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Sexual Harassment in Egypt:
An Old Plague in a New Revolutionary Order

Zusammenfassung
Sexuelle Belästigung in Ägypten: eine alte Plage in einer neuen revolutionären Ordnung


Schlüsselwörter
Tahrir, Ägypten, sexuelle Gewalt, Körper, Frauenbewegung, Revolution

Summary
The article aims at analyzing sexual harassment in Egypt in changing sociopolitical contexts at various times; I argue that no analysis of the Egyptian revolution is complete without an understanding of these broad sociopolitical conditions that have contributed to the culture of anti-women and sexual violence since the 19th century. I am not suggesting that sexual harassment always took the same form and was practiced with the same level of violence, or even rooted in the same reason(s) throughout that long period of history. Based on archival research, personal observations and intensive interviews with activists I show how sexual harassment increased in violence caused by the state’s heavy-handed security and neoliberal policies.

Keywords
Tahrir, Egypt, sexual violence, body, women’s movement, revolution
1 Introduction

Since the Tahrir Revolution broke out in Egypt in January 2011, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces have turned the female body into a site for political struggles and both sides have politicized sexual harassment against women. Continuously destabilized Egyptian regimes have employed sexual harassment to drive female protestors out of the public space, while oppositional activists have put the issue at the top of their political agendas in order to embarrass the regime and mobilize followers to protest. Both camps have mistakenly discussed sexual harassment as if it were “a new phenomenon” that came about as a result of the recent increase in women’s political participation.

In the first part of this article I trace sexual harassment in Egyptian urban spaces back to the late 19th century. I show how nationalists used it in debates to express socio-political anxiety about the British occupation (1882–1954) and rapid urbanization during the 20th century. These debates ignored women’s need for legal protection in the public space and implicitly denied women’s right to the public space. I then discuss how the state and oppositional activists politicized the female body against the backdrop of the revolutionary movements in the first decade of the 21st century. I argue that the ongoing struggles over the last decade have succeeded in destabilizing the gender and sexual orders and have put women’s rights to control their own bodies and sexuality at the top of the national political agendas. While indicating that sexual harassment has been a constant in the Egyptian public space since the second half of the 19th century I am by no means suggesting that sexual harassment took the same form, was practiced in connection with the same level of violence, or even rooted in the same reason(s) throughout that long period of history.

The article aims at analyzing sexual harassment in continuingly changing sociopolitical contexts and argues that no analysis of the Egyptian revolution is complete without an understanding of the broad sociopolitical contexts that contributed to the anti-women and sexual violence culture.

2 Sexual Harassment in Egypt: A History

Sexual harassment, or taharush jinsi in Arabic, is a relatively new term that was introduced to everyday Egyptian as late as the 1990s when civil society organizations started paying attention to how widespread gender-based violence was. Until recently, Egyptian penal codes, abundant with articles dealing with rape and sexual honor code violations, were devoid of articles that explicitly came out in favor of punishing harassment. Meanwhile, the popular concept of mu‘aksa, often translated as “teasing” in colloquial Egypt-

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