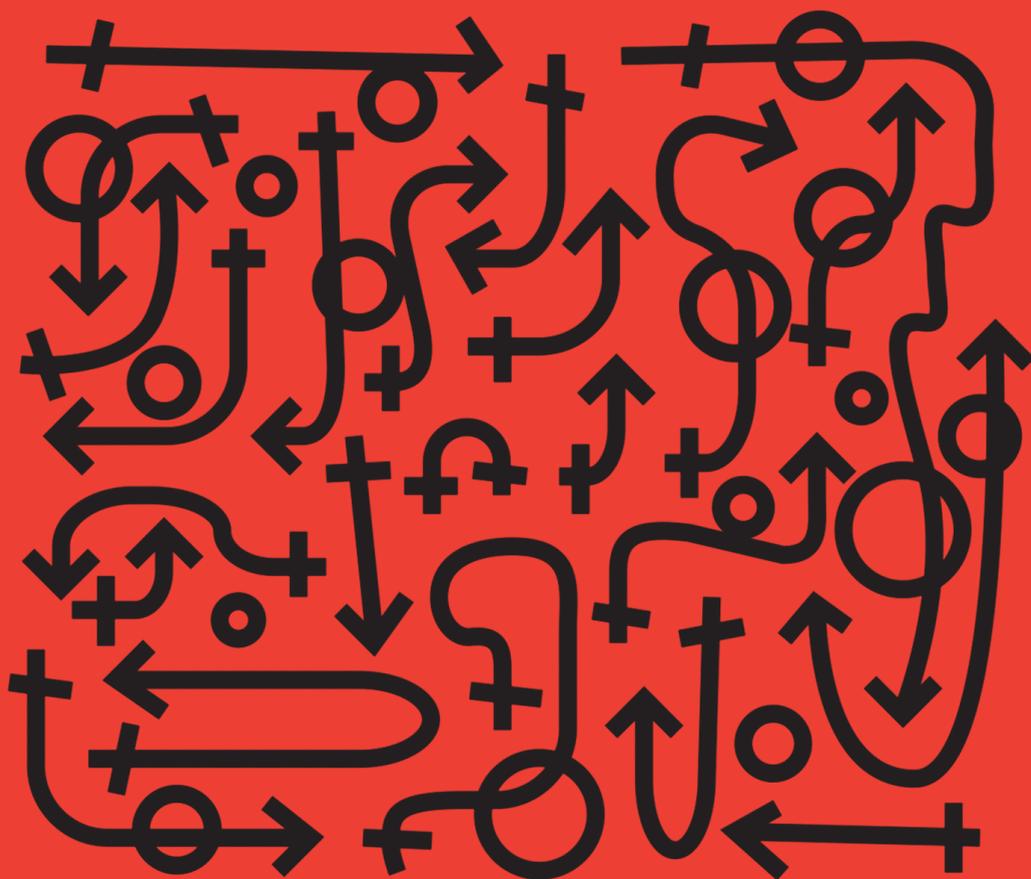


GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

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EGYPT

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN PUBLIC SPACES IN EGYPT: THE PARADIGM SHIFT IN USE OF TECHNOLOGY



Uprising of Women in the Arab World

Sally Zohney

<https://www.facebook.com/intifadat.almarza?fref=ts>

Introduction

Sexuality has been defined as being about “health, pleasure, bodies, violence, rights, identity and empowerment... about families, domestic space, intimate relations and public engagements...”¹ This definition carefully lays out the variables, the differences and layers that all together form our understanding of the term “sexuality”. In 1994, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development² included “sexual health” under the definition of “reproductive health” for the first time; which means that any dimensions of sexuality that go beyond reproductive rights were given less attention – not even defined by the international community. The past few decades have witnessed a growing change in understanding the rising dimensions of sexuality in relation to discrimination, HIV/AIDS, minority rights and especially gender-based violence.³ The Egyptian intellectual Salama Mussa (1887-1958) is considered to be among the pioneering Arabs in modern history – if not the first – to discuss sexuality as a matter of public concern. His groundbreaking efforts drew attention to the importance of integrating sexuality in the context of the national Egyptian culture. He even called for the education of youth on sexual health, relationships and behaviour through an open and scientific debate.⁴

This intellectual Arab Renaissance was coupled with a strong feminist movement actively engaged in public life. The segregation of women from public life and the political sphere was the main drive behind the movement, which sought to accomplish a stronger status for women and also to underline

major concerns regarding female sexuality. This context cannot exclude the historic writings of Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi who had nurtured a new wave of awareness on female sexuality in general and on female genital mutilation (FGM) specifically since 1960.⁵ Her book was the first to be written by an Egyptian woman exposing gender discrimination on the basis of sexuality in Egypt.

Until 2005 sexual harassment was not identified as a social problem in Egypt, although it had been addressed by several NGOs and women’s rights organisations. In the same year, female journalists were sexually assaulted by police and paid thugs in front of the Press Syndicate (or union), on a day known as “Black Wednesday”.⁶ While no clear definition of the term “sexual harassment” had yet been made, women in Egypt were subjected to numerous forms of sexual assault with little or no means of protection, prevention or tools to document the social phenomenon. Women’s ability to stand up to this harassment was minimal, and civil society organisations were single-handedly leading the way to address the issue without any official response. It was not until early 2000 that tangible change was felt on the ground to combat sexual violence.

This report focuses on the transformation in the approach to combating sexual violence and creating a public debate on the issue, using technology to provide protection and support for women. It discusses how technology changed the equation and introduced innovative tools to combat sexual violence in Egypt and raise public awareness.

Egypt’s ban on pornographic websites

In May 2015, the administrative court ordered Egypt’s prime minister to take immediate action to ban pornographic websites in Egypt. This came just two years after the same court decided not to ban them in another case.⁷ The argument behind the ban was

1 Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA). (2006). *Sexual Rights and Social Movements in India: Working Paper*. New Delhi: CREA.

2 www.unfpa.org/publications/international-conference-population-and-development-programme-action

3 World Health Organization. (2015). *Sexual Health, Human Rights and the Law*. apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/175556/1/9789241564984_eng.pdf?ua=1

4 Wahba, M., & Roudi-Fahimi, F. (2012). *The Need for Reproductive Health Education in Schools in Egypt*. www.prb.org/pdf12/reproductivehealth-education-egypt.pdf

5 El-Saadawi, N. (1972). *Women and Sex*.

6 Abdel Monem, A. (2015). Reconstructing Sexual Harassment in Egypt. *A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 1(1).

7 In 2013, under former president Mohammed Morsi, the administrative court ruled against enforcing a ban on pornography websites. The case arose after Egypt’s former prosecutor general Abdel-Meguid Mahmoud submitted an official decree ordering Egypt’s Ministry of Telecommunications and Ministry of Interior to ban pornographic websites based on a 2009 case.

one citing the spread of “immorality among children and youth”.⁸ Earlier in 2009, under ousted President Mubarak, the court issued the first verdict to ban pornography online, but it was never applied. Under the short-term Islamist regime of Mursi in 2013, the prosecutor general at the time ordered the implementation of the 2009 court order to ban pornography websites, but this was also not carried out.⁹

It is interesting to note that the official reasons behind the ban were mainly about the social impact of pornography, particularly on the youth. Will the recent ban on pornographic content – if implemented – have a positive impact on the youth? Are there alternative online platforms challenging the mainstream sexual content on pornographic websites? And mostly, how are pornographic websites linked to the alarming rates of sexual violence in Egypt?

In 2014, Egypt’s penal code witnessed a historic amendment criminalising “sexual harassment” for the first time in Egypt, under article 306 (a). The definition is specifically important as it includes social media and the use of wireless communication as one of the mediums that can be used in sexual harassment.

The Egyptian authorities still have a long way to go to create an institutional structure that can provide immediate support and protection for women who suffer sexual violence, especially when it comes to technology-related violence against women. Yet the inclusion of social media and wireless communications in the legal amendment is a serious acknowledgment of the severity of the problem and the need to understand and properly address how information and communications technologies (ICTs) are used as means of sexual violence against women.

Pornographic content from a gender perspective: What do women in Egypt know of unwanted sex?

Ideas about sex and sexuality, many of them competing with each other, proliferate on the internet: everyone “Googles” everything. A young boy learns about sexual pleasure by watching commercialised pornographic videos teaching him how to be “pleased” by inferior, submissive female bodies. Young girls (or sometimes even women) are unluckier; they learn that male pleasure is directly

equivalent to personal pleasure. Submission and consent to violence are embedded in online pornographic content. Added to this are the lack of knowledge and access to proper educational and informative resources in mainstream conservative upbringing in Egypt. The question is, what do women of tomorrow know of unwanted sex? What does technology offer women when it comes to protection from violent pornographic content?

The impact of mainstream pornographic content on sexual relations is alarming – especially when it comes to a lack of proper online protection and offline support services for women and girls. Domestic violence is endemic: nearly half of married women aged between 15 and 49 reported that they had been hit, slapped, kicked, or subjected to some other form of physical violence at some point after they were married, according to the 2005 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey.¹⁰ The repercussions of violent pornographic content directly affect young people’s behaviour and understanding of sexual pleasure. Violent pornographic content mirrors an incomplete, gender-blind version of sexual pleasure, and affects both men’s and women’s understanding of sexual relationships and healthy, intimate partner behaviour. In my country, it is very rare to find women-to-women conversations objecting to or analysing online pornographic content, as a way of understanding their own situations, and as a way of understanding the impact of technology on their lives. You seldom, if ever, hear of a mother who discusses sexuality or sexual pleasure in an informed and open way with her daughters, aside from how her daughter can protect her virginity. For school students, sexual and reproductive health is addressed in science classes in a very limited way, and it is very common for students to skip these classes out of embarrassment.¹¹ According to the research conducted by the Population Research Bureau (PRB),¹² the 10th grade boys interviewed had no knowledge of puberty before its onset, and most female students from urban backgrounds referred to their mothers as the main source of sexual information, while surprisingly, girls in Upper Egypt depended on books and teachers for information. An interesting conclusion from the survey is that young girls wanted information that goes beyond reproductive issues; they wanted to know about their bodies and sexuality, the kind of information they did not know how to find.

8 Ahrām Online. (2015, 20 May). Egypt’s court orders ban on porn websites. Ahrām Online. english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/130768/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt%E2%80%99s-court-orders-ban-on-porn-websites.aspx

9 Egyptian Streets. (2015, 20 May). Egypt Court Bans Pornography. *Egyptian Streets*. egyptianstreets.com/2015/05/20/egypt-court-bans-pornography

10 www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR176/FR176.pdf

11 El-Zahraa Geel, F. (2012). Quality sexual education needed for adolescents in Egyptian schools. Population Research Bureau (PRB).

12 Ibid.

The feminist writer Naomi Wolf provided an important reflection on how technology changed the landscape of sexual education forever, describing this generation, born in the 1970s and 1980s, as “the last generation to experience that sense of sexual confidence and security in what we had to offer.”¹³ The notions of “sexual confidence”, “sexual consent”, and “pleasurable acts” are crucial and interlinked – and these can be used to analyse the impact that pornographic content has on personal relationships, as well as the understanding of sexuality among men and women.

The information found on *Maalouma*,¹⁴ Egypt’s first website to provide information on reproductive rights and sexuality, as well as online services for the youth, is important in understanding how technology has been used as a tool to provide alternative platforms for sexual education. *Maalouma* publishes articles, provides private counselling services through SMS, and offers e-learning modules and infographic material, amongst other web content on sexuality. According to its first annual report (in 2013), an article entitled “10 benefits of the female sexual orgasm” was listed as the third most viewed, with a total of 34,828 views, with an article on male masturbation receiving a similar number of page views. When it came to the SMS service, aggregators indicated that menstruation followed by intermarital sexual relationships were the top-ranking topics, while female virginity came last.¹⁵ According to these results, it is clear what kinds of information on sexuality are important to Egyptian youth; what matters is no longer keeping your virginity, but female sexual pleasure. This shows that society no longer dictates what kind of information is important to the youth, and the kind of information that should be online. *Maalouma* has successfully developed a model for using technology to address sexuality in an interactive way, listening to the needs of the youth and the kind of content on sexuality they require, and responding to these needs.

The evolution: Speaking up against sexual violence

Sexual violence is a growing threat to the everyday life of Egyptian women and girls, ranging from diverse forms of sexual harassment, to sexual assaults and even rape and mob attacks, a number of them occurring on national holidays, and, as suggested, during large demonstrations. In 2006, during the Eid holidays, a group of male teenagers sexually assaulted a group of young women in front of a cinema in downtown Cairo.¹⁶ Although mass media covered the event, the Egyptian Ministry of Interior issued a statement denying the event and declaring it a rumour.

Two years later, a woman called Noha Roushdy spoke up and decided to open a case against a man who physically harassed her in an upper class neighbourhood of Cairo. After a strong legal battle, she won her case and he was sentenced to three years in prison and received a EGP 5,000 (USD 640) fine. Noha became the first Egyptian to open a sexual harassment case (although legally, sexual harassment was not defined as a crime at this time). Again, despite this, the state did little to address the issue or even support Noha in her pursuit of justice. Also in 2008, sexual assaults involving large groups of men took place. In one instance 150 young men aged 15 to 22 gathered in Gamet el-Dewal¹⁷ on the Eid holiday, attacking women and tearing off their clothes in public. According to articles published in the media, the police arrested 38 of the attackers – only three were detained and the rest were released with no charges.

Another heartbreaking sexual harassment story that was reported on in the media concerned a 14-year-old girl called Heba who was attacked on her way back from school. She managed to escape her harasser after he cornered her and sexually assaulted her. She was able to injure him and run away. After this, the harasser escalated the situation and decided to come back for his “prey”. The second time he used another girl to lure her and kidnapped Heba. She was locked for three days in a room and beaten and assaulted, before she escaped. Her attacker was arrested later on, but it is unclear whether or not he was imprisoned.¹⁸

13 Women’s Weekly. (2015, 11 June). Lost innocence: Why girls are having rough sex at 12. *Women’s Weekly*. www.aww.com.au/latest-news/in-the-mag/lost-innocence-why-girls-are-having-rough-sex-at-12-20831

14 www.ma3looma.net; Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/ma3looma.net/info/?tab=page_info; YouTube: www.youtube.com/Ma3looma; Ask FM: ask.fm/Ma3looma

15 *Malouma Annual Report*, December 2013 (internal document provided by *Maalouma* national coordinator in Egypt Sarah El-Demerdash).

16 Eid is a national three-day holiday on the Muslim calendar that follows the holy month of Ramadan. In Egypt, families and the youth dress up, go to movies, have open-air picnics and take Nile cruises.

17 Gamet el-Dewal Al-Arabeya in Mohandessin, Cairo is famous as a meeting point for the youth, especially young men who go there to dine out, hang around the streets and also hire prostitutes.

18 Note that the sources of the news included are from the Masry el-youm and Sherouk newspapers’ special file 7/2/2013.

Although it seems obvious that most of the documented cases of sexual violence clearly identify the harasser or abuser, very little state action was taken to investigate the cases or protect the women. Although sexual harassment is criminalised under the 2014 Penal Code, several forms of sexual violence are not a crime on the statute books, such as rape with sharp objects, psychological abuse, domestic violence or marital rape.

Countless analyses and reports were produced on the use of technology and social media in Egypt and Tunisia as political tools throughout the revolution. It was often described as “digital revolution”, in some cases to highlight the strong contribution these platforms made to political change. Technology is making a similar contribution in combating sexual violence against women, especially in a context of minimal state intervention protecting women.

In 2011, 22-year-old Dina Emad was assaulted by a man on a motorcycle in front of Cairo’s biggest shopping mall. She was able to apprehend him with the help of bystanders and he was charged at the police station. Her “tweets” on Twitter sparked strong support from young men and women; she was featured in a number of media interviews and articles, and portrayed as a positive role model for young women.¹⁹ Shortly after this, Christine Leon, a student at the American University of Cairo, stood up against a contract worker who sexually harassed her on campus and reported him as well. He was later fired by his company and ordered off the campus. Christine also tweeted her story and the media dubbed her the “second heroine” fighting against sexual harassment.²⁰ Christine herself said she was inspired and motivated by what Dina did and felt she could do it herself. In both cases, young women were not only able to report and speak up against sexual assault using technology, but also provide immediate updates on their physical and emotional well-being: media coverage acted as a reaction to this social media frontline news. Youth were leading the agenda in addressing sexual violence, women were providing an informal network of support, and hashtags were created to document cases. And again, the state was silent – perhaps also not approving of its diminished role in the prevention of sexual violence.

Another important milestone was the groundbreaking hashtag campaign in 2012: “EndSH” or “End Sexual Harassment”. This was an online call

for action created by a number of women’s rights advocates to raise awareness and public dialogue on sexual harassment in Egypt using Twitter and Facebook. Little did they know that this hashtag campaign would gain momentum across Egypt in just a few days; women were courageously taking over virtual platforms and sharing shocking stories, accounts of bravery, and creating instant support networks. Women and even men worldwide were sharing testimonials and stories and voicing their stand against sexual harassment. An online dialogue on the topic was created involving NGOs, public figures, human rights advocates and everyday internet users, thanks to the power of social media. In a few days, #EndSH was a top-ranking Twitter hashtag worldwide.

In March 2014, a female student at Cairo University was sexually assaulted by male students. The new element in the story is that her attack was recorded on several phones and became an online story the same day.²¹ The video showed the attack clearly, and how security guards were unable to ensure her safe exit from where she was hiding. The University dean later blamed the student for her “indecent” clothing. Women’s rights advocates and social commentators harshly criticised the statement made by the dean. Facebook and Twitter were again the scenes of the public debate that ensued, and eventually pushed the dean to change his position and launch an investigation into the incident.

That incident opened the door to historic change: a few months later civil society organisations were behind groundbreaking amendments to the student code of conduct, making Cairo University the first public educational institution to issue a code of conduct forbidding sexual harassment on campus, and setting up an official investigation committee to deal with the crime.

Using digital technology to combat mob sexual assault

Mob attacks involving sexual assault have become a new form of sexual violence in Egypt, first targeting activists and female journalists in the 2005 demonstrations against the Mubarak regime. The first widely covered case of mob assaults was one involving Lara Logan,²² a female reporter from the United States who was covering demonstrations in

19 Lilian Dawoud, talk show host, and Dina Emad, guest. El-Soura Al-Kamelah (The Full Picture), ON TV, 28 June 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1jNurQKUhU>

20 Online story of Christine Leon, El-Masry El-Youm, 20 July 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TC8Y6tZ-5k>

21 Mada Masr. (2014, 18 March). Victim blamed for sexual assault at Cairo University. *MadaMasr*. www.madamasr.com/ar/node/2410

22 Moisse, K. (2011, 2 May). CBS Reporter Lara Logan Opens Up About Tahrir Square Attack. *ABC News*. abcnews.go.com/Health/MindMoodNews/cbs-reporter-lara-logan-opens-tahrir-square-assault/story?id=13492964

Tahrir Square on the night Mubarak stepped down. According to the NGO Nazra for Feminist Studies, there were at least 500 survivors of mob attacks involving sexual assault between February 2011 and January 2014.²³ And according to an International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) report there were over 250 documented cases of mob sexual assaults during the period November 2012 to July 2013 – these were all incidents of women being targeted by men and boys, many carrying weapons.²⁴ On the day Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's presidential victory was announced on 3 June 2014, and on the night of his inauguration ceremony on 8 June, at least nine women were violently assaulted sexually.²⁵ Not only were individual women attacked and threatened to prevent them from playing an active public role, but women-led marches and calls for action came under similar violent threats.

My personal testimony as one of the organisers of the 2011 International Women's Day (IWD) peaceful stand in Tahrir Square in celebration of the international event – also coinciding with the rise of women's engagement in political life during the revolution – is that the day ended dramatically. Groups of men started insulting and verbally harassing female demonstrators, who were few in number and with limited protection around them. Assaults escalated into physical attacks that forced us as organisers to call an end to the demonstration by early afternoon, fearing for the personal safety of the women around us. Several lessons were drawn from the experience. In 2012 the IWD march was much more prepared. There were a greater number of protestors, outreach ahead of the demonstration, and also media and online coverage of the event. Twitter and Facebook served as tools to document the demonstration, and were trusted to report attacks, including from undercover state security personnel. Demonstrators would share photos of suspicious men as a way of sending out an alarm to other women, and soon enough these

men would be forced to leave the march. The presence of livestream media and coverage of the march provided instant safety to female demonstrators who knew that thousands were able to know exactly what was happening on the ground. A sense of immediate protection was given using modern technology.

Mob attacks involving sexual assault are a horrific nightmare, not only for the survivors, but for women's rights advocates on the ground. In November 2012 an independent initiative was formed by women rights advocates and feminists called Opatish ("Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment"). It has contributed the most to documenting mob attacks, and offering immediate intervention to rescue women from mob assaults, all of which have occurred in Tahrir Square. Formed by a diverse group of individuals with strong knowledge on sexual violence, it rallied NGOs to provide legal, psychological, media and other support to survivors. Male and female volunteers got together and divided themselves into teams. Each team dealt with different needs, such as intervention, safety kits, on-the-ground awareness raising, the operation room and a safe house.²⁶ Other volunteer-based initiatives offered support, such as the Tahrir Bodyguards, *Shoft Taharosh* (I Saw Harassment) and the Imprint Movement.²⁷

What is innovative about a group like Opatish is not only its flexibility, allowing diverse types of support to be offered and linking these together, as well as its capacity to count on volunteers' efforts, attracting hundreds of male as well as female supporters and advocates, but its use of digital technology to combat sexual assaults. Volunteers on the ground were tweeting observations using the hashtag #Opatish or passing on the details of the Twitter account, while a dedicated team was documenting and compiling data from the tweets so that the intervention groups could act. Social media platforms were used to liaise with the other intervention groups (such as Imprint and the Tahrir Bodyguards) who would help provide assistance. At the end of each day a total count of the mob attacks was made indicating the number of women rescued and hospitalised, and the status of their cases. These reports are considered to be the only documentation available on these types of mob attacks

23 Nazra for Feminist Studies. (2014, 9 June). The Mob-sexual Assaults and Gang Rapes in Tahrir Square During the Celebrations of the Inauguration of the New Egyptian President is Sufficient Proof for the Inefficiency of the Recent Legal Amendments to Combat these Crimes. Joint statement. nazra.org/en/2014/06/mob-sexual-assaults-and-gang-rapes-tahrir-square-during-celebrations-inauguration-new

24 FIDH et al. (2014). *Egypt: Keeping Women Out – Sexual Violence Against Women in the Public Sphere*. https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_women_final_english.pdf

25 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. (2014, 9 June). At Least 9 Cases of Mob-Sexual Assault and Gang Rapes with Sharp Objects and Fingers this Week. eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2014/06/09/2144; Marroushi, N. (2014, 16 July). Tahrir sexual assault survivors recount their ordeals. *Mada Masr*. www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/tahrir-sexual-assault-survivors-recount-their-ordeals

26 Marroushi, N. (2015). Violence Against Women in Egypt: Prospects for Improving Police Response. *Saferworld*. www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/904-violence-against-women-in-egypt-prospects-for-improving-police-response

27 <https://www.facebook.com/opatish?fref=ts>

in Egypt, offering a serious data set for research, investigation and reporting.

It was not until one video of a violent mob assault was recorded through a personal phone camera and streamed online, causing national and international fury, that President Sisi ordered an intensive investigation into the issue of sexual violence in public spaces in Egypt. He himself visited a survivor at her hospital bed. Shortly after this, Egypt's first department dealing with violence against women was created under the Ministry of Interior, and the first amendment to the penal code criminalising sexual harassment was approved.

Needless to say, these battles were won mainly due to the resilient efforts and long roads feminist and women's rights organisations have travelled throughout the years, either at the policy level or in creating grassroots awareness. Yet it cannot be denied that the leap made by recent generations using digital technology through tools like HarassMap²⁸ to report cases, encourage women to speak up, rally volunteers, create a social buzz, or attend to more violent cases that required immediate interventions through Opantish and other groups, played a radical part.

Action steps: What can we learn from this?

In a world driven by technology in every respect, securing the sexual rights of women is no exception. Simply banning pornographic content without providing alternatives is not guaranteed to combat

sexual violence or raise generations able to identify their sexual needs. Egyptian authorities need to take seriously the impact pornographic content has on the understanding of the youth when it comes to sexuality, providing alternative platforms for information and encouraging schools to do the same.

Although technology has had a serious negative impact on respecting women's sexual rights and silencing women's voices, it has been adapted to serve as a tool for information, support, protection and reporting in Egypt. Several initiatives have successfully demonstrated best practice in this field. However, these volunteer efforts are not enough to provide a comprehensive understanding of sexual violations against women, and to offer sustainable protection for women. The efforts of HarassMap and Maalouma are still limited in scope, and do not provide national data or reach women in marginalised communities. This weakens the representativeness of their findings on sexual violence.

Women in Egypt have a desperate need to understand their sexual needs separately from men's needs, so they can reclaim their bodies and differentiate between consensual acts and unwanted sex. Until then, countless cases of domestic abuse and violent sexual assaults will continue to exist. Without any intervention, another wave of sexual violence against women will wash away any rights that have been reclaimed.

28 harassmap.org/en

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

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