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## Sexual Violence and its Resistance in Post-revolutionary Egypt: at the intersection between authoritarianism and patriarchy

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### Abstract

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This article argues that sexual violence in the context of post-revolutionary Egypt should be understood as a complex contextual political technique that lays different claims on the subject. This results in complex modalities of resistance that aim to oppose patriarchal structures as well as authoritarian structures. Post-revolutionary regime(s) have been appropriating and policing certain notions of masculinities and femininities, illustrating how authoritarian power structures intersect with patriarchal power structures. Different revolutionary strategies included a political intersectional approach by explicitly underlining the complicity of the regime in events of sexual violence. However, this political intersectional framework was absent in different reports or enactments of solidarity from the West, clinging onto gender as the sole perspective when discussing sexual violence. Isolating these collectives from the authoritarian context they were constituted by, risks re-articulating and re-affirming other oppressive authoritarian discourses.

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## Introduction

Different observers and commentators have perceived women's agency during the Egyptian revolution, as well as after the Eighteen days of the Revolution, as a result of presupposed feminist desires. However, such a paradigm isolates women's agency and resistance from the political context it was constituted by (el Said et al., 2015: 9). This article examines sexual violence as a complex contextual political technique having different claims on the subject, resulting in complex modalities of resistance that aim to oppose not only patriarchal structures but opposing authoritarian structures as well. Therefore, to get a profound understanding of the use of sexual violence and its resistance in post-revolutionary Egypt, this work includes the concept of political intersectionality as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw distinguishes 'political intersectionality' from 'structural intersectionality', in which the former refers to how inequalities and their intersection are integral in understanding political strategies (Crenshaw, 1991). Although the concept of intersectionality initially is used to discuss inequalities and their intersections specific to social constructs such as gender, race, class and sexuality. This article uses the concept of political intersectionality to examine how inequalities and their intersection, as the result of patriarchal and authoritarian structures in post-revolutionary Egypt, are manifested in the events of sexual violence and its resistance. As the debate regarding sexual violence against women in this context was situated within two (sometimes) conflicting political agendas. That is, the agenda of those opposing authoritarianism and those whom remain silent on the atrocities regarding sexual violence out of fear for the 'reputation of the revolution' (El Nadeem, Nazra and New Woman Foundation, 2013: 47). In addition to international organizations and feminist collectives that aim to resist the patriarchal system by demanding more state security presence on the streets, without acknowledging the violence inherent therein (Grove, 2015: 360).

As mentioned by Crenshaw (1991) this need to split one's political energy between two

sometimes composing groups, is an aspect of intersectional disempowerment that is seldom confronted. With the result that the parameters of the revolutionary strategies were not always inclusionary of the experience of Egyptian women. In some cases, such as the demonstrations during International Women's day on 8 March 2011, women protesting were harassed and accused of taking away attention from the main issues of the Revolution (Al Ali, 2012: 29). Whereas certain strategies regarding preventing sexual violence sometimes overlooked the complicity of the regime. For example, UN-recognized feminist campaigns in Egypt that reject class-conscious movements for social change and focused on cultural explanations for sexual violence. The solution suggested by such organizations often included an intensification of policing on the street. Resulting in "securitized and militarized appropriations of international gender and security interventions" (Amar, 2013: 204). As well as the Human Rights Watch report on sexual harassment in Egypt which failed to locate the role of the state itself in these attacks, while suggesting an increase of law enforcement to protect the victims (HRW report, 2013). In addition to the annual report of HarassMapp (2010-2012) which did on one hand acknowledge that in some cases sexual violence offences were committed by the Egyptian security forces. Yet, on the other hand criticized the same forces for lack of presence or lack of willingness to intervene (Grove, 2015: 352).

The most troubling consequence of such intersecting discourses is that one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other (Crenshaw, 1991: 1252). In the case of Egypt, this led to reproducing and reinforcing patriarchal discourses by revolutionary groups who excluded gender issues. In addition to certain feminist collectives and international organizations reproducing and reinforcing authoritarian discourses by overlooking the regime's complicitness. Despite this being problematic on its own, both sides undermined their own agenda in the long term, for as the (authoritarian) state works through and with patriarchy.

The first section of this article examines how the concept of the state is gendered and it is in the interest of post-colonial states to uphold patriarchal gender norms. Illustrating that gender issues are extremely politicized thus making it the perfect means of social control for regimes. This will be followed by an analysis on the use of sexual violence as systematic state policy in the 2011 Revolution and prior to it, concomitant with the authoritarian patriarchal logic the Egyptian regime has generated and exploited. Thirdly, forms of resistance that emerged in post-revolutionary Egypt will be exemplified, challenging and subverting the patriarchal gendered logic of the regime. Followed by the last section, where I will argue that integrating the concept of political intersectionality is necessity in feminist scholarship to avoid a one-dimensional analysis of events, that is at the risk of re-articulating oppressive (authoritarian) discourses.

### State power and patriarchy

Different feminist scholars have underlined how and why state power works through and with patriarchy. According to Raewyn Connell (1990) the state is the central institutionalization of gendered power, referring to the idea that the state is the main organizer of gender relations through its scale and coherence. Thus the state defines, through its laws and administrative arrangements, the boundaries for what is legal and what is considered illegal (Connell, 1990: 520). As discussed by Nira Yuval-Davis (1980) it is in the interest of the state to uphold patriarchal gender norms. States are ideally in accordance with the 'nation', referring to the constructed collectivity that legitimizes political control over a certain territory. The idea of the nation, therefore needs to be constantly re-constructed and if not, it ceases to exist and with it the legitimization of political control. For women this has implications, as they become the so-called 'bearers of the nation' (Yuval-Davis, 1980). Referring to the idea that what comes out of the womb of the women of the nation, *is* the nation of future. Therefore, these (newborn) members need to be in line with what is perceived as the 'nation' otherwise they undermine its existence. Especially when being born into a nation is perceived as the only way to

become a full member, the interest of the constructed collective is prioritized over women's (reproductive) rights (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 22). In addition to this, women are perceived to have a 'cultural role'. "Women are often constructed as the cultural symbols of the collectivity, of its boundaries, as carriers of its honour and its intergenerational reproducers of cultures" (Yuval Davis, 1997: 67). This especially true for states, such as Egypt, who have been colonized. As the colonial project was embedded in a discourse centred around the assumption that women in non-Western societies were oppressed creatures waiting to be liberated by Western 'civilization' from the inherent oppressive Islam (Etienne and Leacock, 1980: 1). In other words, it was believed that colonisation was 'justified' for it aimed to improve the women's position by abandoning her native culture in favour of the customs and beliefs of the European culture (Ahmed, 1992: 129). However, as well as European thinkers justifying the colonization through such discourse, Egyptian thinkers, such as Qasim Amin, re-articulated the notion of inferiority of the native and the superiority of the European. By stating that the Egyptian society had to conform along the lines of Western society and therefore questioned the veil or the seclusion between men and women (Ahmed, 1992: 161- 162).

The consequences of such colonial discourse are still visible today. That is, the colonial discourse never questioned male-dominance in general. Instead, the old classical and religious formulations on gender in Egypt was *overlaid* rather than displaced by a new discourse on women. As women were still perceived in relation to men (Amin, 1992: 19). In other words, 'feminism' was merely used as a means of imperial domination, which trapped the struggle for women's rights within a struggle over culture. This has been evident in the debate concerning the veil. Whilst those echoing colonial discourse pled for abandonment of the veil claiming it is inherently oppressive, opponents argued that the veil symbolizes the dignity of native customs, claiming it is therefore inherently non-oppressive (Ahmed, 1992: 164). Both sides overlook the element of choice: forcing to wear to veil and forcing to take it off are two sides of the same

coin. Hence, entangling the struggle for women's rights within a struggle over culture, has led to the phenomena that women's rights can still be perceived as a means of cultural imperialism in postcolonial societies (Welchman and Hossain, 2005: 18). Resulting in sometimes glorifying disadvantaged women experiences as 'authentic' and 'local' (Hajjar, 2004: 15).

In this way, gender issues are extremely politicized. Making it the perfect means of social control for regimes, since it provokes the consent of female as well as male citizens. Especially in a context of growing popular discontent and legitimacy crises, governments tend to use women's rights as a sacrifice for identity politics in an attempt to underpin their legitimacy (Kandiyoti, 1997: 6-8). In the context of Egypt this has been evident, since the most distinctive changes in top-down redefining gender roles were made when the regime was in crisis (Nelson, 1984: 223-224). This does not mean that the regime's position regarding gender issues is fixed. Since regime's are constantly changing, their gender politics are also constantly changing (Connell, 1990: 533). As such, the Egyptian state never had one consistent 'gender ideology': it could pose a threat to women's rights but it also could offer resources to women's movements (Al Ali, 2000: 84). For example, right after the Egyptian decolonisation the legitimacy of the new regime was framed on its ability to combat 'backwardness'. Hence the position of women became a part of a national regeneration project that improved education for women and recruited women as labour force. However, these projects never intended to increase women's autonomy, but were merely part of creating a new 'modern' identity (Zubaida, 1988: 7; Kandiyoti, 1992: 434). However, when the Egyptian regime was in crisis, for example as a consequence of economic mismanagement and the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms such as Sadat's *Infitah*. It used populist Islam as a means of enlarging and underpinning its legitimacy. This populist Islamic discourse emphasized a populist construction of the "local" and the "authentic" and consequently utilising women's rights as an important stake in politics to negotiate and remain social control (Kandiyoti, 1997: 7-8).

### Sexual violence as a systematic state policy

More recently, Amar (2011) has underlined how the Egyptian regime has generated and utilized a discourse with at its centre "hypervisible subjects" of femininity as well as masculinity. Hypervisible subjects are "fetished figures that preoccupy public discourse and representation but are not actually recognizable or legible as social formations" (Amar, 2011: 40). As such, during the 1990's when protests occurred, protestors were portrayed as hypersexualized terrorist masculinities (Amar, 2011b: 308). Around that time, thugs and those participating in violent networks, seen as emerging from the informal settlements surrounding downtown Cairo, named *baltagiya* were identified as terrorist enemies of the state (Ismail, 2006: 145). By the 2000's the concept of *baltagiya* was appropriated by the regime and a useful tool of the police. That is, these same gangs were used to disrupt protests by mixing with protesters, shout extremists slogans as well as beating up civilians and the protesters themselves. In order to undermine the demonstrations and make them seem illegitimate (El Nadeem, 2006). Concomitant with the gendered notion of this hypermasculine 'Arab street' was the hypervisibilizing of women as subjects of piety, self-policing, moralization and cultural security (Amar, 2011b: 309). In other words, the state's discourse portrayed women as needing the police and the state to 'protect' them from these men. Thus blending a patriarchal gendered discourse, that implied rescue, increasing intervention and surveillance of the street, the Egyptian regime not only legitimized the presence of security forces on the street, it simultaneously undermined the protests (Amar, 2011: 42). Turning to the period between 2003 and 2006, the security state intensified and generalized its practice of targeting women who were publicly and politically active (Amar, 2011b: 314). Sexual harassment, verbal and physical attacks were used to install fear in women and keep them from protesting. In particular what is referred to as 'Black Wednesday' (May 25th 2005) when those protesting the restriction of the election of a new president to office, were violently beaten, sexually abused and arrested (Hafez, 2014: 23).

Despite the historical context of the use of sexual violence as a means of intimidation, the Eighteen days of the 2011 Revolution in Egypt were relatively harassment-free (Abaza, 2013). Masses of people left Tahrir on the 11th of February 2011, after the ouster of president Mubarak, believing that a “New Egypt” would arise. However, after Mubarak’s ouster the post-revolutionary regime(s) attempted to maintain control and new demonstrations were met with a violent crackdown. Both men as well as women were arrested and tortured in the Egyptian Museum as well as military prison, but it were women that had to bear more humiliation (Abouelnaga, 2015: 43). Furthermore, the rhetoric of the government again ‘re-gendered’: equating the act of protesting for women with prostitution, since the female protester had left her place in the home to go on the streets (Abaza, 2013). Thus what was the ‘norm’ for women, was abstaining from claiming public space. An act of non-observance to this norm, through protesting against the state and claiming public space, challenged this gendered norm. As Michel Foucault (1977) reminds us, bodies that are non-observance are punishable (Foucault, 1977: 183). Female protestors were ‘disciplinary punished’ by being arrested on the grounds of prostitution, subjected to virginity testing, stripping while being photographed or filmed by soldiers and other forms of sexual violence that targeted the female body as an object of power (El Nadeem, Nazra and New Woman Foundation, 2013).

During Mohamed Morsi’s rule this violence and sexual assault continued. At the time of the demonstrations in late November 2012 several confirmed and documented gang rapes took place, resulting in a general state of denial or disagreement regarding who was responsible for such treatment of female citizens (El Nadeem, Nazra and New Woman Foundation, 2013). Again, women activists explicitly articulated it as a systematic state policy to intimidate women and end their participation in demonstrations (Abd al-Hamid and Ahmad, 2014; Langohr, 2014).

The choice of sexual violence on the bodies of women as a method of punishment entails here an extra dimension. As Foucault (1977) pointed

out, the choice of punitive mechanism is not neutral since it not only a direct result of but it also reaffirms the power regime it is constituted by (Foucault, 1977: 24). The Egyptian patriarchal authoritarian power regime is embedded within a discourse that women’s bodies carry the burden of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’; the ‘honour’ of the man is directly associated with a women’s sexuality. Thus, women’s sexuality and bodies needs to be regulated (el Said, 2015: 113). The choice of sexual violence is therefore peculiar (or not), since it is perceived to be ‘honour-tarnishing’. When women are the bearers of ‘honour’ which is linked to her sexuality, sexual violence is a weapon targeted at women to break, defeat and banish then. Hence, the use of sexual violence was not only a result of women’s oppression but simultaneously reaffirmed the oppression of women (Abouelnaga, 2015: 40). This also accounts for one technique that stands out in particular, which is what Foucault (1977) defined as ‘examination’ and finds itself represented in the form of ‘virginity testing’ in post-revolutionary Egypt. Although the technique of ‘examination’ might not be in complete accordance with ‘virginity examination’ (Parla, 2001: 82). It does map out the manifestation of disciplinary power that targets the female body, since virginity testing is targeted at *only* women, classifies women by their virgin/non-virgin status, feeds into normalcy and is punished accordingly (Parla, 2001: 82). At the same time, it upholds male dominance by diverting the attention from the perpetrator and places the attention on the morality of the woman (Jabiri, 2016: 162).

### Sexual violence and its resistance

As Foucault demonstrates: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1980: 95). In other words, instead of giving in to this method of domination, different forms of resistance emerged, challenging and subverting these gendered norms on which the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary regime(s) was built. Thus gender was included in the revolutionary discourse. For example, in the graffiti that exploded during and in the aftermath of the

Revolution in which the violations of women and their bodies occupied a central space (Abouelnaga, 2016: 38-44). Other acts of resistance that illustrate the inclusion of gender, varied from demonstrations against sexual violence, rallies, marches that emphasized that a woman's place is in public, writing down testimonies that underlined the state's complicity in sexual violence, posters and collectives such as Baheya Ya Masr, FouadWatch and OpAntiSH, to name a few out of many (Hafez, 2013: 23; el Nadeem, Nazra and New Woman Foundation, 2013; Sami 2015: 88).

These new collectives were particularly critical. For example, OpAntiSH (Operation Sexual Harassment). A collective that aimed to guarantee a woman's place in public by protecting female protestors on the street, without feeding into the idea of the woman as the helpless victim and at the same time subverting the idea of 'male protection' through including women as 'protectors' as well (Langohr, 2013). Important here is a critical logic regarding gender was employed that was new to Egyptian society (Abouelnaga, 2016: 47). That is, instead of categorizing sexual violence as the marker of a woman's honour, these collectives explicitly perceived and stated that the attack on women were political instead of personal (el Nadeem, Nazra and New Woman Foundation, 2013: 50).

However, it should be emphasised that the demands related to gender were not an initial priority in the Revolution. During the Eighteen days, the banners, slogans and different chants did not express any specific demands related to women or their rights. Key in understanding how gender became significantly included in the revolutionary discourse happened through what Shereen Abouelnaga (2016) refers to as 'transversal alliances'. For as these collectives of resistance were not only performed by women who suffered from this sexual violence. Instead, it was performed by different segments of the populations that were not necessarily a direct victim of such violations. These 'alliances' are not institutionalized but are continuously constituted through events that trigger and require certain acts of alliances (Abouelnaga, 2016: 40). An

example of such an event is the event regarding the 'blue bra'. When on 17 December 2011 anti-SCAF demonstrations were held near the Egyptian cabinet building, a photograph was taken which showed several policemen attacking a veiled female protester in the middle of the street, leaving her blue bra exposed (Abaza, 2013). The regime and its supporters reduced the incidents to the woman's responsibility. It was stated that she was already at fault, being in public and being a *femme fatale* who tore her own clothes to expose her body and implicate the security forces (Hafez, 2014: 21). Despite such attempts, women and men formed an alliance and organized huge demonstrations with slogans such as "The daughters of Egypt's are a red line" and referring to the stripped girl as "Sitt al-Banat". Eventually these demonstrations, resulted in protests against the military rule in general and the blue bra turned into a symbol of national contestation which was occupying public spaces, in the forms of posters and graffiti: the cement walls of the famous Mohamed Mahmoud street near the symbolic Tahrir square were filled with hundreds of blue bra's (Abaza, 2013). In other words, subverting patriarchal gender norms turned into a method of subverting and revealing authoritarianism (Sami ,2015: 102).

### A political intersectional approach

Women protesting against the regime and being physically present in the square were not merely challenging authoritarianism. Additionally, they were challenging the gendered norm generated and exploited by the regime. Hence, two different systems of oppression intersected that led to a different experience and form of oppression for different categories (Laurel Weldon, 2008: 194).

There were different revolutionary collectives that were inclusive of gender and upheld an intersectional approach, as they were not concerned with *only* gender issues. For example, different graffiti works indeed included gender. Yet, such works encompassed all different sorts of violations, including imaging of martyrs and prisoners (Abouelnaga, 2016: 44). However, despite this inclusiveness, such modalities have been wrongly perceived by Western feminist scholars and different media platforms, as being

the result of *a priori* feminist desires. Ascribing these modalities of resistance merely to the category of feminist resistance and overlooking the authoritarian political context it was constituted by (El Said et al., 2015: 9; El Said et al., 2015: 237).

Furthermore, when the director of the renowned grassroots feminist organization Nazra for Feminist Studies, Mozn Hassan, became the target of investigation by Egyptian authorities in 2016 different enactments of solidarity from the West emerged that called for an end of the attacks on Egyptian feminists (Naber and el-Hameed, 2017: 525). Yet, by stating that feminists were under attack just for the mere fact that they are feminists, the enactments were inadequate and even problematic. That is, Nazra for Feminist Studies has not been directly under attack for their efforts to end sexism, homophobia and transphobia *per se*. If so, all feminist groups in Egypt would be targeted in the same way which has not been the case (Naber and el-Haeed, 2017: 521-524). Nazra for Feminist Studies has been under attack for it finds itself at the intersection between patriarchal and authoritarian systems of domination. Its works on sexual violence, among many other topics, has laid bare and provided evidence on how the authoritarian regime in Egypt works through and with patriarchy. Therefore, tarnishing the image of the state as a supporter of women's rights (website Nazra for Feminist Studies).

Examining sexual violence is examining a complex contextual political technique that lays different claims on the subject. This has resulted in complex modalities of resistance that were not only concerned with gender, but the authoritarian context it was constituted by as well. Overlooking such manifestations of inequalities and their intersection by clinging onto gender as the sole perspective, might result in intersectional disempowerment. For as the strategies on the axis of gender are not always neutral towards other axes of inequality. In particular in the case of post-revolutionary Egypt, where such strategies and discourses have been appropriated by the regime itself, to divert attention from its own role in perpetrating sexual violence as well as

appropriating gendered discourses to intensify policing on the street. Thus feminist scholarship should prioritize the concept of political intersectionality as the women demonstrating in Egypt were not only defined by their gender. Their choices were affected by different factors such as the authoritarian context and the effects it had on their daily lives, demanding social justice for women and men *alike* (Abouelnaga, 2016: 26). Not integrating the concept of political intersectionality might result in undermining the agency of those being the most affected by it.

## Conclusion

This article illustrated that the state works through and with patriarchy, for as the state is the main organizer of gender relations through its capacity (Connell, 1990). States often uphold patriarchal gender norms, since it is in the interest of the (nation) state to control women's reproductive rights (Yuval Davis, 1997). Additionally, in previously colonized societies, the position of the woman is a sensitive topic. This is due to European states attempting to 'justify' colonization through the inferior position of women by claiming to improve it (Ahmed, 1992). As a result gender issues remain extremely politicized and often appropriated or even abandoned by governments in order to underpin their own legitimacy (Kandiyoti, 1997).

This has been evident in the case of Egypt, prior to the 2011 Revolution as well as thereafter. The Egyptian regime produced certain ideas of masculinities and femininities and appropriated these when necessary (Amar, 2011; Amar, 2011b). Concomitant with such patriarchal authoritarian discourses, was the use of sexual violence against female dissents as a systematic state policy to keep them silent (Abd al-Hamid and Ahmad, 2014; Langohr, 2014). The use of sexual violence however, as a method of intimidation had consequences for the regime. Different modalities of resistance emerged that challenged and subverted these politicized gender norms in which the use of sexual violence by the regime became a way to reveal its authoritarian ways (Sami, 2015).

The use of sexual violence in post-revolutionary Egypt and the resistance as a result from it, should

be understood within an authoritarian system that intersects with a patriarchal structures. However, such an intersectional framework was absent in the work of different Western feminist scholars, media platforms and enactments of solidarity which de-contextualized the modalities of resistance and clung onto gender as the sole perspective (Abouelnaga, 2016; El Said et al., 2015; Naber and el-Hameed, 2017). Unless feminist scholars and other writers claiming to be feminists, take into consideration other intersecting factors such as the political authoritarian context and its workings, certain struggles will be ignored. Even more worryingly such works risk re-articulating and re-affirming oppressive discourses, placing an extra burden on the shoulders of those working on the ground, surrounded by different intersecting systems of oppression.

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