

Nazra for Feminist Studies

Traditional Values and Human Rights Violations in Egypt:

1. History of the use of traditional values to undermine the rights of women human rights defenders in Egypt, as the violations they face are largely based on traditional, patriarchal values of what it means to be a “respectable” woman:
 - a. Under the rule of Mubarak, women defenders taking part in demonstration on 25 May 2005, dubbed ‘Black Wednesday’, were surrounded by ‘thugs’, who arrived in the then-ruling National Democratic Party buses. They stripped the women and sexually harassed them on the streets. In the case of one of the women attacked, Nawal Ali, it was circulated in the press that she is a loose woman who tore her own clothes to frame Mubarak’s regime.
 - b. Under the SCAF, violations against WHRDs were justified by the claim that the state is simply ‘cleansing’ the country of prostitutes. In the case of the notorious virginity tests, a senior military general admitted, on CNN, to the tests, claiming that “these women were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters”.¹ The tests took place on 9 March 2011, after Egyptian army officers clamped down on protesters, violently clearing Tahrir Square and arresting protesters, including 17 women.
2. Under civilian rule and an elected president, traditional values are still used as a pretext to justify grave violations:
 - a. In the case of the clashes that took place in front of the *Itihadeyya* presidential palace on December 4, 2012 women defenders who were caught by supporters of the president were sexually harassed and cursed at for “violating and opposing God’s *Sharia*”. Many passersby, according to testimonies collected by Nazra for Feminist Studies and other human rights groups, joined in the cursing telling the women that they deserve what is happening to them because they do not want the application of *Sharia* law. Unveiled women were asked by their attackers “where is the cross?” implying that they must be non-Muslims for protesting against Morsi.
 - i. Traditional and religious values are intertwined to create a particularly precarious situation for women. Not only do they deserve the violence befalling them for being active in the public sphere, but also because they oppose the president who is trying to apply divine laws.
 - b. Violations against WHRDs have reached unprecedented levels during the commemoration of the second anniversary of the January 25 revolution on January 25, 2013. 19 cases of gang rapes were reported, 2 of which were raped with metal rods and a knife. The identities of the attackers are unknown.

¹ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/egypt-admission-forced-virginity-tests-must-lead-justice-2011-05-31>

- i. According to testimonies of some survivors, they were asked, by those who saved them if they were still virgins or advised not to protest again- that such is not the place for respectable women.
- ii. Violations to the right to health are also committed in the name of cultural values. According to one testimony, survivor was told by more than one hospital staff not to talk about the rape with her husband because there is not guarantee to the way in which he will react after learning that his ‘honor has been tarnished’. Survivors were often yelled at in public hospitals for crying or screaming; told to quite down because they are disturbing other patients and not to call any further attention to her ‘shame’.
- iii. In the case of the latter survivor, she noted that the entire staff was treating her with rudeness and hostility, as if they wanted to convey the message that they do not approve of her activism and that she deserved what has befallen her.
- iv. A police officer, according to one testimony, advised the survivor’s husband to refuse that his wife undergo an examination by a forensic pathologist because that would entail undressing, which is not the ‘proper’ decision to take in her case so as not to publicize the rape any further. It is the values that cherish ‘modesty’ that govern issues relating to women, and not the proper application of the law.
- v. Violations against women defenders do not take place in a vacuum, embedded in a patriarchal culture that firmly believes that a woman’s place is in the private sphere.
- vi. The Egyptian authorities have not taken any steps to remedy the violations committed against women defenders or to work to eradicate beliefs regarding the inferior status of women. To the contrary, the Human Rights Committee of the Egyptian Shura Council, the upper house of parliament currently endowed with legislative powers, held a meeting on 11 February 2013, to discuss the sexual assaults and rapes that took place in Tahrir Square and its vicinity. Members of the Committee blamed the women for the sexual attacks, wondering how it is that the women call for protection when they have not taken "precautionary measures" to ward off the possibility of sexual attacks. Members said that women taking part in protests bear the responsibility of being attacked for presence in an indecent space, describing what happens in demonstrators’ tents as “prostitution.” The only thing left to say to women is that if you don’t want anything to happen to you, go out without your body.