February 4, 2013

Violence Against Women in the Egyptian and Syrian Uprisings

Donna M. Hughes, Dr., University of Rhode Island

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/donna_hughes/27/
Violence Against Women in the Egyptian and Syrian Uprisings

Donna M. Hughes

Women have been full participants in the uprisings throughout the Arab world. They are seeking to be citizens with rights and opportunities in countries free of dictators. Women protested equally with men in early 2011 in Egypt. They were full of hope for a future of equality and opportunity, and for a while, it looked like a possibility. One researcher and activist said, “It became surreal how perfect the relationship between men and women was. For a month I never thought I was a girl. No one ever looked at me like I was a girl.”¹

Their hopes have been brutally suppressed, as they have become objects of violent assaults and exploitation.

**Suppression of Women in Tahrir Square**

Sexual harassment of women has long plagued women of Egypt. Indeed, throughout the world, women are touched, grabbed and insulted in public. Since the protests began in Tahrir Square in Cairo, the harassment has escalated to violence and sexual assault in an attempt to humiliate and punish the women protestors and make them stay at home.

The first internationally reported mob sexual assault wasn’t of an Egyptian woman, but of the CBS News correspondent, Lara Logan, who was reporting on the protests. On the day that President Hosni Mubarak was removed from power, February 11, 2011, Logan was the victim of a mob sexual assault near Tahrir Square. Months later, Logan said she was assaulted by a mob of 200 to 300 men for 40 minutes.

For an extended period of time, they raped me with their hands. My clothes were torn to pieces...what really struck me was how merciless they were. They really enjoyed my pain and suffering. It incited them to more violence.²

The first video of an Egyptian woman being assaulted came to international attention in December 2011. Police are shown pulling off her abaya (black cloak) and kicking and dragging her in the street.

Days following this assault, 10,000 women protested in central Cairo declaring that “the daughters of Egypt are a red line that cannot be crossed.”³ Some women started a graffiti campaign, using the woman’s blue bra exposed by the attackers, as a symbol of resistance. But the sexual violence has only escalated.

The harassment and assaults are organized. Men come to demonstrations for the purpose of sexually assaulting women. They form mobs around the women so they cannot escape and rescuers cannot reach them.

The assaults have become more vicious and deadly. The following is an excerpt from a victim’s testimony.

All that I knew was that there were hundreds of hands stripping me of my clothes and brutally violating my body. There is no way out, for everyone is saying that they are protecting and saving me, but all I felt from the circles close to me, sticking to my body, was the finger-rape of my body, from the front and back; someone was even trying to kiss me... I was completely naked, pushed by the mass surrounding me to an alley. ... I am in the middle of this tightly knit circle. Every time I tried to scream, to defend myself, to call on a savior, they increased their violence and rape. I fell again in the sewer water... and I realized, then, that falling amounts to death. I decided to keep my calm, seeing that screaming is followed by more violence. I tried to remain standing, holding onto their hands which are violating me, and their arms... I was able to escape death by stampede and found a building, where the doorman was standing behind the door, refusing to open it. I was stuck in the building’s entrance for a log [sic] time, bodies scrambling around me, their hands still violating me. I even saw some [man] standing on top of elevated surfaces to be able to watch freely, feeding his sexual frustrations by watching. I felt that I spent a long time in that corner, until someone threw me a pullover, which was impossible to put on, as bodies stuck to me, preventing me from


wearing it. I succeeded, in a moment, to put the pullover on, the same moment I heard a group of young men to my left agreeing to take me to another place, according to one of them, ‘we will take her and then one by one, guys’.  

At first, friends and relatives tried to assist each other when they came under attack. One woman, who tried to rescue another woman from being assaulted, was so severely beaten she was in a coma for two days and in the hospital for three months (See the link for an interview with Azza Hilal.)

Two groups, composed of women and men, have formed to rescue women protestors who are under attack: Tahrir Bodyguard and Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault (OpAntiSH). Scaffolding has been erected so that monitors can see around Tahrir Square and identify where violent mobs have formed around women. The rescuers try to move as a team to rescue women who are under attack, but the pressing crowds makes it difficult for them to remain together. OpAntiSH also provides follow-up medical, legal and psychological support to women.

The rise of citizen journalism -- the use of mobile phones to capture an image or video and upload it to the Internet -- has enabled the world to witness scenes of assaults on women.

Horrific testimonies and videos have been posted on web sites documenting the war being waged over women’s dignity and bodies.

On the Night of January 25th, 2013, I was volunteering for Operations Anti Sexual Harassment. …Then I saw a girl with a black hooded jacket being crushed by the crowds right in front of the building. She was screaming on the top of her lungs and was completely helpless. People were trying to pull her away from the door and back to the square. The closer I got to the girl, the more I personally was groped. Someone touched my buttocks, had his hand over my thighs and my pants pockets. I knew he was trying to pick pocket me and tried to push his hand away. Another man starting budding [sic] me with his head in my abdomen and then rolled his mouth over my chest. At this point I lost my temper, shouted, sweared at the crowd and started hitting one of the men grabbing

---


5 Egyptian women, two years after the revolution, By Charlene Pele, Christopher Moore, Khalil Bechir, Willy Bracciano, France24, January 17, 2013 http://www.france24.com/en/20130115-egyptian-women-two-years-after-the-revolution (video)

6 Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault http://www.facebook.com/opantish
the girl in his forearm. Someone with a flammable pressurised canister set a flare above us. That pushed the crowds off a little bit and moments later a group of people managed to get the girl through the door and shut it closed. That wasn’t the end of the story for the crowds though: People started pushing us towards the metal door, crushing us hard to the extent I felt my ribs were about to crack. Our group tried to organise into a semicircle, facing the crowds and fending them off the building’s doorstep: holding elbows and hands tight with our backs to the gate. People started hitting us with wooden and metal rods, others were holding knives and swords. A hooded member of the black-blott\(^7\) [sic] pushed in his way through the crowds and swayed a penknife at me. He then literally punched me in the chest with the hand he held the penknife with. Initially I thought he stabbed me but luckily there was no blood. The pushing and crushing continued along with sword swaying and canister induced flares. We received some help from a couple of Tahrir body guard volunteers.\(^8\)

A video of a mob sexual assault taken by activists in late January 2013 has been released showing the intensity of the mob attack and the attempts by rescuers to reach the victim and drive off the attackers by using flares (A link to the video is in the footnote).\(^9\) On January 25, 2013, OpAntiSH reported 19 mob sexual assaults in one day. Most recently, a video shows riot police beating a naked man.\(^10\)

**Determined Resistance**

There is still determined resistance among the women, even the most seriously assaulted women. They refuse to be humiliated. They are telling their stories on web sites, such as Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment (https://www.facebook.com/opantish).

We will not be frightened; we will not hide in our homes. Sexual harassment is a social disease that has been rampant for years, used by the regime to intimidate girls and women. But we must know that sexual harassment is a social issue, not merely a political one, and what takes place during festivities and crowded places attests to that.

---

\(^7\) The Black Bloc are men in black masks, black sweatshirts, and matching black Adidas athletic pants. They are copying the appearance and action of anarchists in Europe and North America. They have only appeared in Egypt in the last week or so. It isn’t clear what their role is. “Egypt’s Black Bloc: An Exclusive Interview, Jared Malsin, http://www.vice.com/read/we-met-somemembers-of-egypts-black-bloc, February 1, 2013.


do not know if this testimony will make a difference or change, for the violations are still ongoing... but this is the least I can do. .... To the women of this assailed country, you are the greatest.  

_Uprising of Women in the Arab World_

While some women are still determined to go to Tahrir Square to protest, many women are using the Internet to carry out campaigns, tell their stories, and proclaim their liberation.

The Uprising of Women in the Arab World (http://uprisingofwomenintheabworld.org/en/) is the home of a photo campaign. Women and some men from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia proclaim why they are uprising. They hold up a photo of themselves with a written statement which begins I’m with the uprising of women in the Arab world because....

...my freedom is not a gift from anyone. I was created free and I will take my rights and impose my freedom (Hanan from Egypt)

...my decision to wear the veil is mine and not that of my father, my uncle or my society (woman from Lebanon)

...I have the right to add my children to my passport without anyone else’s approval (woman from Jordan)

...for 20 years I wasn’t allowed to feel the wind in my hair (Dana in Syria)

...I don’t need a guardian. I’m a person of full age and capacity (Feryal in Saudi Arabia)

This web site is also a place for women to tell their stories. At the beginning of February 2013, there are 65 stories. Women are invited to share their stories because “the stories hidden under our pillows need to come out in the open.”

_Abir from Lebanon who describes being raped as a child_

_S. A. from Yemen who says the first time she was sexually harassed she was 5 years old_

---


Syrian Women: From Protestors to Victims of Rape and Trafficking

Syrian women were active participants at the beginning of the protests against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.  

The non-violent protests quickly descended into violence and then civil war. To date, an estimated 64,000 people have been killed and 755,000 refugees have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt.  

As troops moved from neighborhood to neighborhood, women and girls were targeted for gang rape. According to the International Rescue Committee, rape by soldiers in front of their families was common. People also suffered torture. Some young women and girls were killed. Because of the stigma attached to rape, women in Syria rarely reveal that they have been raped in normal circumstances. Women arriving in refugee camps are more willing to talk about their experiences, but there is still fear of retaliation or even being killed by a family member for dishonoring the family.  

Refugee camps are not turning out to be refuges for women, especially young women and girls. Some families are forcing their daughters to marry to reclaim their honor or protect them from rape. The concept of family “honor” and how it can be ruined by even suspicion of a daughter being sexually abused is sometimes so irrational that family members will take extreme

Nesrine from Tunisia who wasn’t allowed to accept a scholarship for a two week trip to Europe because she needed to wait until the day she could travel with her husband  
Rana from Saudi Arabia describes being groped from behind while on an airplane  
Hala, a 50 year old woman from Egypt, describes what it was like to be “purified” (the term of genital mutilation) when she was 11 years old

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17341613


16 Syria: A Regional Crisis, The IRC Commission Syrian Refugees, The International Rescue Committee, January 2013

Donna M. Hughes & Melanie Shapiro  
Co-founders of Citizens Against Trafficking
measures. The International Rescue Committee reported that in one case a man shot his
daughter when soldiers approached to prevent her from being “disgraced” by rape.  

In Egypt and Jordan, Syrian women and girls are being selected for marriage and taken away in
what amounts to human trafficking. Men come to the camps looking for young women and
even underage girls. They say the women and girls will be married to wealthy men in Gulf
countries who will protect them and give them a better life. These “marriages” are being
advocated by Muslim clerics who are encouraging Egyptian men to obtain a wife this way. The
Egyptian National Council for Women’s Rights has issued a statement saying these arranged
marriages are “crimes committed against women under the guise of religion.”
The lack of available resources is forcing some women with families to turn to “survival sex.”
Once women engage in this activity even one time, they become extremely vulnerable to
further violence and exploitation.

Egyptian and Syrian women’s hopes of freedom and dignity following the overthrow of
dictators have been crushed, and worse they are now becoming victims of sexual violence and
exploitation. There are gang rapes even in the most public place in Egypt – Tahrir Square. And
Syrian women and girls are becoming victims of trafficking in refugee camps.

Women want freedom and rights. They have been demonstrating for two years and their
declarations can be read on the Internet.

Conflicts continue and the outcomes are still unknown, but for women, the future is looking
much less promising than it did two years ago.

---

17 Syria: A Regional Crisis, The IRC Commission Syrian Refugees, The International Rescue Committee, January 2013

18 “Syrian Refugee Women Vulnerable to Exploitation in Egypt,” IRIN, Humanitarian News and Analysis, UN Office
   for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, January 31, 2013.