

# IDS

## EVIDENCE REPORT

No 10

Empowerment of Women and Girls

### Battling with Increased Gender-Based Violence in Egypt's Transition: Report on the Scoping Workshop held in Cairo, November 2012

Mariz Tadros

July 2013

The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Empowerment of Women and Girls theme.

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Input was provided by Lawyers for Justice and Peace and the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Aid. The author would also like to acknowledge comment/review/feedback on this publication from Deepta Chopra and Alyson Brody.

The material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

**AG Level 2 Output ID: 101**

## **BATTLING WITH INCREASED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN EGYPT'S TRANSITION: REPORT ON THE SCOPING WORKSHOP HELD IN CAIRO, NOVEMBER 2012**

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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in July 2013  
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# Acronyms

CEWLA	Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance
DFID	Department for International Development
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
SCAF	Supreme Council for Armed Forces

# 1 Background to the initiative

There are three streams of work under the Accountable Grant theme of women and girls, one of which is collective action around gender-based violence (GBV). GBV here refers to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) definition as per Article 1: 'Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'.<sup>1</sup> While we recognise that in most cases, women tend to be disproportionately affected by such forms of violence, nevertheless, we argue that the definition above needs to be used to refer to GBV as affecting both women and men.

The work on collective action in the face of gender-based violence seeks to understand the extent to which GBV can become a community issue that engages men in challenging and confronting violent and abusive behaviour towards women, and through which notions of masculinity, manhood and identity are broached. It is important to note here that 'engages men' does not only mean the participation of men as 'objects' of awareness-raising interventions or activities led by women. It also means men, alongside women, assuming ownership and leadership of initiatives that challenge social norms and values in societies that endorse or are tolerant of GBV. We will examine the relationship between GBV, collective action and masculinities through six country case studies examined over four years. Three main activities will feature in each country case study:

- a database of interventions on GBV which presents a brief profile and contact information of all the collective actors working on one or more types of gender-based violence in a particular country that is readily available to all;
- a scoping activity with local partners on actors and interventions to address GBV, and the documentation of one or more case study initiatives that highlight important lessons to inform more effective policies in this area;
- a critical analysis of these initiatives.

## 1.1 Case study approaches

### 1.1.1

Close consultation with local partners, and the promotion of co-construction of knowledge in terms of defining the forms of GBV that are most relevant at the country level and understanding and analysing strategies of engagement. Co-construction of knowledge on GBV here means working with partners to develop concepts and frameworks inductively from their own experiences and realities, as opposed to working deductively by imposing a top-down framework of analysis which they seek to apply to their realities.

The strength of such an inductive approach is that it allows the development of approaches that are sensitive to changing realities and does not assume they can be accommodated by universal models of analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2009/2009\\_add\\_gen\\_vio.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2009/2009_add_gen_vio.pdf)

### **1.1.2 The use of corroboration and triangulation to ensure the validity and rigour of the findings and analysis**

The issues emanating from the workshop were corroborated with secondary data analysis on GBV. In selecting the key interventions that would represent the focus on activity 3.3.2<sup>2</sup> of the accountable grant, we did not only rely on the workshop participants' perceptions of the actors who are most influential in making a difference in addressing GBV but also consulted more broadly with key gender experts and activists from movements that were not represented in the workshop.

### **1.1.3 The use of participatory approaches to encourage active engagement from different groups**

A variety of participatory methods such as mapping of actors and relationships were used at all stages of knowledge production (see the methodology Section 5 for application).

### **1.1.4 The use of power analysis where relevant to provide a deeper and more 'layered' analysis of issues at hand**

Power analysis tools and frameworks were introduced in a selective manner (see methodology Section 5 for application in the Egyptian context).

### **1.1.5 Researchers at IDS working on the different country case studies will work collaboratively to design the research in such a way as to allow for cross-country comparisons**

For example, the template for use in the database will be adapted to different country case studies; the stakeholder mapping workshop will be informed by similar approaches for engaging participants and the country case studies will seek to answer a core set of questions.

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<sup>2</sup> Issuance of a report on the most effective interventions led by informal youth initiatives to counter gender-based violence in public spaces.

## 2 Background to the Egypt country case study

### 2.1 Rationale for selection:

1. Egypt was selected as one of the six country case studies for examining collective action on GBV for a number of reasons.
2. Egypt is one of the most important countries geo-strategically in the Arab region, and the nature and outcome of its transition from authoritarian rule will have important implications not only for its own citizenry but also for other countries witnessing revolts.
3. While DFID does not have a country office in Egypt it has a large and politically significant initiative, the Arab Partnership, in which gender equality is identified as an area of concern and engagement.
4. IDS has strong contacts with various stakeholders in Egypt and has a long history of successful engagement with partners.
5. There has been a proliferation of citizens organising through collective action for various causes, hence, this offers an excellent opportunity to examine the dynamics of organising as they unfold.
6. There has been an intense backlash against women's rights in Egypt since the 2011 revolution. The examination of interventions seeking to address heightened levels of GBV therefore carries important policy messages for countries in transition.

The Egyptian Revolution, instigated on 25 January 2011, saw the participation and leadership of women in the bid to oust Mubarak from power and demand 'freedom, justice and dignity' for all. Accordingly, there were raised expectations that women's agency would be recognised by the post-Mubarak state and society alike, through increased opportunities for leadership and more egalitarian attitudes towards citizenship rights for all, irrespective of gender. However, the past two years has witnessed a backlash against women's equality, reflected in:

- the exclusion of women from leading decision-making positions and processes, in particular in government;
- the drop of women's representation in parliament from 13 per cent in the 2010 parliament to 2 per cent in that of 2011, even though the number of women campaigning for office had doubled from 2010 under Mubarak to 2011 in the first post-Mubarak elections;
- the amplification of voices in politically influential positions demanding the revision of family law and child law in order to reverse the gains made in previous years, such as calling for the decriminalisation of female genital mutilation, the removal of women's

arbitrary right to divorce through *khul*<sup>3</sup> and the reduction of the minimum age of marriage;

- the diffusion of socially conservative discourses that demand women's restricted presence in public space, and their abidance by a particular moral and social code of behaviour (see Section 8 on 'places of worship').

At the heart of the backlash against women's rights is the configuration of power that emerged when Mubarak was ousted. The Supreme Council for Armed Forces (SCAF) which took over rule did not actively seek to incorporate into the new government sections of the population that had previously been marginalised, such as women, youth and non-Muslims. SCAF's evasion of accountability for its highly exclusionary policies was made possible by the lack of solidarity among the various actors who were demanding their rights. In the case of women's situation, women's organisations were too fragmented to present a united front to SCAF. They also did not have relationships with political parties and other politically active groups that would give them political weight. Consequently, they had minimal bargaining power to influence the political settlement that was in the making during the first phase of the transition.

In the second phase of the transition, marked by the Islamists' ascendancy to power through the parliamentary and presidential elections, the backlash against women was maintained and deepened. For example, there was no official condemnation on the part of the ruling powers of the growing assault on women in public spaces in Egypt, which ranged from sexual harassment to cutting young girls' hair in attempts to intimidate them to wear the veil.

The backlash against women is taking place against a backdrop of a high level of political volatility and lax security. Rule of law is weak, and citizens continue to feel very vulnerable to assaults on the street from organised gangs, thugs and criminals. Shortly after the initiation of the workshop in early November, an escalation of violence erupted in Mohamed Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo when police clashed with youth protestors. This was followed by a political crisis of significant magnitude following President Morsi's announcement of a series of edicts which allow for a concentration of executive, judiciary and legislative powers in his hands.

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<sup>3</sup> The right of women to unilaterally divorce men through a court system by forgoing some of their financial rights (though not those rights relating to their children).

### **3 Gender-based violence as a priority issue in the Egyptian context**

From the mid-2000s up to the ousting of Mubarak, the national women's machinery, The National Council for Women and many non-governmental organisations worked on combating domestic violence, largely through research, awareness-raising interventions and lobbying the government for the issuance of a law (which never materialised). While domestic violence continues to be an issue in the Egyptian context, as in most other countries, Egyptian men and women shifted their attention after the revolution to focus on sexual harassment as one of the key forms of gender-based violence which women became particularly vulnerable to. This is not to suggest that exposure to sexual harassment suddenly emerged as an issue after the revolution, it has been a widespread phenomenon for a while. For example, a survey conducted by the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights in 2008 indicated that 83 per cent of female respondents said they have been exposed to sexual harassment and 50 per cent said that they are exposed to it on a daily basis.

However, the lax security situation and the increased pervasiveness of a highly misogynist discourse towards women, primarily, though not exclusively, disseminated by Islamists seems to have made matters worse. The author's own research through focus groups in Cairo (Fayoum, El Minya, Beni Suef and Qena) shows that women have experienced an increase in the frequency and type of harassment in the past two years: namely, that they are more vulnerable to being sexually harassed more often, and it is becoming more daring (more groping/touching/attempted removal of clothing).

This is corroborated by further evidence from research undertaken by the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA). In late 2012 CEWLA conducted a survey in seven governorates (Aswan, Sohag, Qena, Asyut, Cairo, Fayoum and El Minya) with 476 persons answering the questionnaires (205 women and 271 men). The results revealed that at the top of the list of issues that were identified as affecting women's situation after 25 January were:

1. The deteriorating economic situation;
2. Sexual harassment;
3. The kidnapping of women.

Hence sexual harassment features prominently as one of the prime concerns. When asked what undermines their sense of security in the period post-25 January revolution, 21 per cent of respondents said the absence of security personnel in the streets, 19 per cent cited their exposure to sexual harassment, 10 per cent said the prevalence of arms and weapons, and another 10 per cent said unemployment (as the most common answers). As to how the streets can become a safe space once again, among the top responses: 20 per cent said the presence of a fair and capable security force able to withstand criminals in society, 16 per cent said the issuance of a law that protects women from sexual harassment, and 12 per cent said the speedy trials of criminals and the detention of those who had escaped from prison.

What is clear though is that gender-based violence on the streets of Egypt has become a pressing concern affecting citizens in a very tangible manner. In response to the absence of security on the streets, some of the women interviewed in focus groups mentioned that one of the responses that some families took to protect them from harassment was to prevent their daughters from going to schools or universities. Other responses have been to not allow women to go out unaccompanied, and to press them to carry tools to use as self-defence.

## 4 The scoping workshop

What is critically important to remember is the political moment in which this workshop was being held. It was at a time shortly after President Morsi had assumed leadership of the country (in July 2012) and a political rift had appeared between supporters of the Islamists versus those that opposed them. At the time of the workshop the two most critical issues being discussed vis-à-vis women's rights were the drawing up of the constitution and the fight against gender-based violence in public spaces.

The Institute of Development Studies in collaboration with the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA)<sup>4</sup> held a workshop at the Safir Hotel Dokki Cairo on 4 November and a follow-up roundtable on 5 November on CEWLA premises in Bulaq al Dakrou.

### 4.1 The aims of the scoping workshop

- To bring together activists to identify the most acute forms of GBV in the Egyptian context;
- To undertake a mapping of actors influencing GBV, both positively and negatively;
- To discuss strategies for confronting GBV and engage with those using collective action and who work with men.

#### 4.1.1 Workshop participants

There were 23 participants at the workshop including:

- informal youth groups (vigilante groups) who were active in the anti-sexual harassment campaigns launched during the Eid period and more generally in public spaces such as Emsek Moutaharsh, Baheya Ya Misr, Shoft Moutaheresh and Fouada Watch;
- members of formal coalitions and NGOs such as the coalition for ending violence against women and the New Woman Foundation, Association for the Protection of the Environment in Asiat, Women's Development Association in Qena, Association of Wadi el Nil for Development in Luxor;
- political activists such as Samira Ibrahim (activist who launched case against the military's use of a virginity test against her).

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<sup>4</sup> In view of the increasing restrictions on non-governmental organisations receiving foreign funding, the funding for the workshop was channelled through a law firm specialising in human rights 'Lawyers for Justice and Peace'.

# 5 Workshop Day One

## 5.1 Methodological approach

A combination of power analysis, ranking and mapping methods were used and integrated with a view to moving away from an 'extractive' format for the workshop where participants are being asked to volunteer information without any benefits to themselves. For example, one of the first tasks that different groups in the workshop embarked on was to draw on flipchart paper all the actors they associated with GBV, whether as perpetrators, inciters, protectors, justice restorers, etc. Participants discussed the highly complex relationships between them and through consensus ranked various actors according to influence.

Participants were introduced to power analysis in order to enable them to unravel layers of underlying forces and actors influencing their contexts. The intention was to:

- (i) Use concepts of visible, hidden and invisible power for contextual analysis. The power analysis approach deployed here relies on the concepts of visible, hidden and invisible power originally conceived by Lukes and developed by John Gaventa.<sup>5</sup> Visible power refers here to 'seeing who participates, who wins and who loses in these arenas, you can tell who has power. For instance, we can analyse which interests are able to maintain debate, whose interests prevail in key decisions, such as on a key policy or budget decision, and whose voices and interests are present, but have little influence.'<sup>6</sup> One of the limitations of focusing exclusively on visible ways in which power is exercised is that there is little attention being paid to whose voices are not represented and why.

Hidden forms of power 'are used by vested interests to maintain their power and privilege by creating barriers to participation, by excluding key issues from the public arena, or by controlling politics "backstage". They may occur not only within political processes, but in organizational and other group contexts as well, such as workplaces, NGOs or community-based organizations'.<sup>7</sup>

Invisible power goes a step further than hidden power because it does not look at the issues that are kept off the agenda, but the ways in which ideologies, values and forms of behaviour influence how people think and relate to issues. 'In this form of power, people may be unaware of their rights, their ability to speak out, and may come to see various forms of power or domination over them as "natural", or at least unchangeable, and therefore unquestioned. Poor people, for instance, may accept their circumstance as the status quo even in the face of inequalities around them, internalizing dominant explanations of poverty that tell them poverty is "their fault" rather than a systemic problem.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net) for further details.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent discussion of the failure to build developmental coalitions in Yemen during Saleh's regime, see Phillips (2011).

<sup>7</sup> See [www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net).

<sup>8</sup> The definitions are taken from the powercube, understanding power for social change [www.powercube.net/analyse-power](http://www.powercube.net/analyse-power).

This involved translating the concepts into Arabic by the IDS researcher, finding nuanced words that would convey the meaning, and thinking of examples to give from the Egyptian context to help participants relate the conceptual with the practical. Such material can be used for future workshops in Arabic as well.

- (ii) Ensure participants were better positioned to identify what levels of power their strategies have engaged with so far, and what levels of power they need to engage with in future while developing their strategies (including using expressions of power such as *power with*, *power within*, *power to*). These concepts derive from Veneklessen and Miller [www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/newweave\\_chapter3.pdf](http://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/newweave_chapter3.pdf). Again, the concepts were translated into Arabic, examples from the Egyptian context presented, etc.

Since the theme was on collective forms of action to address GBV, participants were briefly introduced to experiences/lessons/issues that have emerged from a literature review on this theme from different global regions and the rationale for focusing on collective action and working with men.

## **5.2 What kind of Gender-based violence concerns us?**

For the analysis of the Egyptian context, participants identified a number of key sites where GBV was happening. Participants ranked the spaces through which people were exposed to the highest level of GBV as follows:

1. Public spaces such as the streets, public transport and local markets;
2. Police stations;
3. Places of worship (again via the messages it propagates);
4. Schools and universities.

Participants agreed that the media was a cross-cutting driver of GBV rather than a site *per se* and that it should be integrated in all group work. In the first half of the day people were divided into three groups, each relating to one of the key sites where GBV was perceived to be most prevalent:

1. The street (including public transport and markets);
2. Police stations;
3. Places of worship.

Each group addressed the questions:

1. Who are the actors who influence the form of violence?
2. What forms does the GBV take?
3. What kind of power levels are at work (visible, hidden, invisible)?
4. Why does GBV happen in these particular spaces?
5. What kind of interventions are in place and what is needed?

## 6 Gender-based violence in public spaces

### 6.1 Case study

One of the participants, a young woman in her twenties, spoke about her own experience of being the victim of sexual harassment in front of Metro Cinema on the first day of Eid ul-Adha feast. Ironically she was there as part of a youth group that had formed and gathered in downtown Cairo to monitor acts of sexual harassment and report on them. A young man touched her on her leg and then walked away as if he had not done anything. She noted his face. A few minutes later, the same young man came and touched her buttocks. She stopped him and asked him why he had done that. He denied it and tried to run away but she held on to him. They ended up in the police station where the officer in charge discouraged her from filing a lawsuit as the young man had apologised to her. She insisted on filing a complaint. The next day the young woman, accompanied by a lawyer, went to the General Prosecutor's office to continue the complaint procedure. There a police officer verbally abused her and asked her what she was doing in the street in the first place (i.e. implicitly questioning her moral conduct). The young man's mother was also there and she also accused the young woman of making up the charges and of spoiling the family's Eid with her nonsense. She cursed her and accused her of amoral character.

When inside the General Prosecutor's office, the young woman discovered that the file had been declared closed. She insisted on pursuing the complaint to court with the accusation of '*hatk 'ard*' (sexual assault). The accused was kept in custody for four days and on his release, he and his family went to the area where she lives and initiated a campaign to tarnish her reputation. Faced with such violence, her family tried to persuade her to drop the charges against the young man so as not to attract more negative attention. They proposed an informal reconciliation meeting so that the matter would be brought to an end. When the young woman insisted on pursuing the case through the court, her father was extremely upset and threatened to pressure her into marrying a much older suitor so as not to have to bear responsibility for her any longer. The family was so ashamed of the attention they were getting as a consequence of their daughter being called names and having her honour questioned that they considered asking her to leave her home and abide elsewhere.

#### 6.1.1 Who are the victims of gender-based violence in public places?

A scoping of the perpetrators of violence was particularly helpful to go beyond the stereotype of the young unemployed man out on the prowl to ravage an innocent young girl. What is particularly interesting is that the number one listed source of harassment happens to be children: boys whose ages range from 9–12. Participants were in agreement that this age group has taken up harassing women as a form of hobby and an imitation of what they see grownups do. Moreover, in addition to men (including married men) participants also identified police officers, some sheikhs in the mosques and drivers of public transport. Interestingly women belonging to Islamist movements were also cited as perpetrators of harassment in some public places, and their intention was to intimidate women from dressing in a way that they define as immodest.

The scoping of the actors also showed that though young girls are the prime targets of sexual assault, there are no specifications as to age, attire or status that make women more or less vulnerable to assault. Women wearing the face veil have been sexually assaulted, so too have elderly women.

### **6.1.2 Why do they harass?**

- Blind prejudice to women in public spaces as not supposed to be there;
- For fun, out of boredom;
- To break a woman's will/sense of self;
- To copy others (in particular with respect to young boys).

### **6.1.3 What levels of power are involved?**

#### **Visible levels of power**

- Direct assault from perpetrator on victim;
- Resistance from police officer to file complaint and their inclination to let the harasser off;
- Judges who are inclined to rule minimum terms or let harassers off;
- General Prosecutor.

#### **Hidden levels of power**

- Women who cover up for men who harass;
- MPs who refuse to put the issue on the agenda;
- The unfavourable response of the family of the victim of harassment who openly declare she is a victim of abuse and insist on filing a complaint;
- The apathy that characterises society's response to the harasser;
- Fear that the harasser (or his gang) would be carrying weapons that they would use against those who intervene on behalf of the victim(s).

#### **Invisible levels of power**

- Social values that blame women for being out on the street for the harassment they receive;
- Religious discourses that demonise women as the seductresses who are responsible for men's actions;
- Perceptions that if sexual penetration (rape) did not happen, then what is the big deal;
- The hierarchy of violations in which rape is not seen as serious as other ills, for example, stealing.

#### **Why does sexual harassment happen?**

- The economic conditions that prevent young men from getting married;
- The media that encourages sexual violence;
- Popular sayings;
- Popular songs.

Interestingly, no one mentioned the absence of rule of law and security, reflecting perhaps the state of affairs in the country.

#### **6.1.4 Participants identified a number of strategies that need to be pursued in engaging with gender-based violence on the streets:**

- Capturing and documenting initiatives and activities;
- Identifying influential persons in decision-making positions of authority who may informally provide support;
- Awareness-raising to larger sections of the population.

#### **6.1.5 Participants spoke of their use of collective action in their campaigns to:**

- Share experience;
- Mobilise the masses;
- Put pressure on the police to respond;
- Break the silence barriers.

#### **6.1.6 Participants cited the following tactics that they have already deployed:**

- Stand-ins and protests;
- Seminars and public events;
- Street theatre and films;
- Print-outs and graffiti;
- Displaying data and information and other communication mechanisms to raise awareness among citizens on the streets.

#### **6.1.7 Participants identified the following outcomes as their criteria for having achieved success:**

- Coverage in the newspapers and news media;
- Online coverage;
- Official television coverage;
- Responsiveness of people and their joining the campaign;
- Policymakers' explicit statements indicating awareness of the issues.

Though activists have been immersed in planning and undertaking interventions, they had rarely had a chance to reflect on how they know that they have made a difference. Also given that many of the groups are informal, and have only been in existence [at the time of the workshop] for a few weeks or months [almost all less than a year] there was much reflection on how impact is measured. Generally activists knew they made a difference when volunteers expressed a desire to join, when it became a public opinion issue (media and press coverage) and when informally people came to express their solidarity with their work.

### **6.1.8 Which interventions are addressing violence in public places?**

Participants in the working group cautioned that what works in one part of Egypt does not necessarily work in another. Consequently there are no blueprints for nationwide application that should be followed, and care is needed to ensure that interventions respond to specific contexts. For example, in the Delta city of Damanhour, young women and men formed a human chain, standing side-by-side holding flyers with messages against sexual harassment. The participant explained that many women and men came to talk to them, share their own experiences of sexual harassment, and discuss what needs to be done. However, one Cairo-based participant explained that when he and other participants tried to form a human chain in downtown Cairo, some gangs and thugs came to deliberately attack them, ridiculing their work and sexually harassing the women in the human chain as a show of their strength. This needs to be examined however, on a one-to-one basis since human chains have sometimes been highly successful in conveying the messages to the wider public and in other instances they have put those participating in danger of assault.

Some of the proposed interventions included:

- use of graffiti by drawing pictures and writing messages on the walls of buildings, bridges, and large gates in main streets where large numbers of people pass by;
- production of short films and clips and finding avenues for their dissemination;
- production of short advertisements on television;
- legal awareness within society of the criminal code on sexual assault;
- information sharing productions screened in the street with entertaining messages that people can relate to;
- male peer-to-peer education in particular on the streets, in public transport and in local communities;
- work with local leaders on a community level on publicly condoning such practices.

These proposed interventions largely emanate from the activists' own experiences (except production for short advertisements on television). Participants however, admitted that they have had little success in their outreach to local religious leaders.

All participants agreed that men of religion play a highly influential role in Egyptian society – now even more than before. Some participants argued that we should identify in each community those that sympathise with the issue and invite them to join the anti-harassment campaigns. Others urged caution, saying that the same religious leaders who may be willing to speak against sexual harassment may also blame young women for inciting men's behaviour and demand that they be more modestly dressed and that they restrict their public presence. So caution is needed in how to work with religious leaders so that collaboration is built on common ground.

### **6.1.9 What is needed to move forward?**

The vigilante youth groups who had achieved success on the first day of the Eid had a number of characteristics that work in their favour:

- They were young men who had achieved immense success in addressing an issue that was conventionally exclusively championed by women activists and transforming it into an issue of public concern.
- These young men had appealed to conceptions of manhood and masculinity and had used measures that included surveying and reporting, exposing and shaming, shielding women through sheer physical presence, as well as pressing police officers to intervene.

The challenge now is how to transform a highly successful men- and women-led campaign into a social movement with sustained collective action, sustained relevance in the community and effectiveness.

A number of key strategic areas for sustained collective action on gender-based violence in public spaces were identified.

- Building the internal capacities of the groups so that there is a clear vision, mission, strategy and internal communication process.
- Building the ability of these small groups to work.
- Building links with other initiatives and civil society organisations.
- Expanding geographical outreach beyond city centres and into other districts.

## 7 Gender-based violence in police stations

The relationship between the police and the Egyptian citizenry is a particularly controversial one. It is believed that one of the precursors of the Egyptian revolution was the human rights violations perpetrated by the police against citizens. Police stations were seen as sites for the torture of victims who had no recourse to the rule of law, in view of the immunity that police officers seemed to have enjoyed.

During the revolution, there were many acts of vengeance on police officers in particular in some Governorates such as Alexandria and Ismailia where the officers who were notorious for mistreating citizens were subjected to some brutal attacks and some were even killed.

Such information is based on the author's own research and discussions with informants. However, such a dimension of the Egyptian revolution has yet to feature in the mainstream historical narratives which tend to focus on the non-violent nature of the revolutionary forces strategies to overthrow the Mubarak regime.

Following the overthrow of Mubarak, there was a security vacuum which all Egyptians suffered from, namely, the absence of the police on the streets and in the police stations to ensure law and order was maintained. The police, feeling they have been the target of Egyptians' wrath at the time of the ousting of President Mubarak chose to keep a low profile or adopt a *laissez faire* approach to violations of the law occurring around them. In such a context, thugs (*baltageya*) and organised gangs began to roam the streets of Egypt terrorising people, stealing and engaging in acts of violence. Citizens began to wish for the return of a strong, effective police force that would maintain law and order. Many activists on the other hand worried that there had been no government efforts to introduce structural reform to the police corps and hence they may return to their old way of doing things. Activists are particularly concerned that as people's desperation for a strong police presence increases, the police may feel they have carte blanche to resort to violence and torture once again.

The participants who joined the working group on the police force as a site of the exercise of gender-based violence believed that one of the reasons why sexual harassment was left unchecked on the streets of Egypt was not only the failure of the police to assume law and order but their acts of complicity as well, for example by harassing women themselves or by letting people caught in the act go free. However, participants were keen not to scapegoat the police based in the police stations and hence decided that the actors responsible for GBV are 'All the institutions and departments that are part of the Ministry of Interior'.

In undergoing a power analysis of the Ministry of Interior with respect to why they engage in gender-based violence, a number of interesting dynamics came to the fore. The first is the educational syllabi taught in the police academies and colleges which encourage the use of violence. This was identified as a visible power being exercised, manifest in the substance of the material that the police recruits are being taught. Participants identified a hidden form of power at work which serves to create a culture of impunity: the solidarity expressed between officers who come from the same social class and often from the same families (with the practice of passing on the position of officer inter-generationally) (hidden power). Finally an

invisible form of power which creates an environment that is tolerant of abuses is the deteriorating economic situation which has taken its toll on citizens and police officers alike.

## **7.1 Sections most vulnerable to violence**

- the poor;
- poor women;
- sex workers;
- underage persons retained for criminal activity and the women among them;
- non-Muslims, in particular the women among them.

### **7.1.1 Ways in which violence is enacted:**

- systematic torture;
- verbal abuse;
- gender-based violence towards women and girls;
- the incarceration of women as a pressure tactic against men;
- particular forms of torture targeted against women.

The group believed that only structural change will elicit the necessary transformation and there are many civil society initiatives that have been proposed to reorganise the Ministry of Interior.

A number of observations were made from the wider group, including the importance of avoiding generalising about all officers and the Ministry of Interior in its entirety as:

- There are officers who refrain from abuses.
- We need to also take into account the regional differentials in responses, that is, in Upper Egypt, it is more difficult for police to wage violence against citizens because the people would respond fiercely en masse to any humiliation of their citizens.
- It is important to also note the phenomenon of the kidnapping of activists, including women activists and their retention in police stations.
- Harassment of female journalists as a tactic of intimidation.
- Important to also note ways in which the police collaborated with other forces such as the military in Mohamed Mahmoud Street and Tahrir Square to break activists' will.

## 8 Gender-based violence in places of worship

Islamic religious actors vary in Egypt. They include Al-Azhar University, the largest Sunni learning establishment in the country, the state-regulated mosques, and the mosques that are led by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and ultra-radical Salafi movements. The role of the mosques in influencing public opinion has increased dramatically after the ousting of President Mubarak when restrictions on freedom of expression were removed, and the Islamist forces (both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis) increased in political power. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis have used the mosque as a platform for engaging the people on social, cultural and political issues. In view of the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood has continued to exist as a religio-political movement, while its party the Freedom and Justice party is leading the country, its power of influence through the mosques has increased.

This group faced intense difficulties in view of the sensitivity of matters to do with religion. Unlike work on gender-based violence in the street or in the police station where as activists they have plenty of experience in exposing abuse and demanding accountability, there was no precedent within the group on engaging with places of worship as sites where sometimes discourses blaming women for their immodest attire are used to explain the prevalence of sexual harassment.

The group agreed that there was an invisible level of power being exercised in the form of the use of the authority of the pulpit to incite intolerance, and therefore implicitly justify GBV violence. It was also pointed out that the authority and power of those who reside over the places of worship cannot be underestimated, nor its impact on shaping people's thinking and attitudes. Some of the religious leaders' discourses on sexual harassment were seen to be particularly harmful to condoning acts of assault. For example Sheikh Abd Allah Badr when asked about his opinion on the incidents of group assault on women in Eid ul-Fitr said 'I challenge anyone to find me a single incident of a woman in the *niqab* being harassed. The only girls that are harassed are the filthy ones who expose their flesh and wear mini-skirts'. Another religious leader blamed a woman for sexual harassment even if she was wearing the *niqab* because she can incite a man through her glances. Another sheikh said that women unveiled are like lollypops which attract the flies to them.

Participants noted that these discourses did not only circulate through the mosques but through the satellite broadcasting television through which religious leaders reach out to Egyptian viewers, some of whom disseminate highly reactionary messages regarding women. In terms of actors, those identified as most influential were the sheikhs, the imams, the priests and the assistants in the mosques and churches respectively who exercise authority over the people (though there was hardly any talk of the church context). The way in which they influence is through a combination of visible and invisible power, manifest in the:

- weekly Friday sermons;
- the lessons given in mosque and church;
- the issuance of haphazard fatwas [religious opinions/edicts] whether directly in face to face encounters or through their appearances on satellite television.

In terms of interventions, working with religious actors was a task where collective action is deemed very difficult since there is no consensus on normative values associated with religious prescriptions and prohibitions. For example, the group got locked in an intense debate on whether the authorities who prevent a woman from entering a mosque have legitimate reasons for doing so or whether they are violating her right to enter unrestricted.

In view of the limited exposure of the population to alternative discourses and sources of religious knowledge, there is a high level of vulnerability within the population. The group discussed how women and children then become particularly vulnerable to this level of invisible power in view of the immense role the places of worship play in shaping their perceptions and values.

There was concern with the use of the pulpits for political purposes – that is, to endorse the Islamists in power, and how this might affect people’s perception and engagement with gender-based violence. Participants noted that religion is now being used in a highly systematic manner with the purpose of arousing fear and whipping up people’s sentiments.

Participants also noted that there is also a visible level of power being exercised in places of worship characterised by the subjection of children to violence in the form of beatings in religious lessons.

Members of the Centre for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance spoke of their experience in engaging with religious leaders (specifically sheikhs) regarding more enlightening *fiqh* (jurisprudence) interpretations and only one of 43 were aware of their existence. A participant spoke of an instance where the sheikh preaching a more progressive discourse in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Sohag was met with opposition from the public who made a complaint against him that he was propagating Shia thinking in the village.

Initiatives that have already been pursued:

- an intensive six month programme of engagement with religious leaders;
- spreading ‘enlightened readings of the *fiqh*’;
- supporting all movements and actors that are fighting the spread of Wahabi thinking;
- knowledge sharing encounters with activists working with religious leaders.

## **8.1 What are some proposed strategies of intervention?**

- work towards changing the religious discourse on women’s equality;
- work with the *ma’zouns* outside Cairo and build their capacities;
- building the capacities and knowledge of youth cadres in *fiqh* issues, Shariah and enlightened readings;
- co-ordination of work with religious movements that endorse a civil state such as *Azhariyoon ma’ dawla madaniyya*, *azhariyoon bella hodood*, the Sufis, *Salafi Costa*;
- work with Sheikh el Azhar especially in the process of their development of the declaration on the rights of women commonly known as Wathekat al-Azhar;
- the importance of pursuing such collaborative work in a collective capacity and not through one-to-one engagements which weakens the political weight of the civil movements.

### **8.1.1 What is needed to move forward?**

- preparation for a major public event in Abdeen Square with posters, videos and graffiti on 25 November to mark international day against violence;
- organisation of a nationwide stand-in on the same day at the same time in all governorates on the occasion.

NB: In view of the highly unstable political environment in Egypt, it was not possible to go ahead with either intervention.

## **9 Workshop Day Two**

On the second day, the workshop focused on gender-based violence in Upper Egypt. The Upper Egyptian participants who were present on the first day of the workshop but whose voices did not influence the agenda setting had an opportunity to share their experiences, priorities and issues.

They felt that, while sexual harassment in public places was an issue, it is not the main form of GBV to which women are subjected. Sexual harassment did occur in the market place and in public transport, but it was often quickly contained through the positive intervention of passers-by.

However, participants identified other forms of violation of rights which were becoming particularly acute since the Islamists had rise to political office and assumed a dominant presence in Upper Egypt. The two most critical issues raised were early marriage and polygamy.

### **9.1 Early marriage on the rise**

Participants argued that early marriage is a form of gender-based violence because it undermines girls' bodily integrity at a very young age. While traditional rural communities have always favoured the early marriage of girls, due to the pressing economic situation and the growing belief in girls acquiring at least a secondary school education (up to 18 years old), the age of marriage had been rising. However, since the Islamists have become increasingly influential in local communities, they have been encouraging families to forgo the requirement that girls be educated to secondary level, and contend with their completion of preparatory school (age 14). They have also been promoting the early marriage of girls so that they would not grow into 'spinsters'. There is a growing campaign to encourage financially able men to take up second wives and encourage parents of young girls to give them into marriage as second wives.

Participants said that both phenomena have shaken their communities because they challenge the fundamental gains that have been made through decades of community work to encourage families to recognise the rights of the girl child to complete her education and marry at an age where she has achieved a higher level of emotional and physical maturity.

### **9.2 Polygamy: a case study**

With respect to polygamy, Hoda, the founder of one of the first community development NGOs to work on women's rights issues in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Qena said that she is particularly disturbed by a new phenomenon that she has witnessed, namely, the campaign to convince men in her community to take up a Syrian wife. Hoda explained that there has been an influx of Syrian refugees into Qena. In the mosques affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis she noticed that in the Friday prayers when all the men in the villages are congregated, the local imams have been calling upon the believers to take on a Syrian wife as a way of alleviating their suffering as a consequence of the war. Hoda noted that in Qena, as in the rest of Egypt, polygamy is very rarely practiced. She noted that men are struggling with supporting one household, let alone to take on another wife and

support another family. In view of their impoverishment, these men who have taken up another wife have often brought her to live with their first wives. She said that many women have approached her to share their devastation at suddenly having to share their husbands with another woman. She said this has had a detrimental psychological, mental and economic impact on these women beyond what is spoken about or recognised in the communities in which she works in Qena.

Participants agreed with Hoda that this emergent phenomenon [of religious actors encouraging men to take up Syrian women as second wives] is not only specific to Qena, but is also occurring in other governorates as well. They spoke of the need for a collective action approach to addressing these issues that would involve not tackling it as a women's right issue but as an issue of protecting the community and upholding principles of justice and fairness. They argued there needs to be a discourse challenging notions of increased masculinity with having multiple wives.

### **9.3 A collective action approach would involve:**

- identifying local leaders and influential persons (men and women) who may be sympathetic to challenging early marriage and polygamy and working with them;
- documenting and researching scrupulously these phenomena and sharing them with the media through life stories and relevant data;
- developing short effective messages against these social practices and targeting particular groups such as young men and women in existing programmes/initiatives that are ongoing in the community;
- sharing experiences and best practices between practitioners working in different communities.

## 10 Conclusions and ways forward

The workshop was helpful on many fronts:

First, it was a good networking opportunity for youth groups who tend to be scattered in connecting, sharing their experiences, debating contexts and approaches and talking about strategies of engagement.

Second, it was the first time for the entire group to be exposed to power analysis, and its practical application in their group work enabled them to capture the less 'visible' forms of power in relation to both understanding their contexts as well as sharpening their strategies of intervention.

Third, the workshop brought together a diversity of actors, who were joined together by a common aim of combating GBV, but who worked through different means and different contexts.

On the other hand, the workshop also exposed a number of challenges:

First, the extremely volatile and highly unpredictable situation in Egypt meant that activists that have their feet on the ground found it very difficult to commit time for reflective practice nor to afford to strategise and plan in a context that keeps on changing.

Second, while the introduction to power analysis was welcomed, undertaking a couple of practical exercises was simply not enough. It had to be woven into their daily practice, perhaps through action research. This regrettably required many more follow-up interventions which were not feasible.

Third, the workshop exposed the deep chasm that exists between the different kinds of actors, the priority issues, and the strategies of engagement between the activists working in urban Cairo and those working in Upper Egypt, in particular in rural areas. This would obviously have bearings on cross-regional work.

One of the objectives of the workshop was to help IDS identify actors and their initiatives who need to be examined and analysed for the country case study. From the workshop it was evident that the intervention of the youth groups who had organised and worked collectively to address gender-based violence in the form of sexual harassment on the streets of Egypt represents an important case study worth examining in greater depth.

It also became evident that collective work in rural areas through community mobilisation of men and women against new social practices also offers important lessons in working in contexts in which the majority of the Egyptian population live. These would inform the selection of the detailed case studies for the next phase of work.

# References

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