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RECLAIMING THE STREETS FOR WOMEN'S DIGNITY: EFFECTIVE INITIATIVES IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN BETWEEN EGYPT'S TWO REVOLUTIONS

Empowerment of Women and Girls

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Executive summary

This paper is about the struggle to combat gender-based violence in public space in Egypt through the sustained collective action of vigilante groups who organically formed to respond to the increasing encroachment on women in public space from 2011 onwards. The study examines the emergence of a distinct form of collective action (informal youth-led activism aimed at addressing sexual violence in public space) at a very distinct historical juncture in the country's history: the phase after the ousting of President Mubarak in February 2011 through what became known as the 25th of January Revolution and up to the ousting of President Morsi in what became controversially known as the 30th of June Revolution of 2013.

In a context of lax security and the collapse of law and order (which already had inherent weaknesses during Mubarak's era), the sudden wide circulation of weapons, women reported a dramatic increase in their vulnerability and exposure to sexual violence in public space. One study released in 2013 showed that over 99 per cent of Egyptian women have experienced sexual harassment, a third of whom stated they were raped, gender-based violence in public spaces. Between 2012 and 2013 sexual violence in public space emerged as one of the two main gender issues that drove social activism in Egypt (the other being the drafting of the constitution).

This study distinguishes between politically and socially motivated sexual violence against women in public space. While it acknowledges that both are driven by common structural causes (hegemonic masculinity, lax security, etc.), it nevertheless argues that the policy implications for holding accountable the perpetrators and for awareness-raising are different. The forms of collective action that emerged to counter the rise in sexual violence in public space recognised the need to counter both kinds of sexual violence. Their emergence must be understood against the backdrop of Egypt experiencing one of the highest levels of citizen engagement in street activism experienced in a century. Their survival and sustainability is dependent on a number of structural and agential factors, which are discussed at length in the report.

Through a process of broad-based consultation on what constitutes effective interventions and which initiatives meet this criteria, three cases representing different models of effective interventions were selected: Shoft Taharosh, Bassma and Opantish. An appreciative inquiry approach was adapted to understand what enabled and constrained their efforts to elicit positive social change in norms and practices associated with gender-based violence. Bassma has distinguished itself by its highly regimented taskforce that works on two levels: rescue operations and awareness-raising campaigns. Its work with the security forces has also a marker of its credible reputation. Shoft Taharosh is a successful model of collective action across different initiatives, and which have capitalised on the diversity of skills and resources available within the different groups that it brings together in order to initiate awareness-raising campaigns, rescue operations and engage in policy influence. Opantish is a distinct example of an initiative that emerged to respond to a very specific phenomenon witnessed in protest spaces: women who become the targets of collective/gang forms of sexual violence. Bringing together virtually all the active informal youth-led actors involved in combating sexual assault, it has orchestrated rescue operations on a large scale.

Despite differences in political orientation, strategies of engagement and relationship with the government, what binds initiatives such as Bassma, Shoft Taharosh and Opantish and the many other initiatives that have engaged in street politics (at least at the level of the founders and organisers) is their belief in the *unconditional* right of women to bodily integrity irrespective of where they are, who they are with and how they are dressed.

Some of the indicators of their success include: high levels of volunteer recruitment, broad-based community endorsement, recognition by the local and international media of these actors as authoritative sources of knowledge on the incidents of gender-based violence in public space, and the rescue of women who are targets of assault.

The report shows in detail how men's involvement in gender-based violence work, completely unconventional in the case of Egypt, de-ghettoised women's issues and helped build a constituency for gender justice. The report also highlights the role of collective action, as opposed to simply a critical mass of men, in enabling effective interventions on the part of these three initiatives. Finally, the report argues that these initiatives in conjunction with others may develop into a new movement of major influence and political weight, provided a number of agential and structural factors allow this.

Policy recommendations

The report highlights a number of policy recommendations geared for different actors: (1) western policymakers and donors who have expressed a commitment to addressing gender-based violence and/or support processes of positive social change involving civil society in the Arab world; (2) the Egyptian government whose policies and practices play a critical role in both mitigating gender-based violence as well as creating an enabling environment for youth-based initiatives to thrive; and (3) the collective actors working on gender-based violence in the hope that the documentation, deliberation and analysis presented above will provide useful points for discussion around their future work.

International policymakers and donors: The emergence of these alternative, unconventional informal youth-led initiatives that have been so successful in addressing gender-based violence offers unlimited opportunities for informing donors' own practices and policies not only for Egypt but more broadly for its global framework for combating GBV. Moreover, international actors can also play a positive role in creating forums and spaces to enable exchange of experience across initiatives engaging men in gender-based violence from Latin America, Africa, South America, Asia. In view of the importance of the collective nature of these initiatives, it is critically important that donors funding policies promote *collective action* across the initiatives rather than for supporting individual capacity-building of the initiatives which often, if provided in large amounts of money, transforms them into professionalised entities disconnected from their constituencies.

With respect to the Egyptian government, it should take measures to activate article 11 of the proposed constitution which stipulates that 'the state shall also be committed to protecting women against all forms of violence'. These measures include: (1) the new Egyptian parliament (2014) to pass a new law combating gender-based violence in public and private spaces; (2) the Ministry of Interior to initiate security sector reform with respect to the attitudes and practices of its officers, from the lowest to its highest tiers

Moreover, the Egyptian government should secure the freedom of association of all informal youth initiatives and recognise them as viable actors even if they do not become legal entities (i.e., non-governmental organisations [NGOs]).

For the youth-based initiatives: There is a need to focus on internal capacity-building while being cautious not to adopt the culture of NGO professionalism which often leads to an elite disconnect with the grass roots level. In view of the new political phase which Egypt is going through, strategies will need to be adapted to both engaging the street, political parties, civil society as well as the government.

Initiatives will need to incorporate victims of sexual violence in any transitional justice plans. In order to support movement-building, initiatives should find a space and time that is convenient for the different initiatives to touch base and catch up on a regular basis, irrespective of whether there is a need to work collectively or not. Finally, initiatives should seek to build cross-country links with other actors who have worked on gender-based violence with men.