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Experts urge Egypt to rethink two-child population strategy

Medics say limiting families not the answer for a country where a baby is born every 15 seconds

By Ruth Michaelson

The Guardian (03.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2LWnN1A> - In the cramped office of New Cairo hospital's family planning clinic, Safah Hosny sets a box overflowing with contraceptives next to the visitors' ledger on a small desk.

There are eight condoms for one Egyptian pound, about 4p, or ampoules of injectable birth control, for just under 9p. A contraceptive implant lasting three years costs 22p, while copper IUDs – the most popular form of birth control on offer according to Dr Hosny – cost 17p.

The low prices, far less than in any Egyptian pharmacy, are due to subsidies provided by Egypt's health ministry, as clinics like Dr Hosny's are on the frontline of Egypt's battle against an exploding birthrate. A government programme called "two is enough" has been launched to encourage people to limit family size. From this month, the prime minister, Mostafa Madbouly recently announced, the government will cease to provide financial support to a family after their second child.

The five-year, \$19m (£15m) programme comprises a poster campaign as well as growing a network of mobile and fixed family planning clinics across Egypt. Posters covering the walls of Egypt's metro show an Egyptian 50-pound note, worth about £2.20, torn into five. "Would you rather divide this into five, or into two?" it asks.

But the price and availability of contraceptives at clinics like that in New Cairo hospital belie a wider issue: that Egypt has a long way to go in persuading its people.

"Sometimes patients arrive here knowing absolutely nothing about contraception, so I have to explain all the different methods," says Hosny. "Then [the woman] chooses, with her husband's permission. Her husband is normally here for the first visit, and witnesses her signing a consent form which shows she understands, but then she is alone for the follow-up appointments."

Hosny says the clinic is happy to serve unmarried women. "For unmarried women I suggest the pill or injections," she says, pulling out a slide of contraceptive pills.

Population size is now regarded as such a crisis by the government that President Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi declared at a 2017 conference: "We have two real challenges facing our country: terrorism and overpopulation."

Egypt now has more than 104 million people, including 94.8 million inside the country. A baby is born every 15 seconds in the country, meaning it ranks 13th in terms of global population. This has placed strain on already scarce resources such as water, and could amplify existing problems for families already struggling to put food on the table following a 2016 financial crisis that led Egypt to devalue its currency and sparked rising inflation. According to Egypt's official statistics agency, the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics, 27.8% of Egyptians live below the poverty line.

Yet "two is enough" risks failing to target the things that could make a real difference when families, particularly those from Egypt's working class, are deciding to have children. The campaign will increase sex education for some medical professionals, but will not begin a programme of sex education in schools, currently non-existent. It also ignores options for women with unwanted pregnancies, with abortion seen as a legal grey area in Egypt.

"I think it has to be multi-disciplinary thing," says Dr Hussein S Gohar, an obstetrician and gynaecologist at the Yosri Gohar hospital in Cairo. "You have to start in schools to educate young kids about sex education, contraception and the hazards for themselves, as well as the future of the population explosion. Then they have to target people about to get married, and married people. But if you're going to make legislation punishing them for a third child, then you have to provide an exit route for them, by allowing medical termination or even abortion clinics."

The heart of the problem, according to Gohar, means thinking about what motivates people to have large families in Egypt. "You need to change the mentality of the people and how they see things rather than just telling them what to do," he said. "You can't just go to people once every few months and say the population is too large and there's not enough water so you need to have a smaller family."

Dr Ahmed Fathy, an obstetrician and gynaecologist at New Cairo hospital, agrees. "For poorer families, it's not about whether a child is a gift from God, but rather [that] extra children are a method of income," he explains. "If you're a family with a farm, extra workers cost more money. But if you have more children, one can look after the animals, another can look after the machines, and another can tend to the plants."

The Egyptian government's best efforts may also fail to reach more conservative doctors in rural areas, who are more likely to convey the message to patients that every child is a blessing, or to limit information about contraception. "The fact is that in every country, the government can't cover the entire spectrum," says Dr Natalia Kanem, head of the UN Population Fund, which has partnered with Egyptian ministries for the "two is enough" campaign. "Private providers can misinform, or even perform so-called medical female genital mutilation. Our job is to flood real information here to counter the myths."

A mushrooming and overwhelmingly young population disadvantages young women according to Kanem, who cites the fact that 62% of the Egyptian population is aged 29 or younger. "If you have a young population, those young people tend to have children young as their mothers were young, so you see an acceleration," she says. "Unless women are able to make a conscious decision to have a child later, to marry later."

"When girls are left behind, half the population is left behind."

Egypt's top Muslim authority condemns harassment of women

Cairo was named most dangerous megacity for women in an international perception poll carried out by the Thomson Reuters Foundation last year

By Heba Kanso

Thomson Reuters Foundation (28.08.2018) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2BWcwgo> - BEIRUT - A statement by Egypt's highest religious authority denouncing sexual harassment could be a turning point in efforts to crack down on abuse against women, activists said on Tuesday.

Al-Azhar, which has huge influence over Egypt's mostly Muslim population and trains most of the country's imams, took to Facebook and Twitter this week to denounce the practice of harassing women, including over their behaviour or clothing.

Activist Lobna Darwish said the al-Azhar statement would create debate around the issue, even if it did not immediately change minds.

"They have the ability to promote this language against sexual harassment everywhere in Egypt ... So they can at least change part of the culture," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Cairo. "We hope this is a new beginning or a step, a decision, a political commitment to working on sexual harassment," said Darwish, gender and women's rights officer for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

Cairo was named most dangerous megacity for women in an international perception poll carried out by the Thomson Reuters Foundation last year.

Women's rights experts said the treatment of women in the Egyptian capital had worsened since a 2011 uprising seeking social change, with harassment a daily occurrence.

Suad Abu-Dayyeh, a Middle East expert with global advocacy group Equality Now, said it was "significant that al-Azhar has denounced sexual harassment because people in Egypt, or in our region, depend so much on the religious scholars".

But she said both government and civil society needed to do more to change people's views on how women should be treated.

Rights coalition takes on female genital mutilation in Egypt

By Rahma Diaa

Al-Monitor (13.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2BzgNo6> - Women and human rights organizations in Egypt marked the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Feb. 6 by announcing an "Anti-FGM Action Plan" to create new policies and mechanisms to reduce these practices against women and young girls in Egypt.

According to the most recent gender-based violence survey conducted by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in 2015, 9 out of 10 women in Egypt have undergone FGM. In 2014, that figure was about 92% of married women aged between 15 and 49, with 78.4% of the operations performed by doctors and nurses.

Representatives of 146 organizations were present at the press conference, including the Tadwein Gender Research Center, the New Woman Foundation, the Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Women's Center for Legal Guidance and Awareness, Salemah for Women's Empowerment, the Cairo Center for Development, the Egyptian Coalition on the Rights of the Child and the Union of Associations to Combat Harmful Practices against Women and Children.

Amal Fahmi, the director of Tadwein and the group's coordinator, told Al-Monitor that efforts by state institutions against FGM practices have not achieved the necessary changes. They have criminalized FGM without setting up a framework to enforce the law or raising awareness of the psychological and physical dangers of female circumcision.

"The situation is getting worse as 80% of FGM procedures are done at the hands of doctors, according to the stats obtained by the anti-FGM associations and organizations. The campaign that was recently launched aims to pressure the government to change its approach, raise awareness through sex education courses in schools in addition to media awareness campaigns against the medicalization of female genital cutting and develop a human rights discourse against FGM with a focus of women's rights to health and bodily integrity," Fahmi explained.

Fahmi also stressed the need for the government to enforce the laws criminalizing the custom to act as a deterrent and to stop its spread. She noted that the government will have to train health inspectors, police and prosecutors to monitor for and detect FGM and respond to incidences of it.

Since 2008, when the state added Article 242 to the Penal Code criminalizing FGM, only two cases have been brought to court. The first was in 2015, when the Mansoura Appeals Court sentenced a doctor to two years in prison with hard labor and closed his practice for one year after a child death following a procedure.

Similarly, in July 2016 in Suez, a doctor, anesthetist and the victim's mother were prosecuted in the death of a girl during a circumcision surgery. They were charged with manslaughter, and each received suspended sentences of one year in prison.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi issued Law No. 78 of 2016 to amend Article 242. Before that point, the article called for imprisonment between three months and two years or a fine of \$282. After the change, those accused of practicing FGM face harsher punishments: imprisonment for a period of no less than five years and no more than seven.

Reda el-Danbouki, the director of the Women's Center for Legal Guidance and Awareness, told Al-Monitor that the coalition will lobby for an amendment to close a loophole created by Article 61, which allows for violence committed to protect oneself or others against serious physical or moral harm. Danbouki said lawyers or judges could claim circumcision is done for necessary medical reasons, "basing their argument on this article."

Danbouki added that there is no need to increase FGM-related punishment as the real change will come when the existing law is enforced and the government starts inspecting hospitals and medical centers, punishing perpetrators and raising awareness on the dangers of this practice, which many Egyptians continue to view as necessary according to Sharia despite a fatwa by Dar al-Ifta declaring FGM haram (religiously forbidden).

According to a survey of Egyptian youth conducted by the International Population Council in 2017, 70% of young men and 57% of young women feel that FGM is necessary.

Azza Soliman, the director of the Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance, told Al-Monitor that the campaign is intended to revitalize the efforts of the human rights organizations that took the first steps to fight FGM in 1997. Back then, their work brought about a drastic change in the rhetoric around FGM, and for the first time people started talking about it as violence against women.

"This group conducted thorough studies on the history of FGM to prove that it was not related to Islam or Pharaonic traditions but rather a practice that originated in Africa. Consequently, they worked to remove the religious framework and basis for this practice and demanded an end to it," Soliman added.

"In 2003, the organizations' efforts came to a halt, when the authorities took it upon themselves to combat FGM but failed to bring about a substantial change, prompting the women's organizations to join hands and try to make a real difference to protect women and young girls against the dangers of this practice," Soliman added.

Female genital mutilation and Syrian girls

By Nikolaj Nielsen

Excerpt from EU Observer (02.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xQV07g> - Reports are now emerging of young Syrian refugee girls in Egypt having their genitals mutilated - a widespread practice among Egyptians - by Syrian parents.

Cases of what is also known as "female genital mutilation" (or FGM) began to surface months ago.

"Syrian refugees started adapting the culture, [and] they started accepting things we are trying to abandon," Aleksandar Bodiroza, who heads the United Nations Population Fund, told reporters in Cairo.

Though outlawed in Egypt, the vast majority of married Egyptian women have been cut. Often relatives hold down the girl while a midwife or doctor removes or cuts the labia and clitoris.

The tradition is not limited to Muslims. Christian communities in Egypt are also known to force the procedure onto their daughters - some as young as 8 years old or less.

"It is very specific for Egypt - you don't have it in the Gulf, you don't have it in Jordan, you don't have it in Palestine, you don't have it in Syria. We were caught by surprise," said Bodiroza.

Zaid M. Yaish, who also works at the UN fund, said poverty and desire to marry off daughters are among the likely factors that contribute to the abuse.

"I noticed that Syrians are starting to adapt this FGM - this is a surprise to me. I mean, in Syria, there was never FGM before and that is due to the social pressure," he said.

Nobody knows yet how prevalent FGM is among Syrians in Egypt, or if the reported cases are isolated.

But like almost all Egyptians, Syrians and other refugees are facing crushing unemployment. While Syrians have access to health and education, they require work permits.

Public services are dire and the financial woes, felt by all, are particularly harsh among those who have fled war only to survive on threadbare diets and wages, if any, which are even lower than Egyptian standards.

"The price of meat went from 40 pounds to over 160 pounds per kilo. Everything is increasing, we can't keep up," said Maher El-leilani, a refugee in his late 50s from Homs in Syria, who now lives on the outskirts of Alexandria.

The EU is attempting to alleviate the inflation by injecting some €2 million into a broader cash-assistance programme, distributed by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR).

Syrian families can get anywhere between 600 to 2,800 Egyptian pounds per month. Six-hundred Egyptian pounds, as of this month, is roughly equivalent to €28. Last October, the same amount would have equated to around €62.

"We have seen a deteriorating situation, an increasing vulnerability, with more people becoming more vulnerable when compared to six months ago," said Aldo Biondi, an expert on Egypt from the European Commission's humanitarian aid department.

"More and more families are falling under poverty, so they knock at the UNHCR," he added.

Egypt increases prison terms for female genital mutilation

Al-Monitor (27.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2dJnh4L> - The Egyptian parliament has significantly boosted criminal penalties for female genital mutilation (FGM), passing an amendment that is widely welcomed by many segments of Egyptian society.

Human rights groups are hoping, but are not convinced, that the amendment will help reduce this widespread phenomenon across Egypt.

In 2008, Egypt banned FGM operations in governmental and nongovernmental hospitals and other private or public practices following the death of an Egyptian teenager, Baddour Shaker, who had undergone the procedure in June of that year.

A few months later, an article was added to the penal code criminalizing FGM and punishing those who force it upon women with jail terms of three months to two years, in addition to a fine of 1,000-5,000 Egyptian pounds (\$113 to \$563).

The bill defined FGM as being “the partial or full removal of the external genital parts or deformity of such parts without any medical justification.”

Mona Ezzat, head of the Women and Work Program at Egyptian human rights group New Woman Foundation, told Al-Monitor, “FGM is associated with the prevailing customs, traditions and culture in society. It is practiced in [Egypt] because parents are still totally convinced of its viability. Thus, forcing society to relinquish this tradition should not be done through laws alone.”

People in nonurban governorates even have traditional songs about FGM, which is seen as a part of their heritage. To change this attitude, Ezzat said, requires changing the culture, religious rhetoric and school curricula, in addition to rigorously applying the law.

In all the years since FGM was first criminalized, Egyptian courts have only dealt with two related lawsuits. In June 2013, 13-year-old Suhair al-Bataa died during an FGM procedure performed by Dr. Raslan Fadl in Dakahlia. For the first time in Egypt, a public prosecutor there referred the case to a court.

Though Fadl initially was acquitted in November 2014, prosecutors appealed the ruling. The Court of Appeal in Mansoura sentenced him in 2015 to two years in prison with hard labor for manslaughter and three months for performing the illegal procedure, while shutting down his practice. However, Fadl served only three months of the sentence after the family accepted a financial settlement, according to Human Rights Watch. The girl’s father was sentenced to three months for forcing his daughter to have the procedure.

In July of this year, the public prosecutor of Faisal city in Suez governorate charged a doctor and a girl’s mother with manslaughter after the 17-year-old died during FGM surgery in May. Authorities said Mayar Mohamed Mousa died in a private hospital as a result of severe blood loss during the procedure.

The hospital was closed and there were demands for harsher punishments for offenders, prompting parliament to approve an amendment Aug. 29. The law now requires prison terms of five to seven years for those who perform FGM and as much as 15 years if the case results in permanent disability or death.

Egyptian society continues to be greatly swayed by customs and traditions more so than religious views — which appears to be progress. In fact, prominent clerics in Egyptian society, such as Ali Gomaa, the former grand mufti of Egypt, have stood against FGM. Yet this hasn’t been enough to influence the community.

On June 14, 2015, Egypt launched a National Anti-FGM Strategy. The incentive was backed by the National Program to Enable the Family and Eliminate FGM; the public prosecutor; the Ministries of Population, Health, Interior, Education, Awqaf and Higher Education; Al-Azhar University; Dar al-Ifta al-Masriyya (The Egyptian House of Religious Edicts); the Egyptian Church; and the National Council for Women.

According to the Demographic and Health Survey "Egypt 2014," the number of women undergoing FGM has declined. It showed that the number of mutilated females aged 15-17 dropped to 61% that year, compared with 74% in 2008.

The same survey said 92% of the polled women of reproductive age (15-49), who were or had ever been married, had undergone FGM, compared with 96% in 2005.

The survey showed that FGM among all women aged 15-49 decreased by 6% between 2005 and 2014 and by 13% among women aged 15-17 between the years 2008 and 2014. Yet the number of women undergoing this procedure is still alarming.

Ezzat of the New Woman Foundation told Al-Monitor a dramatic effort will be needed to raise awareness among families and parents in their homes. "The message relayed by officials on television is not enough to sound the alarm on the seriousness of this practice," she said.

Azza Soliman, head of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, praised efforts made by the media and Egyptian educational representatives to battle the phenomenon. She cited, however, the need for more support from the religious community to help change societal perceptions about the problem.

"It is imperative to find an enlightening religious discourse to clarify the religion's stance on this issue," she told Al-Monitor.

Female genital mutilation needed because Egyptian men are 'sexually weak,' lawmaker says

By Sudarsan Raghavan

The Washington Post (06.09.2016) - <http://wapo.st/2c8fzCy> - It was an outrageous argument, by any measure: Women should "reduce their sexual desires" because Egyptian men are "sexually weak."

This is what an Egyptian lawmaker, Elhamy Agina, claimed over the weekend in making an argument in favor of female genital mutilation or FGM.

"We are a population whose men suffer from sexual weakness, which is evident because Egypt is among the biggest consumers of sexual stimulants that only the weak will consume," Agina said, according to a translation in Egyptian Streets, an English-language local news website. "If we stop FGM, we will need strong men and we don't have men of that sort."

So it is better for women, he continued, to undergo the brutal practice to "reduce a woman's sexual appetite." And by doing so, he added, women would "stand by their men" and life would proceed smoothly.

Of course, this led to a maelstrom on Twitter and other online sites.

The centuries-old practice involves the partial or full removal of the external sex organs, usually with a knife or razor blade, in a belief that doing so reduces sexual desires. The cutting can lead to urinary infections, menstrual problems, infertility and death, in addition to psychological trauma.

The practice was banned in Egypt in 2008. Since then, circumcising girls has been punishable by a prison sentence of between three months and three years as well as a hefty fine. Still, FGM remains a widespread practice here, as it is in many other African nations and parts of the Middle East.

According to the World Health Organization, Egypt has some of the highest rates of FGM, in company with Somalia, Djibouti and Sierra Leone. A UNICEF study in 2013 found that as many as 27.2 million women in Egypt have been circumcised.

The Egyptian cabinet recently approved a draft law that would impose stiffer penalties for those who force girls and women into FGM. Jail terms would range between five and seven years, and harsher sentences would be imposed if the procedure leads to death or deformity. In May, an Egyptian teenager died of complications after undergoing FGM, propelling the United Nations to urge Egypt to enact stricter punishments. The new legislation is awaiting ratification by the parliament before it can become law.

By this week, Agina was backtracking on his comments. In one local newspaper, Al Masry Al Youm, or the Egyptian Today, he clarified that his rejection of the toughening of penalties for FGM was based on how "it is hard to apply in Egypt."

And in a phone interview with TV host Eman Ezzuldine on Mehwar Channel that his comments were to be considered only a "jest."

"I don't get afraid, and I meant no offense to Egyptian men," Agina continued. "Egyptian men are true men, and I am a true man."

"Take my wife's phone number and ask her," he added.

Egyptian girl dies during banned female genital mutilation operation

Authorities investigate after 17-year-old died under general anaesthetic in a private hospital, despite FGM being illegal in the country

The Guardian (31.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1Pel7v5> - Egyptian prosecutors are investigating the death of a teenage girl during a female genital mutilation operation at a private hospital.

Mayar Mohamed Mousa, 17, died in a hospital in the province of Suez on Sunday while under full anaesthesia, said Lotfi Abdel-Samee, the local health ministry undersecretary.

"This is something that the law has prohibited," stressed Abdel-Samee.

Despite the ban in 2008, female genital mutilation (FGM) is still widespread in Egypt, especially in rural areas. It is practised among Muslims as well as Egypt's minority Christians.

The law led to the first prison sentence against a doctor in Egypt in January 2015, with the girl's father in that case given a three-month suspended sentence.

On Sunday, Mousa's sister had just undergone the operation before she was sent in for surgery.

The girls' mother is a nurse, while their late father was a surgeon. The operation was being carried out by a registered female doctor, according to Abdel-Samee.

Authorities shut down the hospital on Monday after transferring patients to other hospitals as prosecutors questioned the hospital manager and medical staff involved in the operation, Abdel-Samee said.

They have also spoken to the mother, a prosecution official said.

The case was opened after a health inspector reported the circumstances of the girl's death.

Medical examiners have carried out an autopsy, and are due to report the cause of death, said Abdel-Samee.

While 200 million women and girls worldwide have been subjected to the practise, there have been major strides in Egypt, as well as Liberia, Burkina Faso, and Kenya against FGM, according to Claudia Cappa, the lead author of a February UN children's agency report on the issue.

"The latest figures from the Egypt Demographic and Health Survey show that we're winning," the United Nations Development Programme said in a report last year.

"Mothers' attitudes are changing, too," UNDP said.

While 92% of mothers had undergone the procedure, only 35% of them "intend to circumcise their daughters," according to the UNDP report.

Victims of the procedure are left to cope with a range of consequences from bleeding and pain while urinating, extreme discomfort during sex, fatal complications in childbirth and deep psychological trauma.

Top religious leaders start outreach program in Egypt to end female genital mutilation

By Stoyan Zaimov

CP World (09.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1qfwBTg> - The Islamic University of Al Azhar, the highest academic center of Sunni Islam, has joined the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Egypt in the fight against the epidemic of female genital mutilation.

Fides News Agency reported that Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Tawadros II and Sheikh Ahmed al Tayyeb, imam of al-Azhar, signed a joint statement on Monday committing their fight against the many abuses children in Egypt suffer.

Statistics show that more than 70 percent of all Egyptian children suffer some form of abuse or violence within their families and communities, Fides added.

As many as 850 leaders of churches and mosques, including imam, priests, monks, and pastoral workers are expected to attend preparation courses that will allow them to engage more effectively and lead the fight against "genital mutilation, early marriage, kidnapping and sexual abuse."

Child agency UNICEF has warned that at least 200 millions girls and women around the world in 30 different countries, mainly in Africa, have been subjected to genital mutilation, suffering "profound, permanent, and utterly unnecessary harm."

The practice is carried out for various reasons, often a mixture between cultural and religious beliefs, but is primarily aimed at ensuring girls remain "pure" before marriage, so as not to damage their marriage prospects or the family's status.

CNN reported back in 2015 that genital mutilation is a problem for millions of schoolgirls in Egypt, with as many as 92 percent of married Egyptian women between the ages of 15 to 49 having been subjected to the medically dangerous practice.

"This is a gross human rights violation," Jaime Nadal-Roig, the U.N. Population Fund representative in Cairo, told CNN. "It doesn't add anything to the life of the girl, and there are no medical or religious grounds whatsoever."

Although genital mutilation was made illegal in Egypt in 2008, it remains heavily interwoven in the fabric of the Muslim-majority society.

"People used to have a party after a girl was circumcised, they'd celebrate and exchange gifts," Nadal-Roig explained. "So for them to turn from there and say, 'look this is a crime or this is a sin or this is not allowed by religion' means confronting a lot of beliefs and social norms."

Al Azhar has condemned a number of extreme practices and human rights abuses done in the name of Islam around the world, such as the continued slaughter of Christians and other minorities at the hands of the Islamic State terror group.

Al-Tayyeb said back in April 2015 that the killing of 28 Ethiopian Christians in a video released by IS is a "heinous crime — which goes against any religion, law or human conduct."

Why Egyptians have mobilized against public sexual violence

The Washington Post (06.04.2016) - <http://wapo.st/23oMuZY> - In 2012, young Egyptian female and male activists launched a number of groups dedicated to ending public sexual violence, or PSV. They sought to end sexual harassment — ranging from catcalls to groping women's bodies — on the street and in public transit, and to stop mass sexual assault on major shopping boulevards during the Eid holidays or political protests, when groups of men grabbed and stripped women, and in some cases raped them with sharp objects.

This activism represents the kind of change political scientists often miss. Democracy advocates and political scientists alike tend to focus on quantifiable changes in electoral politics, laws and constitutions. But how can we measure less tangible changes in societal norms that may have even more impact on securing citizens' daily freedoms? Though Egypt has not witnessed the democratic blossoming many had hoped for in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings, discourse on key social issues has evolved in significant ways.

In the decade before Hosni Mubarak's February 2011 overthrow, women's rights activism in Egypt focused on improving girls' and women's legal rights in the private sphere, including increasing access to divorce and raising girls' marriage age. This activism was

led by female lawyers, professors and other professionally accomplished, primarily middle-aged women.

In contrast with earlier women's rights activism, the main objective of the 2012 anti-PSV work done by groups, such as Basma, Anti-Harassment Movement and Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault (OpAntiSH), was not legal change. While activists took pride in 2014 amendments to the penal code on harassment, a major short-term goal was to physically intervene to prevent instances of PSV — that is, until President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi's crackdown on activism in public spaces rendered this impossible. The long-term objective remains changing the norms used to justify PSV.

What allowed this new form of activism to emerge, and how does it matter? In addition to the creation of new youth movements, significant structural change in the Egyptian TV sphere after 2011 markedly expanded televised discussions of public sexual violence. This coverage has helped to spread and normalize two arguments central to anti-PSV activism: that perpetrators are engaging in an unacceptable, and criminal, form of behavior, not excusable by any form of women's dress; and that it is the responsibility of all Egyptians — everyday citizens and leaders alike — to work to stop it.

Privately owned satellite TV channels — as opposed to programming created directly by state agencies on state channels — are widely viewed in Egypt, with cost not a significant barrier due to the ubiquity of illegal access. Coverage of PSV on satellite TV began during the late Mubarak era, but until December 2010 it was episodic and usually in reaction to high-profile events. In 2006, a group of men grabbed and stripped women in front of a Cairo cinema during Eid celebrations, and no TV station discussed the assaults for three days until activist Nawara Negm appeared on an episode of Mona al-Shazly's "al Ashira Mas'aan" show discussing Ramadan soap operas. Negm's on-air suggestion that the guests address the assaults instead led al-Shazly to interview bystanders and ask the Ministry of Interior for a response. Al-Shazly returned to harassment issues with an October 2008 interview with Noha Rushdy, the first woman to sue her harasser in court.

More regular coverage of PSV would only begin two months before Mubarak was overthrown, in December 2010, as hosts began covering new anti-PSV initiatives. This included an interview with Engy Ghozlan, a co-founder of HarassMap, the first major organization dedicated to stopping PSV, which had opened only one month earlier.

In the months after Mubarak's overthrow, the satellite media landscape changed dramatically. While only five private satellite channels existed in January 2011, by September, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces had licensed 16 new satellite stations, including the Muslim Brotherhood's Misr 25. As the number and ideological diversity of satellite programs increased, new types of programming also emerged, including the investigative journalism program "Awwal al-Kheit" and humor programs, such as "Hukumat Nuss al-Layl" and Bassem Youssef's "al-Birnamij." These new programs publicized the work and mainstreamed the narratives of anti-PSV groups.

It is possible, but unlikely, that the significant increase in TV coverage of PSV after Mubarak's overthrow was simply a reflection of an enormous increase in the phenomenon itself post-2011. Sexual harassment was widespread under Mubarak, with a 2008 survey in three governorates by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights finding that 83 percent of women had been harassed, 46 percent on a daily basis. A 2013 U.N. survey of women in seven governorates found that 99 percent of women had experienced harassment, with 49 percent saying it occurred daily. Studies asking women whether harassment has increased since Mubarak's overthrow have found a range of results, from unanimous reports of increases in one study to more equivocal responses in the U.N. Women 2013 poll. However, one clear change in the post-2011 period was the emergence of mass sexual assaults at protests.

Mass assaults were not unknown during the Mubarak era, including the 2006 Eid attacks, but the number and brutality of such attacks increased dramatically at protests between 2012 and 2014, with groups like Tahrir Bodyguard and OpAntiSH created to rescue women assaulted in Tahrir protests. Many TV programs took these attacks as a springboard from which to discuss PSV more generally. But the activism of new anti-PSV groups also played a key role in pushing the issue onto the agenda and shaping how it was discussed, from programs that detailed how anti-harassment and assault groups worked to the many TV hosts who allotted significant airtime to activists.

Challenging dominant discourses: Does women's dress cause harassment?

The most widespread "justification" for PSV is that women's "improper" appearance — a category that could include lack of veiling and wearing form-fitting clothing — causes harassment. In the U.N. Women 2013 survey, the most prominent reason men gave for harassing women was dress, with 73 percent of men indicating that "the girl's dress was not decent and revealed her body contours" as a reason for harassment.

Several new satellite shows tackled this issue head on. An April 2014 episode of the comedy show "Hukumat Nuss al-Layl" opened with the host, surrounded by mannequins covered in white sheets, scoffing at claims that women bore no responsibility for harassment. The host uncovered the first mannequin to show a female form in a sleeveless bandeau and tight pants and asked, "what about this woman isn't asking to be harassed?" Each mannequin that he uncovered was more conservatively dressed than the previous one. As he undraped the last mannequin, he asked, "what respectable woman who doesn't want to be harassed would walk in the street dressed like this?" while uncovering a form dressed in a black niqab only showing the eyes and a voluminous black dress. Later in the segment the host interviewed Tahrir Bodyguard member Mary Awadallah about myths and realities surrounding PSV.

The extent to which women-blaming narratives have been increasingly challenged can be seen in the fact that they are beginning, on occasion, to be rejected even on Islamist programs. On an October 2012 episode of "Sitt al-Banaat," a talk show aimed at women on the Muslim Brotherhood's Misr 25 channel, host Shahinaz Mahmoud rejected the idea that women were responsible for harassment and praised women who reported their harassers to the police. While another host, Nour Abdullah, suggested that "immodest" dress might facilitate harassment, the segment was dominated by a psychologist who insisted that even public nakedness could not legitimize harassment, a narrative strengthened by an interview with activists from Basma, best known for forming groups to stop Eid harassment, and Against Harassment.

Even Salafi channels, which feature repeated invectives against women in the public sphere, are not immune. On a February 2013 episode of the show "Masabih al-Buyut" on the Salafi al-Hafeth channel, an Islamist-leaning professor of criminal law, a member of the upper house of parliament from the Muslim Brotherhood's ruling Freedom and Justice Party and Ayman Nagy of Against Harassment debated the causes of PSV. Unsurprisingly, the guests disagreed strongly with Nagy on the role of women's dress, with the law professor arguing that it facilitated harassment while Nagy responded that "we [men] are not animals walking in the street ... [as if] I have to attack any woman I walk behind." More surprising was that host Ahmed Baha repeatedly contested his guests' claims that "inappropriate" dress facilitated PSV, at one point arguing that in the 1960s and 1970s there was much less harassment despite the fact that most women were unveiled and many wore short skirts.

In a clear sign of changing social narratives, talk show host Riham Sa'id was suspended after an October broadcast in which she showed private photos of a woman who had

been assaulted in a mall and suggested that more conservative dress would have prevented such assault, leading advertisers on the show to withdraw their sponsorship.

Questions of accountability

Activists assert that all citizens need to fight PSV and hold leaders accountable for encouraging or neglecting it. The work of everyday citizens against harassment has been lauded by hosts across the political spectrum, from the liberal Bassem Youssef, who praised activists from OpAntiSH and Tahrir Bodyguard as “people who are really making a difference,” to the previously mentioned Muslim Brotherhood “Sitt al-Banaat” program, whose hosts extolled their activist guests as “beautiful and positive.” More important, satellite TV has also facilitated challenges of both Islamist and military leaders. In November 2012, Azza Soliman, then the director of the Center for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance, and a leader of I Saw Harassment, appeared on ONTV’s program “al Sura al Kamila.” Host Liliane Daoud confronted Saad Amara, a Freedom and Justice Party leader, with recent statements by Muslim Brotherhood leaders blaming women for harassment, after which the activists sparred with Amara and Nader al-Bakkar, the then-spokesman for the Salafi al-Nour party.

Even as criticism of the Sissi government has slowed to a trickle in satellite media, an assault on women at the mass celebrations of Sissi’s June 2014 election prompted pro-Sissi talk show host Lamis Hadidi to excoriate the minister of health for public hospitals’ lackadaisical response.

It is too early to tell definitively whether the changing discourse about PSV in the satellite media is decreasing harassment on the ground. But the development and spread of a changing narrative reminds us of something that political scientists often forget – that the results of periods of political upheaval cannot be measured only by changes in the formal political sphere, and that “revolutions,” which so far have definitively failed to usher in stable, liberal politics, can nonetheless advance important social changes.

Egyptian feminist leader Mozn Hassan resolute in face of official investigation

Nazra for Feminist Studies head receives widespread support over claims NGO is illegal as crackdown on Egyptian civil society is condemned

The Guardian (31.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1XqLiYg> - The head of a women’s rights organisation remained defiant after becoming the focus of an investigation launched by the Egyptian authorities as part of its ongoing crackdown on civil society.

Mozn Hassan, executive director of Nazra for Feminist Studies, said the group would continue to work, regardless of what happened to her.

Hassan has been summoned for questioning, along with other staff, over claims that Nazra has been operating illegally.

“Other people will carry on the work,” she said. “I know it’s my choice. I have this passion about feminism in my country. I know it sounds cheesy, but there is something about Nazra. It’s not about [one] person – we’ve really managed to have this collective.

“I know other people in Egypt are managing things. It’s not about me existing ... People who have been in this process, I think they will continue.”

Hassan, speaking during the Commission on the Status of Women in New York earlier this month, received a summons to appear before authorities during the annual two-week meeting.

She was due to be questioned on Tuesday, but the hearing was postponed.

This week, women's rights activists and academics from around the world signed statements denouncing the attack on Nazra and the increasing clampdown on feminist groups and rights defenders.

In a statement on Monday, 43 women's rights organisations condemned "the escalating targeting of civil society organisations in Egypt, and in particular the targeting by the authorities of the Egyptian feminist organisation Nazra for Feminist Studies, founded and led by woman [sic] human rights defender Mozn Hassan, who is a prominent feminist and is known for her extensive work on feminist movement-building and combating sexual violence in the public sphere".

The statement added that the summoning of Hassan followed "numerous steps taken to stifle her activism in the public space, including systemic smear campaigns against her and other civil society leaders, issuance of a gag order on the media for coverage of the foreign funding case, in addition to the lack of transparency and non-declaration of charges directed against [her] until now."

The statement called on the authorities to drop the case against Nazra. "Instead, the Egyptian state should be taking all measures necessary to acknowledge the important and pivotal work ... Hassan conducts in the advancement of women's rights, provision of support services for survivors of sexual violence and a feminist discourse that is against all forms of violence and extremism."

Another statement, signed by 130 academics, added: "As academics, university professors and scholars, who are socially and politically engaged and concerned, we consider the investigation [against] Mozn Hassan a direct threat to the feminist and activist engagement of Nazra for Feminist Studies, whose work has focused on contributing to the continuity and development of the feminist movement in Egypt. We also view the investigation as part of the larger crackdown on civil society organisations, and on fundamental freedoms and rights in Egypt, including academic freedoms."

Hassan is being investigated under case 173/2011, known as the "foreign funding case" because it targets local and international NGOs for illegally receiving funding from overseas.

Investigations began in 2011 and resulted in the conviction of 43 NGO employees in 2013. The government has recently reopened the case, which has led to travel bans, asset freezes and the questioning of prominent activists.

Other groups currently under investigation include the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, and the human rights activist Negad el-Borai.

"Public spaces are shrinking [for civil society], but now they are closing the space," said Hassan. "Things have been happening in the last two months."

She said she believes Nazra, which has been registered as an NGO since 2007, is being specifically targeted because it campaigns for human rights. "We're not this nice acceptable women's organisation, we're not a development-only [organisation]. We think

the feminist movement is a political movement. We've always had a human rights perspective ... we are not like other feminist organisations."

She added: "If they want me, better to take me than the rest of the team."

"We are trying to have a survival mechanism. As long as we can work, we are doing things."

Egypt may ban 'Jewish' niqab in public places

Female Egyptian MP claims full-face head covering is un-Islamic, comes from Jewish communities that lived in Arabian peninsula

The Times of Israel (12.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/22vCcqx> - Egypt may soon ban women from wearing the niqab in public places and in government institutions, according to a report in the British Independent last week.

The niqab is a more severe head covering than the hijab, which covers the head and leaves a woman's face revealed. A niqab leaves only the eyes visible and is usually black in color.

Parliament member Amna Nosseir, a professor of comparative jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University, is supporting the ban and said that the Niqab has non-Islamic origins.

Nosseir said the restrictive head covering is in fact a Jewish tradition dating back to the Jewish communities that existed in the Arab peninsula before the beginning of Islam.

The female parliamentarian argued that several passages in the Quran contradict the use of a niqab and said the Muslim holy book advocates modest clothes and covered hair, but no cover for the face.

Egypt, the Independent reported, has already passed several restrictions on wearing the niqab. Last month, Cairo University banned nurses and doctors from wearing it in medical schools and teaching hospital, explaining that the ban would "protect patients' rights and interests."

In September 2015, the university banned academic staff from wearing niqabs in classrooms, after students complained that it was difficult for niqab wearers to communicate coherently with students.

Female genital mutilation and Syrian girls

By Nikolaj Nielsen

Excerpt from EU Observer (02.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xQV07g> - Reports are now emerging of young Syrian refugee girls in Egypt having their genitals mutilated - a widespread practice among Egyptians - by Syrian parents.

Cases of what is also known as "female genital mutilation" (or FGM) began to surface months ago.

"Syrian refugees started adapting the culture, [and] they started accepting things we are trying to abandon," Aleksandar Bodiroza, who heads the United Nations Population Fund, told reporters in Cairo.

Though outlawed in Egypt, the vast majority of married Egyptian women have been cut. Often relatives hold down the girl while a midwife or doctor removes or cuts the labia and clitoris.

The tradition is not limited to Muslims. Christian communities in Egypt are also known to force the procedure onto their daughters - some as young as 8 years old or less.

"It is very specific for Egypt - you don't have it in the Gulf, you don't have it in Jordan, you don't have it in Palestine, you don't have it in Syria. We were caught by surprise," said Bodiroza.

Zaid M. Yaish, who also works at the UN fund, said poverty and desire to marry off daughters are among the likely factors that contribute to the abuse.

"I noticed that Syrians are starting to adapt this FGM - this is a surprise to me. I mean, in Syria, there was never FGM before and that is due to the social pressure," he said.

Nobody knows yet how prevalent FGM is among Syrians in Egypt, or if the reported cases are isolated.

But like almost all Egyptians, Syrians and other refugees are facing crushing unemployment. While Syrians have access to health and education, they require work permits.

Public services are dire and the financial woes, felt by all, are particularly harsh among those who have fled war only to survive on threadbare diets and wages, if any, which are even lower than Egyptian standards.

"The price of meat went from 40 pounds to over 160 pounds per kilo. Everything is increasing, we can't keep up," said Maher El-leilani, a refugee in his late 50s from Homs in Syria, who now lives on the outskirts of Alexandria.

The EU is attempting to alleviate the inflation by injecting some €2 million into a broader cash-assistance programme, distributed by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR).

Syrian families can get anywhere between 600 to 2,800 Egyptian pounds per month. Six-hundred Egyptian pounds, as of this month, is roughly equivalent to €28. Last October, the same amount would have equated to around €62.

"We have seen a deteriorating situation, an increasing vulnerability, with more people becoming more vulnerable when compared to six months ago," said Aldo Biondi, an expert on Egypt from the European Commission's humanitarian aid department.

"More and more families are falling under poverty, so they knock at the UNHCR," he added.