

# Mobilising against sexual harassment in public space in Egypt: From blaming ‘open cans of tuna’ to ‘the harasser is a criminal’

## Key messages

- > While sexual harassment was a widely prevalent social problem in Egypt during the thirty year authoritarian rule of President Mubarak, its prevalence and intensity, particularly in public spaces, has increased dramatically since the revolution of 2011.
- > Men have co-formed and led movements against harassment, in which their involvement is organic, not instrumental. Opportunities for ownership of the initiatives has attracted and sustained the interest of young men and women.
- > HarassMap and Imprint are examples of two youth-led initiatives in Egypt that are committed to changing the social acceptance of sexual harassment and the public politics that allow for its continuation.
- > In order to challenge the social norms that justify sexual harassment of women, initiatives have to continuously adapt their messages and entry points in order to create changes in social responses and political realities.
- > To sustain men’s activism in gender based violence, there needs to be sensitivity not only to the cyclical nature of movements, but to the life cycles of men themselves.



HarassMap’s community outreach captains during the Maadi Volunteering Festival in March 2015.  
Image from HarassMap

## Introduction

At a remote coffee shop in one of Cairo’s middle class suburbs in August 2015, I noted the waiter, a young man, stood from afar listening to every word of the conversation I was engaged in. At first I thought he must be an informant for the government and decided to ignore him; after all, we were talking about the contribution of men to youth initiatives to counter sexual harassment on the streets of Egypt – what could he possibly find contentious about that? As we were about to leave, the waiter shyly came up and said “I have been listening to your conversation. I am a student

working over the summer holidays, and when I heard you talking about keeping the streets safe from harassment, I was really pleased. See, I and a group of my friends decided to print our own ‘no to harassment’ t-shirts and whenever there are going to be crowds [gathering in our area], we patrol the area to make sure that women are left alone. It is just not right that girls and women can’t walk the streets without facing this kind of nastiness. I noticed you have a sticker on harassment, and I realised you also have something organised. If you ever need volunteers, I am ready, day or night to join.”

This random act of a young man stepping forward, expressing his commitment to defend women's rights to public space, free of harassment, is a strong indicator of the impact of youth based initiatives to stir parts of a national conscience into the importance of stopping sexual harassment. These organic, youth led initiatives comprised of men and women became especially popular in 2011/2012. This was not the first time I had witnessed members of youth based initiatives being approached randomly by unknown men and women in public space volunteering their services. Though these initiatives engage through street action, they have broad based outreach via online and television media. When in public, they are recognised by the stickers on their handbags, the messages on their t-shirts and other publicly displayed signals.

According to a widely quoted nationwide study by UN Women, 96.5% of women in Egypt report experiencing sexual harassment in the form of touching, while 95.5% of women report experiencing verbal sexual harassment. A shocking 30.3% report having been raped (El Dabh 2013). While sexual harassment was a widely prevalent social problem during Mubarak's thirty year authoritarian rule, according to focus groups undertaken in Egypt in 2011/2012, the prevalence and intensity of sexual harassment, especially in public spaces, has increased dramatically (Tadros 2012).

What is particularly exciting about men's involvement in these youth movements is their sustained activism in a deeply tumultuous political context. Though these initiatives emerged during a flourishing political culture that following the 2011 January 25th Revolution, their collective struggle against sexual harassment in public space was sustained even when the political context changed. This suggests that they were not acting out of a revolutionary whim but a commitment to women's right to public space, irrespective of what else is going on. While some initiatives that were established with a view to rescuing women in protest spaces in 2012 have become inactive, others have sought to continue to work, showing a singular commitment to the cause.

## How was men's engagement sustained to successfully address sexual harassment?

There are a number of important factors that have contributed to men becoming involved in sexual harassment initiatives. The fact that these initiatives were co-founded by groups of men and women, and some of them had names that were generic rather than specifically feminist, helped attract a broad base of young people, men and women. The use of gripping messages, graffiti, images and social media helped make men and women want to claim the issue of harassment-free streets. The wide prevalence of harassment in the 2011/2012 post-revolutionary

collapse of the rule of law stirred many men to show solidarity with women whose daily experiences of harassment were becoming more intense and fearful.

For HarassMap and Imprint, the challenge was how to sustain their volunteers' involvement in countering sexual harassment when they had more restricted access to public space for street activism. Both initiatives sought to sustain their volunteer base (and recruit new volunteers) by working in multiple public spaces. In addition to seeking permits to work in the streets, they have extended their outreach to university campuses and schools, transport vehicles' depots and modes of transportation, and youth workers affiliated to the Ministry of Youth. They have created opportunities for volunteers' growth through the carving of 'safe spaces' where men and women can honestly reflect, share experiences and find solidarity in their common struggle. This is critical when men are sometimes vilified for their work on sexual harassment, being represented as 'not real men' and seen as wasting time instead of engaging in what men are 'supposed' to do (for example work and raise a family).

## What processes and strategies were used?

The mechanisms and processes for equipping men and women to engage in public outreach were developed through 'doing' street work, coming back and reflecting on what worked, what didn't and what they could experiment with next time. It is a complete reversal of the idea of developing a theory of change and trying it out. From practical experience on a grassroots level, innovations have emerged. HarassMap has developed consciousness-awareness sessions that seek to dispel popular myths about femininities, masculinities and gender roles. Imprint challenges its volunteers to rethink assumptions and ideas about gender power relations by getting them to reflect on their experiences in community outreach.

Imprint and HarassMap have recognised that justifications and rationales for sexual harassment are not static – they evolve as society deals with it. Volunteers report back on responses to particular arguments or entry points used to get people to think differently about sexual harassment. This feedback informs the development of messages to make them more effective. For example, in their earlier activism, one of the entry points used by the initiatives was "This could be happening to your mother, sister or wife". However, men would reply "My mother/sister/wife would never dress like that". Now HarassMap and Imprint have moved to emphasising the idea that it is the right of every human being not to be harassed, and dispelling myths associated with attire (showing, for example, how women in the niqab [face veil] also get harassed). The initiatives now believe that they should capitalise on the fact that the state has issued a law that is tough



Imprint's security patrol volunteers lining up into formation, receiving final instructions and getting ready to patrol the street of Talaat Harb against sexual harassment, August 2014, Eid Patrols. Image from Imprint

on sexual harassment. They aim to use this law to help shift the shame and blame from harassed women to men who are violating the law, and are therefore criminals. It is in the process of continuously revisiting their entry points of engaging the public, reworking their messages and approaches, that volunteers are able to keep in tune with the pulse of the people while being prepared for counter reactionary backlashes.

## Lessons learnt

### Engaging men in politically closed contexts

- **Authoritarianism is not a predictor of gender policies on the ground.** The case of Egypt saw, against a backdrop of closing political space, the issuance of new legislation on sexual harassment, the establishment of a women's police taskforce to stop harassment and a more favourable public engagement with anti-sexual harassment messages.
- **Men's commitment to gender based causes can be sustained if initiatives adapt to changing political contexts.** In Egypt, a singular commitment to stopping sexual harassment allowed initiatives not to get embroiled in partisan politics, and to find innovative pathways and strategies of continuing their work.
- **Differentiated approaches toward engaging the state have been effective.** HarassMap and Imprint have built key allies sympathetic to their cause within different state institutions at various levels.

### Strategies for mobilising men against gender based violence in public spaces

**The volunteer base of the initiatives are the key to sustainability and effectiveness.** The needs of 'seasonal volunteers' are different from those interested in one off interventions and different again from those

who have a long term commitment. In order to sustain volunteer activism, which is particularly beneficial for morale, ownership and internal organisational strengthening, initiatives need to:

- Afford sufficient 'doing' opportunities, followed and preceded by reflexive practice.
- Invest in team building.
- Develop systems to share stories of change and evidence of impact on the ground.
- Offer opportunities for mentoring.
- Protect existing safe spaces for men and women to share struggles and learning.
- Offer opportunities to acquire new skills seen as beneficial for personal growth and wellbeing.
- Increase feelings of ownership of the initiative, through power sharing opportunities and in resolving crises.
- Recognise different communication and networking channels. Social media is a powerful channel for disseminating information and mobilising volunteers, but the mainstream media is also important as it informs a broader public.
- Recognise that men's involvement, like that of women, is cyclical. It is related to the cycle of the movement itself, which can go through phases of dormancy and heightened activism. Volunteers have their own life cycles and which may exert pressures on time available for volunteering.

### The role of external actors in creating an enabling environment for men's engagement

- **Caution should be taken to avoid engaging men in gender and development through an "add men and stir" approach.** Men do mobilise around gender issues when they see the cause as worthy, when they can claim it as their own, and when it is framed in terms of the kind of society we live in.

- **Multilateral organisations that are well connected with government and civil society should assume a convening role.** This allows for the creation of dialogue and informal relationship building without aligning initiatives with donors in a way that may be harmful to their reputation or image.
- **External actors regularly working with government officials** on issues associated with gender equality, security, or rule of law/justice system issues should ensure that anti-harassment initiatives are invited to meetings with officials, giving them opportunities for to build connections with government.
- **Supporting anti-harassment initiatives to build capacity in impact assessment studies** would enable them to document, monitor and appraise change across time.

### Further reading

Edström, J.; Hassink, A.; Shahrokh, T. and Stern, E. (eds) (2015) *Engendering Men: A Collaborative Review of Evidence on Men and Boys in Social Change and Gender Equality*, EMERGE Evidence Review, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

El Dabh, B. (2013) '99.3% of Egyptian women experienced sexual harassment' in *Daily News Egypt* <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/04/28/99-3-of-egyptian-women-experienced-sexual-harassment-report/#sthash.nzSWzRom.dpuf> [accessed 10th August 2015]

Tadros, M. (2015) 'Mobilising against sexual harassment in public space in Egypt: From blaming 'open cans of tuna' to 'the harasser is a criminal'' EMERGE Case Study 8, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton: IDS

Tadros, M. (2012) *Battling with increased gender based violence in Egypt's transition: report on the scoping workshop*, Evidence Report no 10, Brighton: IDS

### Methodology

This Story of Change is based on the EMERGE case study:

Tadros, M. (2015) 'Mobilising against sexual harassment in public space in Egypt: from blaming 'open cans of tuna' to 'the harasser is a criminal'', *EMERGE Case Study 8*

The case study explored two initiatives, [Imprint](#) and [HarassMap](#), in order to examine men's involvement in effective collective action to counter gender based violence. A two day meeting was held to co-construct the research agenda with the two initiatives, during which there was a reflection session on the most important changes in the political contexts in which the initiatives operate. The research included interviews with those playing a leading role in both initiatives, ten life histories with men who have been active as volunteers and professionals in each initiative, and five open ended interviews with women volunteers and professionals who work closely with the men in each initiative. Other interviews with staff took place as well as informal conversations with analysts. This was complemented with secondary data analysis on sexual harassment and the broader context of Egypt. A validation meeting was held after all the data was collected with the leaders from both initiatives and researchers.

This story of change is part of a series of eight, developed collaboratively by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Promundo-US and Sonke Gender Justice as part of the Engendering Men: Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality (EMERGE) project. The project is made possible through support from DFID under the Leadership for Change programme. Learn more about EMERGE – our work, our findings and free resources, here: <http://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

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ISBN 978-1-78118-264-2



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