



CAIRO INSTITUTE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS STUDIES
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مركز القاهرة لدراسات حقوق الإنسان



Targeting Women: Severe Human Rights Violations against Women in Egypt

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) and female political activists have faced gender-based violations ever since the rule of former president Hosni Mubarak. The practice of targeting WHRDs with gender-based violence, including sexuality baiting, sexual harassment and assault, and threats of rape, among others, continued during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which lasted from February, 11, 2011 to June, 30, 2012.

Egyptian and international human rights groups [documented](#) the escalation of violence against WHRDs during the rule of the SCAF, the height of this escalation being the notorious case of “Tahrir Girl” who was stripped to her bra on the streets of Cairo by military soldiers on the day of dispersing the Cabinet sit-in, in December 2011. Another striking example of the severe human rights violations against WHRDs is the case of the 7 women protestors who were submitted to virginity tests allegedly by doctors from the military. The perpetrators behind these tests have not as of yet been held accountable, despite these tests amounting to rape and torture under international law.

The violence against WHRDs during their participation in demonstrations reached unprecedented levels of brutality. Nazra [documented](#) three cases of violent sexual assault, one of which reaching the level of rape using fingers, during a demonstration on June 8, 2012 protesting the sexual harassment of women who participated in a demonstration on June 2, 2012. Cases of gang rape were also reported towards the end of November in Tahrir Square and its vicinity. In a testimony published by [Nazra](#) of a survivor of group sexual assault and gang rape that took place in the vicinity of Tahrir Square, the victim indicated she had been stripped of her clothes and finger-raped.

With the coming to power of the Egyptian president, Dr. Mohamed Morsi, on 30 June 2012, hopes that the targeting of WHRDs would cease did not materialize. The attacks¹ that took place against female protests on December 5, 2012 in the vicinity of the presidential *Ittihadiyya* Palace brought to mind the orchestrated attacks against WHRDs on 25 May 2005, dubbed ‘Black Wednesday’. Black Wednesday took place in the context of a national referendum on amending constitutional articles when ‘thugs’ belonging to the, now dissolved, National Democratic Party were deployed to beat protesters, with the help of police forces, in front of the Press Syndicate, and sexually assaulted female protesters and journalists.. A similar targeting of WHRDs took place during the protests in the vicinity of Ittihadiyya Palace; Ola Shahba, a woman present at the protests, recounted, in a talk show, the way in which she was attacked and dragged through the streets by supporters of the president.

¹ The President, his Group, and the Government Must Cease their Policy of Targeting Female Activists and Excluding Women from the Public Sphere, Joint Statement, 12 December, 2012, available at <http://www.nazra.org/en/node/177>

The statements of government officials following these violations are far from complying with international standards and on the contrary indicate a trend of impunity for perpetrators: the Egyptian government, by not investigating seriously these attacks and by not prosecuting the culprits does not uphold its responsibility to protect its citizens and to guarantee their right of peaceful assembly. On December 4, 2012, Prime Minister Dr. Hisham Kandil stated that protesters at Ittihadiyya Palace are responsible for “protecting themselves”. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies has extensively documented violations happening at the vicinity of the Palace and evidence of torture and ill treatment was found: however, perpetrators remain untroubled in the events that claimed the lives of at least 11 protestors and the injury of hundreds more.²

Since the beginning of the demonstrations marking the second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution on January 25 2013, 19 cases of gang rape were reported, two cases of which were raped with a sharp rod. The testimonies gathered by Nazra and other Egyptian human rights groups indicate that the rapes were organized, with the use of the same tactics nearly in every instance, to isolate and attack the protesters and the presence of unidentified groups that consider protests and demonstrations as opportunities to violently attack women protesters. These attacks seem to be designed to scare and shame women into avoiding demonstrations, thus preventing them from practicing their democratic right to participate in the transitional democratic process Egypt is undergoing.

The severe and brutal turn that the violations against WHRDs has been taking under the rule of president Morsi has gone completely unpunished and no serious investigation whatsoever has been undertaken. No government official addressed the escalation of violence against WHRDs. On the contrary, Prime Minister Kandil continues to assert that it is the responsibility of protesters to secure the peaceful nature of demonstrations, in complete disregard of Egypt’s responsibility to maintain the safety of protesters and to protect the right to peaceful assembly under international law. While activists state they do not possess enough evidence to clearly identify which political group, if any, is behind those attacks, it is nonetheless the State of Egypt’s responsibility to ensure that perpetrators of these violations are arrested and prosecuted and that reparation is granted to survivors of gender based violence.

On February 11, 2013, the Human Rights Committee of the Egyptian Shura Council, the upper house of parliament currently endowed with legislative powers, held a meeting to discuss the sexual assaults and rape that took place in Tahrir Square and its vicinity. Members of the Committee "mostly from the political islamic majority of the committee" blamed the women for the sexual attacks, wondering how it is that the women can call for protection when they have not taken "precautionary measures" to ward off the possibility of sexual attacks.

The tendency of the Egyptian authorities to call on protesters to protect themselves is manifested plainly in this case, with a member of the Committee calling on political faction to halt the call for demonstrations if they cannot protect the demonstrators.

This lack of will to protect, promote and fulfill women's human rights in Egypt and to guarantee survivors access to justice and due process follow a legacy left by former dictator Hosni Mubarak and by the SCAF. The failure to investigate and prosecute those responsible for violations committed against WHRDs during the rule of the SCAF signaled the continuation of the state of

² CIHRS, 'Al Ettahedya' Presidential Palace clashes in Cairo, 5-6 December 2012

impunity in the future, president Morsi appointing Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, former minister of defense and head of the SCAF, and Lieutenant General Sami Anan, former Chief of Staff of Egypt's military presidential advisers, and medalling them with high honours.

Finally, the recent constitutional developments also indicate a worrying pattern of continued discrimination against women; the newly adopted Egyptian Constitution has failed to provide necessary guarantees that would ensure equality for women in the exercise of public freedoms and their political participation. Additionally, the draft which was submitted to referendum in December 2012, no longer listed gender as one of the grounds for prohibiting discrimination by public institutions.

Accordingly, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) and Nazra for Feminist Studies would like to make the following recommendations to the Egyptian government and the international community:

- Call on the Egyptian authorities to end the state of impunity enjoyed by those responsible for violations committed against WHRDs by conducting impartial and independent investigations in all cases of human rights violations committed by the army and the police as well as other actors. By clearly indicating that Egyptian authorities do not tolerate grave violations against WHRDs, the practice of targeting WHRDs by state and non-state actors, so far assured of the existence of a state of impunity, would cease;
- Call on the Egyptian authorities to take it upon themselves to maintain the safety of peaceful protests, and refrain from announcements that place the burden of such a responsibility on the protesters. The complete absence of any state presence during demonstrations led civilians to take it upon themselves to deal with gang rapes through popular initiatives such as Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment. While a laudable effort, the responsibility of maintain the safety of peaceful assemblies should not fall on untrained protesters;
- Call on the Egyptian authorities to train law enforcement officials on international human rights standards relating to the maintenance of the security of peaceful assemblies, contained in the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials;
- Call on the international community to push the Egyptian authorities to initiate an evaluation of the protection needs of WHRDs, who must be primarily involved in this process;
- Call on the international community to push the Egyptian authorities to respond to the communications sent from the offices of the following Special Rapporteurs in January 2012 concerning violations committed against WHRDs in November and December 2011: Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, and the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice.³

³ Refer to communications sent by the offices of Special Procedures to the Egyptian government with regards to complaints submitted by Nazra for Feminist Studies concerning violations committed against WHRDs in November and December, 2011, AL G/SO 214 (67-17) Assembly & Association (2010-1) G/SO 214 (107-9) G/SO 214 (89-15) EGY 2/2012, 19 January 2012.