

Harassment free zone - A fight against sexual assaults in Egypt

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Why isn't anybody doing anything? Attempting to curb sexual harassment by targeting the harassers is very challenging in Egypt since the driving forces are complex and compounded. We need to focus on the bystander, says Eba'a El-Tamami.

I was tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, double parked and waiting in the car while my client and colleague stepped out to buy something on Tahrir Street. This trip back home to Cairo was work-related: I was shooting a TV commercial for my Dubai-based advertising agency and during breaks I was enjoying playing tour guide. I looked up to find a man standing around 8 metres away, staring at me directly and walking towards the car. As he walked towards me, he put his hand on his groin and pulled out his penis. At 7pm, on an incredibly busy street. I was stunned. Terrified.

He hovered, walking around in semi-circles for a good minute, getting a good view of me. I tried to honk the car horn but no sound was coming out. I frantically looked around. So many people. Why isn't anybody doing anything? How is he getting away with this? I decided to drive up ahead and park next to a family waiting for a bus in the hope that my location would deter him. A few seconds later, the back door flung open and my colleague said, "Hey, we're done! Why did you move so far ahead?"

I live in Cairo now. Post revolution I decided I wanted to move back to work in social marketing, to invest my expertise in issues I feel strongly about. While researching initiatives working to combat sexual harassment, I met with one of the founders of HarassMap, an independent, volunteer-based initiative whose mission is to stamp out the social acceptability of sexual harassment in Egypt. I now head their marketing and communications unit.

HarassMap works to convince people in society to respond to incidents of sexual harassment in the same way people respond to other public crimes. When a thief once approached me and my sister as we sat in a car in Cairo, our calls of Harami! (thief) were met by interventions by several passersby, including a group of men sitting on the pavement and a family taking a day trip in their car: "I'm sorry, I tried to block their way with my car but I was going to run them over. . ." said the father.

But why is it that in a society where communal ties are relatively strong, and where the average bystander will intervene in an incident of theft or will voluntarily squeeze into the middle of a crowd to break up a street fight, people remain silent or even place blame on the victim when they witness an act of sexual harassment?

Such double standards were not always the case. It was not so long ago that Egyptians were proud of the safety and dignity of their neighborhoods. Everyone remembers stories of bystanders standing

up to harassers, even chasing them and shaving their heads as a mark of shame.

There is little research and much speculation about the reasons that drive people to commit acts of sexual harassment. Harassment has been explained as an expression of moral turmoil and frustration due to factors such as poverty, deterioration of public education and transportation, the lack of moral education, increasing stress from overcrowding and pollution, as well as the hierarchical and authoritative nature of Egyptian society. Challenges to notions of patriarchy and the resulting 'crisis of masculinity' are sometimes highlighted as potential reasons for frustration and harassment, and rhetoric from religious fundamentalists and mass media is also blamed as promoting and condoning harassment, sexual objectification and discriminatory treatment of women. There are many other possible reasons, and the reality is that no single explanation holds the key.

Against this backdrop, attempting to curb sexual harassment by targeting the harassers is very challenging in Egypt, since the driving forces are complex and compounded which makes them hard to overcome. Instead, at HarassMap we focus on another target: the bystander.

Our work is aimed at changing society's perceptions of sexual harassment, harassers, and the victims of harassment, and changing bystanders' behavior by mobilizing them to intervene when they see it happen. By doing this, society itself can begin to re-establish consequences for harassment by shaming the harasser. We believe that making sexual harassment socially unacceptable - particularly in a society this tight-knit - acts as the greatest deterrent and will be pivotal in wiping out this epidemic that has become a blight on all of our lives.

We act through a combination of online and on the ground work. On the ground, our volunteers go into their own neighborhoods across Egypt and talk to people in the street about the seriousness of harassment in Egypt, dispel myths and stereotypes through facts and figures derived from research, and convince them to take action against harassment when they see it happen. Our 500+ trained volunteers talk to the "permanent fixtures" in the street in their own neighborhoods - bawabeen (doormen), shop keepers, kiosk owners - all of whom have a big impact on the culture of that street: they can decide to ignore or even participate in harassment incidents they witness, or they can put a stop to it.

Our online reporting system, where victims of and witnesses to harassment can tell us what happened and where - through an SMS short code, our website, email, Facebook or Twitter - works in tandem with this grass-roots presence by allowing volunteers to 'Harassment free zone' sticker demonstrate to people in their neighborhoods that sexual harassment does in fact happen in their very streets. When we're able to convince people of the problem we give them a sticker to place in their shop or kiosk to state that they are now a "harassment-free zone". If they do see harassment taking place, they pledge to intervene to stop it in order to protect their streets.

We're launching the "harassment-free zones" program on a much wider scale in 2013 to include more areas across Egypt, including restaurants, cafes, shops, kiosks, and even public transportation. We're also starting a program in schools, to address the shocking number of sexual harassment incidents that happen to children, or by children.

The bottom line is, we believe that the most powerful and sustainable way we can put an end to this epidemic of gender-based abuse is by standing up to it as a society. A society that proved not so long ago that the people themselves can create real change.

Eba'a El-Tamami

P.S.

* <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/eba'-el-tamami/harassment-free-zone>

* This article is republished here as part of 5050's series exploring themes to be discussed at the Nobel Women's Initiative conference Moving Beyond Militarism and War: Women-Driven Solutions for a Nonviolent World May 28-31, Belfast, Ireland. Jennifer Allsopp and Heather McRobie are reporting from Belfast. Read 50.50's full coverage of the conference