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## Review of ECWR's Seminar on Sexual Harassment and Egypt's Tourism Industry

*by Azita Azargoshasb*

Sexual harassment in Cairo emerged as a subject of scrutiny in 2008, highlighting the fissure between a slow restructuring of the permissible male-female encounter among city residents and an increasing degree of international and national pressure to reinvent local gender norms according to more cosmopolitan social and legal formulae. Sexual harassment as both an imagined and literal obstacle to everyday life in Cairo elicits emotional response from Cairenes spanning the social spectrum. An explosive debate on the public e-mail listserv Cairo Scholars<sup>1</sup> during June and July of 2008, followed by an outcrop of several Facebook groups and gender text reading circles,<sup>2</sup> all denote the issue as one in flux, adding hue and dimension to the ways in which sexual harassment obscures the boundaries between emotion and bodily experience for Cairo's residents as they engage an expanding scope of the city's public and private spaces. In its ability to deftly obscure these boundaries, sexual harassment becomes challenging to define in both legal and vernacular discourses. As Egypt undergoes this lengthy process of reforming gender relations to meet a new image of itself, sexual harassment emerges as a signature issue not simply in its ability to underscore the tension between Egyptian and foreign cultural norms being exercised within the city's limits, but also in its ability to penetrate layered notions of gender and permissible gendered encounters within Egyptian culture itself.<sup>3</sup> By interrogating both theaters simultaneously, sexual harassment and the set of local initiatives charged with remodeling its conceptualization within local law and local ethos contribute to a view of Cairene culture as one internally *conflicted*.

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<sup>1</sup> Cairo Scholars is a listserv started by Middle East Studies professor Samer Ali at the University of Texas, Austin in 2005 for students and researchers new to Cairo. To join the listserv or to request access to an archive of the sexual harassment debates from June-July, 2008, send an email inquiry to [cairoscholars-subscribe@utlists.utexas.edu](mailto:cairoscholars-subscribe@utlists.utexas.edu).

<sup>2</sup> A Facebook group entitled "Stop Sexual Harassment in Egypt!" was the first of several groups to crop up on the subject of sexual harassment. During the summer of 2008, I noticed three advertisements on the Cairo Scholars listserv for gender text reading circles.

<sup>3</sup> ECWR's latest field study, *Clouds in Egypt's Sky*, posits that sexual harassment is a recent phenomenon in Egypt, emerging largely since 2002. Four Egyptian women over the age of 40, whom this author interviewed, alternatively suggested that public commentary and displays of "interest" from men are not new. The difference between public commentary today and years ago, they agreed, is that what was once considered a kind of safe "flattery" has shifted to "lewd and vulgar talk," as one woman coined the sentiment. The women seemed to agree that touching and other forms of physical contact between strangers in the street are new.

The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), a midlevel NGO enjoying Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and Egypt's leading advocate of anti-sexual harassment reform, first launched its comprehensive Cairo-based initiative "Making Our Streets Safer for Everyone" in 2005. An original and enduring campaign, "Making Our Streets Safer" has engaged local and international media programming,<sup>4</sup> enabled an ongoing series of local workshops and publications and lobbied tenaciously for enhanced gender sensitivity in Egypt's institutions, from the micro to macro level. Launched informally in 2000 as an ongoing set of field surveys intended to gather primary data on sexual harassment on Cairo streets, "Making Our Streets Safer" fast became a multifaceted advocacy campaign permeating a vast scope of social, economic and professional sectors. The results of its third and most recent field survey, *Clouds in Egypt's Sky*, based upon the testimony of some 2,020 Egyptian women and men<sup>5</sup> and 109 foreign women, has added momentum to a legal reform campaign to criminalize sexual harassment in Egypt since its release in March of 2008.

On August 19, 2008, ECWR hosted a seminar entitled "Sexual Harassment and its Impacts on the Egyptian Economy" at the Pyramisa Hotel in the Doqqi neighborhood of Cairo. A tangential outgrowth of the "Making Our Streets Safer" campaign, the seminar sought to identify and make meaningful both a candid discussion of Egypt's evolving social attitudes and perceptions toward sexual harassment – how it has historically been construed, to what extent those perceptions have changed and the changes now needed to effectively remedy the nation's "cancer"<sup>6</sup> – as well as a more pragmatic rendering of sexual harassment as a detriment to Egypt's economic growth aspirations. Shaped by the objectives of ECWR's 2008 "Million Signatures Campaign,"<sup>7</sup> an initiative designed to garner the support of public and private sector firms and regional economic heavyweights operating in Cairo, the seminar was co-hosted by representatives from Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and the nation's parliament. Seminar speakers ultimately converged around the legal project to criminalize sexual harassment in Egypt by coupling that initiative with the priorities of Egypt's tourism industry and its potential to incur revenue losses as a result of sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is not yet explicitly recognized in Egypt's penal code. The existing penal code does recognize Insulting (Article 306), Indecent Behavior (Article 278) and

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<sup>4</sup> Sexual harassment has been a recurrent theme among Egyptian and international news media in 2008. According to the ECWR website, Egyptian actor and television host Hussein el Imam aligned himself publicly with ECWR's "Million Signature Campaign" and dedicated a full episode of his program to discussing ECWR's anti-sexual harassment efforts.

<sup>5</sup> The sample of Egyptians interviewed was equally divided into 1,010 Egyptian men and 1,010 Egyptian women. This is the first ECWR sexual harassment study to gather a male sample.

<sup>6</sup> Magdi Abdelhadi, "Egypt's Sexual Harassment 'Cancer,'" *BBC News*, July 18, 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7514567.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7514567.stm).

<sup>7</sup> ECWR's "Million Signatures Campaign" was launched 6 March 2008.

Sexual Assault (Article 268),<sup>8</sup> all of which *may* be, but infrequently are, applied to sexual harassment claims, due to cumbersome evidentiary standards and insufficient willingness to prosecute. The legal project contained within ECWR's broader initiative thus endorses the formal incorporation of a legal definition of sexual harassment as:

unwanted sexual conduct deliberately perpetrated by the harasser, resulting in sexual, physical, or psychological abuse of the victim regardless of location, whether in the workplace, the street, public transportation, educational institution, or even in private places such as home or in the company of others such as relatives or colleagues, etc. (ECWR 2008, 2-3)

Accompanying a legal definition of the acts and spaces which characterize sexual harassment in its broadest and most inclusive sense, ECWR envisions a synchronized institution of reformed legal process, evidentiary standards and a system of punitive recourse to support the criminalization of acts deemed illegal (ECWR 2008, 16).

Criminalization is here envisioned as an essential step toward further integrating Egypt's penal code with the international standards and objectives set forth by its commitments to uphold and enforce the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),<sup>9</sup> the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000) and the Beijing Platform for Action, a compendium of globally-pertinent objectives and strategies adopted by participants of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 to further women's equal participation and representation in a number of national contexts. Yet, inasmuch as the adoption of new law(s) may be considered among the most fundamental steps in bridging Egypt's domestic legal framework with its international obligations to establish a cosmopolitan outlook on gender, such law(s) cannot stand detached from the social environs in which they operate. Ostensibly, legal reform must also involve the codification and implementation of a feasible, comprehensive and effective punitive strategy for dealing with victims, witnesses<sup>10</sup> and a new body of "criminal" citizens – rather daunting task.

Conference participants, taking cue from ECWR's *Clouds in Egypt's Sky* publication, discussed a range of punitive remedies including the implementation of a broad-based

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<sup>8</sup> This information was collected from the *Facebook* group, "Stop Sexual Harassment in Egypt!" which is administered by members of ECWR's International Relations Unit.

<sup>9</sup> This was signed by Egypt in 1980 and ratified in 1981. Egypt is not a signatory of the Optional Protocol (2000) for CEDAW. Egypt signed and ratified CEDAW with initial reservation to Articles 9(2), 16, 29(2) and 2. Egypt's international commitments to the broader project of legally guaranteeing women's equality with men also stem from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both signed by Egypt in 1967 and ratified in 1982, as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), signed and ratified in 1990 with reservations relating to Articles 20 and 21.

<sup>10</sup> According to Egypt's penal code, claims of Insulting, Indecent Behavior and Sexual Assault require two witnesses and, as is still the standard in some Islamic countries, the witness of (at least) two women serves as the equivalent of one male witness. This exemplifies the basis for Egypt's reservation to CEDAW, Article 2, which gives Egypt's application of Shar'i'a precedence over its adherence to the Convention's observations.

training (and re-training) program to help street police recognize and manage cases of sexual harassment; the enabling of street police with tools for on-site issuance of violation tickets (akin to the traffic violation model, which many argue has been widely effective in Cairo); the mobilization of an on-site offense reporting system; and enactment of a set of punitive consequences for police officers who either refuse to report cases of sexual harassment or incite the act(s) themselves. Imprisonment as penalty for sexual harassment was not discussed at the seminar, nor does the idea emerge as a dominant strategy in any of the ECWR campaign literature.

ECWR, joined by several partnering NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) in Cairo and in Egypt more generally, have championed the operative ethic that legal reform can be effective only when coupled with a political and social strategy to transform attitudes. In practicing its preach, the “Making Our Streets Safer” campaign has thus taken local norms to task through a series of increasingly notable television and radio adverts and a vast body of literature and testimony on the subject of sexual harassment. These strategies, intended to compliment and support the more pointed legal reform project, tap into a sphere of moral and ethical tropes, engaging notions of personal rights, public responsibility and Islamic values to achieve popular reception and legitimacy. Yet much of the local publicity and high-level pressure now concentrating on the issue of sexual harassment and its adjoining legal reform project defers to the claim that sexual harassment bears high economic costs.<sup>11</sup> The diverse socio-political initiative ECWR established to reshape attitudes toward gender from the grassroots level, which in turn gave rise to the legal reform project, is increasingly coupled with a translation of sexual harassment’s effects into money terms, with lost tourism revenues as a popular refrain.

The “Sexual Harassment and its Impacts on the Egyptian Economy” seminar entertained this economic rationale and, in doing so, contributed to the framing of sexual harassment as an impediment to Egypt’s neoliberal growth trajectory. There it was suggested that sexual harassment alienates foreign tourists, students and residents in Cairo who contribute significantly to the nation’s foreign exchange accounts both indirectly in the form of tuitions and scholarships, donor aid and foreign direct investments, while also directly in the purchase of goods and services from local formal and informal merchants and establishments. Noting that some 98 percent of foreign women interviewed in ECWR’s latest field survey affirmed exposure to sexual harassment while in Egypt and that, of this sample, some 96.3 percent identified tourist destinations and foreign educational institutions as the second most concentrated sites of harassment following Cairo streets, speakers at the seminar concluded that sexual harassment is a significant threat to foreign women visiting or residing in Cairo (ECWR 2008, 9). As the bearers of

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, 1) Reem Abu Zahra, “MP Chides Tourism Ministry over Sexual Harassment,” *Daily News Egypt*, July 14, 2008, available at <http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=15072>; or 2) Shaimaa Fayed, “Female Tourists Face Sexual Harassment,” *Business Monthly*, October 2008, available at [www.amcham.org.eg](http://www.amcham.org.eg).

critical capital, more likely than foreign men to be subjected to sexual harassment while traveling abroad, foreign women become powerful agents in this paradigm and an asset the Egyptian government wants to protect.

Foreign female residents are not, however, the only venue for potential lost revenues. According to the seminar, lost productivity which results as Egypt's female laborers retreat from the workplace for fear of being sexually harassed by employers, fellow employees or by persons encountered on the way to work also poses an obstacle to growth. The seminar downplayed this aspect of the survey data, which was statistically minimal despite a significant bias toward Egyptian women in ECWR's female survey sample.<sup>12</sup> Of the 83 percent of Egyptian women interviewed by ECWR who affirmed exposure to sexual harassment, 91.5 percent of that sample identified Cairo streets, *not* the workplace, as the primary location of harassment (ECWR 2008, 9-11). It is important to acknowledge that Egyptian female survey responses may reflect a gendered fear of punishment for "witnessing" sexual harassment in the workplace, ranging from loss of employment to social marginalization or escalated encounters of harassment. To support an accurate reading of ECWR's survey data on the whole, however, it is even more essential to note that the data provides its most conclusive evidence that revenues from foreign spending in Egypt are more sensitive to fluctuation as a result of exposure to sexual harassment than both earnings and revenues compromised as Egyptian women become reluctant to enter or remain in the workplace.

The suggestion that economic losses inevitably result from sexual harassment to an extent which merits its criminalization relies upon a precarious stream of logic, even when supported by ECWR's invariably well-researched and defended claim that sexual harassment is profoundly deleterious for Cairene society.<sup>13</sup> What lingers problematic in situating a discussion of sexual harassment within a neoliberal framework where macroeconomic aspirations such as stable foreign direct investment, foreign university tuitions and escalating tourism revenues suffice as legitimation for legal reform, is the implicit endorsement of those aspirations as a package of non-negotiable commitments and obligations to the global economy and the project of advancing Egypt's position within that economy at all cost. Such framing of the discussion thus merits the question: does the strategic entanglement of macroeconomic objectives and globally-funded "gender" advocacy for the purpose of altering sexual harassment trends at home imply a surrender of the critical distance necessary to critique those economic objectives in and of themselves? Particularly once sexual harassment becomes realized as a social phenomenon rooted in economic, social, political and existential frustrations, does the case for revenues ultimately aim too shallow?

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<sup>12</sup> ECWR's female sample included 1,010 Egyptian females and 109 foreign females.

<sup>13</sup> ECWR's "Making Our Streets Safer" campaign is ultimately one which challenges the motivations behind sexual harassment as they affect all of Egypt. Because the campaign is currently focused on raising awareness of sexual harassment in Cairo, I take the liberty here in referring to "Cairene society."

Apropos of the moment, with Egypt's sexual harassment legal reform project on the doorstep of institutionalization, it is vital to pose such questions, and not simply because an export-oriented, *revenues by any means necessary*, neoliberal growth paradigm invariably couples social and economic "development" initiatives with a range of financial obligations and symbolic forfeitures, which should on those grounds be fervently interrogated. It is vital more importantly because tailoring legal and social reform to suit macroeconomic ends inevitably informs both the way and the extent to which new laws and new social norms take shape and become internalized as part of contemporary culture. What is worrisome is the possibility that once social aims are tailored to meet economic targets on Egypt's checklist of priorities, the entire project of realizing sexual harassment as a violation of the right to gender equality, which emerges as one of many just entitlements in a civil rights framework, takes a back seat to the project of earning national revenues, toward which sexual harassment is merely an inconvenient hindrance and gender equality the necessary instrument for its oust.

The "Sexual Harassment and its Impacts on the Egyptian Economy" seminar helped convey sexual harassment as a critical example of how gender and sexuality issues become emblematic of the Southern metropolis and its *conflicted* state, teetering on the precipice of an outward-looking neoliberal economic transition while confronted by the mounting consequences of its own social negligence and displacement. Between these two centers of gravity, Cairo, like many Southern cities, struggles for balance and upgrade. ECWR, in its dedication to gender and sexuality reform initiatives across sectors, has contributed to Egypt's negotiation of growth and progress, not simply by gathering momentum behind initiatives intended to shape the way Egyptians create and envision their future society, but also by giving reason to question the ways in which Egypt, as a nation, should proceed toward that vision.

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