

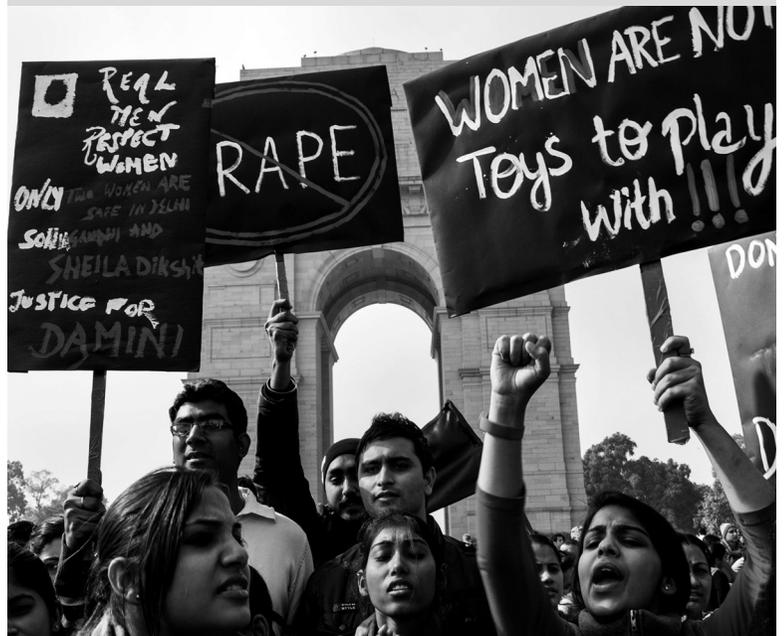
# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 51 | Number 2 | September 2020

## COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Editors Mariz Tadros and Jenny Edwards



<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	iii
<b>Collective Struggles Against Sexual Harassment: What We Have Learnt About Pathways to Accountability and their Outcomes</b> Mariz Tadros and Jenny Edwards	1
<b>Fighting Sexual Harassment on Campus: How Local Contexts of Different Universities Affect the Dynamics and Outcome of these Efforts</b> Amal Hamada, Ahmed Kheir, Enas Hamdy and Heba Youssif	21
<b>Women Politicians Navigating the 'Hostile Environment' in Pakistan</b> Ayesha Khan, Zonia Yousuf and Sana Naqvi	43
<b>'Me Too' and the 'List' – Power Dynamics, Shame, and Accountability in Indian Academia</b> Adrija Dey	63
<b>Multilevel Responses to Sexual Violence in Schools in West Africa</b> Jordan J. Steiner and Anne M. Spear	81
<b>Uniting Against the Tides: Filipino 'Shefarers' Organising Against Sexual Harassment</b> Lucia Tangi	97
<b>Disruption and Design: Crowdmapping Young Women's Experience in Cities</b> Sophie Tanner, Nicole Kalms, Hayley Cull, Gill Matthewson and Anthony Aisenberg	113
<b>Collective Silence and Accountability for Sexual Harassment in Lebanon</b> Menaal Munshey	129
<b>Accountability with Teeth</b> Maha El Said	149
<b>Glossary</b>	167

# Fighting Sexual Harassment on Campus: How Local Contexts of Different Universities Affect the Dynamics and Outcome of these Efforts\*

Amal Hamada,<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Kheir,<sup>2</sup> Enas Hamdy<sup>3</sup> and Heba Youssif<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract** In a context where sexual harassment and assault against women is widespread, this article examines the approach taken by three Egyptian universities to the issue. The article argues that the outcome of the universities' efforts in combating sexual harassment is influenced by their local context and it is this context that can hinder the route to accountability. It examines the interactive relationship between collective action and accountability in the context of fighting sexual harassment on campus. It applies the methodology of action research as a tool that is capable of producing more democratic relationships in knowledge production. The article concludes that there are many differences between the three universities in terms of defining the problem as well as with regard to their local contexts. Those differences question the notion of collective action and accordingly the concept of accountability.

**Keywords** Egypt, university campus, fighting sexual harassment, collective action, accountability, action research.

## 1 Introduction

This article discusses the differences and similarities between three Egyptian universities (Fayoum, Alexandria, and Beni Suef) in terms of fighting sexual harassment on campus. We argue that these differences and similarities affect the outcome of the efforts and are reflective of the local contexts of each university, which eventually hinders the ability of collective action to bring about accountability. The article is part of a more comprehensive project on the impact of collective action on accountability

© 2020 The Authors. *IDS Bulletin* © Institute of Development Studies | DOI: 10.19088/1968-2020.128

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (CC BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited and any modifications or adaptations are indicated.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 51 No. 2 September 2020 'Collective Action for Accountability on Sexual Harassment: Global Perspectives'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.



in addressing and fighting violence against women in higher education institutions.

Violence against women and sexual harassment has been one of the most pressing issues for gender and human right activists in Egypt in the last couple of years. Numbers and statistics in this regard are very alarming (UNFPA, NCW and CAPMAS 2015). Yet, it is not how many females are suffering from harassment on and off campus that is the issue; rather, it is the fact that there is growing interest in fighting this on campus through different Egyptian universities and university professors joining forces.

In June 2014, and following the reporting of a case of sexual harassment at Cairo University, the long history of working on campus to address the issue was finally rewarded.<sup>5</sup> The Cairo University administration decided to launch an Anti-Sexual Harassment and Violence Against Women Unit, the first of its kind in Egypt. The unit's mission is threefold: first, to raise awareness amongst the university community about sexual harassment; second, to provide legal support to survivors of sexual harassment and lead investigations on reported cases; and third, to provide psychological and/or medical support for victims/survivors.

In collaboration with the Cairo University unit, the Higher Council of Egyptian Universities recommended that every university should launch a similar unit to join forces in addressing the issue of sexual harassment. The National Council for Women (NCW) has similarly collaborated with a number of universities in launching such efforts. The outcome has been that a number of universities – such as Helwan, Monofia, Fayoum, Beni Suef, Aswan, Alexandria, Kafr Al-Sheikh, Banha, Zaqazeq, and Mansoura – have formally launched similar units or are in the process of doing so.<sup>6</sup>

Parallel to the efforts on campus, efforts to modify the penal code to include penalties for sexual harassment were successful in 2014. The change includes the addition of the term 'sexual harassment' for the first time in Egyptian law. Moreover, the law does not stipulate the gender of the victim, allowing for the expansion of protection to both males and females. It also acknowledges the imbalance in power relations between perpetrator and victim, which is a factor when considering punishment.

## **2 Conceptual framework**

Can we assume from the above discussion that there is a growing level of collective action that will lead to increasing levels of accountability? In order to respond to this question, we need first to define what we mean by collective action and accountability, especially in 'fragile' contexts (OECD 2015). Collective action refers to a purposeful and organised series of actions addressing a certain phenomenon and aimed at reaching a goal that is important for the group in general. Collective action can be formal or informal depending on the context and the challenges

faced.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the concept questions motives for engaging in these series of actions as well as the outcome.

Olson (1965) used the economic approach to analyse motives for engagement and concluded that the outcome of collective action is a public good which might benefit those involved in the collective actions as well as 'free riders', thus reducing the possibility of engagement by rational actors. Individuals conducting a rational choice would not participate in collective action if the cost of this participation is higher than the benefit, and the outcome is more of a public nature. Later literature developed the idea and focused more on non-material goals for joining collective action; for example, personal satisfaction, prestige, and/or passion about a certain cause.<sup>8</sup> What is the result of collective action? Does collective action lead to social change? Institutional change? Accountability? The fate of collective action differs according to the context, type of issue, size of group, resources available, allies and enemies, as well as other factors. In this article, we focus on the relationship between collective action and accountability in regard to fighting sexual harassment on the university campus.

By accountability we refer to the process of holding institutions (universities in our case) accountable for taking actions to prevent sexual harassment, investigating reported cases, and providing necessary support to victims/survivors. Accountability in this sense has three dimensions: transparency of procedures, answerability to set policies, and enforceability of punitive measures.<sup>9</sup> The argument is that increasing levels of accountability lead to increasing levels of efficiency and less corruption. Therefore, improving the university's accountability levels would lead to a decrease in its levels of sexual harassment and eventually an increase in safety for all within the university community (McGee and Gaventa 2011).

Since 2011, Egypt has been going through massive challenges at societal and state levels. Discussing these challenges in detail is beyond the scope of this article, but the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2015) defines the Egyptian context as 'fragile'. A fragile context is one that includes one or more of the following 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' (Green 2017: 9–10). The Egyptian case corresponds to more than one of these indicators.

Yet, in regard to the scope of this article, the third indicator is most relevant. Collective action is perceived as potentially a successful mechanism that would enable effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. As far as collective action is concerned,

most of the literature available deals with it in its relationship to social movements, in which the two are defined together as a 'rational, purposeful and organized action... [and] collective action derives from a calculation of the costs and benefits' (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 14). What characterises collective action is the level of 'structure' that ties together different components of a social movement. In other words, collective action within a social movement relies heavily on the ability of different parties to launch and maintain different structural relations which allows the continuation of the movement; even though some members/parties stop engaging. Those 'structural spheres' do not have to be formal and/or institutional, as they may work as forms of networks or arrangements between different parties to a cause (Johnson 2014: 2–5). Nevertheless, in our case, structure refers to the anti-sexual harassment units created by the three universities in order to institutionalise efforts to fight sexual harassment on campus (Rucht 2013: 171).

This article will examine the contexts of the three universities, to explore the relationship between collective action and accountability. The case study shows some level of institutionalising efforts for fighting anti-sexual harassment on campus, i.e. establishing units for this purpose. Yet, does establishing these units reflect an increasing level of accountability? Or will it lead to increasing levels of accountability? Also of importance, can we accredit the establishment of these units to collective action conducted on and off campus in the last decade? Or was the collective action one force in bringing about this change, yet we need to take into consideration other factors contributing to it?

We argue that in the three cases, accountability meant different things to different actors. For university professors engaged with pushing for the units, accountability meant convincing/pressuring the university administration into recognising the problem and institutionalising efforts to combat it. For students participating within the units' activities, accountability was not clear as a concept. What was more significant for them was the potential to engage in collective action in a context that does not welcome student activities of a political nature. Moreover, institutionalising efforts towards combating sexual harassment should be understood as an outcome of a multi-dimensional process; collective action is one, but not the only, factor.

### 3 Methodology

This article builds on action research as the methodological tool used in following the activities at the three universities. Action research is defined as the engagement of researchers and the research community in a process of creating and reflecting on actions. Included are three interacting levels of voices: the researchers (first voices), the universities' anti-sexual harassment staff and students (the second voice), and the interactions

and discussions with experts as well as policymakers within the universities.

Action research as an approach lends itself to a better understanding of the research community, more balanced power relations amongst participants, and grounded solutions for identified problems developed by the community. It might be also defined as an emergent inquiry process aiming at providing solutions to existing problems with certain societies and/or organisations, i.e. bringing about social change. This is achieved whilst developing self-help competencies in the research community and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry (Coghlan and Brannick 2010). Action research has to take into consideration the balance between the actions, research, and the participation of the research community (Greenwood and Levin 2007).

The action research discussed within this article included interacting cycles of reflection. The first was amongst the researchers co-authoring the article, and the second was our individual engagement with our respective universities. Balancing the relationships amongst the co-authors is an important matter, in terms of gender, age, as well as academic background. Action research allows room for self- and group-reflexivity, questioning the positionality amongst the group and in relation to the topic and research community. Being part of academia might stimulate a less democratic relationship, yet, engaging in a process of knowledge production that includes reflexivity definitely changes the inter-group dynamics towards a more democratic nature that includes each person's narratives of the problems and proposed solutions (Loewenson *et al.* 2014).

The second element of action research is the product itself, i.e. the research. This involves a threefold process: designing actions, planning the schedule for implementing them, and finally implementing those actions. Throughout these processes, there is an ongoing reflection practised by different participants of the research community to question: (1) the research question, (2) the concepts used, (3) the analytical frameworks, (4) the changing dynamics of power between and amongst the researchers and research community, (5) the outcome of the actions, and (6) the conclusions of the research. This helps to produce knowledge that is more participatory, engaging, reality-based, and democratic in its essence (Gaventa and Cornwall 2008: 179–82).

Throughout the project in general, and for the purpose of this article specifically, data were collected using mainly two techniques. First, we conducted six weeks' participatory observation with students and the unit's administration. We were not responsible for developing activities; rather, we reflected with students on them. Second, a number of in-depth interviews

were conducted with students, the administration, and faculty members engaged with the units, to reflect on the unit's mission, the purpose of the activities, and the main challenges facing them. Action research requires an ongoing process of reflection amongst the research community. This process of reflexivity was mainly conducted between the authors of this article, especially in regard to our positionality to the rest of the research community. We affirmed that on certain occasions we felt that the research community viewed us as 'experts coming from the capital'. It was crucial for us to maintain a distance from activities and local dynamics in order not to affect the outcome of students' engagements.

#### **4 Background of the three universities and their local contexts**

The three universities (Beni Suef, Alexandria, and Fayoum) were chosen in order to investigate the relationship between collective action, accountability, and empowerment.<sup>10</sup> They officially launched their units in December 2016 (Beni Suef), July 2017 (Fayoum), and September 2017 (Alexandria), respectively. The locality of these universities and their campuses needs attention, because each hosts students predominantly from their respective and neighbouring governorates. According to the admission system of governmental universities, there is a geographical distribution of students corresponding to their original residence. Thus, students of a certain university represent to a great extent the local socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of their governorate.

The Beni Suef governorate is located in Upper Egypt, where much of the population live in rural areas (76.6 per cent).<sup>11</sup> The governorate is amongst the poorest in Egypt according to official statistics (Baseera, UNFPA and NPC 2017). The socioeconomic conditions of the governorate and its inhabitants are important for understanding the conservative nature of the society and the university community's reluctance to recognise the problem of sexual harassment as a challenge that needs to be addressed. The Beni Suef campus comprises three separated campuses spread over the city of Beni Suef. Each campus hosts a number of faculties. The distance between the campuses does not facilitate coordination on activities or outreach to the university community, in general. The university administration is very active in formalising relationships with international universities in different countries in an attempt to improve its ranking and educational performance.<sup>12</sup>

In December 2016, Beni Suef University gained approval to establish a unit and adopt an anti-sexual harassment and violence policy in cooperation with the NCW.<sup>13</sup> Similar to the case of the Cairo University unit, Beni Suef's unit is directly affiliated with the president of the university. It consists of a complaints officer, a psychological support officer, an education and training officer, and a secretariat. In addition, there is an

executive committee to supervise the unit, which is headed by the president of the university. Seventy-five per cent of the executive committee's membership must be women. The committee consists of three faculty deans, three interested or experienced professors in the field of combating sexual harassment and violence, professors from the faculty of law or legal affairs, two representatives of civil society, and the president of the student union or a member of the student union. The role of the unit is to receive sexual harassment and violence complaints, to transfer complaints to the anti-harassment committee (which then investigates the complaints secretly and recommends any punitive measures), to take measures to assist victims of harassment and to protect the complainant, and to implement different activities, such as training and raising awareness.

The Alexandria governorate is located in the north, serving as Egypt's ancient capital during the Greek and Roman periods before the capital was moved to Cairo during the Fatimid rule in the seventh century. The city of Alexandria overlooks the Mediterranean Sea and, along with its inhabitants, is more cosmopolitan in nature. Industry is the main economic activity and it houses Egypt's largest ports. For the last two decades, there has been an increasing influence of religious conservative groups (Salafi and the Muslim Brotherhood), which would have an effect on the social discourse on sensitive issues such as sexual harassment.<sup>14</sup> As in Beni Suef, the campus of Alexandria University is spread over two main locations: one for humanities and the other for natural sciences, whilst other faculties are spread across the city. Campus security generally does not allow students carrying humanities identity cards into the natural science complex and vice versa, though students have their ways of entering the two complexes. The point here is that the campus is not perceived as collectively hosting Alexandria University students, where they learn and practise different activities, but it is treated as having different and separate locations.<sup>15</sup>

Alexandria University had been struggling for some time to launch its anti-sexual harassment unit.<sup>16</sup> After a long process of negotiating with the university administration, the unit materialised in September 2017, but with a different group of university professors from the ones already involved with anti-sexual harassment activities. The unit works under the direct supervision of the president of the university and operates under a protocol signed between the university and the NCW. The unit states that it aims to implement the goals of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with the NCW, but without giving any specific details. Prior to its launch, a number of the university's professors were engaged at different levels with training and campaigns organised by different non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as attending different workshops within the Cairo University anti-sexual harassment unit.

The Fayoum governorate is an oasis at the edge of Egypt's Western Desert and is situated within conservative Upper Egypt. Yet, its proximity to the capital (around 90km) adds traits of Cairo's complexity. This proximity allows for a greater level of interaction between the capital and Fayoum City in terms of population movement and intellectual interaction. Nevertheless, both the governorate and the city of Fayoum suffer from underdevelopment and poverty; accordingly, it is more affected by the socioeconomic conditions of Upper Egypt. The governorate relies on agriculture and tourism as its main source of income and, according to official statistics, has a 12 per cent unemployment rate as of 2017.<sup>17</sup> Like Beni Suef and Alexandria, Fayoum University is located in the capital city of its respective governorate; this gives relative advantage to the campus and its inhabitants. Residing in capital cities gives students, administrators, and faculty members better access to resources and opportunities. The university receives students from across the governorate and from neighbouring ones, thus granting better exposure to different experiences for the university community in general.

Fayoum University was formed as a branch of Cairo University in the mid-1970s. Three decades later, in 2005, it became an independent university, which should be taken into consideration when analysing power relations between the two.<sup>18</sup> Its sexual harassment unit was established with the substantial support of the university administration and its president, who has affirmed that the unit should work as a driving force for training students to play an active part in spreading the unit's values and familiarising the university community with its work. The head of the unit is a member of the NCW and this has helped in securing financial support and conferring a certain legitimacy on the unit. It has also helped in facilitating activities across campuses as compared with other universities. The unit includes two committees: the supreme committee, comprising the president of the university, vice presidents, and deans; and the executive committee, comprising a number of interested faculty members, a faculty member to provide psychological support, a faculty member from the school of law, student union representatives, and a civil society organisation representative from the social initiative, Harassmap.

Islam and Christianity constitute the main religions in Egypt, and religious discourse plays an important role in most issues, especially those related to women's rights, public presence, and sexuality. There is no single governorate where Christians comprise the majority, although there are concentrations of Christian communities in some Upper Egypt governorates such as Assuit, Menia, and Suhag (Mohamoud, Cuadros and Abu-Raddad 2013).

Tribal elements in Egyptian society are relatively understudied.<sup>19</sup> Tribes came to Egypt from the Arabian Peninsula and have

resided in the country since the seventh century. There is no official census of their distribution over different governorates, though unofficial reports locate them mainly in border areas. This includes the East and West Sahara, as well as different governorates in Upper Egypt (Abul-Magd 2013). The intersectionality of gender, religion, and tribal affiliations is important in understanding the social discourse regarding sexual harassment as well as the complexity that comes with allegations of such acts. A male member of the university community harassing a female member of the university community is not just an individual threat to her safety, but is seen as a threat to a greater set of relations where the man's identity, his tribal affiliation, and his religion pose greater challenges to the fragile and complicated context.

### **5 Discussions of the activities**

The activities conducted in the three universities did not differ much in terms of content, conduct, and relationship to the university administrations. The three universities needed to get the approval of their administrations for any activities conducted on campus, whether organised independently or in collaboration with NGOs. The position of the unit head and that person's relationship with the administration facilitated the process of securing permissions and obtaining security clearances for guest speakers. In some cases, the title of activities had to be changed to avoid confrontation with less supportive university staff or local community members. For example, at Beni Suef University most of the workshops and lectures had to be devised with more generic titles in order not to provoke the local community and unit opponents. In an interview with the professor responsible for facilitating the activities of the unit, she had to give a broader title to an event addressing a social problem facing the local society: such as early marriage.

Activities had to manoeuvre and build on the official discourse of state support for women's issues in order to circumvent potential opponents. Beni Suef represents the in-between case, an established unit with a supportive unit head but still operating under a conservative mindset from the university management. What has helped Beni Suef to operate actively is the ability of the unit head to manoeuvre around whatever might stop her from doing different awareness activities, either by choosing context-acceptable titles for those activities or by carrying out work under the umbrella of state support to women issues, which somehow might have very easily pressured the university management into accepting unit work on the topic of violence against women, including sexual harassment.

Activities are good opportunities to reflect on the level of support the units have enjoyed from university administration. Fayoum University, for instance, has had the verbal and physical support of its president, who has attended almost all the

activities conducted on campus. At Alexandria University, the activities have been very limited in number, due to lesser levels of support from university officials who did not participate much in activities conducted by students to raise awareness and increase knowledge about sexual harassment. Moreover, students have always encountered difficulty in getting security permission for their campaigns without the assistance of one of the supportive professors.

The content of most of the activities has revolved around defining sexual harassment and its implications for victims (social, health, psychological, and educational performance), reasons and myths related to sexual harassment, an introduction to the unit and its work, as well as the procedures for filing a complaint. The content has also included information on the responsibility of different actors and parties in the university to make the campus a safe place for all. Most activities/events ended with asking students to fill out applications to join the unit. An evaluation process by the faculty coordinator and the unit follows, and selected students receive training by Harassmap and become active volunteers within the unit in future activities.

Though resources are limited, students have used available materials to develop and deliver their messages. When available, they have used posters provided by NGOs collaborating with the unit and/or the NCW. Yet, mostly it is human capital (students with the help of faculty members) who have done the job. Students have recited poems and designed short theatrical performances, stand-up comedy, and small group discussions. The message delivered during activities does not always balance the human rights discourse with that of the male protective discourse that builds on the responsibility of male students to make the campus safe for their female colleagues. This discourse sits within the patriarchal culture of Egypt which emphasises male duty and responsibility to protect females, whether relatives or strangers. These two discourses are not contradictory by default, but each calls for different arrangements and mindsets. During activities, there is always the dilemma of balancing the two rather than emphasising one of them, and specifically not overemphasising discourses of protection, which unit participants feel reinforces the victimisation of girls and women and situates them as in endless need of protection.

Reporting cases is a very politicised matter; as such, there are no published records of complaints and their outcomes. The administrations of the three universities are constrained by the conservative nature of their local communities and the widespread belief that sexual harassment is very rare, if existent, on campus. For this reason, most of the units' activities have centred on raising awareness about sexual harassment in general, with a special focus on related myths. Beni Suef University conducted more than one event during the first

semester of the 2017 academic year, but none addressed sexual harassment *per se*. As the university administration was reluctant to acknowledge the existence of the problem, student activity in this regard was not permitted. Thus, activities were organised as a series of public lectures in collaboration with the NCW to address more general topics, such as early marriage and its implications, and the role of women in development. The public lectures were good venues for the new unit to ask and respond to questions, yet controls circumscribed their ability to reach out to the student and university community and address directly the issue of sexual harassment.

Alexandria University conducted a one-day awareness campaign on sexual harassment within its Faculty of Arts on 24 October 2017. The campaign was led by four students, three of whom had previous experience with similar campaigns. This activity was conducted in collaboration with Harassmap, who sent team members to assist. The campaign's purpose was to discuss the definition of sexual harassment and to clarify legalities around the act, which was criminalised under Egyptian penal law in 2014. Students distributed posters and visual materials to other students whilst talking with them.

Fayoum University conducted a one-day awareness campaign on 1 November 2017.<sup>20</sup> The nature of this campaign was different in that it was conducted in the presence of the president of the university, the anti-sexual harassment unit head, guests from the NCW, and students from different faculties. The campaign covered the definition of sexual harassment, the reasons for sexual harassment, information about the university's anti-sexual harassment unit, and how students could contact the unit. Student participants used poems, theatre, and stand-up comedy, and ended their campaign with an open discussion with students about sexual harassment and myths in relation to the issue. What is noteworthy is that the event was held in a very strategic campus location with heavy official attendance, including the president, official delegates from the NCW Fayoum branch, and most of the unit's members from different faculties.

Interestingly, one of the activities on the Fayoum campus was about electing/choosing a student committee to act as a communication point between the university/unit administration and students. Initial communication was launched between the university administration, unit head, and students active on other issues, to spread the word about the unit and its role and purpose. Later, amongst students who attended the first training session, internal elections were held to choose a female coordinator and male vice-coordinator to coordinate future activities.<sup>21</sup> The elected students were backed by the administration and were involved in other university initiatives such as 'For Egypt' (Mn Agl Masr)<sup>22</sup> and 'Enactus'.<sup>23</sup> These students have been able to build on their previous connections with other

university students to promote the unit. Unit events have been concentrated in the beginning of the academic year, and mainly organised as different rounds of awareness-raising events and orientation sessions. These activities have engaged the students of different faculties about the work of the unit and succeeded in recruiting new volunteers to work with it.

### **6 Reflections on the activities**

As mentioned previously, an important element of action research is practising reflexivity during the planning and implementation process in order to observe the positionality of researchers in group dynamics, as well as in respect to other members of the research community. Coming from the capital (Cairo) and from Cairo University (one of the oldest and largest universities in Egypt) holds a certain amount of power. Students and faculty members from these three universities looked up to the experience of Cairo University (and to us as researchers accordingly), and in numerous cases were expecting to receive aid and advice. On the other hand, as researchers, we were very aware of this power dynamic and its limitations on action research, and tried to maintain a balance between sharing and reflecting on the activities and 'telling' them what to do.

Working on the topic of fighting sexual harassment needs both passion and knowledge. In certain training sessions, passion was overwhelmingly visible compared to knowledge on the topic. Passion could be understood as a personal preference, grievance, and/or commitment to the cause. Yet, lacking the knowledge to address the topic and frame the message can have negative results. Some students were unable to see the problem of sexual harassment as a threat to both women and men. Some students (both female and male) framed the message as a female problem, i.e. only females suffer from it, only they can stop it, and male colleagues can only help partially. Ethnographic observations reveal, however, that whilst females comprise the majority of victims/survivors of sexual harassment, there are males who suffer from the problem, who need to be heard and included in different messages addressing the issue.<sup>24</sup>

Assumptions about sexual harassment need to be supported by data; myths about sexual harassment (in terms of reasons and motives) need to be differentiated from the real reasons for it. Students with a high level of passion and lacking supporting information were less tolerant in delivering the message to other students. In outreach activities, some students were unable to explain the problem and capitalise on presentations or activities performed for the students, who did not share the same perspectives. For example, one widely held myth is that girls are responsible for inciting the sexual harassment they suffer based on their dress or behaviour. This discourse emerged in most discussions with students or members of the university community. Information and data prove this wrong as women

suffer harassment regardless of their dress code; veiled, unveiled, women wearing the niqab, and/or who dress conservatively all suffer from sexual harassment.

Practices of 'power over' rather than 'power with'<sup>25</sup> are prevalent during most of the activities. Power dynamics between the university administrations and the different units are in favour of the university. University administrations, in most cases, have the upper hand in deciding fundamental decisions such as naming and appointing the head of unit, allocating resources, labelling the discourse used, and granting permission to work with specific partners. In cases where the administration and the unit head have close relationships with the NCW, practices of power are more sharing in nature. In other cases, the university does not facilitate the unit's work and forces a particular approach to sexual harassment on the unit.

In university administrations in conservative settings there is no room for units to adopt a human rights-oriented discourse. This reflects a very important point, which is that there will always be hidden compromises whilst working on sensitive social topics in such contexts. For example, units are indirectly compromised in their messages by the need to continue seeking university support, otherwise they might risk losing the support which allows them to operate. The power over is also manifest between the unit and the body of volunteers. The unit planned and chose the themes of activities, though most of these were implemented by the students. Even in cases where students were leading the process, there was an 'unwritten agreement' about the limits of topics, activities and/or discussions.

This 'unwritten agreement' reflects the social dynamics of the respective local community, the power dynamics between the students and the unit in terms of spaces of expression, and it also reflects the political limits of activities on campuses. Discussing sexual harassment as an issue in its entirety would be seen as an attack against social norms, religious discourses, economic arrangements around the public and the private, as well as women's position within the patriarchal system. The sustainability of the existence of the units prevails over their ability to push for better conditions of accountability.

Within the body of volunteers, power is also practised 'over' rather than 'with'. For example, Fayoum has an interesting system for managing volunteers. In order to be accepted, students have to answer a questionnaire reflecting their knowledge and commitment to fighting sexual harassment. Their responses are evaluated by the student coordinator, who has the right to accept or reject a volunteer's application. Once accepted, each student receives 100 points during his/her membership. If the person is not committed to the unit or is accused of wrongdoing, points get deducted from their 'account'. After a reduction of

30 points, the student's membership gets frozen for a period of time and a repeat offence results in the loss of all points and membership. In order to volunteer again, the student has to reapply and go through the same process. Though this practice might appear necessary to show a student's commitment and seriousness, its implementation gives space for power practices and reflects a hierarchal form of power arrangement, i.e. a replica of social, economic, political as well as administrative forms. The body of students, which is supposed to be a body of equals, turns into another space of inequality where decisions are taken without consultation, and criteria for evaluation are unclear or imprecise.

The university community is patriarchal, not only in its male dominance of higher positions but also in terms of power distribution and the existence of a masculine discourse. In Beni Suef, the university administration denies the existence of sexual harassment on campus and accordingly gave the unit a less controversial name: 'fighting violence against women' rather than 'fighting sexual harassment' as a compromise. In Alexandria University, the administration's decision to launch a unit and nominate a coordinator did not consider the professors who had already spent time developing and working on the idea. The decision was made unilaterally, side-lining them and installing another professor with a previous affiliation with the NCW.

Accordingly, we need to reflect on the politics of the relationship between university administrations, the units, and the NCW. The NCW has presented itself as the speaker and the champion for women rights in Egypt in the last couple of years. There is a question about the positionality of the NCW in relation to society and the state. On the one hand, it was established in early 2000 by former president Mubarak in compliance with international obligations. The NCW is affiliated directly with the presidency, which appoints its board and the council reports directly to the president's office.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the NCW is not an NGO; rather, it could be recognised as a government-organised non-governmental organisation (GONGO).<sup>27</sup> This controversial position between state and society representation affects its political positionality. For NGOs, the NCW is representative of state power and competes with them over resources (from donors) and championing the women's cause. On the state level, the NCW is neither a part of the legislative branch nor the executive branch.

The weakened positions of NGOs<sup>28</sup> in the last years has opened up space for the NCW to play a greater role on issues such as violence against women in general and sexual harassment in particular. Nevertheless, the discourse adopted by the NCW cannot depart from the one adopted by the state, i.e. the conservative and protective discourse. On another level, the NCW is consolidating its relationship with different universities through the establishment of these anti-sexual harassment units.

It provides some help to them in terms of logistics and resources. More importantly, however, the NCW provides political coverage and protection for the units and their activities from the state; working with the NCW is perceived as collaborating with the state agenda regarding women's issues. The relationship between the NCW and the state (political leadership and different agencies) could be capitalised on in favour of institutionalising the efforts of anti-sexual harassment. In return, however, there is a fear that the NCW might take over the units, resulting in the loss of their independence, thus becoming branches of the NCW on campus. This is especially worrisome in cases where university administrations and/or unit members have strong ties with the NCW.

Gendered power dynamics are also very manifest in student-to-student interactions in the three universities. Though some students treated sexual harassment as a female issue, female students often deferred to their male colleagues in certain cases. When reaching out to new students, especially to male students, some female students were less eager to engage with them and preferred to 'outsource' the task of engaging with them to male colleagues. Female students felt less empowered and less advantaged and needed external support from their male colleagues. Some explained that discussing sexual harassment with male strangers is rather awkward and puts them in a bad position. They would be labelled 'bad girls' for discussing inappropriate topics, whilst male colleagues are more able to discuss this issue. Nevertheless, this situation reinforces the idea that sexual harassment is a taboo subject that cannot be discussed in public, as well as reinforcing the traditional gender power dynamics where women have no voice to speak for themselves and that they need men to give them voice by speaking on their behalf. Though this observation was valid in all three universities in general, in Beni Suef and Fayoum, as more conservative settings, female students felt even less empowered.

The process of justice is at risk of the political will of the university administration. Most of the units have a clear mandate for their work which states awareness, protection, and support as the main areas of functioning, yet there is ambiguity in the procedures to implement this work and in the relationship between the units and the organisational and administrative structure of the university. In terms of existence, units are usually launched by a decision of the university president with or without an MoU with the NCW. However, this decision establishes the unit as customary and not fully official until it gets the approval of the university board and receives financial allocations and personnel, which has not materialised so far for the units analysed in this article. This puts units at risk of being closed if there is not enough support from the administration or if it has failed to secure financial approval.

Termination is not the only thing units fear. There is always concern that they need the approval and assurance of the university president at every step and for every activity and project, which affects the independence of the units and their ability to manoeuvre. Moreover, according to their mandate, units receive sexual harassment complaints, follow the approved procedures for investigating the complaint, reach a conclusion, and suggest punitive actions. Units do not have the legal power to enforce punitive actions; rather, they refer to the university president to make the final decision. In certain cases, and due to certain power dynamics, punitive actions have not been implemented and the results of the investigations remain locked away. The 'political management' of complaints has two major impacts: it questions (a) the commitment of universities in addressing sexual harassment and punishing perpetrators, and (b) the transparency of procedures and holding people to account for their actions and institutions for their policies. Another impact is that students lose faith in the commitment of this institutional effort; units therefore become *de facto* 'social clubs', where students do not work to bring about social change and address a pressing problem, but rather use activities as an opportunity to socialise and mingle with other students. This also questions the idea of the social accountability of the units.

## 7 Conclusion

This article discusses the differences and similarities between three Egyptian universities (Beni Suef, Alexandria, and Fayoum) in fighting sexual harassment within their respective campuses. We have argued that these differences and similarities affect the outcome of these efforts and are reflective of the local contexts of each university, which raises questions about the ability of collective action to bring about accountability in a fragile context. Relevant to the scope of our article, the Egyptian context responds mainly to the third indicator of the five fragility indicators: lack of effective accountable and inclusive institutions. The discussion of the activities conducted by the three units reveals that collective action is not just the sum of individual actions; it should have a common goal/purpose and an agreed set of actions to reach it. Whilst the goal in our case is relatively clear, i.e. combating sexual harassment on campus, there are discrepancies in terms of defining what sexual harassment is, its existence on campus, its reasons, the methods for fighting it, and the messages used to address the issue. Those differences actually negatively challenge the ability of different parties to develop collective action strategies at the intra-university level: unit/university, unit/students, and students/students.

Different actors had different motives for engaging with the units' activities. Some faculty members and students are true champions of gender justice issues and fighting sexual harassment. Others are inclined to use the issue of sexual harassment as a political opportunity to achieve visibility and

power. Noteworthy in the Egyptian context, where political activism is criminalised and condemned, is that working with the NCW and the units provides a small window of opportunity for youth activism. In the three examples, units fought for their initiation and survival through building alliances with the NCW and university administrations, compromising sometimes the identity of the unit, its message, and a focus on one dimension of work (awareness) at the expense of others (support and protection).

The three units are headed by female professors, as is the case with the majority of other Egyptian universities with similar units.<sup>29</sup> The gendered aspect to the administration of these units is interesting to examine. Most units headed by women are more active compared to those headed by male professors. This raises the question about the local perception of sexual harassment as a female problem that concerns only women. How then can we understand gender dynamics between the units and between them and university presidents (all males) and the university community in general? In cases where tribal relations are relatively important, how does the intersectionality of tribe, gender, socioeconomic status, and religion affect the unit and its ability to coordinate collective action and eventually make the university as a body more accountable in regard to fighting sexual harassment?

Official support by the university might have contradictory impacts. It might legitimise student activities and strengthen a unit's position against opponents. This support, however, might also endanger a unit and its activities in two primary ways: it might compromise the independence of the unit and force upon it a certain discourse, and it might expose the unit to more visibility, which would trigger attacks from both inside and outside the university. For instance, the Beni Suef unit was able to manoeuvre around its less supportive administration and managed to conduct a series of activities on campus under different titles. This exposure stimulated a number of 'angry' articles in the local press attacking the unit and its head for propagating 'foreign ideas to the local society'.

Fragile contexts do not only affect the work of different actors, but also the structure of the units. Lacking sustainable support and predictable leadership and policies, different units have had to plan in the short term rather than the medium or long term. A change in university leadership, which has happened in all three cases, means a change in alliances, support, chain of leadership, and space for action available for the units.

It is also worth mentioning the relationship between the larger socio-political context and the university context. In all three cases, the units are mirroring social and political relations, i.e. hierarchal and less democratic forms of authority. Students are at the bottom of power arrangements, with limited room for independent action, unless they have strong political alliances,

such as the group 'Mn Agl Masr' in the case of Fayoum University. This not only affirms the third fragility indicator of 'unaccountable institutions', but also raises questions about the means to change these power arrangements. Some students were very sceptical about the outcome of their work. They stated that, in most cases, especially less famous ones, punitive actions are very limited (transfer of the accused personnel to another department or university faculty or minor administrative penalties). Some focused on their limited ability to suggest activities or invite speakers without facing security restrictions or rejection. Should we start with social accountability which creates pressure leading to political accountability?

Assumptions that accountability and empowerment are interrelated need further investigation. In the case of the three universities, accountability is redefined through actions to mean limited recognition of the problem, existence of the unit, permission to conduct limited student activities, and assigning units to receive complaints. With this comes more visibility of the professors and students active in addressing sexual harassment, who then become easy targets for attacks by opponents. Moreover, resistance to recognising the problem on campus intensified in certain cases. We do not have any documentation, but based on observation and unofficial interviews, defending professors accused of perpetuating sexual harassment became fiercer. In some complaints, informal pressure was applied to protect the professors, and in other cases, even if the investigation ended in condemning a faculty member, no punitive action was taken. Some units – in other universities – did not conduct any activities or perform any awareness campaigns, even though they got all the official permits to form the unit.

There is no hard evidence that the existence of the units and their work has affected the university community in terms of formal accountability, i.e. documentation of cases and punitive actions against perpetrators. Nevertheless, change has happened on the less institutional level as students engaged with the limited activities have been empowered through: (1) acquiring knowledge and skills through training, (2) spaces opening to address the problem and uncover myths related to sexual harassment, and (3) speaking about violations and gender relations in general. Working on different campuses for the purpose of this article, we have seen a gradual and slight change in terms of awareness and students' recognition of the problem and its effect on the university community. Some students are becoming more sensitive and considerate when it comes to interacting with colleagues and an increasing number of students (male and female) are engaging with the cause. Taking into consideration the political context in Egypt in the last decade, efforts to bring about social change are becoming more challenging, yet there are nascent traits especially amongst students even though they are the less powerful group in the hierarchy of university society.

## Notes

- \* This issue of the *IDS Bulletin* was prepared as part of Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA), an international research programme exploring social and political action in fragile, conflict, and violent settings. A4EA is a consortium led by IDS and funded with UK aid from the UK government (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – FCDO). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policies of IDS or the UK government.
- 1 Amal Hamada, assistant professor of political science, Cairo University, Egypt.
  - 2 Ahmed Kheir, independent researcher.
  - 3 Enas Hamdy, independent researcher.
  - 4 Heba Youssif, independent researcher.
  - 5 Discussions about sexual harassment both on and off campus go back prior to 2011. Women activists and feminist movements have been active in addressing the issue and raising awareness about it. One of the early reports on the issue can be traced to 2004, Hassan (2004).
  - 6 The number of universities joining this endeavour is increasing. Private universities are also starting the process, and most of them are seeking the advice and the support of Cairo University (interview with Dr Maha El Said, Director of Cairo University's Anti-Sexual Harassment and Violence Against Women Unit, 10 October 2017). However, the official status of some of these units is unclear. Some of them have officially started and are active, others are launched with no activity, and others are still in the process of launching.
  - 7 One of the ground-breaking studies in this regard is Mancur Olson from the 1960s. In his article, Olson addressed individual motives to engage in group/collective action. He applied an economic approach to analysing individual motives to engage in such activities. For further details on Olson's argument and a recent critique, see Czech (2016).
  - 8 For further discussion on the logic of collective action, see for example, Udhen (1993).
  - 9 For a further discussion on accountability and its development in terms of concepts and practices, see Sharma (2008: 6–7).
  - 10 We use the term 'empowerment' as a mechanism by which different actors manage to practise their agency in bringing about change. Empowerment in this sense does not only include access to resources and opportunities; rather, it must also include an increase in self-esteem, confidence, and the ability to bring about social transformation for the addressed issues. For more details on meanings and the operationalisation of empowerment, see Luttrell, Quiroz and Bird (2007) and Luttrell *et al.* (2009).
  - 11 Facts about **Beni Suef** [in Arabic].
  - 12 For more information on MoUs signed by the university with different institutions and universities, see [website](#).
  - 13 See Beni Suef University official [website](#).

- 14 For example, see **the results of the last parliamentary elections in Egypt in 2015**, as well as Brown (2011) and Awad (2014).
- 15 Interview online with students and graduates from Alexandria University, 14 September 2018.
- 16 Alexandria University official **website**.
- 17 Fayoum governorate **website** [in Arabic].
- 18 Fayoum University official **website**.
- 19 One of the interesting research studies on tribes in Egypt is Abu-Lughod (2016). In this work, Abu-Lughod spent two years with Awlad Ali (one of the largest tribes in the West Desert in Egypt), conducting an anthropological study on gender dynamics expressed in folk poetry.
- 20 This was the highlight of the unit's activities. A number of other events (around seven activities during the Autumn semester of 2017) were organised with less attention, attendance, and propaganda.
- 21 There was clear direction by the unit head to select a female student for the coordinator post as a tool to promote female participation in the unit.
- 22 **Mn Agl Masr** [in Arabic] is an initiative started outside the university campus by a number of Egyptian parliamentarian supporters of the current political regime. The group on campus is more of a chapter for the group mobilising patriotic activities.
- 23 See **Enactus website** for more information on the group.
- 24 Most of the studies available address male victims of sexual violence within the political context. For example see Tadros (2016).
- 25 For a detailed discussion on the concept of power and its different expressions and manifestations, see the **powercube website**.
- 26 See **NCW website** [in Arabic].
- 27 For more information about the 'GONGO' concept, see Cumming (2010).
- 28 A copy of the new law may be found **here** [in Arabic]. There is a lot of criticism of this law from NGOs, activists, and international and local donors. The executive regulation necessary for implementing the law is not yet finalised (as of December 2018). For more information about the weak position of Egyptian NGOs compared to the state, see Ismail (2018) and Herrold (2015).
- 29 Nine out of the 14 units in Egyptian governmental universities are headed by female professors. All these universities are headed by male professors, except for a short period from 2009 to 2011 when Alexandria University was headed by a female professor.

## References

- Abul-Magd, Z. (2013) *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt*, Berkeley CA: University of California Press
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2016) *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, Oakland CA: University of California Press
- Awad, M. (2014) 'The Salafi Dawa of Alexandria: The Politics of a Religious Movement', *Current Trends in Islamic Ideology* 17: 5–39
- Baseera, UNFPA and NPC (2017) *Population Situation Analysis Egypt 2016*, Cairo: Baseera, United Nations Population Fund and National Population Council
- Brown, J. (2011) *Salafis and Sufis in Egypt*, The Carnegie Papers, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2010) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, 4th ed., Los Angeles CA: Sage
- Cumming, L.S. (2010) 'GONGOs', in H.K. Anheier and S. Toepler (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, New York NY: Springer
- Czech, S. (2016) 'Mancur Olson's Collective Action Theory 50 Years Later. A View from the Institutional Perspective', *Journal of International Studies* 9.3: 114–23
- Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. (2006) *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., Malden MA: Blackwell
- Gaventa, J. and Cornwall, A. (2008) 'Power and Knowledge', in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*, Los Angeles CA: Sage
- Green, D. (2017) ***Theories of Change for Promoting Empowerment and Accountability in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings***, IDS Working Paper 499, Brighton: IDS (accessed 26 February 2019)
- Greenwood, D.J. and Levin, M. (2007) *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks CA: Sage
- Hassan, R.M. (2004) 'Clouds in Egypt's Sky'. *Sexual Harassment: From Verbal Harassment to Rape*, Cairo: Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, EU and United Nations Population Fund
- Herrold, C. (2015) 'NGO Policy in Pre- and Post-Mubarak Egypt: Effects on NGOs' Roles in Democracy Promotion', *Nonprofit Policy Forum* 7.2: 189–212
- Ismail, M.M. (2018) 'Comparative Analysis of Legal Frameworks Governing NGOs in Egypt with Applications from Global Practices', MA thesis, Department of Public Policy and Administration, American University in Cairo
- Johnson, H. (2014) *What is a Social Movement?* Hoboken NJ: Wiley
- Loewenson, R.; Laurell, A.C.; Hogstedt, C.; D'Ambruoso, L. and Shroff, Z. (2014) *Participatory Action Research in Health Systems: A Methods Reader*, Harare: TARSC, AHPSR, WHO, IDRC Canada, and Equinet
- Luttrell, C. with Quiroz, S. and Bird, K. (2007) *Operationalizing Empowerment: A Framework for an Understanding of Empowerment within SDC*, London: Overseas Development Institute

- Luttrell, C. and Quiroz, S. with Scrutton, C. and Bird, K. (2009) *Understanding and Operationalizing Empowerment*, ODI Working Paper 308, London: Overseas Development Institute
- McGee, R. and Gaventa, J. (2011) ***Shifting Power? Assessing the Impact of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives***, IDS Working Paper 383, Brighton: IDS (accessed 26 February 2019)
- Mohamoud, Y.A.; Cuadros, D. and Abu-Raddad, L. (2013) 'Characterizing the Copts in Egypt: Demographic, Socioeconomic and Health Indicators', *Qscience Connect* 22: 1–13
- OECD (2015) *States of Fragility*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- Olson, M. (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press
- Rucht, D. (2013) 'Social Movement Structures in Action: Conceptual Propositions and Empirical Illustration', in J. van Stekelenburg, C. Roggeband and B. Klandermans (eds), *The Future of Social Movement Research: Dynamics, Mechanics, and Processes (Social Movements, Protest and Contention)*, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press
- Sharma, B. (2008) *Voice, Accountability and Civic Engagement: A Conceptual Overview*, London: Overseas Development Institute
- Tadros, M. (2016) 'Challenging Reified Masculinities: Men as Survivors of Politically Motivated Sexual Assault in Egypt', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 12.3: 323–42
- Udhen, L. (1993) 'Twenty Five Years with the "Logic of Collective Action"', *Acta Sociologica* 36.3: 239–61
- UNFPA, National Council for Women (NCW) and CAPMAS (2015) *The Egypt Economic Cost of Gender-Based Violence Survey 2015*, Cairo: United Nations Population Fund