progress, nevertheless, there is sufficient material to reflect on the process and discuss next steps.

2. Conceptual framework

This paper claims that networks as a form of collective action can help to enhance levels of accountability concerning fighting sexual harassment on university campuses. Collective action is fundamental in creating a consensus within the Egyptian university community regarding the existence, magnitude and response needed to address the issue of sexual harassment. Networking is a flexible format that allows for building alliances and consensus, producing knowledge, and sharing expertise. Thus, we need to discuss the three concepts – collective action, networking, and accountability – and their inter-relation in some detail.

Collective action is a very broad term and its body of literature is huge. A great part of the literature deals with collective action in its relationship to social movements, defined as a 'rational, purposeful and organized action… (and) collective action derives from a calculation of the costs and benefits' (Della Porta and Dialni 2006: 14). The decision of an individual to engage in collective action is not just a rational calculation of cost and benefit, but a commitment to a cause. What characterises collective action from individual committed actions is the level of 'structuring the actions'. By structure we refer to a wide range of arrangements between actors; this could be informal hierarchy within a group, a steering committee composed of delegates from different subgroups, an umbrella organisation, and\or network (Rucht 2013: 171).

Mariz Tadros' recent work on gender justice in Egypt (2016) proposes five typologies for women's collective action: women's movements, women in movements, feminist movements, anti-feminist movements and gender justice movements. The last one is the most important in our case. Gender justice movements are mixed gender groups with a clear agenda of gender justice and especially women's rights. The movement does not specifically have to be led by women, but it is crucial that the whole agenda and discourse of the group is clearly seeking and endorsing women's rights, and that women are represented within the group at all levels. Gender justice movements' main differentiation from feminist movements is that their main target is to achieve social justice for all, not specifically about defying the patriarchal system *per se* (Tadros 2016).

In this paper, we use the term 'collective action' to refer to the arrangements and interactions taking place among Egyptian public universities (i.e. universities owned and run by the government) in fighting sexual harassment. More specifically, we use the modality of 'networking' to describe these arrangements. Collective action in this context has emerged as a network, a structure conducive in different levels and forms: (a) it helps participants to maintain different levels of independence, while keeping the spirit and the momentum of collective action;

(b) it does not require high levels of collectivism compared to more structural forms of NGOs and/or civil society organisations; and (c) it basically adopts a non-hierarchical relationship with the possibility of one participant facilitating rather than leading the network activities (Tadros 2016: 59–60; Rucht 2013: 170–5). Moreover, our network is focused around a specific issue, i.e. fighting sexual harassment and violence against women on campuses. This network is serving a number of functions: 'knowledge management… amplification and advocacy… Community building ... fostering consensus among groups and finally mobilizing resources' (Hearn and Mendizabal 2011: 4).

However, there are a number of limitations to this form of collective action. First, the members' commitment to the cause might fluctuate depending on various elements beyond the scope or control of the network – for example, a change in the internal hierarchy of a subgroup, with less commitment to the cause, might lead to less engagement with the network as a whole. Second, the ability of the network to mobilise resources, and specifically financial resources, might be questioned especially in cases where there are limited and/or restricted resources already. Third, different members might have different approaches or understandings of the cause that glues the network together. Sexual harassment is a very complicated issue and can be approached from different perspectives adopting different discourses. This variation could affect the ability of the network to mobilise and recruit new members as well as jeopardise its ability to develop a coherent message about the cause. This paper describes action research as the methodology that informed the study's approach to understanding the formation of the proposed network and whether it would lead to accountability and institutionalisation of anti-sexual harassment efforts in different universities.

To Schmitter (2007) accountability means a relationship between two parties in which one party accepts and feels obliged to practise transparency for his\her actions and to be responsible for the implications of those actions. This relationship needs to be institutionalised, meaning that it has to be embedded in a set of rules that are known to all actors. The term has grown to be an important procedural element in governance and democratisation. Democratisation, in this sense, does not only relate to elections and voting, though these are instrumental to democracy, but rather focuses on the ability of citizens to practise high levels of participation and engagement with public affairs during and between elections. Accountability in this sense refers to the ability of different citizens to hold government officials responsible for their actions and decisions both when voting them in or out of office, and during their period of governing. Social accountability, which means the ability of different communities to own the power of influencing, monitoring and participating in decision-making, would definitely help to enforce forms and levels of formal accountability. Social accountability does this by integrating the citizen level within governance, in the

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sense that it holds citizens accountable to each other in terms of respecting the law and values of society.

Does the practice of accountability lead to the empowerment of citizens? Or is it the other way around and the empowerment of citizens creates effective accountability? This is a fundamental question; it seems that the common understanding of accountability in available literature is that it automatically leads to the empowerment of citizens and their ability to become active participants in decision-making and during implementing processes. In a recent publication by the World Bank a reference is clearly made to 'better governance, better results with accountable government: democracy is stronger, services are more efficient, corruption is exposed …good governance is recognized and respected' (World Bank 2004: 2). Nevertheless, this relationship is not as automatic as it seems; both empowerment and accountability take different meanings according to the context in question. In non- or less democratic contexts accountability in its more common use is very low and is barely institutionalised. In these contexts, people go no further than expecting government officials to recognise and acknowledge a problem. Empowerment in these contexts would be more about giving the voiceless a voice. Decision-making is monopolised by a small economic/political and/or social elite. The majority of the population is left at the margins with no real possibility of being heard or having their needs taken into consideration. In development studies there is more emphasis on economic and political empowerment. Both types of empowerment are crucial in terms of sustainable development according to international standards; yet it is very unlikely that they would lead to concrete empowerment that could force accountability on different actors. Results of economic and political empowerment might show on charts and statistics, yet without addressing power distribution and dynamics in a society, those indicators will not lead to genuine social change.[6]

The study focused on in this paper uses action research as a methodological tool that encourages the engagement of the research community (the researcher and the participants) in a process of knowledge production about both terms being used in the research and the conclusions reached. In the study, different participants[7] engaged in several rounds of discussions about what they meant by accountability especially concerning anti-sexual harassment efforts. While agreeing that the end goal of accountability was the institutionalisation of anti-harassment efforts inside universities, most participants agreed that accountability could have different forms and levels – taking the current contexts

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[6]   There is a very interesting study on accountability in Bangladesh, in which the author suggests a concept of rude accountability. It means the ability of the poor to cause shame and embarrassment to public officials when both formal and social accountability do not work properly. For more details see Hossain (2009).

[7]   Participants in this research are university faculty members and students engaged in anti-sexual harassment efforts, as well as members of the research team.

of different anti-sexual harassment units into consideration. In their current situation, accountability meant the ability of different university professors engaged in anti-sexual harassment activities to convince their respective university boards to do the following: (a) recognise the problem; (b) support the launch of anti-sexual harassment units; and (c) provide assistance to the newly emerged units. Participants also agreed that institutionalising these efforts would materialise through the launch of a network for Egyptian universities against sexual harassment. The network should provide regulated channels through which to exchange experiences, expertise and knowledge, thus helping (together with other measures taken at society and government levels) to bring about social change with regard to women and public spaces.

3. Which universities and why?

Efforts have been ongoing for a long time inside and outside the universities to fight sexual harassment and violence against women. A number of university professors aware of the issue have been part of different endeavours in this regard. Collective activism by non-state actors intensified in the years before 2011. Reports on the issue and activities to raise awareness about it were spread over the media and social platforms. The NCW, as a semi-governmental organisation, engaged in developing a new strategy for action, of which combating violence against women was an integral part.

Nevertheless, universities stand at different points on the continuum in fighting sexual harassment. While some enjoy the support of their boards as well as their students, others have suffered from a lack of administrative support or student engagement. Each example bears examination in terms of the research question. Accordingly, though the number of universities launching anti-sexual harassment units is increasing, for this study we selected four public universities to demonstrate the range of experiences of support for anti-sexual harassment units. The University of Beni Suef has support from its board and students; the University of Alexandria has student support but no board support; the University of Helwan has no board support and no mobilisation from students, although students did receive individual training; and the University of Fayoum has board support but little student support, although this has been increasing. Further discussion on the context of their experiences is laid out in the findings section. Two issues regarding the management of the study are important. First, the choice of universities had to take into consideration the political context. Some universities were more reluctant than others to engage with student activities concerning sexual harassment, though their initial position may have been more welcoming. Second, during the action research there were a number of administrative changes within unit membership and/or at the management level in some universities. In the University of Alexandria for example, when the university president finally officially launched the unit, he appointed as lead a university professor who was not originally involved with the efforts to establish it. In Beni Suef, the new university president was less enthusiastic about the unit and its work compared to the old administration. The situation at the University of Helwan did not develop into more concrete action regarding the activation of the unit or launching student activities. The changes had different implications for the level of engagement with research activities, and could affect our ability to reach generalisations and concrete answers about the research question.

Figure 3.1 Matrix of selected university case studies

Relatively positive institutional policy from above (faculty) **AND** **Positive** student mobilisation from below	**No** institutional policy from above **No** mobilisation from below (neither students nor faculty)[8]
Case: University of Beni Suef	**Case: University of Helwan**
Positive institutional policy from above **Increasing** student mobilisation from below	**No** institutional policy from above (this changed during the course of the research with the decision to launch the unit) **Positive** student mobilisation from below
Case: University of Fayoum	**Case: University of Alexandria**

Source: Created by Hamada and Tadros.

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[8]   Students received training individually, not under the university umbrella nor on campus.

4. Background and context

This paper tries to examine the relationship between collective action and accountability. There are three elements we need to take into consideration in this regard; first, the historical background of anti-sexual harassment efforts inside the universities; second, the efforts of the NCW; and third, the Egyptian state's stand on the issue. The Cairo University anti-sexual harassment unit started in June 2014 with a very small, yet active team of university professors who had a long history of activism in general, and feminist activism in particular. The unit has grown since 2014 in terms of staff, activities and outreach. Part of Cairo University's success has been its ability to influence the Supreme Council of Universities[9] to issue a recommendation to establish similar units in all Egyptian universities.[10] The Cairo University experience sheds light on the ability of governmental entities to build alliances with civil society organisations (most of the activities conducted by the unit were done in collaboration with youth-led initiatives) as well as with officials (Ministry of Interior) and international organisations (UN Women).

The NCW is a very important entity in the work against sexual harassment and in setting the ground for accountability and institutionalisation. The NCW was established in 2000 to empower women and defend their rights in legislation and policies. The NCW also represents Egyptian women in the international arena in addition to a number of other functions.[11] In 2015 the NCW issued a national strategy for combating violence against women (2015–2020). The strategy defined four pillars: prevention, protection, intervention and legal procedures, and aimed at fighting violence against women on both domestic and community levels.[12] The NCW collaborated with universities all over Egypt to institutionalise efforts to fight violence against women. There is, however, a difference in discourse about the issue between the NCW and Cairo University. The NCW takes into consideration cultural sensitivity and addresses the issue in a broader terminology of 'violence against women', while Cairo University addresses the issue more directly as a 'sexual harassment'. Both are aware of the inter-relationship between the two terms, yet the difference in terminology reflects the different perspectives in regard to how the problem is defined and tackled. For the NCW, sexual harassment is an issue that is too culturally

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9   The Supreme Council was established in 1950 to coordinate between different Egyptian universities on issues concerning degrees and related matters. The Council is headed by the Minister of Higher Education and its board consists of heads of universities as well as five experts on education. For further details on the Council, its mandate and activities, see the **Supreme Council of Universities website**.

10 Another paper will discuss the experience of Cairo University and its challenges.

11 The National Council for Women is a semi-governmental entity established in 2000 and reporting directly to the Egyptian President on areas concerning protection and enhancement of women's conditions in Egypt. See the **NCW website** for details on the organisation, its mandate and activities.

12 The **NCW strategy** can be accessed on the UN Women Global Database on Violence against Women.

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sensitive to be addressed separately, and could and should be part of a greater package of fighting violence against women in general. To them, this approach is more inclusive and culturally sensitive and enhances the ability to bring gradual social change. The Anti-Sexual Harassment Unit in Cairo University does not deny the connection between violence against women, and sexual harassment as a sub-category of it. Nevertheless, they insist on targeting sexual harassment *per se* rather than clustering it with other forms of violence such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage, as they regard different forms of violence as requiring different initiatives and policies. While they acknowledge the interconnectivity of the different forms, they believe that it is more practical to address each form directly and distinctly, and in doing so, this could bring about social change. Both perspectives intersect, but depart from each other at the level of discourse, proposed actions and policies. Whether both entities are able to enhance areas of agreement and downplay issues of difference is a question to be answered in the next phases of launching the network.

The political context is of no less of importance. In March 2017 the Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi announced that 2017 would be the year for women, suggesting that the state would increase efforts to improve women's position in public life. In terms of numbers, the current Egyptian legislative body has a record number of female members (89 out of 596 members, i.e. 14.9 per cent); the current cabinet has six female ministers out of 34 (three ministries have never been led by women); and the current constitution requires a 50 per cent female and youth membership in the next municipal councils. At a different, yet related level, a new law increasing punishment for sexual harassment crimes was issued in 2014. Although it does not meet the aspirations of some feminist groups who wanted more severe penalties, nevertheless, it is considered a breakthrough in terms of defining the act and increasing the punishment.

In examining the research question,[13] the paper takes into account these three elements – the history of the anti-sexual harassment units, the efforts of the NCW, and the state's stance on sexual harassment – and their inter-relation.

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[13] The research question: how does networking strengthen or hinder collective action for institutional accountability in the case of anti-sexual harassment efforts in Egyptian universities?

5. Methodology

This paper is part of a larger project examining the relationship between accountability and collective action. The project uses action research (AR) as an approach to secure a better understanding of the research community, create more balanced power relations among participants and develop reality-based solutions for identified problems.

5.1 Understanding action research

What do we mean by action research? What are the advantages of using it? What is the positionality of the researcher towards the community and the topic?

AR is a balance of three elements: action, research and participation. If we miss one element, then the process is not action research, rather it is applied research or conventional research deploying fieldwork techniques (Greenwood and Levin 2007).

Action is aimed at changing the dynamics within the group (researchers and stakeholders) to become more equitable, collaborative and productive. These actions are aimed at solving a problem defined by the researcher and the stakeholders while bringing social change to power dynamics. The research philosophy and the engagement level of everybody who is designing, planning and implementing the research helps to generate powerful research knowledge. Researchers applying this approach generate knowledge through implementing actions, thus it is researching through action rather than researching the action. In other words, AR is not about listing actions to be taken on a certain course, rather it is about deliberating and reflecting among the research community about a problem that needs addressing and the best way to deal with it to bring about social change. Research is comprised of cycles of actions and reflections practised continuously to ensure equitable, collaborative and productive relations inside the research community.

The participation element in AR is aimed at: (a) shifting the power balance between the professional researcher and the community co-researcher in favour of the latter; and, (b) transforming the process of knowledge production into a more democratic form. In conventional research, the researcher holds a different position of power in relation to the 'researched community or individuals'. He/she uses knowledge produced elsewhere to examine questions and test hypotheses on others. AR should work differently, in that power relations are horizontal rather than vertical. Everybody can claim the ability to produce knowledge, yet with different techniques and from different angles. The researcher/facilitator is equipped with research tools and material and at the same time, the rest of the

research community is equipped with first-hand experience and context-related knowledge. Thus, the process of knowledge production becomes more about power within the community rather than exercising power over the community.

As Shani and Pasmore (2010) note: 'Action research may [also] be defined as an emergent inquiry process' aimed at providing solutions to existing problems with certain societies and/or organisations. 'It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organisations, in developing self-help competencies in organisational members and in adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry' (Shani and Pasmore 2010).

AR can have a huge impact on changing the power dynamics among a community of researchers as well as between the researcher and participants. In positivist research the researcher has power over reality (through distancing and rearrangements of its elements) and over objects (through reinforcing their lack of agency rather than focusing on their daily struggle to exist and influence). AR by contrast emphasises a different form of knowledge production that integrates all actors within a community of learning. Knowledge production using participatory research depends on local realities and the responsibilities of all those engaged (researcher and participants) in bringing about social change and solutions to problems identified and prioritised by the researcher and participants (Gaventa and Cornwall 2008). In other words it helps in 'shifting power towards those affected by the problem … and create[ing] their counter-narratives' (Loewenson *et al.* 2014: 14).

AR works through a cycle of four processes: (1) planning, (2) taking action, (3) evaluating the action, and (4) further planning. Integral to the four steps is the ongoing process of reflecting individually (at the researcher level), within the community (the researcher and the community), as well as collective reflections with circles outside the research.

A crucial part of AR are the voices of the research. AR includes three voices compared to conventional research where researchers work on a topic and present the work to another entity (the third voice). In AR the three levels of voices[14] and audiences are highly integrated and presented throughout the whole process. 'First person' is the ability of the researcher to dig deep into himself/herself and question assumptions, philosophy, positionality and/or ways of relating to their actions. 'Second person' is more about the ability of the researcher to engage in a process of deliberative discussion with others concerned with the subject matter – in other words, the ability of the researcher to build a constructive relationship with different stakeholders of the research topic. The 'third person' is the community of inquiry and knowledge that will

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14   Also referred to as 'person'. In the paper, 'voice' and 'person' are used interchangeably.

benefit from the well-informed action that emerges from the action-research process, including the partner(s) who receive the report. Who are we involving in our research who can help us (the first and the second voices) in elaborating and consolidating the knowledge produced?

Figure 5.1 The action research cycles
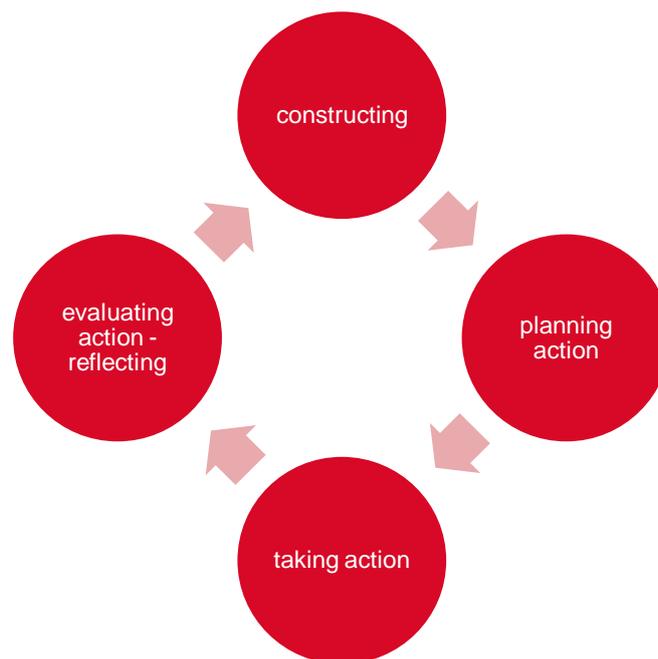
Source: © 2014 by David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Prior to the cycle, context and purpose form a preliminary step that is very important as it is aimed at building consensus among the co-research community about questions such as: why is this project necessary or important? Is there an opening for enhancing change? In addition to answering these questions and others, this step is important in creating and enhancing the collaborative relationship that is a fundamental part of AR.

After preparing the ground, the four main steps of the action research follow: constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating and reflecting on actions. This process is continuous until the end of the project. Needless to say, the phases of constructing, planning action, and taking action are collaborative and participatory, taking place within and among the researcher(s) and the community. AR is an ever-continuing process of reflection using the first- and second-person levels. A researcher committed to the participatory and democratic nature of AR will undertake a continual process of reflecting and evaluating on the questions asked, tools used, findings concluded and the level of participation and engagement by all participants and partners in the research.

This process of continuous reflection is a substantial part of the quality of the research.

5.2 How far do we allow the first person to control the four phases of AR?

This is a very important question and a serious challenge to the integrity of the researcher and the quality of the research. The process of designing, planning, and implementing the research might lead the researcher (the first person) to take over the research and enforce his/her ideological or value preference over it. Positivists would argue that conventional research and tools might be a better guarantee against this intervention. Nevertheless, the process of reflecting across the three levels of analysis (first, second and third persons) would help researchers and participants to maintain quality and rigorous answers to the questions: what happened (topic of the research)? How do we make sense of what happened (reflections)? And what needs to be done (in terms of further planning or further action) to achieve change? (Coghlan and Brannick 2014: 16).

An inherent element of AR is that power is transferred and shared with the community of participants. Accordingly, it is totally unethical if the main researcher fails to secure a more balanced power relationship with participants. Moreover, there are different sources of risk that might emerge within AR:

1. tension between participants in the research (second and third voices);
2. tension over who gets to represent the community and which interests are prioritised over the others;
3. protection of the confidentiality, safety and privacy of the participants, especially in politically sensitive conditions; and
4. tension over reporting, what should be included, what should be left out, how to present unfavourable results (Loewenson *et al.* 2014: 74–7).

It becomes the responsibility of the lead researcher (the first voice) to delicately manage all these risks and tensions. While creating a more collaborative and participatory research community, it remains the responsibility of the lead researcher to facilitate and manage the process of knowledge production and management. The positionality of the lead researcher is a very delicate navigation through the process of designing, planning, implementing and evaluating the research, and the final phase of reporting on the process. During the whole process the lead researcher has to secure the balance and integration of the two voices (the first and the second) and respect commitment towards the third voice (the partner(s) receiving the report) (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014).

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In participatory research everyone involved is part of a dual process, the process of researching (with its multi-dimensions) and at the same time they are co-subjects, as they participate in the activity that is being researched. Nevertheless, there are hidden power positions within the process.[15] In our study, several techniques were used to create a safe environment to encourage the participation of all. First, we tried to build confidence and trust among the members of the community as a pre-requisite for engaging in the work. Second, the group usually discussed activity design after proposing more than one option. Third, I openly questioned my own position with the research community in order to build more equitable relations. Fourth, ongoing and continuous reflection with different members of the research community helped in sustaining these relatively equitable relations. Yet, it would be naïve to assume that there were not positions and levels of powers that were interacting and revealed throughout the whole process.[16]

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[15] Being a member of the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University (a premier school) facilitated a certain reception and cooperation for the research. Faculty members from other universities were very welcoming and cooperative. There was a sense of obligation about cooperating and looking good before a faculty member from the capital (see Reason 2003: 175).

[16] It is very interesting to read about the different types of cooperative research and different forms of positionality. For a useful resource see: Heron and Reason (2001).

6. Description of activities

The research activities were conducted at two levels. At one level, three MA students[17] spent 90 hours planning and implementing activities with the anti-sexual harassment units and students in three of the case study universities (Helwan, Fayoum and Alexandria). Their reports are an essential part of the findings discussed below. A second level was conducted with the anti-sexual harassment units' directors around the efforts to establish a network between Egyptian universities. A detailed discussion of the findings follows later.

As this paper is part of a larger project applying an action-research methodology, we can categorise activities in relation to this in the following steps:

– Preliminary step: important in building consensus among the research participants about the research question and about the best technique to tackle it. A capacity-building workshop was organised by the Institute of Development Studies, in the UK, in collaboration with the Women's Unit at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, and the Anti-Sexual Harassment Unit at Cairo University in September 2017. The workshop focused on introducing action research as a methodology as well as creating collaborative relationships between the participants and creating the foundational basis for considering the vision, mission and objectives of the anti-sexual harassment units and the proposed university network. Groups participating in the workshop (anti-sexual harassment units, MA students, as well as medical staff working in teaching hospitals) worked together to plan different sets of activities and actions, and discussed their relevance to and implications for addressing the main issue of the project. Participants also discussed different techniques for tackling administrative and bureaucratic challenges.

– The second phase of activities involved one-to-one interviews with university professors at three of the case study universities (Helwan, Alexandria and Beni Suef) about the work of the anti-sexual harassment units and about the need for and importance of networking. The interviews took place over the course of the first academic semester 2017/18.

– The last phase of actions involved a workshop organised by the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, the Institute of Development Studies, and the Anti-Sexual Harassment Unit at Cairo University. The workshop brought together potential members of the

universities network to deliberate and reach consensus about a number of questions. This was first around mapping the reality of anti-sexual harassment efforts at the various universities (challenges and opportunities); second, exploring why a network was needed (how to build a common understanding of the mutual benefits of engaging in a network); and third, discussing how the network could be established (who does what, when and how). This third question was about the group's next activities and actions. Participants agreed on the importance of maintaining the communication thread. As a result, there was a proposal to create a mailing list to facilitate interaction between the group and to support network members in exchanging knowledge and expertise. It is also important to highlight that a lot of attention was paid to maintaining the confidentiality and safety of the participants and, at the same time, to maintaining a collaborative relationship with the newly established community of knowledge.

7. Discussion of the findings

We have discussed earlier in this paper that accountability in this context relates to the ability of university professors engaged with anti-sexual harassment efforts to convince their respective universities to: (a) recognise the problem of sexual harassment on campus; (b) support efforts to launch new anti-sexual harassment units; and (c) provide support for the units once they are established. These elements would eventually contribute to developing university policy in this regard. These three definitional pillars were developed through reflections within the research community (the researcher/facilitator and the different participants). Accordingly, empowerment would entail the success of active members in achieving one or more of the three pillars and in promoting the functions of the network as a form of institutionalising accountability. As suggested by the research community during the workshop in February 2018, the network would start with an online platform to share news, expertise, and knowledge, as well as lessons learned from different cases and complaints. The network would use emailing lists to disseminate knowledge and news about unit activities. Sharing these would create a culture of transparency, which is a fundamental part of accountability. Institutionalisation of accountability in this sense means that different behaviours and activities would be consistent, establishing routines and regulated actions, and eventually institutionalised practices across the universities. There would be little room left for individual interpretation; rather the network would create its own agreed code of conduct, which everyone would be encouraged to follow.

Participants agreed that collective action is crucial for the cause of fighting sexual harassment and violence against women for different reasons. For this collectivism to succeed and achieve its goals, it needs strong alliances both inside and outside universities, bearing in mind the power relations between different partners. These findings are therefore discussed in recognition of the magnitude of the problem and the support needed for newly established units.

7.1 The importance of collective action

In this paper, collective action refers to the efforts to establish a network of Egyptian universities in fighting sexual harassment and violence against women. There is a high level of endorsement for such an initiative by all universities involved regardless of their individual institutional positions. Universities without an official anti-sexual harassment unit (Helwan), one that is newly established (Alexandria and Fayoum), and/or one that is relatively older (Beni Suef and Aswan), share the understanding of the importance of networking. Though networking has different functions to perform, the main goal is empowerment. All

universities perceive networking as a form of support and empowerment, either in negotiating the existence of anti-sexual harassment units, enhancing bargaining power and/or supporting activities. Each participant in the projects in those universities feels less powerful individually – the strength in numbers is very crucial to them. The collective identity of 'Egyptian universities' is a more empowering position than speaking in the singular form. As one professor put it, 'if important and influential names and institutions are involved, it would be much easier to convince my university about the importance of the network'.

Empowerment also means building on the different experiences and best practices of the different units. 'No one needs to re-invent the wheel; we can share expertise and experiences, lessons learned and how to face different challenges and problems', a faculty member affirmed. Reflecting on different meanings of empowerment developed by participating universities brings to light the intersectionality of different expressions of power, especially the interaction of power with, to and within.[18] The collective deliberation over the concept and different meanings of empowerment for each participant is actually developing a different form of power hierarchy. Rather than one university/professor leading the process from the top and regulating the relationship in a patriarchal format, three processes are taking place simultaneously, aiming to change the power dynamics into a more democratic form. This is done first by recognising the ability of the research community to develop knowledge related to the concepts and tools, giving power to them. Second, the power of knowledge creation is practised collectively, including the researcher/facilitator and community of research, thus sharing power between the two ('power with'). Finally, the outcome of these dynamics enables the research community to overcome their earlier imbalanced positions of power to become empowered 'within'. Empowerment in this respect is not only something practised at the network level, but also importantly, as a self-developing sense of ability to contribute to knowledge production and the process of research itself.[19]

As previously mentioned, Cairo University has more power than the other universities, for different reasons – its history, and the history of the unit in particular, its powerful and charismatic leadership, and alliances and partners. This powerful position is reflected in the nature of network interactions and in the ability to build collaborative collective action. There is a common understanding that Cairo University's position can work to the network's advantage. It can help to provide expertise, a model of action, manuals for training, help in mobilising resources and leading or facilitating the network. The question is what can the

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[18]   See the powercube website for more information about the different **expressions of power**.

[19]   The last point was strongly reflected in discussions that took place between participants at the Cairo University workshop organised on 10 February 2018, 'Activating the Egyptian Universities Network on fighting sexual harassment and violence against women'. More than 14 universities attended the workshop to discuss and reflect on the issue of the network. The main outcome was developing a draft document for the network's mission, vision and goals.

network give back to Cairo University? Collective action empowers and protects Cairo University's position as a pioneer leader in efforts to fight sexual harassment with its partners: governmental (the Ministry of Interior and Higher Council for Education), semi-governmental (the NCW), and civil society organisations and local and international donors. If Cairo University continues to work alone in fighting sexual harassment on campus, it would eventually weaken the cause and undermine its efforts. Working in collaboration with other partners (universities, governmental agencies and civil society) helps Cairo to capitalise on the efforts and maximise them. It also assists in institutionalising the unit within the university structure. Currently the unit is not integrated into the institutional structure of the university. The unit works under the auspices of the university president and reports directly to him. It does not have a clear financial structure in terms of rewards and honorarium allocation for faculty members working in the unit. The financial instability and highly demanding activities are leading to a high staff turnover and threatens the continuity of the unit if it loses the support of the president for any reason. However, if the unit gets to lead/facilitate the network, this leading role would require more recognition by the university administration and would eventually produce anti-sexual harassment systems that are better structured.

Collective action is crucial to building networks between units, with partners inside respective universities, and in the local communities. During meetings, professors from local/regional universities affirmed that those universities have the necessary knowledge and expertise about their local contexts, both inside and outside the university community. How to label the cause is a good example of why local contexts matter, as discussing issues of sexual harassment in public is a highly sensitive and controversial topic. Conservative perspectives vary from denying the existence of the phenomenon altogether, to preferring to tackle it indirectly and adopting a subtle language. One of the professors said that the president of her university told her that 'we are a respected university, we don't have sexual harassment on campus'. Another professor said that she prefers to label all activities as 'fighting violence against women' rather than fighting sexual harassment in order to get the support of the university administration. This position is not exclusive to universities located outside Cairo. Different professors' understanding of their cultural and administrative contexts therefore becomes very important. They can easily identify potential supporters and opponents. Developing interaction with the university community, society and influential actors becomes essential in strengthening the positionality of the unit and eventually will provide the network with a rich repertoire in this regard.

Collaborative action needs to be supported by the political management that enables its work, thus we need to make reference to the decisions of strategic alliances and power dynamics within the units.

7.2 Survival and re-defining accountability

Efforts to fight sexual harassment inside and outside Egyptian universities are happening within an extremely restless political, economic and social context with high levels of uncertainty. This shifting context extends to the organisational arrangement of the units. Each university board decides the format of its unit; almost all of the established units are directly linked and report directly to the office of the university president. While this empowers the units by not putting them under the auspices of different deans or administrative units, it may also put them at the mercy of the university president and in the event of staff change, this could jeopardise the whole project. Some of the units have coordinators working within different faculties to manage student activities, while others manage the student activities directly through their units without a network of coordinators. In cases where the units are still getting going, different formats have also been proposed: some are expected to work through a committee (an administrative format less clear and less independent than the unit); or with a dean of a specified faculty; or directly with the president of the respective university, but with no intention of turning it into an independent unit like Cairo University. Though the launch of a committee is a breakthrough, that format would not provide much scope for the work. A unit with a clear hierarchy and staff would be able to plan and execute activities, follow up on complaints and reach out to students and faculty members for collaboration.

The changing context also affects the ownership of the idea of the unit. In certain cases, due to patronage and visibility issues, professors who worked hard to establish the unit are sidelined in favour of another person. Changes in leadership are undermining for more than one reason: a change might affect the focus and/or the discourse of the unit regarding sexual harassment; it could also result in a drift in unit agenda priorities. In such cases, units could become 'celebratory' entities within the university with no power of influencing policies or culture.

Intensive discussions between different units focused on leadership change and its impact on accountability. The original research question was based on the assumption that collective action would have a positive impact on accountability, which would mean the recognition and the institutionalisation of anti-sexual harassment efforts. The changing and uncertain context is forcing us to reconsider what we mean by accountability. To the research community, taking into consideration the struggle to survive, accountability means the ability of different units to convince university administrations to recognise sexual

harassment as a problem, to recognise the efforts to institutionalise the anti-sexual harassment units, and to guarantee a place for this institutionalisation within the university structure. Accountability in this sense is unachievable without building alliances with other universities and with external influential actors such as the NCW. A faculty member from one university described the process of fighting for the launch of the unit in these terms:

> The unit was a dead project until the dean got involved for different reasons. The unit originally should have been under the jurisdiction of the director of the university. I gave him the proposal in March 2017; he put it aside, until they signed a protocol with NCW of cooperation. The unit would then be absorbed by the Council with different agendas and vision.

The faculty member said that she did not mind involving the NCW as long as they supported the unit: 'I need them to protect the unit.'[20]

The situation is not the same in all universities. A faculty member from a different university put it more bluntly: 'The only chance we have is the NCW to do an MOU [memorandum of understanding], to pressure the university president. The goal is to establish a unit with any help.' She also emphasised that the experience of Cairo University was essential in this context:

> I need support from Cairo University about documentation of different cases. This is a point usually raised in discussion; no one gets punished for committing sexual harassment. If I have documentation of cases, this would empower my position in the discussion.

In other words, collective action contributes to creating a sense of ownership and the ability to strengthen each individual unit collectively via different parties.

7.3 Strategic alliance with the National Council for Women

Reflecting on the role of the NCW with different participants, there was consensus about the necessity for good political management in terms of building alliances. The NCW organised a one-day workshop in November 2017 to demonstrate its commitment and that of its head, Dr Maya Morsi, to its national strategy and to supporting universities in their efforts to fight sexual harassment. The meeting included 26 universities represented either by their presidents or high-profile delegates. Cairo University was represented by the

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[20]   It is worth noting that when the decision was finally made to launch the unit, this speaker was sidelined and a different person with no involvement in the struggle for the unit was assigned as its lead.

director of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Unit. The meeting aimed at considering best practices and strategies to address violence against women. The discussions reflected a high level of consensus about the need to coordinate efforts in this regard. In addition to previous MOUs signed between the NCW and universities such as Fayoum, Beni Suef and Alexandria, it was suggested and agreed that the Council would sign similar MOUs with other universities to support their work to launch similar units or to strengthen the work of existing units. During the meeting there was a clear understanding about the importance of the NCW and the Cairo University unit in collaborating to launch a network of Egyptian universities; however, the format of such collaboration was not clear.

The NCW's successful cooperation with certain units capitalises on the fact that some university professors engaged with anti-sexual harassment efforts are already active members of the Council, and thus provide good communication and cooperation channels between the two. Nevertheless, there was a fear that the NCW would take over the units and control their work, according to their agenda and discourse. The NCW is a semi-governmental entity with close connections to state organisations. Those affiliations may call into question the ability of units linked to the NCW to maintain their own independence. All participants nonetheless affirmed that the NCW did not have the expertise needed to plan and execute activities, therefore collaboration would not come at the expense of the units' independence.

Significantly, all participants were eager to collaborate with the NCW in order to protect their negotiating position with their respective universities, to empower their positionality within their local communities, and to enhance their resources. Reflecting on the power imbalance between the units and the NCW, participants noted that while each unit is less powerful than the NCW, two opportunities might shift this imbalance in their favour. First, working together would empower the units as well as support sharing of experiences and best practices, building consensus on the discourse and concepts related to the cause of anti-sexual harassment, as well as changing cultural contexts hostile to gender justice issues. Second, the ability of individual units to build coalitions within their university community and their local societies is an important factor. Some units developed this ability out of a need to diversify their network of allies. The strategy enabled them to maintain a decent level of engagement with student activities despite decreasing levels of support within their university.

Building a formal alliance with the NCW would empower units and consolidate them when dealing with university administration and local authorities. In the case of Beni Suef for example, the unit facilitator was very sensitive about the political, social and geographical context she was working within. The university campus is huge and it takes a lot of effort to coordinate activities between different faculties. Moreover, the local context of a governorate in upper Egypt

was less receptive to alerting public attention to the issue of sexual harassment and resources were scarce. Yet, the facilitator was able to draw on: (1) personal experiences with regard to media and communication; (2) previous networks and connections in local media; (3) efficient and engaged groups of student volunteers and committed university professors; and (4) maximising the state's official commitment to women's issues, to counter the lower level of support she received from the university board. For this unit, its relationship to the NCW remains a contested issue; the Council is very keen to establish an institutional relationship through an MOU. According to that arrangement, the unit would receive limited financial and logistic support. In return, the NCW would expect the unit to follow the NCW's line of discourse and adopted agenda. This planned relationship is troubling for the unit and its facilitator; both are aware of the need for the NCW's support, but at the same time need to guarantee their independence.

The strategic alliance between the units and the NCW is facing a major challenge in terms of the chain of formal/informal authority. The NCW's preference is to have extended forms of collaboration and monitoring of the units and their activities. On the other hand, units are formally affiliated with universities and working under the framework of the Higher Council for Universities. Signing MOUs with the NCW and accepting their demands for some level of control and monitoring might cause conflict in the chain of formal/informal authority. In this case, conflict may be avoided if a good level of coordination and collaboration is maintained among the three actors: the university boards, the units and the NCW.

7.4 Alliances with NGOs and international organisations

The current political context in Egypt is deeply critical of both NGOs and international organisations for reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, both entities have the resources (financial and technical) required to enable the work on fighting sexual harassment. The dilemma of how to interact with NGOs and INGOs needs special attention, with tactics of distant and close collaboration being used. The new law regulating NGOs in Egypt was issued by President Sisi in January 2017, and was published in the Egyptian Gazette in May the same year; however, by 2018, the law – which it was feared would further restrict NGOs' work – was still not properly in force.

It has become impractical for units to benefit from the expertise and resources of youth-led NGO/INGO initiatives that emerged after 2011. Some international organisations are also looked upon with suspicion; as a result, the ability of units to engage in collaborative work with them is severely limited. Units must scrutinise decisions to keep old alliances or to build new ones that entail a long

bureaucratic process of security clearances and approvals. 'Best practice' for building temporal and/or more permanent alliances with NGOs and international bodies is still developing and is context-specific according to each university. Whether collective action helps to develop these 'best practices' is unclear. Collective action is generally empowering, yet in the contexts in which the units operate given their universities and their local conditions, it might not be helpful to develop these 'best practices'. A more relaxed political context and the ability of the units to adapt to new political and legal contexts would help to improve the development of best practices.

7.5 Power dynamics within the units

The research project and this paper use a gender justice movement framework. This framework promotes a commitment to a gender justice agenda and to empowering both men and women. Women-led units should not be a key concern in this context. Fighting sexual harassment and violence against women is a societal challenge that matters to men and women and requires the engagement of both. On the ground, the position is more nuanced. There is still a belief that sexual harassment is a 'women's issue' that requires the attention of women. The number of men engaged in these efforts is much smaller than that of women, and units led by female professors are likely to be more active. While this makes the effort more feminist than gender justice in nature, it is incumbent on the initiative and its discourse to be relevant to the university community in general and not only to women. Building consensus, especially around the reasons for sexual harassment, is an ongoing challenge. Some individuals (university professors as well as students) still believe that there should be a dress code in order to deal with sexual harassment. As one professor put it, 'girls should watch what they are wearing and where they are going'. This discourse brings the issue back to one of shaming the victim rather than blaming the aggressor, which is a core concept underpinning efforts to fight sexual harassment. Gender justice commitments differ from one unit director to another, affecting the discourse, activities and possible alliances.

Another layer to the issue is the power structure within each university and the ability of the unit director to locate him/herself within it. The professorship hierarchy and the ability of the unit director to build relationships of patronage inside and outside the university help to strengthen the position of the unit and its staff.

The inconsistency in commitment to the gender justice discourse was seen during student training and activities. During the internship, MA students noticed that, regardless of the capacity-building training on myths related to sexual harassment, some students (both female and male) expressed the same points of view that vilified women who are assaulted. Age and gender were not

determinant factors in this criticism; cultural discourse was much more powerful. This brings into question the relationship of the discourse used within the units to the social context. In some cases, there was a more positive change in attitudes and a reduction in the frequency of sexual harassment through the use of a more conservative and protective discourse. Using a rights-based discourse may not bring change – moreover, it may trigger animosity in local communities. Heba Youssef, a Gender and Development MA student from Cairo University, who also works with harassmap,[21] discusses in a report the frustration she experiences after training sessions with students on sexual harassment and related issues (Youssef 2017). She noticed that students are not always ready to engage with a human rights discourse in relation to sexual harassment; rather they would respond more positively to a discourse highlighting the male protective role concerning their female colleagues. Her frustration stems from the contradiction between the ethics and values embedded in a gender justice discourse and the local context that seems unready to embrace and respond to such a vocabulary. The choice in this case is between reducing the level of sexual harassment without making a significant change to societal dynamics, or abiding by the gender justice discourse and alienating the issue further from the community. In this context, units negotiate a narrow balance between the two, paying special attention to local politics.

Student participation in unit activities is a key element of their efficiency and effectiveness. In the four universities where AR was conducted, the collaborative relationship between students' committees and faculty coordinators/unit facilitators was found to be at best minimal. The students implement most of the activities, such as awareness campaigns, recruiting other students and facilitating events. Capacity-building for students is, however, top-down, where students gather to receive training with not enough time to reflect on the material. Culturally sensitive issues such as dress codes and sexual harassment need more than formal training in order to be totally endorsed by the trainees. In most training sessions, students have less influence in terms of producing training material or critically engaging in designing the programme. At the same time, affiliation to a unit, especially through physical symbols such as uniforms or badges, creates a sense of empowerment among those students who are involved compared to those who are not. This reinforces a cycle of imbalanced power relations and detracts from fighting against sexual harassment. Though this point was not discussed thoroughly with participants, there is a need to

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21 Harassmap is an initiative started in 2010 aimed at fighting sexual harassment in Egyptian society. It started first by developing interactive mapping for 'hot' areas where there are reported sexual harassment incidents. It has developed over the past seven years to be the main entity developing material and training on issues related to sexual harassment in Egypt. It has also developed a partnership with a number of government institutions and universities. For more details see the **Harassmap website**.

address the issue and work to make anti-sexual harassment efforts more collaborative and power-sharing.

Reflecting on the interaction of the first and second voices, it seems crucial to refer to the issue of visibility and its impact on the units as well as the network. Collective activism to fight violence and sexual harassment inside and outside universities demands passion and engagement by different activists who enjoy a certain level of visibility. This visibility does not always have the same effect on the position of the unit and its internal dynamics; in some cases, individuals with high levels of visibility were able to maximise their power and use this to empower the units. In other cases, the visibility had a negative impact and harmed efforts to launch units or was not helpful in managing internal rivalries within units. This issue needs to be understood in conjunction with the ability/inability to build interwoven networks of mutual interest and having a relatively clear mechanism for sharing the costs and enjoying the benefits of investing in collective action. Furthermore, gender power relations are an important element in this dynamic; the visibility and assertiveness of a female university professor is perceived differently from the visibility and assertiveness of her male colleague. The latter might be seen as a natural leader while the former would in most cases be seen as a threat to the established patriarchal order.

Collective action – although highly needed and appreciated by different participants within the research community – cannot be assumed to lead to accountability. This is not least for the reasons that surfaced during the research and have been explored in this paper. First among these issues is the ability of different actors to bring to fruition actions to fight sexual harassment, thus helping to institutionalise efforts and empower units. Second, efforts cannot be sustained without building meaningful and balanced alliances with the NCW and other useful partners, i.e. different universities, NGOs and international organisations allowed to work in Egypt. Third, units are not homogeneous (and we may question if we want them to be). Diversity within the units can help them to be more inclusive, open and capable of creating a culture against sexual harassment. But this diversity should not be such that it produces contradictions in perceptions and/or in the actions proposed, or this will jeopardise the ability of units to function properly.

8. Conclusion

Collective action aimed at launching an Egyptian university network to fight sexual harassment and violence against women is still work in progress. The discussion in this paper highlights the main pillars of these efforts and how we can understand the role of coalescing around the institutionalisation of these efforts. One of the last activities under the action-research study on countering sexual harassment was a one-day workshop to discuss a draft document for the planned university network. The workshop was organised by the Faculty of Economics and Political Science and the Anti-Sexual Harassment Unit both at Cairo University, and the Institute of Development Studies. Participants represented a number of universities as well as the NCW, and agreed on a number of issues as summarised below.

As we began the research, there had been some achievements at the formal level of accountability: the legal code had increased the penalties for sexual harassment, and a number of universities had started their own anti-sexual harassment units. Questions remained, however – what about other forms of accountability? And is mere recognition (reflected in the launch of the units) enough to fight this phenomenon?

Social accountability must go hand-in-hand with formal accountability. In fragile contexts,[22] formal accountability can be voided of any significant meaning and can drift into a set of meaningless procedures. Social accountability, which means the ability of different communities to own the power of influencing, monitoring and participating in decision-making, would definitely help to enforce forms and levels of formal accountability. Launching the units, strengthening the existing ones, and forming the network are crucial steps in the long battle to create a safe and inclusive space for everybody on campus. Yet, initiating these steps and then embedding them within university culture among students, staff, administrators, faculty and security are different levels of accountability. Throughout the research, the ability of different university professors engaged with this issue to bring about change varied at two levels. In universities where there was relative support from the university board (Fayoum and Beni Suef) units were able to profit from the engagement of others in the university community, thus contributing to both forms of accountability (formal and social). In contrast, in contexts where there was a low level of support from the university board, the ability of professors to conduct activities with students relied heavily

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22   A fragile context is one that includes one or more of the following five fragility indicators: (1) increasing levels of violence; (2) lack of access to justice for all; (3) lack of effective accountable and inclusive institutions; (4) low levels of economic inclusion and stability; and (5) diminishing capacities to prevent and adapt to social, economic and environmental shocks and disasters. For more details on the concept, see Green (2017: 9–10).

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on their ability to build coalitions with the NCW or NGOs concerned with the issue.[23] Those situations emphasised social accountability, and helped to nurture the hope of being able to push for formal accountability later. There is no guarantee that social accountability leads to formal accountability; nevertheless, it can create social pressure and if accompanied with the right political opportunity, it can lead to formal forms of accountability.[24]

Social change in fragile contexts brings with it challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, alliances are not fixed; rather, they are fragmenting for some social forces and increasing for others. This opens windows for a change in the agenda of, as well as the parties to, an alliance. Gender justice issues, fighting violence against women and/or integrating women into public space could have a chance of becoming prioritised and defended by new players and forces that are aiming to gain popularity among the people. On the other hand, there is a problem of uncertainty and vagueness. Societies going through intense political, social and economic change with high levels of societal tension pose increasing challenges to collective action at the society level. Support for a certain cause might disappear, newly formed alliances might disintegrate, laws supporting human rights might remain a dream. This high level of uncertainty negatively affects the sustainability of collective action, along with the chance to institutionalise it.

Collective action is multi-layered, inside the university and among universities. Most of the efforts inside the universities were pursued at a collective level. For example, in Alexandria University, the goal of launching the unit was adopted by a group of young professors who developed the idea and then led efforts to mobilise for it; however, they were blocked from heading the unit once it was formed. The university board decided to start the unit using different personnel to lead it and to be part of its executive committee. Uncertainty about the leadership of the unit, its priorities, philosophy of action, and recruitment policy challenge the effectiveness of the unit and the purpose of collective action. In Beni Suef, professors engaged with the unit built on their ability to bring people from different faculties to facilitate an activity. These efforts are temporary as there is no financial reward or acknowledgement of the efforts. Faculty members and students engaged in these activities lack support or reward which, as we have seen, eventually leads to high turnover. The other level of collective action is among universities that are launching the network. The paper discussed how different participants affirmed the importance of collective action to launch and sustain the network and how this would enhance their positions within their respective universities. Local and national levels of collective action need to be

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23 Space for collaborating with NGOs is very limited. Almost no NGO, except for Harassmap, has access to work on campus. Harassmap is supported by its alliance with NCW as well as previous MOUs with a limited number of universities such as Cairo University and Fayoum.

24 This conclusion is also affirmed in Naomi Hossain's research on rude accountability (Hossain 2009).

aligned in order to ensure best results. Otherwise, collective action will be randomly conducted with no concrete results towards either empowerment or accountability.

9. What next?

Efforts to build a network to institutionalise anti-sexual harassment efforts have not yet borne fruit. What has been accomplished so far is ongoing deliberation between different participants about the importance of working collectively to empower each other. Meetings took place to build consensus about what is meant by networking and what to expect from such a model. Nevertheless, the process of launching the network is still progressing and must come up with different techniques to face a number of challenges, namely:

– the high level of uncertainty in the political, social and economic context of the Egyptian state and society;

– high levels of uncertainty with regard to the leadership of units in certain universities – or what we may call the threat to existence and survival;

– uncertainty over the ability of different partners to maintain high levels of efficient communication;

– difficulties related to building allies (best practices in dealing with external partners);

– problems with mobilising resources.

Next steps are expected to lead to building consensus on the best techniques to face these challenges as well as to agree on the document regulating the network and placing the network within the current legal framework of the Egyptian universities. We can say with great confidence that the consensus built up over the 2017/18 academic year enhances the process of strengthening collective action at the university level.

Annexe

List of interviews conducted with faculty members:

– Dr Amany El Nahass, Assistant Professor, University of Helwan,
  17 November 2017

– Professor Maha El Said, Director of Anti-Sexual Harassment Unit, Cairo
  University, 25 September, 10 October, 22 October and 15 November 2017

– Dr Nerseen Hossam Eldine, Chair of Women's Unit and Assistant Professor,
  University of Beni Suef, 18 November 2017

– Dr Rihm El Sayed, Assistant Professor, University of Alexandria, 21 October
  and 30 November 2017

– Dr Sedika Abdel Mena'm Abdel Ghany, Assistant Professor, University of
  Alexandria, 21 October 2017

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