Media Portrayal of Street Violence against Egyptian Women

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The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

"Often ignored in media coverage of the Egyptian revolution is how protests led by labor unions—many of them women based labor unions in the manufacturing cities of Egypt—catalyzed the revolution," says Nadine Naber. Women are at the heart of every social movement that happens in Egypt and the Arab world. Nevertheless, the local media keeps portraying women as submissive or oppressed, which directly and indirectly feeds into the continuing practice of street violence and sexual harassment against women in Egypt. With the alarming statistics documented by local women's NGOs of violence against women in recent years, this research attempts to document the nature of local media portrayal of violence against women, outline its reasons and repercussions, and figure out the possible solutions to improve women's image in the Egyptian media. Through conducting in-depth interviews with NGOs, experts, media professionals and renowned figures it aims to find ways to counter the unfair socially-accepted justifications, and thus help limiting the actual violence exercised against women.

Keywords: Egypt, violence against women, harassment, sexual harassment, media representation

Introduction

Since more than a decade ago, Egypt has witnessed alarming levels of violence against women and girls with rising numbers of sexual harassment incidents and mobs' sexual assaults. Women's rights NGOs' involvement in countering this phenomenon has propelled the media to cover physical and sexual violence against women, especially since the uprisings of January 2011 and June 2013. Nevertheless, the mainstream media coverage of violence against women remains occasional and limited to significant incidents of sexual harassment, while violence also extents to exclusion and stereotyping in political life.

Violence against women in Egypt is a socio-cultural political phenomenon, due to a male-dominated culture and a patriarchal authority, as well as the deteriorating economic conditions, and the widening gap between social classes and categories. It is also integral to the wider context of political violence, the struggle over power as well as the violence against women. So, we can safely argue that violence against women is used in politics to strangulate women's participation in all politics and political events. According to a UN Women study in 2013, sexual violence and harassment reached 53 percent of Egyptian Women, political violence aimed at stereotyping and exclusion from political life 27 percent and domestic violence 20 percent (Badran, 2014). Twelve percent of women do not report harassment in fear of societal attacks (Egyptian Center of Women Rights). In addition, Egypt is ranked the 6th in the 10 most unsafe countries for women in the world (wittyfeed.com, 2016).

"Street sexual harassment is an endemic social problem that harms women both physically and psychologically and violates their basic rights to safety and mobility," (Towards a Safer City, HarassMap.org). According to UN Women, 99.3 percent of Egyptian women say they have been subjected to sexual harassment at least once in their lives, 49.2 percent of them say it happens daily and 48 percent of them say it happens more since the 2011 uprising. In addition, there are 500 reported cases of mob sexual attacks in Tahrir Square, since January 2011 (Keeping Women Out, 2014). If we linked them to the violence by political forces in 2005 and 2010 elections, we find that street violence against women has been systematic to halt women's political participation and stereotype them to a limited number of roles where they do not compete with men (Guenena, 2013). The predominantly state-controlled mainstream media plays a crucial role in stereotyping women as well.

Especially after the fall of the Mubarak regime, attacks against women participating in the demonstrations have been on the rise. Then, in early days of SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) rule, women protesters were arrested and forced to undergo "virginity tests" and reports of rape by mobs in Tahrir square emerged. The media was completely silent about this until reports of international NGOs were published in the foreign press that they had to admit it had happened. Then, under Mohamed Morsi's presidency, sexual attacks were continuously reported during Tahrir protests. Witnesses and survivors reported:

> Tens of men surrounded the survivor tore off their clothes and groped their bodies. Some were raped by multiple perpetrators, who were often armed with sticks, blades and other weapons. Security forces failed to intervene to protect

female protesters, prompting citizen movements to set up their own security patrols, (Keeping Women Out, 2014).

With the alarming statistics documented by local women's NGOs of violence against women in recent years, this research argues that the negative and unfair media coverage of violence against women feeds into the systematic societal and state violence exercised against women. By consulting the current and contemporary status of mainstream media coverage, conducting in-depth interviews with media experts, women's NGOs, and social psychologists, this research attempts to counter the unfair socially-accepted justifications for such phenomenon by outlining its roots, and figuring out ways to delimit its growth through the media, the state and the NGOs.

Media Coverage of Violence against Women in Egypt:

The mainstream media coverage of violence against women in Egypt has always been biased against women holding them responsible for this violence in direct and indirect ways. Despite that fact the mainstream media negatively reports on sexual harassment against women at work and in the street, the media discourse on the issue of political involvement of women is divided between supporting and opposing women in politics (Abu Youssef, p.1).

Violence against women in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, issued in December 1993 (resolution 48/104), adopted by the UN General Assembly, is defined as "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 deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life," (Article One). Article Two specifies that "Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following:

> a. Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;
> b. Physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women, and forced prostitution;
> c. Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs," (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,1993).

Looking into those three criteria, a comprehensive study of print and broadcast media coverage of violence against women indicates biased, sporadic and superficial coverage. The print media discourse does not reflect in-depth coverage or regular campaigns combating different forms of violence against women. Rather, most coverage was in response to particular incidents or as part of coverage of public events, not a newspaper's initiative to combat violence as a social phenomenon. Print

media tackles issues of domestic violence hesitantly and neglect issues considered taboo and not to be addressed (Abu Youssef et al, p.20).

Analysis of the coverage of community violence confirmed that print media discourse has contributed to creating a type of psychological violence against women. This happens by demeaning women's image in discussions of crime-related issues, diminishing them through caricatures, or objectifying them as mere bodies or sex advertisements. Commenting negatively and denigrating the image of women when reporting on community violence brings into question the journalists' awareness of the forms of violence against women. As a result of the sporadic and insufficient awareness of violence against women, the journalistic discourse is very general and does not reflect unique environments or social classes (Abu Youssef et al, p.20).

The print media coverage was also primarily oriented to the elites, the upper class, and upper segments of the middle class, with rare exceptions. As a result, forms of violence that are prevalent among the poorer social classes, such as sexual harassment in factories and fields, incest in slum areas, and trading of girls through so-called summer marriages, are absent from the print media discourse agenda. The print media did not offer solutions to issues of either domestic or community violence against women addressed (Abu Youssef et al, p.21).

Television, the most important means of affecting awareness among the Egyptian population, addressed issues of violence only periodically, and avoided discussions of critical issues such as domestic violence, the last on its agenda of interests. Egyptian television programs typically opposed community violence, and addressed domestic violence as a result of the general spread of violence, unemployment, and disintegration of the family. They did not suggest solutions to these problems nor encourage society to combat violence. Moreover, radio and television drama on family conflict depicted women as solely responsible for family disintegration. Moreover, they suggest that the best way to reform a woman is to reproach or hit her, and such violence is always presented in a justifiable manner that will appear to viewers as the appropriate solution (Abu Youssef et al, p.25).

Effort to Combat Violence against Women:

1- Grassroots Effort: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):

NGOs play the most part in combatting all forms of violence against women in Egypt, but their role remains limited in the absence of a clear media strategy and effective legal frame. Various NGOs conduct large-scale awareness campaigns, but their biggest challenge remains in rural and slum areas, and indigenous communities, where people are deeply insecure and feel suspicious towards any development effort. Those campaigns, conducted by various anti-sexual harassment movements, track harassment cases, via social media and send organized teams of volunteers to intervene in mob assaults to protect women from harassers in public places. According to Mosleh (2015), they encourage people to use social media to expose harassers, employing a number of hashtags—among them #AntiHarassment and #ExposeHarasser. The goal is to speak out against the daily sexual harassment they witness or experience, breaking the silence surrounding these crimes.

NGOs also use mobile technology and alternative media to spread awareness of women's rights and improve women's image: Two significant cases are HarassMap and ACT-Egypt. HarassMap, launched in 2010, make use of digital media technology to spread awareness and collect data via crowdsourcing means. Taking the advantage of social media and the widespread of smart phones in Egypt, HarassMap encourage women and men to report incidents of sexual harassment as they experience or witness them. The website "maps" the reports online and in real-time. HarassMap.org is an "interactive mapping interface for reporting incidents of sexual harassment anonymously and in real time." According to Grove (2015), the project uses of "spatial information technologies for crowdmapping sexual harassment." Trained volunteers encourage people in public places to take a "zero-tolerance" approach towards sexual harassment.

Another alternative medium counter the lack of awareness of conventional media is to convey equality and present women as capable human beings is the project developed by ACT-Egypt and produced a film "In the Mirror," which exposes this lack of awareness. The film tells the story of a woman in her 50th birthday searching for her "true" self after having lived her life seeing her reflection through a "mirror" called "media." She remembers her life since childhood, and goes through the changes that happened in Egypt, and compare and contrast them to the women's image in the media during the same period. Featuring interviews with media experts, and specialists in psychology, sociology, advertising and celebrities to explain women's image in each historic era, the film analyzes the nature and characters of filmmakers, to illustrate how to illustrate how their ideologies and social and political attitudes influence their vision of women's role, and in re-enacting this vision through the media (Media and Gender Justice, 2014).

"In the Mirror" has been adopted by some human rights and women organizations as "an advocacy tool" to fight violence directed towards women through media. Some independent filmmakers expressed intention to begin a series of productions and deliberations with media monitoring organizations. overall, there is a now a core of civil society organizations, academics and writers who take the issue of gender-focused media monitoring more seriously as seen through their work (Media and Gender Justice, 2014).

2-   Political Violence and the Anti-Harassment Law:

Sexual assaults against women protesters in Tahrir Square put the issue of political violence against women into the public and media spotlight. It has been a long-standing and systemic problem in Egypt representing a major obstacle to women's participation in politics and political events. According to the report Keeping Women Out, these crimes have been constantly met with "almost complete impunity," with successive governments failing to address the crisis. Violence targeting women protesters is "aimed at silencing women and preventing them from participating in protests. Many of the survivors and witnesses interviewed believed that attacks are coordinated and seek to break the opposition."

While the Keeping Women Out report documents numerous cases of harassment over the last few years, no one was ever brought to justice since March 2014: "no investigation has been opened." Impunity by both the state and society contribute to the continuation of such crimes, as the perpetrators know they will not be held

accountable. Labelled as an "epidemic" such violence is met with absolute impunity a climate of tolerance.

In addition, the lack of legal definition of sexual harassment, which covers a wide range of actions, from flirting to rape, also contribute to this. NGOs who work on raising awareness report that women do not know what constitute harassment; verbal and visual harassment, such as name calling or sexual invitation, are not recognized as so. There is a social tendency to downgrade the actions, so that the survivor reports, for example, sexual assaults and rape as sexual harassment (Keeping Women Out, 2014). This minimization of such crimes, by the state and the predominantly state-controlled media, makes them invisible and socially accepted.

The state failure to address the violence against women, according to the report Keeping Women Out, is well reflected in the widely spread discriminatory political and religious discourse reflected in the mainstream media, which blames the survivor and imply that women should not be in public places. While several religious clerks blamed women for their own harassment arguing that they wear provocative clothes intentionally to be harassed. In the meantime, there is an increasing number of youth, males and females, volunteering to prevent sexual harassment, protect survivors, expose perpetrators, and document incidents. The factors fueling this persistent violence include, the lack of security, blaming the survivor with shame and stagnation, the climate of impunity and the lack of accurate data and statistics (Keeping Women Out, 2014).

In June 2014, and in the day of the inauguration of the current president nine women were raped by mobs while celebrating in Tahrir square, with one assault caught on video causing widespread outrage as it went viral online. Sisi visited the woman who was assaulted while she was in hospital, and made a public commitment to tackling impunity towards sexual violence and harassment in Egypt, which was widely praised by the predominantly pro-government state-controlled media (Sexual Violence, 2014).

This act that was met with large skepticism from the women's rights campaigners and activists, as just a media show more than anything else. First, the issue was politicized by the media "to imply that the sexual violence has solely been perpetrated by the Muslim Brotherhood during the post-revolutionary period since 2011, rather than an epidemic in which the police, the military, and the judiciary (through widespread failure and willingness to prosecute) have all been complicit." Second, Sisi was responsible for the forced 'virginity tests' when he headed the military intelligence during the SCAF period in 2011 (Sexual Violence, 2014).

The law introduced in 2014 that criminalized sexual harassment for the first time, was criticized by anti-harassment activists for "not going far enough in its sanctions against harassment, and not being practicable." Activists were concerned by "who will be prosecuted under the new law: namely, that it will be deployed to make sexual harassment and sexual assaults 'apolitical', by punishing the crime when it is committed by civilians but not providing oversight to ensure apparatus of the state such as the police and the military do not, themselves, also commitment sexual violence and harassment," (Sexual Violence, 2014). A deep-rooted cultural problem cannot be resolved by just a law that is applied by the same people who reportedly committed this crime repetitively.

Research Outcome and Recommendations:

To figure out solutions to the endemic issue of violence against women and in specific sexual harassment, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 of media professionals, media figures, human rights experts, women rights activists, which included the following recommendations:

◦ The media should use positive terms, such as survivor not victim
◦ Not to ask or use information that imply ethical judgments that held the survivor socially responsible, such as, what she was wearing or what time in the night.
◦ There should be a balance between the audience right to know and the survivor's privacy.
◦ Sexual harassments are not individual incidents; they are part of socio-political/cultural context. This must the reporting context.
◦ The media should be able to provide the survivor with information of rehabilitation or legal centers that can help them.
◦ The media should not downgrade the violence, and report rape as harassment and harassment as flirting and so on.
◦ The media should stress the principle of equality between men and women designated in the constitution.
◦ Ethically the media should be on the side of the survivor not the criminal. This does not negate the principle of media objectivity.
◦ To combat the problem, the government, the media people should synchronize efforts with anti-harassment NGOs, Women's NGOs, rehabilitation and legal centers to raise awareness at grassroots level, and to report accurately and regularly on the issue.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study demonstrates the strong correlation between media-aided state violence and societal violence. Societal acceptability and justification of violence against women is backed by the systematic violence exercised by the state along with the favorable mainstream media coverage for such crimes. To counter this, the state must adhere and enforce the anti-sexual harassment law and the penal code to prevent violence against women, and raise the societal awareness about women's rights in equality and freedom.

NGOs and civil society organizations are exerting its utmost effort to combat violence against women in various formats, through documenting violence on their websites, conducting awareness campaigns as well as training teams of volunteers to combat street sexual harassment. Those teams act as body shields for women in large gatherings and social celebrations, such as the two Islamic feasts. NGO members bring into attention the amount of violence exercised against women by reporting and documenting it on social media. The availability of such information in social media and making them available the public sphere, forces the mainstream media to cover such news, invite them to speak and thus, spread awareness on a wide scale when there are grand violations.

In addition, NGOs use of alternative media, such as HarassMap using crowdsourcing technology to gather and map accurate and up to date information to document violence. At the same time, they encourage women to report what they come across

anonymously. ACT Egypt, also, has produced a film that grabbed significant attention towards the amount of violence to which women are subjected.

All such effort, however, will not be effective enough in combating this phenomenon unless there is a concerted effort from the side of the government, to enforce laws protecting human rights, along with the mainstream media, together with the NGOs to improve the status of women and the image of women, and thus the level of awareness in society.

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Appendices:

Civil Society organizations combating sexual harassment and assaults:

-       El Nadeem for the Management and Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture
https://www.facebook.com/elnadeem/?fref=ts

-       Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (ECWR)
http://ecwronline.org

-       Task Force for Combating Sexual Violence

-       Harassmap
http://harassmap.org

-       Basma (Imprint Movement)
https://www.facebook.com/Imprint.Movement.eg

-       Operation Anti Sexual Harassment (OP Anti-SH)
https://www.facebook.com/opantish

-       Tahrir Bodyguard
https://www.facebook.com/Tahrir.Bodyguards

-       "Shoft Taharosh (I Saw Harassment)
https://www.facebook.com/Shoft.Ta7rosh

-        "Against Sexual Harassment"
https://www.facebook.com/Ded.Ta7rosh

-       "Expose Harassers"
https://www.facebook.com/efda7.mota7resh

-       Banat Masr Khat Ahmar (Egypt's girls are a red line)
https://www.facebook.com/banatmasrkhata7mar

-       Initiative for Female Egyptian Lawyers

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