

Sweeping Assaults Against Women Started Long Ago in Egypt

“Black Wednesday” of 2005 was Just the Beginning while Epidemic of Sexual Violence Against Women Continued Growing

Brief Background Paper – 22 July 2020 - <http://nazra.org/en/node/713>

COVID19 Pandemic Led to Increased Targeting of Women Human Rights Defenders and Provided Opportunity for Ruling Regimes to Close Public Sphere

Recent waves of arrests of women offered one evidence on a growing (systemic) inclination to largely target women in Egypt.

Examples to the above include recent arrest of many young “TikTok Women” - all arrested in relation to the App were women, including one who was proven to have been raped- on charges of “infringing on Egyptian family values” as stated by the Egyptian Public Prosecutor office regarding the State’s role in the cyber sphere.¹

At the same time, three female members of the family of an inmate in Torah Prison were assaulted by several women before the eyes of the Egyptian security forces charged with guarding the Torah Prisons Area. This scene precisely brings back to mind events of 2005, when female “thugs” conducted mass physical and sexual attacks against female activists to disrupt a demonstration condemning constitutional amendments.²

The incident, known as the “Black Wednesday” of 2005, and which was condemned by the African Court for Human Rights³; marked the beginning of a series of attacks by non-state actors against women, which evolved into mass sexual assaults in 2006 during “Eid” festivals in downtown Cairo, 2008 & 2010 during celebrations of African Cup; in addition to Sexual violence and gang-rapes in the area surrounding Tahrir Square after January 2011, which reached the peak 2013-2014.⁴

The leniency with which non-state actors’ assaults against women were treated, gave green light to violate these women, whether by direct orders from the State or through colluding with societal violence in general, in addition to failure to convict the perpetrators, except some of them on 2014, on the day of the inauguration of the Egyptian President.⁵

However, the year 2018 witnessed a serious shift in State practices targeting of women for their opinions, as well as unprecedented expansion of gross violations being committed against such women during arrest, interrogation, detention, and trial. More than 77 women and girls were arrested because of their

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/ppo.gov.eg/>

² <https://ifex.org/egypt-sanaa-seif-abducted-outside-the-public-prosecutors-office/>

³ <https://eipr.org/en/press/2016/05/three-years-willful-disregard-egyptian-government-refuses-implement-ruling-african>

⁴ <http://nazra.org/en/node/229>

⁵ <https://www.nazra.org/2019/03/%D9%85%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%A4%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-1919-%D9%88-2019>

onions or activities, even though arrests were both illegal and unconstitutional, and were accompanied by severe violations.⁶

Amal Fathy, one of these women human rights defenders, was arrested for posting a video in which she complained of sexual harassment she was subjected to and expressed her anger against this widespread phenomenon and the state's poor performance in addressing it. Amal became the target of a widespread incitement campaign, with sought to portray her as a "woman of ill repute" and a someone who "receives foreign funding". She was interrogated as part of two separate cases; a criminal case in which she was sentenced to two-year imprisonment and a fine of EGP 10,000, and a Higher State Security case in which she was released under precautionary measures, after almost eight months of pretrial detention.⁷

In 2019, these practices became more severe and violent, with the arrest of at least 20 women and girls for participating in a demonstration to against State's negligence that resulted in the Ramses Station rail disaster, in which a train derailed and killed more than 20 people. During the period between 19 September and November 2019, more than 170 women and girls were arbitrarily arrested, and most of them were held in pretrial detention [on] Higher State Security cases, through which they have been victims of major violations. The list includes women rights activist Asmaa Dabees, human rights defenders Esraa Abdel Fattah Solafa Magdy; Mahinour El Masry, Marwa Arafa, Kholoud Said Amer , Shaimaa Samy and others all of whom were kidnapped and forcibly disappeared for various periods of time, while both Esraa and Solafa were beaten and tortured.⁸

Since the beginning of 2020 and the implementation of the Corona pandemic precautionary measures, all visits and communication with prisoners were banned, and only infrequent and irregular news about their conditions manage to make their way out. As for Solafa Magdy, the last contact made with her was four months ago, a period during which Marwa Arafa, Shima Samy, Lina Attalah and Nora Younis were also arrested.⁹

The Egyptian State is evidently trying to assert its control and use arbitrary precautionary measures to systematically target women, irrespective of social, political and class differences. The Egyptian State also allows assaults against women in the streets, and inside security-controlled zone such as prisons, in a message that some women deserve protection, and others do not. These tools worryingly contribute to the escalation of violations against women by both State and Non-State actors, without any legal or societal accountability frameworks.

Recent Events

1. Since 9 March 2020, all visits were prohibited in Egyptian prisons due to the COVID19 pandemic crisis. This prohibition did not include measures to allow communication between women human rights defenders held in Egyptian prisons with their families and relatives. Additionally, severe restrictions were imposed on the admission of medical items and food from outside world to prisoners, and restricting dates for such deliveries. **Solafa Magdy**, a journalist and woman human

⁶ <https://violencebehindbarseg.wordpress.com/>

⁷ <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/amal-fathy>

⁸ <https://www.ishr.ch/news/hrc44-egypt-release-solafa-magdy-esraa-abdelfattah-sanaa-seif-and-all-defenders-now>

⁹ <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/06/25/egyptian-authorities-arrest-journalist-nora-younis/>

rights defender, has been detained since November 2019. Solafa's mother appeared in a video complaining that she has not heard from her daughter for more than three months. Despite all calls on the Egyptian government, Solafa remains the only woman human rights defender who has not been heard from- raising concerns about her safety.

2. On 21 April 2020, **Marwa Arafa**, Egyptian translator and blogger, was arrested in her house and forcibly disappeared for almost 13 days before appearing as a suspect in Case no. 570/2020 Higher State Security. Since then, her detention has been renewed in absentia, there is no information about her situation or any communication with her family, and no food or medical material from the outside world were admitted to her.

On the same day, **Kholoud Saad Amer**, an Egyptian translator and researcher, was forcibly disappeared for almost a week before appearing in the State Security Prosecution office on April 28th as a suspect in Case no. 558/2020. Since then, Kholoud did not appear again, and here detention is being renewed in absentia, without presenting her to the Prosecutor.

3. On 17 May 2020, **Lina Atallah**, the Editor in Chief of the news website Mada Masr was arrested while conducting an interview during a sit-in by a mother of political prisoner in front of the Torah Prisons Complex demanding permission for a letter and medical materials to be admitted to her son, imprisoned activist Alaa Abdel Fattah. After being interrogated in Al Maadi Public Prosecution, Atallah was released on a bail of EGP 2,000 after being charged in Case no. 8009/2020, Maadi Misdemeanors Court.
4. On 20 May 2020, **Shimaa Sami**, an Egyptian journalist, was arrested from her house and forcibly disappeared for 10 days before appearing in State Security Prosecution on May 30th, after being charged in Case no. 535/2020.
5. On 18 June 2020, the North Cairo Court postponed its decision on the appeal submitted by **Moza Hassan**, a feminist activist and the Director of Nazra for Feminist Studies, against the decision to ban her from travel, in addition to the appeal submitted by Nazra for Feminist Studies itself against the freeze of its assets. This postponement comes after several other postponements since June 2019. Nazra, and its director Moza Hassan, have been systematically targeted since 2016, on the background of Case no. 173/2011, known in the media as the Foreign Funding Case, where Moza was banned from travel in June 2016 and her assets frozen, followed by Nazra's assets in January 2017.
6. On 22 June 2020, activist **Laila Soueif** and her two activist daughters Mona and Sanaa Seif were in front of the Torah Prison Complex demanding admission of medical items to their imprisoned prisoner of conscience brother, Alaa Abdel Fattah. They were also demanding a letter from him to check on his health. Prior to their departure, they were intercepted by a number of female "thugs" who assaulted and robbed them, in full sight of security personnel, resulting in Sanaa sustaining grievous injuries that were evident in her sister Mona's live broadcast on social networks, which sparked major controversy and accusations that the Egyptian State is behind the attacks.
7. On 23 July 2020, the three abovementioned activists headed to the office of the Public Prosecutor to file a report of the incident and demand that **Sanaa** be examined by the Forensic Medicine

Authority to evidence the injuries. While leaving the office, activist Sanaa was kidnapped in a microbus and later appeared in Public Prosecution, which ordered her detained for 15 days on back of interrogations, after releasing a statement that the activist was arrested in front of the Public Prosecutor's office under a previously issued arrest warrant.

8. On 24 June 2020, journalist and activist **Nora Younis**, Editor in Chief of *Al Manassa* website, was arrested after the website's office was raided by security personnel dressed in civilian clothes and who refused to present any search or arrest warrants. After being held for two nights in Al Maadi Police Precinct and interrogation in Al Maadi Public Prosecution, Younis was released on a bail of EGP 10,000 in Case no. 9455/2020, after being charged with, among other charges; of managing an internet account with the aim of using it to commit an internet crime. It is worth mentioning that Al Manassa website has been blocked in Egypt for three years.
9. On 21 April 2020, popular TikTok influencer **Hanin Hossam** was arrested on charges of "inciting debauchery" and "promoting human trafficking" through her TikTok videos. Later in May, another female TikTok star, **Mawada Eladhm**, was arrested on charges of "violating family principles and values in Egyptian society" through her TikTok posts and videos. Also, in late May, 17-year-old **Menna Abdel-Aziz** posted a video on TikTok showing a bruised face reporting that she had been gang raped by a group of young men, but arrested immediately after that for "promoting debauchery".
10. In July 2020, former American University of Cairo (AUC) student faced claims from over 100 women, mostly AUC graduates, through social media platforms: of rape and sexual assaults against them. The "Instagram storm" went viral to the extent it was referenced by many as the "New Wave" of #Me_Too. Several State bodies responded to the campaign: National Council of Women, Al-Azhar, the Church, Public Prosecution and American University of Cairo itself. The man has been arrested and is still in prison up to now. The case triggered many women to speak up on widespread of sexual violence in different institution's, including human rights organizations. Feminist activist are calling to ensure for accountability and protective policies inside organizations and institutions to combat violence against women.¹⁰

Way Forward

State and non-State actors must respond to end violence and sexual violence against women and all discriminatory practices. Among what can be done is the following:

- State must ensure immediate release of WHRDs and women activists from its jails -at least considering the current pandemic risks. ¹¹
- State must ensure immediate release of Tik Tok Women and stop targeting women on cyber space

¹⁰ <https://egyptianstreets.com/2020/07/07/accused-sexual-predator-ahmed-zakis-victims-include-a-child-egyptian-public-prosecution/>

¹¹ <https://nazra.org/en/2020/03/proposal-urgent-measures-concerning-egyptian-women-prisoners-light-covid-19-pandemic>

- Urgent legislative and procedural steps:
 - Devise a holistic legal framework based on clear definition of crimes against women including sexual violence crimes, wherever applicable in all Egypt's laws instruments; and which also simplifies litigation process(es) and provide protection to VAW survivors.¹²
 - Establish women-operated judges and police personnel specialized courts to investigate cases of violence against women while servicing all women in Egypt without discrimination.

- State, represented by the government and public administration must immediately review its current COVID19 response strategies and plans to ensure that public health services, response, treatment including hospitalization are offered without discrimination to women and girls across Egypt.¹³

- State must conduct rapid assessment and review prisons conditions, particularly those which host women in lack of hygiene requirements and overcrowding environment.¹⁴

- Promotion, adoption and use of internal Codes of Conducts in and within media organizations, unions, and corporates to combat violence and sexual violence against women and penalize perpetrators, now in the past, transparently and publicly.¹⁵

- Public and private institutions must embark on a serious and rapid review of their policies with view to eradicate potential of lenience or tolerance towards violence and sexual violence as well as discrimination against women.¹⁶

¹² <https://nazra.org/2018/05/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%80%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A5%D8%B4%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%82>

¹³ <http://nazra.org/node/539>

¹⁴ <https://nazra.org/2020/04/%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B5-%D8%A8%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A1>

¹⁵ <http://nazra.org/node/250>

¹⁶ <https://cu.edu.eg/userfiles/Anti-Harrass-Book-CU.pdf>
<http://nazra.org/node/616>